WAR BABY: RACE, NATION, AND CULTURAL CONCEPTIONS OF LESBIAN MOTHERHOOD

by

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A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty in English in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy,
The City University of New York

2012

This manuscript has been read and accepted for the Graduate Faculty in English in satisfaction of the dissertation requirement for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

March 22, 2012 _____
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Abstract

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The Interwar period was a time of exaggerated social anxieties about gender, race, class, and sexuality. One of the primary vehicles for expressing this agitation was through a pronatalist cultural focus on maternity that posited women as gatekeepers of racial purity, traditional gender roles who perform a specifically patriotic duty—akin to men's military service—through reproduction. Concurrently, thanks to the ubiquity of Radclyffe Hall's image after the obscenity trial for *The Well of Loneliness* in 1928, the general public in England and the USA had a visual, collective idea of "the lesbian" for the first time. "The lesbian" was in many ways a foil for the idealized, domestic mother, and three novels from this period that are frequently considered classics of lesbian literature all place a heavy, yet currently underexplored, emphasis on the embattled relationship between lesbianism and maternity: Radclyffe Hall's *The Well of Loneliness* (1928), Sylvia Townsend Warner's *Summer Will Show* (1936), and Nella Larsen's *Passing* (1929). Despite her notoriety, Hall's novel places a deeply conservative value in women's reproductive capacity; a driving force in the plot is the female invert Stephen Gordon's need to compel her "normal" lover Mary Llewellyn to heterosexual reproduction—to prevent Mary from using lesbianism as contraception—over Mary's protestation. Warner's novel takes a more politically radical stance, tracing its protagonist Sophia Willoughby's disillusionment

with white, aristocratic motherhood, ultimately having her reject not just marriage and maternity, but other forms of kinship in order to focus on her personal and solitary process of political radicalization. Larsen's novel focuses on the domestic and racial entrapment of bourgeois marriage and motherhood. Larsen conjoins the paranoia of racial and sexual passing through metaphors of pregnancy; Clare Kendry's paranoia about producing a black baby is recapitulated in Irene Redfield's anxiety about her attraction to Clare. These themes are reinvigorated and retold in contemporary narratives about lesbian mothers. The final chapter focuses on the lesbian television soap *The L Word* (2004-2009), which problematically posits the lesbian nuclear family as a locus of social protest and, along with gay military service, a primary conduit for fighting institutionalized homophobia.

Acknowledgements

This project has been a long time in the making, and could not have been completed without the guidance and support of many people, all of whom have my tremendous gratitude.

First, my committee. Jane Marcus, as chair, was an indefatigable reader, critic, and inspiration. She stuck by me through several iterations of the project and through personal ups and downs, despite her own illnesses and stresses. She has supported me as a scholar, mother, and feminist, and will have my thanks, always. Robert Reid-Pharr's commentary always managed to be incisive, clear, incredibly motivational, and uncannily well-timed. I am thankful for his wit as much as his intellect, both of which he has in abundance. I am deeply grateful to Jessie Daniels, who stepped up for me at the last minute and provided perspective of many kinds. My thanks are also due to Michele Wallace and Sarah Schulman, who read my work and helped during the process.

Within CUNY, I am also particularly indebted to two institutions: Macaulay Honors College and the GC's Child Development Center. MHC's Instructional Technology Fellowship program gave me rich, meaningful work that still allowed me time for my scholarship, and introduced me to friends who helped me along the way, especially John Sorrentino. I owe a very special thanks to my supervisor at MHC, Associate Dean of Teaching, Learning and Technology, Joe Ugoretz. Joe has been an amazingly supportive listener, confidante, cheerleader, ad-hoc advisor, parenting coach, and friend. Thank you, Joe. Linda Perrotta, Director of the GC's Child Development Center, works with an incredible set of teachers to make the Center a warm, caring haven for children. I am

thankful to Linda and the other teachers who gave out hugs, read books, and provided unlimited art supplies for Margot's two years there: Dawn, Smyrna, Dolores, and Liang. The Center is also attentive to the particular concerns of doctoral students who are parenting young children, and I am grateful to Kate Muldowney, the Center's developmental specialist, for running their parenting support group and offering impeccable advice and care. Karey and I are grateful and still rather awestruck at the serendipity that brought Margot to the school.

I have many friends to thank. Jody Rosen, Helen Davis, Kate Moss, and Tina Meyerhoff were my original dissertation group, and all read, commented, and provided an incalculable social outlet at the beginning of my dissertation phase and through Margot's infancy. I raise a City Bakery hot chocolate to you all. Other friends who have helped, discussed, read, cajoled, and helped me get up and get to the library or coffee shop include Jen Gieseking, Lindsay Furst, Erin Heiser, and Kara Van Clef. My thanks also go to Cindy Forrest and Amy Takemoto for their calm and steady friendship.

For the family that grew me into an independent thinker: my parents, Jon and Leslie, and my spectacular siblings, Jamie, Natalie, Jon, and Forrest. I love you all.

Finally, for Karey and Margot. Karey, you have been my reader, critic, editor, and support system. You, above all, are to thank for my success. And for my sweet Margot, thank you for making this take a long time. You changed me, and slowed me down with your scrapes and bruises, kisses and cuddles, dancing and laughter. I am all the better for it. My wholeheartmindbody for you both, always.

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Lesbian Nation, Lesbian Mother: An Introduction

In 2005, I began what seemed to be two wildly disparate projects: I entered the dissertation phase of my PhD program and my girlfriend and I began the process of trying to knock me up. Academically, I investigating issues of race, gender, queerness in interwar literature—and trying to find an innovative way into the material that would give me a solid project. At the same time we were poring over catalogs of donors, each bank providing personal interest anecdotes or videos assuring us of the wholesomeness of buying a stranger's sperm and making a family in our contemporary version of eugenics. We looked at numbers, pictures, weights, heights, nationalities, hobbies, trying to make sense of what esoteric combination would give us the child we wanted. We intercepted well-meaning questions from family and friends about our choices in donors, doctors, fertility medications, and procedures, and for several months, life ran in predictable yet discomfiting two week chunks of time: the build up to insemination, followed by the build up to pregnancy test. At the same time, I was solemnly writing about marginalized women who lived 80 years before me whose writing often alluded to struggles with maternal identity.

I eventually did get pregnant, and had every intention of delivering a dissertation along with my baby, but as the months ticked on, my writing was growing without taking on the definitive contours that my belly and baby were. After she was born, my writing efforts seemed to yield muddier and more tentative pages, as I threw much of my energy into caring for my new daughter. My girlfriend and I, both of us people who consider

ourselves queer dykes, found that we had ambivalent (okay, often hostile) feelings about the squeaky-clean, homonormative ways in which gay parents and their children have figured into recent political and entertainment discourses. Gay marriage and nuclear families have been constructed as a liberational, even radical, without much regard for the heavy history that marriage, domesticity, and mothering have. Since our daughter was born in 2006, we've seen the passage of marriage equality in Iowa, New York, Washington DC, and as I am editing, Maryland (following Massachusetts, which enacted it in 2004), as well as quagmires over marriage in Maine, New Jersey and, most famously, California. The White House has decided to stop defending the Defense of Marriage Act. Don't Ask, Don't Tell has been repealed. At the same time, social conservatives have redoubled their efforts to restrict reproductive rights and legal and social advancements made by queers and have ramped up xenophobic rhetoric and anti-immigrant legislation. As lesbian mothers started to take on a new ubiquity in popular and political culture (including family plot lines for most of the handful of lesbian characters on TV, and the public family building efforts of lesbian celebrities like Rosie O'Donnell, Melissa Etheridge, and Cynthia Nixon), I began to wonder how this moment had been created by the patriarchal, white-supremacist culture we live in, and my personal and academic interests merged in a new way. I found myself to be the walking embodiment of a fad, but how could I reconcile the earnest passion with which I took on motherhood and even found myself in it, with my ambivalence towards the political energy that seemed to enable it?

As I turned over texts that I had already been working with from the 1920s and 30s,

I found that representations of lesbianism and maternity were often salient features of the now-canonized sweep of lesbian novels, but the two are seldom considered together in the current body of analysis. Is it possible to begin a history of any group of women by noting that literature often highlights the competing constraints on women's sexuality and their autonomy? Virgin vs whore; mother vs lover. So if we take a cursory look at the large body of criticism that has been generated on lesbian and queer women in literature, it shouldn't be surprising that it often alights on their sexual expression (however overt, implied, or repressed), and that the non-reproductive quality of lesbian sex has been conceived of as a great freedom, and recreational sex without the possibility of reproduction rails against the religious and gendered injunctions women live under. The 1980s are generally seen as the watershed moment in which lesbian women began to question the idea of freedom *from* motherhood and to claim the right *to* motherhood as a freedom. Indeed, Jill Johnston, who chronicled her own disillusionment with family and motherhood throughout the 1970s in her *Village Voice* column, has said that, "Before Stonewall, before 1980, really, motherhood and a lesbian existence were a contradiction in terms" (*Admission*, "Introduction" 8). As mothers who were coming out as lesbian after leaving heterosexual marriages faced daunting custody battles, Lillian Faderman notes that for many lesbians, "it was especially important to find ways to have children without men. Those ways were not so difficult to envision in the 80s when heterosexual women were taking for granted the fact that intercourse did not necessarily lead to having a child; lesbians felt the right to assume that having a child was not necessarily the consequence of intercourse" (*Odd Girls*, 291). Given that I was an elementary school-aged child in the

80s with only a vague awareness of the burgeoning AIDS crisis and bold political actions of the time, it would be relatively easy for me to romanticize that period as the crucible of my origins as a queer, white mom, but I think it's important to move the context further back the timeline. There are older predecessors and precedents.

My own work has been enabled and preceded by the CUNY Graduate Center's rich history of radical and queer scholarship, especially in the English program. Working under the advisement of Jane Marcus, I have been driven to create work that delves into difficult questions that loom over not just history, but contemporary times and my own life. I have had the privilege to build on, engage with, at times disagree with, work started at the Graduate Center and to make connections with other students, graduates, and faculty who work from explicitly political, feminist and queer standpoints. Most importantly, I want to acknowledge the legacy of queer thought coming out of the GC—from Eve Sedgwick, Wayne Kostenbaum, Robert Reid-Pharr and Marcus among others—that has been consistently borne out in groundbreaking student scholarship. I'm particularly indebted to other students who have explored the terrain of gender, sexuality, race, and war under Marcus's direction. Both Gay Wachman, whose GC work was adapted into 2001's *Lesbian Empire: Radical Crosswriting in the Twenties* and Robin Hackett whose 2004 book *Sapphic Primitivism: Productions of Race, Class, and Sexuality in Key Works of Modern Fiction* have provided crucial inroads into the work that I completed, as has the advice and support of more recent graduates like Linda Camarasana, who completed her dissertation *The Bed and the Battlefield: Gender, Sex and Nation in the Trans-Modernist Novel* in 2007. My work is the result of a program and

mentors who indefatigably invite historical and political rigor and scrutiny of literature, and allow for extensive engagement with queer and feminist scholarship. The richness of the school and department's scholarly environment has enabled my multi-dimensional exploration of lesbian motherhood through the lenses or race, war, class, and citizenship.

The new visibility of lesbian mothers, in both real life and entertainment, is a product of our particular cultural moment, but my project explores how tropes of motherhood and reproduction have circulated in earlier lesbian texts, and how themes of racial and sexuality purity, citizenship, and alternative forms of kinship have been written and rewritten within them. To that end, I am looking at several early texts that are often considered classics of lesbian literature—Radclyffe Hall's *The Well of Loneliness* (1928), Sylvia Townsend Warner's *Summer Will Show* (1936) and Nella Larsen's *Passing* (1929). I then turn my attention to contemporary representations of lesbian mothers, focusing on the lesbian primetime soap *The L Word* (2004-9). My intention is not to provide a wide-reaching survey of lesbian mothers in literature, television and film, but to look at the formation of tropes that historically situate the figures of the lesbian and the mother in relation to each other. We find at every turn that the two are deeply entwined not just with sexual and familial identity but also with racial and national identity. What I am asking is how lesbian mothers live inside these constructions of our bodies and ourselves and can we understand ourselves as having a history?

I open my project with an examination of the discourses of racial motherhood in Radclyffe Hall's *The Well of Loneliness*. The well-traversed terrain of Hall's text is an important starting place not just because of its ubiquity in lesbian studies, but also because

it constitutes—according to Laura Doan—the beginning of a widespread cultural understanding of what a "lesbian" was, did, acted like, and looked like. Through the central narrative of protagonist Stephen Gordon's finding, and then rejecting, the love of Mary Llewellyn, Hall figured the noble "invert" as both celibate and a good citizen, willing to cede love to meet the needs of the nation through several mechanisms. First, Hall identifies Stephen excessively with Mother England, and constructs a parable about national military service followed by lonely exile. She furthermore defines Mary's body as reproductive and Stephen's as productive, and when Stephen contrives to create a heterosexual ending for Mary, it reinforces Stephen's martyrdom to the needs of nation and empire, thereby reinforcing her worthiness as a citizen, but her unsuitability as a mother. It is important that we pay attention to the tropes of motherhood and reproduction in *The Well* not only because the novel sets up the mutual exclusivity of lesbianism and motherhood (both logistically and philosophically), but because of the way that the book has constituted a locus of identity, rejection, acceptance and contention both within lesbian studies and in the larger heteronormative sphere.[1]

I then turn my attention to Sylvia Townsend Warner's *Summer Will Show*, an historical novel that embraces a far more radical politics than *The Well* did, but also operates on a logic that opposes lesbianism and motherhood. While Hall's work displayed an extreme anxiety over the perversion of the feminine body, a deep investment

[1] *The Well* was critiqued for its conservative politics even at the time of its publication, with Rebecca West opining in 1929, "In no time homosexuality was given a status as a form of revolt against the Philistine decrepit; and to-day we have an army of young prigs who are as self-righteous about their abnormalities as missionaries who volunteer for Africa in pious mid-Victorian novels" (qtd. in Scott, *Refiguring Modernism* 246).

in whiteness, and a reticence to accept sexual pleasure or autonomy in women, Warner accepts and welcomes alternative community and radical kinship formations: Warner shows her protagonist Sophia Willoughby as able to find her political and sexual self only after the death of her children relieves her of her familial burdens and her aristocratic social position. While there are many interesting harbingers in the novel—including Sophia's quest for a sperm donor after her children's death, and her attempt at parenting outside patriarchy when she and her lover Minna take in Sophia's "half-caste" nephew, Caspar—Sophia ultimately rejects parenting, and motherhood is emptied of its possibility as a radical act. Warner was a devoted member of the Communist Party, and while the novel serves in some ways as an allegorical critique of the Party's failure to adequately reach people of color, it nevertheless celebrates Sophia's ability to be a not-mother. While this is an important and radical choice, Warner shows a deep mistrust of families and motherhood, and reneges on her initial intervention against the nostalgic sentimentality of the mother or child. Her novel is also troubled by a persistent conflation of class and racial others with violence and destruction. Sophia's sexual, national, and class allegiances are tested but her whiteness is only reinforced.

Completing this trio of early lesbian novels is Nella Larsen's *Passing*, well known for its skillful interweaving of the tragic mulatta trope with an exploration of queer sexuality. In *Passing*, the character of Clare Kendry pointedly underscores the paranoia of policing heterosexuality and the inseparability of racist and heterosexist ideologies, while providing an explicit questioning of motherhood within each of those modes. Clare Kendry and Irene Redfield's decisions—one to marry into the black bourgeousie and one to marry a

white man—are specifically racial, sexual, and reproductive all at once. The role that the production of children plays in policing their identities is made plain in Clare's fear of bearing a child whose skin color could out her racial identity. Conversely, Irene's choice to have children who cannot pass for white reinforces her racial identity. Their marriages, of course, serve as guards against lesbianism, but in *Passing*, Larsen shows how each of these containment systems falter, and provides a bleak outlook on the possibility of breaking away from them.

Unlike the *The Well* and *Summer Will Show*, the problem with children in *Passing* is not how to get children, but in already having children. As I have stated earlier, the critique in *Passing* works from within domestic, racial, and reproductive structures, while Stephen (in *The Well*) and Sophia (in *Summer Will Show*) grapple with these institutions from the outside (as women living without men and without children). They deal with exile, abandonment, and escape. For them, being a wife with a bad husband, or being unable to be a husband, is the problem, but marriage itself is not portrayed with the claustrophobic contempt that Larsen uses. Likewise, Hall and Warner's writing tends to turn sentimental when they discuss children, while Larsen uses the children as symptoms of domestic entrapment, and deploys images of pregnancy and birth to illustrate the epistemological terror that Irene experiences around knowledge of racial and sexual difference and deviancy.

Taken together, the work of Hall, Warner, and Larsen shows that reproduction and maternity have been important themes, historically, for lesbian narratives in the 20th century. Each author explores the tension between the two categories in an age before

reproductive technologies and the cultural climate allowed for a more facile relationship between lesbianism and motherhood. That does not mean, however, that the two have come to exist in harmony. In contemporary film and television, we can often see extreme versions of motherhood, where good lesbian mothers inhabit a land of harmony, affluence, and community, enjoying planned pregnancies with healthy babies; the greatest threat to these families is that the state does not provide the protection that it should, and the portrayals situate them as worthy citizens. Bad lesbian mothers exist in the realm of the grotesque—freakish matings and parasitic or vampiric offspring, as depicted in a few horror films such as *Sick Girl* and *The Vampire Diaries*.[2] Lesbian parents on screen embody both the purest and most corrupt ideologies of motherhood, choosing the purity of virgin births or degradation of the body, family, and nation. What is often erased in these competing visions, however, is the critique that earlier generations of lesbians and feminists launched of the family and motherhood. Instead of an examination of the nuclear family as a symptom of a heteronormative culture and a locus of repression, *The L Word* shifts the critique onto ways in which gay and lesbian parents are prevented from fully participating in regulatory regimes surrounding the family, rather than questioning the regulations. In this way, homphobia is depicted as a vestige of a legal system that has not caught up with the times, and not as a reflection of a homophobic and heterosexist culture. This seems to reverse cause and effect. Moreover, homophobia in *The L Word* is represented as a bigger problem for lesbian parents than it is for lesbian individuals.

[2] The current obsession with vampires in entertainment—*Twilight, True Blood*—I think is emblematic of fears about new reproductive forms. Like homosexuals, vampires are a group that cannot sexually reproduce. Vampires and gays are feared for their predatory seductions, defiling of the body, and recruitment of innocents.

The overarching theme that I aim to draw out of each text is how reproduction and mothering are used to police racial and sexual identities. While the competing pronouncements of Havelock Ellis in 1897 that "I regard sex as the central problem of life" (qtd in Somerville 15) and W.E.B. Du Bois in 1903 that "the problem of the Twentieth Century is the problem of the color line" (xxxi) and have been played off one another to examine the ways that racial and sexual identities sharply bifurcated and were subjected to intense scrutiny and regulations at the dawn of the 20th century, both men wrote their words at the beginning of an upswing in regulations on maternity and appeals to pronatalism throughout Europe and in the United States. Fears of declining (white) population, "race suicide," empire building and destruction, and immigration as well as anxieties about women's changing roles all led to an increased emphasis on maternity that was formalized during the Great War and in the interwar period through social programs, incentives, and increased governmental regulation of maternal performance and child welfare. While there is a great temptation to think of eugenics and pronatalism as the province of avowed white supremacists and Nazis, doing so only diminishes the far-reaching effects that appeals to white maternalism had in the time period. The call to maternity in the early 20th century promoted heterosexuality and discouraged interracial coupling; the fusion of racial and sexual cultural anxieties with pronatalism created, in effect, a baby line, through which mothers were invested with the obligation to hold those shaky categories in place. All of the texts that I work with grapple with the effects of racial regulation and compulsory heterosexuality. I will look carefully at the role that reproduction and motherhood plays in undergirding those mechanisms.

I want to state clearly and several times throughout my work that I am *not* completing a project in which I draw simple analogies between the "likeness" of blacks and gays, but that race and sexuality have always been mutually constitutive, and the regulatory schema that have acted upon them have been deployed in similar (and sometimes self-same) ways. The fact that I am looking at English and American literature means that there are different historical mechanisms at work in each, but the manner in which sexuality and race are played out against each other and against citizenship follow similar trajectories. Gayle Rubin asserts that the entwined moral impulses of the two nations in the 19th century, resulted in "The consolidation of Victorian morality, and its apparatus of social, medical, and legal enforcement" (4). In *Against Race*, which demonstrates the fascistic underpinnings of racialized thought even within the context of anti-racist work, Paul Gilroy also rightly points out that the family has been a major arena of control of racialization and nationalism; he identifies family as the cradle and primary vehicle of demonstrating proper forms of citizenship, which is fed by "the sweet-tasting medicines of nationalism and essentialism" (213). This is plainly true in families across racial and sexual spectrums.

While there is definitely queer activism that remains radical in scope and critique, the most visible and frighteningly conservative social activism in recent years has been around marriage equality and the repeal of Don't Ask, Don't Tell. Indeed, in her book *All the Rage: The Story of Gay Visibility in America*, Suzanna Dunata Walters claims that, "The resistance (by both gays and straights) to gay parenting *as different* is chilling. Even in descriptions of such seemingly 'different' events such as a gathering of gay parents…

sameness with hetero families is stressed" (215). If we consider Jane Marcus's assertion that "In fiction, worlds are created that serve as alternate, often more resonant history of the times than the facts allow" and that characters from many books have "an aura of historical reality that shapes our vision of the real events in terms of racial and gendered fantasies some of us share or come to share with their creators" (*Hearts* 4), then the ways in which fantasies of lesbian domesticity have been created, and how they interact with other fantasies about race and citizenship, deserve closer scrutiny than they have so far received. It may turn out to be that not all new "struggles" are truly liberating.

The particular medico-juridical history and evolution of the inverted or lesbian mother cannot be dissociated from the ways in which racialized and imperial meanings have been attached to the general figures of the mother and the child, and in which racial and sexual otherness are symbiotically patrolled. The ideas informing my work in this area are drawn from a few main sources: Anna Davin's "Imperialism and Motherhood" and Siobhan Somerville's *Queering the Colorline*—both of which examine the late 19th and early 20th centuries, setting the stage for the chapters on Hall, Warner, and Larsen. I follow that with more contemporary theory, the concept of "homonormativity," eloquently elaborated by Jasbir Puar in her concept of "homonationalism," and the competing voices of anti-social and utopian queer theorists.

Siobhan Somerville's book *Queering the Colorline* (2000) makes a crucial intervention in the sometimes divergent, often compared strands of critical race theory and queer theory. Somerville examines the watershed moments of the late 19th century—*Plessy v. Ferguson*, the entrenchment of Jim Crow laws, and the growing terror of

lynchings; Alice Ward's highly publicized murder of her lover, Freda Ward; Oscar Wilde's obscenity trial; and the publication of key sexological texts. She establishes this time period as one in which there was increased interest in defining and policing the identification of persons as "black" or "white" and "homosexual" or "heterosexual," and moreover finds that these are not two separate processes, but instead, "the simultaneous efforts to shore up the bifurcate categories of race and sexuality in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were deeply intertwined" (3) and she cautions that "the formation of notions of 'whiteness' and 'blackness' […] must be understood as a crucial part of the history and representation of sexual formations, including lesbian and gay identity and compulsory heterosexuality in the United States" (5). Somerville shows that sexology was reliant on discourses of scientific racism, especially as it sought to situate itself in the naturalist scientific tradition, and relied in part on comparative anatomy: "women's genitalia and reproductive anatomy held a valuable and presumably visual key to ranking bodies according to the norms of sexuality… One of the most consistent medical characterizations of the anatomy of both African American women and lesbians was the 'myth of an unusually large clitoris,' with one researcher even claiming that was *especially* so in women who were perceived to be both 'inverts' and 'colored'" (27).

At the same moment in history, the expansion of empire was another major driving force in the categorization and definitions of types of people, and anxiety about purity and admixture. Unsurprisingly, these events coupled with the Cult of True Womanhood—the Angel in the Home—and a new importance being placed on an idealized form of bourgeois white motherhood, resulting in the endorsement of eugenicist projects across

the political spectrum. In England, as the British Empire expanded, a greater emphasis was placed on good breeding and fighting infant mortality—and mothers' patriotic duty to support the homeland this way. As Anna Davin puts it in her comprehensive article "Imperialism and Motherhood": "If the British population did not increase fast enough to fill the empty spaces of the empire, others would"—others including both indigenous populations and rival white populations (10). Legal, governmental, and charitable organizing around maternal health, infant and child well-being surged. Davin pinpoints the Boer War, too, because it "dramatized fears of national inadequacy and exposed the poor health of the working class in Britain, from which were drawn both soldiers and sailors to defend the empire, and workers to produce goods with which to dominate the world economically" (12). We see a similar process at work in the current rise of hyper-patriotism and homonationalism in the USA.

According to Davin, during the late 19th and early 20th centuries, a middle class cultural shift took place in which women's most important function transitioned from that of a wife to that of a mother.

> Moreover the relationship between family and state was subtly changing. Since parents were bringing up the next generation of citizens the state had an interest in how they did it. Child-rearing was becoming a national duty not just a moral one: if it was done badly the state could intervene, if parental intentions were good but there were difficulties the state should give help, and if it was done well parents should be rewarded at least by approval for their patriotic contribution" (130).

A new importance was placed on motherhood, but alongside it, new powers of state and

medical surveillance developed in tandem with "moral blackmail" that pinned blame for what were essentially problems with social structure—poverty, malnutrition, inadequate childcare for employed mothers, lack of access to medical care, and infant and childhood disease and mortality—on the supposed ignorance, inadequacy, or failure of mothers.

Social problems were morphed into personal shortcomings, and those shortcomings were heaped upon mothers, instead of on the power dynamics of the empire itself. On the other hand, a properly functioning (white) mother was the hope of the race and empire. As Jane Garrity puts it in *Step-Daughters of England,* "Chiefly valued as national assets because they could bear healthy white citizens, these select Englishwomen would both stabilize the imaginary borders of the nation and contribute to the expansion of its empire. Women's identification with nation was thus submerged in their identification with race" (1). While Garrity and Davin's work is situated in English history, the critiques they articulate can be applied in other contexts, even if the exact mechanisms vary. Laura Lovett's study of pronatalism in the USA finds that even though American pronatalism tended to be more subtle than European versions, in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, it is nevertheless true that, "As the state gained greater authority to regulate aspects of public and private life, the industrial family ethic ensures that a set of hierarchical power relationships based on who did the wage earnings would be maintained within the family… welfare policies… were either directly or indirectly pronatalist." Moreover, Lovett articulates the juncture between anxieties over urbanization and immigration in the USA and fears that, "Motherhood and family seemed to be endangered as women's morals, dress, and behavior changed in the early 20th

century." Political response emphasized motherhood because, "Maternalism builds on and makes use of an essentializing image of women as reproducers and thereby limits their political activity to issues directly relevant to their status as reproducers" (6-7).

While Lovett doesn't deal with militarism in her study, the maternalist and pronatalist discourse that surrounded war clearly works in tandem with the military needs and the call to patriotic service. War babies have traditionally been defined as babies born to unwed mothers and servicemen fathers in times of war, and have served as receptacles for competing beliefs about women's morality and patriotism. "The war baby scandal produced two competing narratives, one concerned primarily with the morality of women, and the other with the morality of a government that legally penalized illegitimacy. The crisis of the war baby powerfully mingled the sexual and the maternal body" (Grayzel 91). The war baby is a neat metaphor for the overall belief in the cultural duty and benefit of having children, and the impulse to regulate women and families. It villainizes a government that punishes good women "guilty" of bearing illegitimate children, and pleads instead for the protection and promotion of mothers. Using children to rationalize the need for adults' full rights is a familiar strategy in current argumentation for marriage equality. In *Of Woman Born*, Adrienne Rich recalls, "'Vous travaillez pour l'armée, madame?'" (You are working for the army?), a Frenchwoman said to me early in the Vietnam war, on hearing that I had three sons" (30). All mothers are having war babies whether we know it or not, and whether we like it or not. Monique Wittig pointedly underscores this in "One is Not Born a Woman" when she insists:

Instead of seeing birth as a forced production, we see it as a "natural," "biological"

> process, forgetting that in our societies births are planned (demography), forgetting that we ourselves are programmed to produce children, while this is the only social activity "short of war" that presents such a great danger of death.[3] Thus, as long as we will be "unable to abandon by will or impulse a lifelong and centuries-old commitment to childbearing as *the* creative female act,"[4] gaining control of the production of children will mean much more than mere control of the material means of this production: women will have to abstract themselves from the definition "woman" which is imposed upon them." (11)

Wittig rails against naturalization of gender categories; Paul Gilroy roots all racialized thinking within a fascistic framework that is typically maintained through family structures and women's bodies: "The unholy forces of nationalist biopolitics intersect on the bodies of women charged with the reproduction of absolute ethnic difference and the continuance of blood lines" (*Against Race* 127). The implied fascism of white patriarchy comes as no surprise to any reader of Virginia Woolf or Sylvia Plath, and the processes of nationalistic family building are also at work in defining national norms around homosexual behavior and identity, what Jasbir Puar has termed "homonationalism":

> National recognition and inclusion… is contingent upon the segregation and disqualification of racial and sexual others from the national imaginary. As work in this dynamic is a form of sexual exceptionalism—the emergence of national homosexuality, what I term "homonationalism"… Further, this brand of

[3] Wittig cites this from Ti-Grace Atkinson's *Amazon Odyssey*.
[4] Wittig cites this from Andrea Dworkin's "Biological Superiority: The World's Most Dangerous and Deadly Idea."

> homosexuality operates as a regulatory script not only of normative gayness, queerness, or homosexuality, but also of the racial and national norms that reinforce these sexual subjects. There is a commitment to the global dominant ascendancy of whiteness that is implicated in the propogation of the United States as empire as well as the alliance between this propogation and this brand of homosexuality. The fleeting sanctioning of a national homosexual subject is possible … through the simultaneous engendering and disavowal of *populations* of sexual-racial others who need not apply. (*Terrorist Assemblages* 2)

Puar deftly identifies the important ways in which certain types of homosexuals—who were once believed to be inherently and always enemies of the state—may enter the national imaginary in order to reify a different sort of threat that Puar locates in the body of the terrorist. Puar's work is an important continuation of an examination of the ways in which women, and specifically mothers, also entered into and became a locus of regulation for the nation-state. Ideas and anxieties about national health and morality coalesced in the figure of the mother in the 19th and early 20th centuries, as aptly demonstrated by Anna Davin in "Imperialism and Motherhood" and Claudia Tate in *Domestic Allegories of Political Power*. According to Tate, however, "By the 1920s, the allegorical link between idealized domestic tropes, on the one hand, and liberational racial and sexual desire, on the other had become disengaged" (Tate 15-16). Now we have entered a moment in which liberational desire seems to be *reinscribed* inside of idealized domestic tropes, in which sexual and political dissidence can potentially be absorbed by the wholesomeness of marriage and family. Just as race and sexuality have

been mutually constructed identity categories, cultural beliefs about motherhood and lesbianism have also been established in parallel to each other, and both have been deeply marked by understandings of race, nation, and citizenship. If the transgressive stance of queer and gay critique is brought under the patriarchal construction of marriage and domesticity, does lesbian motherhood in turn become assimilated under a bourgeois motherhood that eschews choice and experimentation in child rearing? In such a schema, must the lesbian mother answer to the same set of regulations that govern reproduction and parenting, regulations that aim to reproduce racial fixity and heterosexuality?

It is not surprising, then, that women's writing about sexuality, and especially lesbian sexuality, in the early 20th century, is often suffused anxiety about motherhood and the nation that was necessarily conflated with racial quandaries. Predictably, the same questions hover over the ways that lesbian mothers are depicted today. In the first three chapters of my dissertation, I argue that the commingling of these factors is a central conflict in early 20th century literature that has widely come to be recognized as the beginning of a lesbian canon. These works have all been analyzed in terms of race, gender, sexuality, and nation, but seldom with regard to the pivotal role that reproduction and especially maternity play within them, and how that provides a crucial history for contemporary politics and fictional representations of lesbian mothers. In each of the stories, lesbian motherhood stands as both a critique and a reification of the state's demands.

The texts I have chosen from the interwar period are among many from the early to mid 20th century that present lesbianism in tandem with or in parallel to motherhood.

One well-known genre of lesbian (or sometimes "lesbian" in its anti-lesbian bent) literature that presents maternity and kinship more obliquely is the school girl (or school teacher/mistress) narrative, including the German Christa Winsloe's *The Child Manuela* (adapted into the film *Mädchen in Uniform*), Antonia White's *Frost in May*, Clemence Dane's *Regiment of Women,* Rosemary Manning's *The Chinese Garden*, Collete's *Claudine at School*, Muriel Spark's *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie*, and, of course, Lillian Hellman's *The Children's Hour*. In these sorts of narratives, the protagonists are placed in environments that vacillate between or conflate the homosocial and the homosexual (typically in controlled, racially homogenized settings), and form pseudo-family groups among each other or with teachers as stand-in mothers. The sorts of bonding that take place among the girls are often dismissed as juvenile romantic friendships, and if teachers are involved, as corrupt and immoral. In school girl and school girl-esque novels, the characters often have an opportunity to develop romantic friendships, or "play house," to play at being couples, husbands, wives and mothers with varying degrees of success and risk.

For her essay "Distance and Desire: English Boarding-School Friendships," Martha Vicinus studied the culture of girls boarding schools in England, particularly in the 19th century. She noted "almost inevitably, the adolescent girl was brought into collision with her mother and her family because she found at school a whole new set of older women to admire and love" and that furthermore, "In boarding school … a girl could indulge in her rave [crush] unimpeded by her mother's jealousy. The system she found there, indeed, overtly encouraged a kind of surrogate mothering that could often turn into a rave.

… An older girl was assigned to 'mother' a new girl, to teach her the norms of the school … The new student could worship an all-knowing older girl" (48-49). The metaphor persists through time periods and in the US, too. For example, a system of metaphoric mothering is also reflected in Madeline Davis and Liz Kennedy's iconic social history of lesbians in upstate New York in the 1940s-60s, *Boots of Leather, Slippers of Gold*. While a small number of the women involved in the study were literally mothers, the idea of the "lesbian mother" is developed in the community as an older woman or couple who fosters, emotionally and/or physically, younger lesbians, often ones who have run away from or been turned out by their families of origin on account of their sexuality.

Conversely, many women working in the early 20th century homophile and lesbian-feminist tradition defined themselves in terms of daughterhood, with the Daughters of Bilitis[5] organization described itself as "a home for the Lesbian" and newsletters often dealt with issues faced by mothers who were still in heterosexual marriages. Jill Johnston, whose essays throughout the 70s frequently discussed her own as well as a general ambivalent or antagonistic relationship[6] between motherhood and lesbianism says,

> Anyhow many women now are "coming out" for the first or second time after the aberration of a conventional marriage and a child or two and are faced with angry ex-husbands and parents and in-laws and poverty and the legal apparatus for taking their children away and the guilt of renouncing motherhood if they feel they *want*

[5] Del Martin, who founded DOB with her partner Phyllis Lyon, said that reading *The Well of Loneliness* gave meaning to the anomalous feelings she had about her sexual identity. She "experienced a release she had never known before… she was a homosexual—a Lesbian" (D'Emelio 101).

[6] Johnston had two children from a heterosexual marriage before coming out as lesbian.

> to give up their children or *have* to give up their children and the problems of living arrangements if they keep them … The legal problems for lesbian mothers who want to keep their children are critical. The law doesn't recognize the lesbian as a fit mother. Thus any father who had the desire and the means can take his child into custody away from a lesbian mother. A threat which retards the gay revolution by keeping the woman a closet case" (95).

Yet Johnston recognizes that many women, including herself, who are mothers because of compulsory reproductive expectations and not through their own wish to be parents are not fit mothers: "Certainly I was a younger woman at such war with my sex role and without knowing that I wasn't a fit mother by anyone's standards including my own and I had to let my children go to become myself. Certainly in any case none of us were told what a drastic drag it was to be a mother. I mean motherhood was a soft fuzzy edge tinted photo of the young ageless beautiful cosmically fulfilled mother." Johnston settles the matter of her own disidentification with motherhood by declaring, "I am really a perennial daughter" (95-6). Similarly, Audre Lorde's landmark work *Zami* conjures the images of numerous foremothers, most of whom Lorde identifies as "dykes" by virtue of their commitment to other women; she deepens the concept of lesbianism as something that is constituted through kinship systems of various sorts of mothers and daughters in the American Black community. This was a time, too, in which the idea of a "lesbian nationalism" was, like Black Nationalism, a form of separatism and not assimilation. The idea of lesbians as a social group constituting a metaphorical family a widely used concept in self-description, sociological work, and echoed in literature. The constant

refrain of "We Are Family" both combats the familial rejection that many gay people experience, and harnesses a rhetoric that directly insists that we are not hostile, solitary aberrations.

There is further development of this overlap between sisterhood and lesbianism in women's spaces in novels that deal with women's war work, particularly during World War I, including pointed critiques of nuclear families. One notable example is Helen Zenna Smith's *Not So Quiet*, in which lesbians and heterosexual women work together as ambulance drivers on the front lines of WWI. As Jane Marcus and Gay Wachman have noted, the narrative was written in part to contest *The Well*. It contains several overtly lesbian characters, but was also meant to counteract the image of WWI women's ambulance corps as lesbian oases. While it does not contest the stereotypes that surrounded lesbianism at the time—mannishness and tragedy, especially—it nevertheless also responds to the militaristic pronatalism of the time that was present in *The Well*. The main character, Smithy, is relieved to know that her soldier-fiancé's war injuries have rendered him impotent (and hence infertile); she does not want to have a baby and doesn't want to provide a potential soldier to her country. She rejects her mother's zeal for helping unmarried mothers of war babies, and also secretly helps finance her sister's abortion, an act that borders on treason. Her anti-natalist stance allows Smithy to queer her relationship to maternity and nation without being queer herself. She willfully refuses her reproductive capability, a refusal that is directly anti-patriotic.[7] This alliance of the

[7] In narratives that are set outside of the confines of institutions like schools and the military (and prisons in lesbian pulp fiction), the ways that lesbians navigate motherhood is more complex. One major oversight of work on lesbian mothers has been the reticence

queer and the anti-reproductive fits nicely with Edelman's arguments, but this sort of refusal is not often part of lesbian narratives. Even in the three I am discussing in depth, the women bear more complicated and often internalized conformist views of reproduction and its personal and political value. Likewise, the critique of motherhood and family that lesbian-feminist thinkers and activists developed in the Stonewall era has also been largely dissolved in current portrayals of lesbians as mothers. Can my generation resist the seduction and ideology of assimilation?

Notably, the texts I am working with have all been written in the aftermath of specific acts of war that carried with them heightened opportunities to define national interests and subjects. Manifest Destiny, empire building, Reconstruction, and Jim Crow mark the historical lead up. Hall, Larsen, and Warner were all writing in the shadow cast by the Great War, and Warner was keenly influenced by the Spanish Civil War and explicitly concerned with the rise of fascism. *The L Word* was produced in the post-9/11 and Iraq War period, and I would argue that the truce in the AIDS crisis brought about by anti-retrovirals, as well as the "culture wars" of the period are also pivotal moments for ideological changes to occur. Each of these topics has constituted a specific national (or international) event with the associated call to patriotism, while also marking moments of

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to discuss characters who are read as lesbians who are also mothers *as* lesbian mothers. For instance, is it possible to say that *Passing*'s Irene Redfield is a lesbian mother? What about Clarissa Dalloway, who is coded by Woolf as a lesbian, but marries and has a child? Clarissa holds dear her memory of kissing Sally Seton, yet recoils from Miss Kilman, her daughter's unmarried lesbian tutor whose choices confine her to a lonely, impoverished existence. Clarissa's choices can be contrasted with Sally Seton's production of five sons. Sally performs a patriotic duty that is both womanly and masculine—almost bi-gendered. The soldier Septimus Smith who has become a pacifist refuses to reproduce and then commits suicide. According to Jane Marcus, "To a pacifist 'queer' imagination, Septimus is a hero because he won't reproduce more cannon fodder.

stark grief and ontological shock. In our current moment, the fight for rights to marry, reproduce, and fight in wars marks a step that is at once reparative and reactionary. Surely there is another path to social justice than an extended courtship with familial and national regulation. My project isn't an answer to this heady conflict, but rather an examination of the textual vines that feed it.

The stock question for lesbians was once "How do you have sex?" but that has recently been eclipsed by "How do you have babies?" When *Queer as Folk* premiered, in both its UK (in 1999) and North American (in 2000) forms, viewers were introduced to two entwined but wildly divergent worlds. The opening scenes show the main male characters in highly sexualized situations—going to clubs and making random hookups—only to be interrupted by calls from their lesbian friends, who have had quite a night of their own: in each version of the show, we meet the lesbian characters in the hospital, holding their newborn babies. The contrast suggests a deep divide between lesbians and gay men: lesbians have babies and gay men have sex. This whole rigamarole of lesbians having babies seems to be repeated ad nauseum in current film and television, seeming to appear by default in many scripts of many shows that feature lesbian characters, some of them made for mainstream audiences and others for gay niche markets (and some as cross-overs): the lesbians on *Will & Grace*; the lesbian ex-wife on *Friends*; Dr. Kerry Weaver on *E.R.,* who quickly pursued marriage and motherhood after coming out as lesbian; the lesbians on *Queer as Folk*; the lesbians on *Rick and Steve, The Happiest Gay Couple*; and, of course, *The L Word*.[8] These fictional accounts of lesbian motherhood are

[8] Lesbian motherhood has also been featured in at least two horror films, *Vampire Diary* in

bolstered with current headlines about the adequacy or even supremacy of lesbians as mothers, including a recent story trumpeting a 0% child abuse rate in lesbian households (Polikoff, "Lesbian Family Study"). At the same time, marriage equality has been catapulted into one of the most contentious contemporary political issues, with both supportive and adversarial positions espousing the rhetoric of family sanctity.

Though my work spans both English and American 20th century literatures, the emergence of the themes in both nations follows a similar trajectory that allows for useful comparisons. The relatively recent advent of motherhood studies, tracing back to Adrienne Rich's 1976 *Of Woman Born,* implores us to look at motherhood as an institution that operates within (and possibly against) patriarchal heteronormativity, and not just a personal experience. Concurrently, sociological, psychiatric, and literary explorations have provided affirmative feedback on the very ability of lesbians to become parents and "do" parenthood. But in the struggle to avow the suitability of lesbians and gay men as parents, it is important not to lose track of critical issues of race and

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2004 and *Sick Girl* in 2006. In the former, a filmmaker completing a documentary on "weekend vampires"—goth club kids—meets a real vampire and ends her heterosexual relationship to be with her. The vampire becomes pregnant, and the filmmaker decides to feed her from her own body. After birth, the vampire abandons the vampire baby with the filmmaker. She continues to feed the baby her own blood, resulting in her physical ruination as she becomes virtually enslaved. In *Sick Girl* a lesbian entomologist's girlfriend is bitten by a strange, tropical, parasitic insect and then turns into an insect herself. The two mate and both become pregnant with thousands of insect babies—but the final scene shows them both pregnant and happily knitting in anticipation of the births. The two plots seem to be parallels of good lesbian mothers/bad lesbian mothers as outlines by Clarke. In *Vampire Diary*, the filmmaker is willing to sacrifice anything to take care of the baby, who is literally a leeching subspecies. In *Sick Girl*, the couple is delighted and proud of their own freakishness. These alternative dystopian/utopian visions of lesbians as mothers draw upon Foucault's notions of the sexual monster, a monster that Jasbir Puar argues has now been reinvigorated to "draw on processes of quarantinizing a racialized and sexualized other" ("Monster" 17).

citizenship that present themselves in family building. In 1986, Audre Lorde wrote:

> These days it seems like everywhere I turn somebody is either having a baby or talking about having a baby, and on one level that seems quite benign because I love babies. At the same time, I can't help asking myself what it means in terms of where we are as a country, as well as where we are as people of Color within a white racist system. And when infants begin to appear with noticeable regularity within the Gay and Lesbian community, I find this occurrence even more worthy of close and unsentimental scrutiny. (Reprinted in Pollack and Vaughn 310)

And yet most of what has appeared, in both mainstream and niche-marketed television and film, has been steeped in this sentimentality. The beginning scenes of *Queer as Folk* show the (white) baby with his mothers, gay aunties and uncles as a sort of nativity scene as they all come to worship the babe, and the gay-playboy-sperm donor is instantly infused with a deeper sense of meaning and humanity. A sign has come that everything is going to be okay, that it does indeed get better: a baby is born.[9]

Not everyone, of course, has taken such a rosy shine to the growing ranks of gay, lesbian, and assorted queer parents and their offspring, or more generally, the blinding hope represented by these wee interlopers. In his dazzling volume *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive*, Lee Edelman examines the rhetoric of the Child on both the left and the right, and defines queerness as a force against "reproductive futurism" and the

[9] Besides marriage and military service, the other issue that has gotten the most mainstream attention in recently years is the high suicide rate among LGBT teens. Columnist Dan Savage launched his wildly popular "It Gets Better Project" in 2010. In his initial "it gets better" message, he drew on this discourse by figuring his own status as a gay father as indicative of success.

cult of the Child, or put succinctly: "Fuck the social order and the Child in whose name we're collectively terrorized" (29). While Edelman rightfully uncloaks the bombastic and treacly worship of the Child, his work also largely ignores the actual experience of parenthood and the varied ways that queers who do choose parenthood organize their existences—which can vacillate between radical social experimentation and social mainstreaming. Indeed, José Muñoz has taken Edelman and other queer anti-utopians to task for "miss[ing] the point that hope is spawned of a critical investment in utopia that is nothing like naïve, but, instead, profoundly resistant to the stultifying temporal logic of a broken-down present" (825-6). Likewise, as Lauren Berlant has pointed out, "Fantasies and practices of social belonging operate imprecisely… to desire belonging to the normal world, the world as it appears, is at root a fantasy of a sense of continuity, a sense of being generally okay, it is a desire to be in proximity to okayness, without passing some test to prove it" (9). However, Berlant's work—both absorbing and instructive—is explicitly concerned with the operation of "hetero-femininity" and I would argue that one of the social tests of lesbian okayness lies precisely in the imperative to couple (preferably to marry) and to raise children. Okayness can be mimicked by the very populations who have raised critical questions about what's okay about okayness in the first place. There is a problem when that becomes an uncritical norm.

This social push and pull of lesbians as mothers is situated in the advent of sexology and its invention of the "invert." Psychologist Victoria Clarke has traced the history of lesbian mothers in psychological texts, and finds that the very idea of the "invert" was initially defined against the notion of marriage, motherhood and normative gender

expression: “The construction of the invert as masculine and sterile was linked to turn of the century gender ideology that posited that women who worked in unsuitably ‘masculine’ professions or undertook ‘too much’ education were doomed to be either sterile or incapable of producing healthy children. The image of the mannish lesbian was used to curtail women’s behaviour and compel conformity to patriarchal gender norms” (120). While some 19th century doctors and thinkers believed that heterosexual marriage and motherhood could cure inversion, early sexologists like Havelock Ellis and Richard von Krafft-Ebing rejected the idea of motherhood as a corrective measure for treating inverts. They firmly espoused the idea of homosexuality as a pathological condition, and warned that it could easily contaminate or be transmitted to children: “Often, no doubt, the children turn out fairly well, but, for the most part, they bear witness that they belong to a neurotic and failing stock” (qtd in Clarke 120). This unhappy juggernaut of motherhood as a cure and motherhood as a disaster persisted well into the 20th century, when “homosexuality” was listed as a condition in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of the American Psychiatric Association (DSM). Experts widely disagreed about the effectiveness of heterosexual motherhood as a course of treatment to cure lesbianism.

With the burgeoning gay rights movement and the removal of homosexuality from the DSM in 1973, the focus of psychological literature shifted from discussing the use of motherhood to “cure” or integrate homosexual women into heterosexuality to debating the suitability of affirmed lesbians’ ability to mother, and fitness as mothers, extending into custody cases and legal battles over adoption. At that point in the psychological and legal literature, emphasis was placed on women who came out as lesbians after having children

in the context of a heterosexual marriage, even though there were some lesbians planning and choosing motherhood. According to Clarke, "Parenting had been a divisive issue within lesbian communities in the 1970s. Lesbian journals and newsletters published numerous debates about the politics of lesbian parenting: between women raising sons and lesbian separatists, and between women who argued that lesbian parenting challenged normative definitions of motherhood and held radical potential and women who maintained that mothering was a conformist heterosexual practice" (121-22).

But concomitant with the AIDS crisis of the 1980s, which brought more heightened lesbian and gay visibility along with a more forcefully articulated homophobia, Clarke notes that the gay and lesbian community was "coming under the spell of a heady dose of pronatalism" (122).[10] While the medico-juridical literature still focused on maternal fitness and custody, a body of research emerged from within a liberal equality framework that sought to demonstrate lesbian mothers' similarity to heterosexual ones, a lack of negative outcomes for children raised by lesbians, and therefore affirm their suitability as parents. According to Clarke, what emerged from this time period was a contrast between a "good" and "bad" lesbian mother: "Judges were more likely to award custody to the good lesbian mother who kept her sexuality private, separate from and subordinate to her

[10] This pronatalism has been identified by some as related to the obliteration of large segments of the gay population during the AIDS crisis, and can be related to national responses to pregnancy in times of war. In her book *Women's Identities at War* Susan Grayzel shows that during WWI in England and France, "motherhood came to represent for women what soldiering did for men, a gender-specific experience meant to provide social unity and stability during a time of unprecedented upheaval" (87). Her arguments extend to show the similarity of the rhetoric of essentialized motherhood cross-culturally. Appeals to stability and social unity mask the state's need for babies during wartime: you can't have war without motherhood.

role as a mother" whereas a "bad" mother who was perceived as militant or activist was likely to lose custody (123). These tropes of good lesbian mother/bad lesbian mother have been extended in the 1990s and 2000s to concerns about lesbians' access to donor sperm and adoption, and a shift to exploring two-parent lesbian families. One vexed outcome from this shift is the tentative conclusion that lesbian-headed families can in some cases be "better" than their heterosexual counterparts, due to more equal division of household labor and more intensive involvement of both parents in the children's lives:

> The literature in the 1990s and 2000s constructs lesbians as fit to parent and lesbian families as good for children. By the end of the 1990s, stories of the 'just-as-good-as lesbian mother' became intertwined with and were eventually superseded by stories of the 'better-than lesbian family'. The category 'lesbian mother' (and the newer categories 'lesbian family' and 'lesbian co-parent') does now unequivocally exist as a subject for psychological research and theorising. However, this category remains problematic, not least because lesbians' fitness to parent is rarely assumed, but has to be proven. Moreover, lesbian motherhood continues to be regarded as a departure from the norm even in affirmative contexts, mothers are assumed to be heterosexual unless otherwise stated. (Clarke 124)

However, the calls for maternal sameness or even superiority do not examine the idea of "family" from a feminist perspective. Clarke looks closely at Sandra Pollack's 1987 article on lesbian mothering, which urges self-definition of identity and family practices for lesbian mothers. Pollack "argued that what comparative psychological research actually examines is 'whether the children conform to acceptable societal norms', which contrasts

sharply with lesbian feminists' commitment to eradicating such norms" (Clarke 126).

We now find ourselves in an oddly eugenicist moment, in which homosexuality is widely regarded as a hard-wired biological fact, lesbians have a variety of scientifically mediated ways to achieve biological parenthood, and the push for equal rights under the law feels firmly grounded in the "facts" that homosexuality is a biological truth and homosexuals can have families, so therefore homosexuals should be accepted and afforded the same rights as heterosexuals. In *American Eugenics*, Nancy Ordover contextualizes biological explanations of sexuality in her work within the history of sexology and racism. She asserts that "Eugenics is hydralike in strategy and ideology: one tentacle entwined with nationalism, another extending towards reform-oriented liberalism, others to blatant homophobia, racism, misogyny, and white supremacy. Multiple identities and a shared demonization has meant that the consequences of eugenics for lesbians, gays, bisexuals, and transgendered people are now, and have always been, bound up with those for immigrants, people of color, and the poor" (124). While I do not endorse essentialist and eugenicist conceptions of gender and sexuality (quite the opposite), I do recognize that the power of these discourses runs deep and is persuasive for many.

Situating the struggle for equal rights *from within* the confines of the family marks the beginning of a transition from conceptualizing homosexuality as otherness to finding ways in which homosexuality can be subsumed into sameness—it becomes a variation of and a pathway to normalcy, rather than a radical critique. Bonnie Mann ponders, "Doesn't public lesbian mothering signal that we've long since replaced the smile of this figure of

selfless and fulfilled, unquestioningly heterosexual motherhood, with some other expression? Or… does the "lesbian" in "lesbian mother" fade, empty, or recede as the "mother" in "lesbian mother" is revitalized, renaturalized, and redeployed? Does the Gorgon-faced figure of the lesbian monster settle into the perky smile of the happy mother in a way that reconfirms both an essential relation between woman and mother, and normative heterosexuality?" (150). My project seeks to examine the ways in which the figures of the lesbian and the mother have circulated in tandem and been used to define ideas of womanliness, maternity, race, and citizenship. And unlike Edelman, I am concerned for the future of children despite the uncomfortable difficulties of the collision of my personal and political.

In my own life, I treat the discourses of mainstreaming and biological determinism with extreme mistrust, and look to several contemporary theorists who examine the tension between the liberal-equality framework and seek more localized, community-based, and frankly queer solutions to complexities of family and citizenship. Widely distributed film and television tends to strongly reinforce the former, which in turn become mutually reinforcing with widely held beliefs about LGBT people. Sarah Schulman has remarked that "Despite the emphasis on gay marriage and parenthood that has overwhelmed our current discourse, how gays and lesbians are treated IN families is far more influential on the quality of individual lives and the larger social order than how we are treated AS families" and in turn has argued that "[W]e have at some time in our lives, been treated shoddily by our families simply, but specifically, because of our homosexuality. This experience, in turn, is mirrored by the legal system and the dominant

social structures within which gay people must live, as well as in the arts and entertainment industries, which select and control our representations" (*Ties that Bind* 1-2 emphasis original). While current representations of LGBT people in film and television[11] are frequently viewed as cultural signs that we are in the twilight of homophobic discourse, these models more truthfully support what Lisa Duggan has termed "the new homonormativity…a politics that does not contest dominant heteronormative assumptions and institutions but upholds and sustains them" (*Twilight* 50).

My goal in elaborating on these themes in my project has been both personal and scholarly. The ideas came to me as I grappled with my own intense desire to be a mother, a desire that had long since overcome the brief period of youthful elation I felt about my own queerness's ability to excuse me from compulsory reproduction. As I tried to reconcile those opposing feelings, I was struck by how closely questions of maternity were infused in novels that are commonly read not just about lesbians as characters, but about the formation of lesbian identities and cultures. I was likewise surprised about how little scholarly attention these maternal narratives have received. I want to hold in tension with each other the importance of recovering these narratives without valorizing any supposed naturalness about motherhood. There are three overarching aspects of family, race, class, and nation that are at work in my first three chapters: exile in *The Well of Loneliness*; escape in *Summer Will Show*; and entrapment in *Passing*. Despite their different approaches, they all examine how sexual non-conformity can or cannot be lived within a

[11] Schulman also points out, "They think that the movies are now representing lesbian characters because Charlize Theron won an Oscar for playing a lesbian murderer and Hilary Swank for playing a queer who was murdered" (21).

homophobic family structure. My final chapter on *The L Word*, however, looks at how idolization and idealization of the nuclear family has subsumed those earlier questions about families and queer people within them. Instead, the family is shown to be an accessible medium for social protest. I hope that by drawing attention to these histories and how they currently are at work in our lives, I can contribute to the invigorating scholarship that holds the intimate allure of lesbian motherhood and domesticity at a critical distance.

Chapter One

"Some primitive thing conceived in a turbulent age of transition": Gender, Citizenship and Reproduction in *The Well of Loneliness*

I will begin right in the middle, which is to say with *The Well of Loneliness*, that troubled text at the troubled epicenter of lesbian studies, identity conflicts, and scorn. And I shall jump right to the middle of that: the most talked about paragraphs, known as the "mirror scene," occurring almost halfway through the novel.

> That night she stared at herself in the glass; and even as she did so she hated her body with its muscular shoulders, its small compact breasts, and its slender flanks of an athlete. All her life she must drag this body of hers like a monstrous fetter imposed on her spirit. This strangely ardent yet sterile body that must worship yet never be worshiped in return by the creature of its adoration. She longed to maim it, for it made her feel cruel; it was so white, so strong and so self-sufficient; yet withal so poor and unhappy a thing that her eyes filled with tears and her hate turned to pity. She began to grieve over it, touching her breasts with pitiful fingers, stroking her shoulders, letting her hands slip along her straight thighs—Oh, poor and most desolate body! (187)

This moment of erotic self-pity is afforded to Steven[1] as she broods over her ill-fated affair with her first lover, Angela Crossby, who has put down Stephen's hopes of a life together

[1] Despite the flurry of analyses of this scene, there is startlingly little acknowledgment that the scene's description of Stephen's body can be read as luxuriantly erotic for the *reader*, in terms of identification or object choice, or both

by mocking Stephen's inability to marry her. Hall follows this segment of the narrative with a visit from neighbor Violet Antrim, who discusses her own upcoming wedding. The narrator briefly alights on Stephen's internal bitterness at the approbation and gifts the "ardent" couple would receive along with being "sanctified by a blessing" (188). Stephen's intense longing is not only for a desirous and understanding lover, but for marriage and the benefits of heteronormativity. In this context, it is curious that with all of the various interpretations of the mirror scene, the self-interpreted *sterility* of Stephen's body has received relatively little attention. Certainly among all of the possibilities, the idea of Stephen's potential motherhood and the possible fecundity of her body has appeared to be one of the most preposterous. This is not without consequence: for when Stephen later decides to reject Mary Llewellyn, a woman with the very "ardent"[2] feelings that Stephen dares not hope for, it is in large part so that Mary's body (and her narrative counterpart, Martin Hallam's) will not be likewise rendered sterile by a homosexual partnership. Moreover, it is in the absence of Mary that Stephen is able to evince her own kind of gestation, making her "barren womb fruitful" in the birth of her own novel about inversion—made possible by the removal of Mary's sexual nagging: "Mary kissed her scar: "Darling, don't start working now, it's so late and besides…" (421). My reading of *The Well* focuses on how the narrative assiduously manages sexuality by focusing on Stephen's purity and Mary's maternal potential.

In this chapter, I will argue that the dissolution of the sexual relationship between

[2] When first introduced to the narrative, Mary is described as "kn[owing] nothing of life or of men and women; and even less did she know of herself, of her ardent, courageous, impulsive nature" (285).

Mary and Stephen allows Hall to restore patriarchal order by forcing Mary's commencement of heterosexual reproduction and securing Stephen's fruitful authorship once she commits to celibacy. This is a crucial step in Stephen's ability to argue on her own behalf for the inclusion of certain inverts in polite society: she is at pains *not* to disrupt traditional gender roles or subvert families. In fact, Hall wanted to open societal opportunities for "The worthy among the inverted—those fine men and women whom Nature has seen fit to set apart as variants of the more usual type… simple souls who long to live honestly and to live as themselves, they desire to form a part of the social scheme, to conform in all ways to the social code as it exists at present" ("Notes on *The Well of Loneliness*" 328). The invert is not a threat to society, but a victim of nature. The overarching logic of the text posits that sexual freedom disrupts both productivity and reproductivity, and while *The Well* is singularly famous for taking up the cause of the "congenital invert," Hall assiduously avoids celebrating lesbian pleasure in favor of heteronormative work ethics. In fact, Mary's sexuality is suspect not because she wavers from Stephen, but precisely because her erotic eye does not waver: it is a perversion of the feminine body that must be corrected, and motherhood is the perfect antidote.

Discussion of *The Well*'s publication and politics usually focuses on Radclyffe Hall's public visibility as a lesbian, and the obscenity trial of the book. While the bravery of Hall's—and Una Troubridge's—willingness to be out is undeniable (though they were protected by their class and social position), I want to urge a political reading that places *The Well* in the context of World War I, nationalism, eugenics, and moral panic.[3] I want

[3] See Davin for discussion of birth rates, infant mortality rates, and social policy in England

the reader to understand the popular English novelist Radclyffe Hall in her conservatism—a conservatism that has been obscured because of *The Well*'s great historical court case and Hall's lesbianism. While I deal exclusively with *The Well* in this chapter, it is important to remember that Hall wrote more than just lesbian novels and it would be a mistake to radicalize her legacy simply because of the struggles and notoriety that surrounded publication of *The Well*.

We can see in Hall both collusion with and an attempt to reject what Robin Hackett calls "Sapphic primitivism": the substitution of the "ethnographic conventions of sexology, anthropology, and psychology" to flag and code lesbian sexual behaviors (9). While Hackett's study examines texts that use Sapphic primitivism as a form a subterfuge—to avoid the very scrutiny that befell *The Well*—Hall both deploys the racialized enabling of "the primitive" *and* strives to create a pure, Anglicized portrait of the invert. It was an important project for Hall to devise a naturalized and nationalized—white—version of the invert to combat the prevalent stereotype of the homosexual as a pollutant that closely aligned with with the "primitive" force represented by the person of color. As fears of a diminishing white population grew during WWI and the interwar period, women's functionality as national subjects became overtly tied to reproduction of citizens. *The Well* closely allies itself with the pronatalism of its day by disallowing Mary from using

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in the early 20th Century. This period saw an intense reclassification of motherhood as a national priority and, like the medicalization of sexuality, a matter subject to scientific calibration and instruction—to improve the stock of the country and empire. Simply put: many policy makers wanted to promote maternity as a matter of national importance, fearing that "If the British population did not increase fast enough to fill the empty spaces of the empire, others would" (10), a feeling that ultimately contributed to the eugenics movement.

inversion as a form of contraception. Yet Hall's novel was singled out as a treacherous poison.

The Well is best known for the trumped-up scandal surrounding its publication, and subsequent banning. Laura Doan has done an excellent job contextualizing James Douglas's infamous *Sunday Express* review of *The Well*, in which he declared:

> It is meet and right to pity them [inverts/homosexuals], but we must also pity their victims. We must protect our children against their specious fallacies and sophistries. Therefore, we must banish their propaganda from our bookshops and our libraries. I would rather give a healthy boy or healthy girl a phial of prussic acid than this novel. Poison kills the body, but moral poison kills the soul. (38)

Doan points out the many other neutral and positive reviews *The Well* received, both before and after the publication of Douglas's. Doan's analysis identifies Douglas as a writer who was known not as a serious critic, but for sensationalistic tabloid pieces, as Doan demonstrates. But as Douglas's call became entwined with the obscenity trial, his quotable words came to overshadow a more nuanced reception to the novel, placing Hall and her work at the heart of a cultural fear about androgynous fashion, suffrage, women's roles, and women's independence. Doan finds that, "The publication of Hall's novel was halted by a combination of superb journalistic timing and a chain of serendipitous events" (28). The upshot, of course, is that the publication and banning of the book, the bombastic article by Douglas, and the widespread circulation of Hall's image "for the first time provided the public with one clear and identifiable image—not just a word—of the "lesbian" and that over the next few decades a "stylized or stereotypical" lesbian … would

emerge on the political landscape" (30).

It is ironic that *The Well* galvanized a political, if problematic, visibility for lesbians, yet espoused such a narrow social justice agenda. As a novel, it is a celebration of whiteness and England just as much as it is about inversion, and it uses mechanisms of family and military service to underscore this. The tactics of contemporary proponents of gay mainstreaming—epitomized by argumentation surrounding LGBT parents and military members—places this debate squarely in the same symbolic territory that Hall traversed. If, as Lee Edelman has recently argued, queers are the ones who are not on the side of "the children," it is all the more important to look at the constructions of motherhood in a foundational text of lesbian identity and lesbian studies.

In *Step-daughters of England*, Jane Garrity is concerned with the symbolic roles of British women during the interwar period: "Valued for their role as reproductive conduits, white Englishwomen's bodies were subjected to a variety of regulatory practices that sought to construct them, physically, as well as spiritually, as potential mothers of the British race" (1). Garrity characterizes Hall's agenda as "not to resist the idealized mother or to destabilize gender roles, but to advance the imperialist ideology of race and motherhood. We see evidence of this perspective in *The Well of Loneliness*, where Radclyffe Hall invokes the discourse of racial motherhood to make the case for the lesbian's national inclusion" (70). While Garrity rightly places Hall's work in line with the quest for racial, national purity and reproduction she also claims that "the lesbian body does not represent a reproductive failure, but rather procreative fecundity and racial purity through authorship" (71) By taking the typical critical stance that Stephen's experience is

both primary and of primary importance, the reading fails to explore the particular *danger* to the national character posed by Mary Llewellyn, and what becomes for Stephen a rather conceptual model of lesbianism: her work—her contribution to society—is what inscribes her lesbianism, in the self-enforced, disembodying absence of sexual practice; with Mary removed from her life, Stephen may live a life of the mind and not the flesh.[4] While the novel's treatment of Mary (the assumption of her need to mother, the urgency to marry her off) is consistent with its political agenda, the discursive significance of Mary's body and sexuality have long been neglected. Woolf wanted to kill the angel in the house; Hall was happy to pile her into the back of an ambulance and drive her home again.

In fact, one of the often-overlooked counterplots of *The Well* is Stephen's persistent drive to save Mary from her own desires, attempting to deny Mary's sexual autonomy to whatever extent possible. In my reading, Mary is attempting to abdicate her responsibility as a white woman to marry and reproduce white children for her country. Stephen must intervene to prevent Mary from committing race suicide. From Mary's initial seduction of the long-suffering Stephen to Stephen's ultimate ceding of Mary to Martin, the relationship problems between the couple are plotted along Stephen's inaccurate beliefs about the meanings of their opposing masculinity and femininity. In Clare Hemmings' meticulous reading of Mary's autonomy, "The two narratives—masculine and feminine—do not coexist happily in the novel. The dominance of Stephen's masculine narrative silences

[4] The metaphors here work well with Susan Stanford Friedman's analysis of literary childbirth metaphors. She notes that, "The pregnant *body* is necessarily female; the pregnant *mind* is the mental province of genius, most frequently understood to be inherently masculine" (52, emphasis original).

Mary, while Mary's assertion of feminine desire results in the disruption of the masculine linearity. Put bluntly, for the masculine narrative to predominate, Mary's story must be silenced" (191). In the same spirit that Adrienne Rich proposed "re-vising" and in which feminist critics have read against masculinist plots, it is important to evaluate the role that Mary plays in a novel whose political agenda has been both celebrated and reviled, remaining a singularly well-known lesbian novel for decades while at the same time, "It is ironic that a novel as racist, classist, and essentially misogynist as *The Well* should be perceived as empowering: the ideology it reflects, with the exception of its plea for tolerance of inverts, is not very far from that of Sir William Joynson-Hicks, the home secretary who ensured that it was brought to trial" (Wachman 161). The pronatalist agenda that the novel imposes on Mary underscores this.

The compliance with a nationalist agenda is heightened by the circumstances of Stephen and Mary's meeting: as ambulance drivers on the frontline during the Great War. The war is presented in the text as a noble and ennobling venture. Young men "looked round and were amazed and bewildered; yet with something that stung as it leapt in their veins, filling them with a strange excitement—the bitter and ruthless potion of war that spurred and lashed at their manhood" (264). Puddle, Stephen's muted and devoted (chaste, lesbian) former nanny, rejoices that England joined the war quickly, and Stephen declares, "All the young men from Morton will go—every decent man in the country will go" (265). In the meantime, Stephen struggles with what to do with herself, even suffering the indignity of her effeminate playwright friend Brockett's enlistment, while she was denied combat duty: "But Jonathan Brockett, with the soft white hands, and the foolish

gestures, and the high little laugh—even he could justify his existence… Stephen never had thought to feel envious of a man like Jonathan Brockett" (267).

In rapturous tones, Stephen uncritically thinks through the meaning of the war, and her place in it:

> Every instinct handed down by the men of her race, every decent instinct of courage, now rose to mock her so that all that was male in her make-up seemed to grow more aggressive, aggressive perhaps as never before, because of this new frustration. She felt appalled at the realization of her own grotesqueness; she was nothing but a freak abandoned on a kind of no-man's land at this moment of splendid national endeavour. England was calling her men into battle, her women to the bedsides of the wounded and dying and between these two chivalrous, surging forces, she, Stephen, might as well be crushed out of existence—of less use to her country was she than Brockett. She stared at her bony masculine hands, they had never been skillful when it came to illness; strong they might be, but rather inept; not hands wherewith to succour the wounded. … And yet, good God, one must do something! (267)[5]

Stephen's dilemma points out two major gendered wartime stereotypes—the soldier and the nurse—and she finds a way to position herself between the two as an ambulance

[5] There is an interesting thematic split between nurses and ambulance drivers, with the former being paragons of femininity, and the latter being positioned as usefully masculinized. The popular memoirs of women's work in the war show a preference for the nurse as a particularly patriotic and valorous, yet unfailing feminine, type. For men, however, the distinction works the other way: ambulance drivers, including political pacifists, were characterized as feminized and cowardly for resisting battle. See Grayzel and Garrity for discussion of women's war work.

driver, after her offer to form a band of woman-warriors at her own expense was denied. She sees the frontline finally, working under the aptly named Mrs. Breakspeare. Hall introduces Mary Llewellyn and the frontline simultaneously, along with Stephen's amazement that the delicate-seeming Mary has the strength to engage in the rigorous and gruesome work of ambulance driving.[6] So Mary is herself introduced as a sort of anomaly—an interloper in no-man's land. The contrast between Mary and Stephen's gender presentations is critically important. If Mary had been written as another "congenital invert," her body would have the same supposed sterility as Stephen's; their mating would be less problematic because it would not carry the same fears of sexual predation and anti-natalism on Stephen's part, and it would not remove an eligible woman from the gene pool. In Lisa Duggan's words, *The Well* defines inverts as "a fixed minority who pose no serious threat to the contours of normal elite domestic life" (*Sapphic Slashers* 189).

Esther Newton's widely-read 1984 article "The Mythic Mannish Lesbian: Radclyffe Hall and the New Woman" hopes to valorize the image of Stephen Gordon in the face of lesbian-feminism that valued "women-identified women." Newton claims that "*The Well*

[6] The trope of the lesbian ambulance driver and her place in the national imaginary is brilliantly reworked in Sarah Water's *The Night Watch*, in which the butch Kay, working as an ambulance driver in London during The Blitz of WWII, transports Viv to the hospital. Viv, unmarried, has had a botched abortion and in hemorrhaging. She begs Kay to tell the doctors that she is married, thinking they will treat her better. Kay gives her a ring that she has and gives the doctors a false name for Viv. Viv is, in her own way, a victim of the war and relies on the help of those also operating on the fringes of social acceptability to fabricate a suitable narrative to explain her actions (choosing to abort, rather than having a "war baby"). Waters' work draws attention to women's and queers' ambivalent relationship to the nation-state.

has continued to have meaning to lesbians because it confronts the stigma of lesbianism—as most have had to live it. … most lesbians have had to face being called, or at least feeling like, freaks" (282). Newton argues that we cannot dispense with *The Well* or with Stephen Gordon, because the image rings true—even if it doesn't have the right pedigree. In her book *Female Masculinity*, J. Halberstam extends Newton's work to look more closely at how Hall shaped the image of inverted women, and reads *The Well* as a book more about gender expression than sexual preference. Halberstam does pay some attention to the conditions of World War I, but celebrates the war because it "allowed some women…to experience their fantasies of being men within the rigid strictures of military life" (87). Halberstam provides a sophisticated reading of the class position occupied by Radclyffe Hall in relation to her lovers and its enabling of her privilege to enact her flamboyant masculinity. But she also suggests that the militarism, police work, and even fascism that Hall and her circle of masculine women friends took interest in had more to do with the masculine display of uniforms rather than conservative politics. Halberstam concludes, "When modern lesbian critics, historians, and theorists read an idealized history of lesbian identification out of the bodies of masculine women, a great violence is done to the meaning of those lives in the name of a politically pure lesbianism" (109), by which Halberstam invokes the "woman-identified woman" of lesbian feminism, just as Newton did. Halberstam does not discuss the ramifications of Stephen's treatment of Mary, nor its impact on the history of lesbianism.

Jay Prosser takes these readings of the masculine narrative even further by reading

Stephen Gordon as a transsexual character. Prosser decries Gilbert and Gubar's reading of *The Well,* which characterizes "transsexuality as a medium for lesbianism" (137). Prosser argues that critics have been wrong to collapse sexual inversion and homosexuality into the same thing, and sees *The Well* as an important body narrative of transsexuality. Prosser claims that Stephen's commodification of Mary is only further proof of her identification with men—even if it is troublesome, and that "In recasting Hall's novel as transsexual, we can see our dogged attempts to read it as lesbian in spite of its narrative have been a case of trying to fit a square peg into a round hole" (168). For my purposes, I am not so much interested in discovering or retreading what precisely Hall and her contemporaries meant by "invert" but in the rhetorical importance of *The Well* as a lesbian novel. While Stephen's inversion may well have been a condition that she and Hall understood in terms of gender identity, the novel has been popularly read and received as one about lesbians, and as such has played a significant role in forming understandings and opinions about lesbians. While it is important to excavate the historical meanings that attached themselves to same-sex desire, the somewhat anachronistic labeling of *The Well* as a lesbian novel, rather than a novel about inverts, feels right because of the longterm reader response to it as a lesbian novel. Because it has long been understood that way, it has become a touchstone lesbian text—even if Hall's intention was to explore gender inversion more than homoeroticism. None of these important readings of *The Well*, however, consider the underlying animus of racial motherhood and how it is played out via Mary.

Identification with Mary instead of Stephen produces an even more "freakish" experience (to use Newton's term) because the feminine invert in *The Well* is a freak in both the straight and inverted worlds. In the critical conflict of the book, Stephen offers Mary *as* the no-man's land in a battle of masculinities: Stephen and her former friend Martin Hallam orchestrate a battle for Mary's affection that is a cruel commodification and manipulation of Mary. The resolution unhappily forces Mary and Martin into heterosexuality and almost certainly into sexual reproduction, cementing their proper citizenship: the most important function of Stephen's sacrifice is that it propels Martin and Mary to land on the proper side of the baby line, even as we can imagine a tragically unhappy marriage between the two.

I need to set up the importance of Stephen and Martin's competition by moving backward to their initial friendship, which was initiated before WWI. Little flap is usually made over Martin Hallam, Stephen's friend from adolescence. He is generally interpreted as the normative WASP who breaks up Mary and Stephen's relationship. Stephen and Martin had met when she was 18 and he 22, and they develop a fraternal relationship, often discussed by the narrator as one between men. Martin violated their friendship by developing affection for her, thereby causing Stephen to experience this instance of "heterosexual" passion as an incidence of homosexual incest. But the assumption of Martin's heterosexuality must be interrogated, for reasons that become even more crucial in the conflict over Mary. I suggest that in the development of Martin, Hall is engaging in a version of what Gay Wachman calls crosswriting: "lesbian crosswriting transposes the

otherwise unrepresentable lives of invisible or silenced or simply closeted lesbians into narratives about gay men" (1). Here we have the possibility of a gay man being written into a narrative about lesbians, but also representing the fantasy life that Stephen would like to have. Martin's ambiguous presence as Stephen's friend, brother, and suitor eventually allow him to function as Stephen's doppelgänger - a construction that allows Hall to project a fantasy life of marriage, assimilation, empire building,[7] and children for Mary and Martin that cannot exist for Mary and Stephen.[8]

The Well of Loneliness does not definitively lend itself to readings of Martin Hallam as a gay character, but it does provide several important clues into his desires that are overlooked not only by the criticism to date, but also in the unfolding of the narrative. We know that Stephen is a masculine person not only in adulthood, but as a child. She has some sort of *essential* female masculinity. Though Hall nods in the direction of "nurture" by situating Stephen's masculinity in the overdetermined atmosphere of her parents' longing for a son, insistence on a son-in-the-womb, and her father's choice of masculine name for his daughter, the newborn Stephen is nevertheless described as "a narrow-

[7] Martin spends his time of national service in Canada, and tells Stephen that he intends to settle there with Mary.

[8] In *Sapphic Slashers*, Lisa Duggan has also pointed out the way that *The Well* mimics a 19th Century sensationalized iteration of the Sapphic love story: the murder plot. "But Mary will not leave Stephen, will not choose Martin over her. Stephen, out of martyred honor, must sacrifice her own desire and relinquish Mary, against the latter's wishes but for her own good. Radclyffe Hall's novel thus repeats elements of the lesbian love murder story: the masculine/feminine contrast, the triangle, and the wish to set up a household… But the defeat of an/or violence by the masculine woman is rewritten as her noble sacrifice of the normal woman's love. This writing ingeniously formulates a plea for social justice for inverts" *because* they are positioned as non-threatening and non-preditory (189).

hipped, wide-shouldered little tadpole of a baby" (13) indicating the masculine form that Stephen will carry through life. Sir Philip's coddling of his daughter's masculine proclivities can likewise not be the sole source of her masculinity, especially in the face her mother, the ultra-womanly Lady Anna, and her admonishments and wishes for Stephen to behave and look more feminine. Moreover, Hall invites her readers to see Stephen's behavior as a manifestation of her *bodily* masculinity, and her father as a compassionate witness to (and not instigator of) his daughter's incongruities with femininity. While Lady Anna regards Stephen as "in some way a caricature of Sir Philip; a blemished unworthy, maimed reproduction" (15), Sir Philip "loved Stephen, he idolized her; it was almost as though he divined by instinct that his daughter was being defrauded, was bearing some unmerited burden" (16). The locus of these parental opinions is Stephen's body itself, the "largeness about her, a certain crude lack of grace in her movements" (16).

As Stephen grows, this inborn female masculinity—sexual inversion—manifests itself in her idolization of Lord Nelson, her identification with both him and with Jesus Christ, her excellent riding (astride, of course) and hunting skills, and her infatuation with Collins, the housemaid. Stephen's interactions with the neighboring Antrim children, Roger and Violet, also stress her bodily difference from "that idiotic Violet—Violet who was learning to ride side-saddle—and Roger strutting around in his Etons, and bragging, always bragging because he was a boy" (48). Stephen dreaded tea parties at the Antrims, a training ground for a future social life, and harbored a disgust for Violet's helpless

feminine posturing, as well as Roger's chauvinistic and aggressive masculinity. Roger takes care to cruelly deflate all of Stephen's proudest accomplishments—especially her strength and hunting abilities—while Violet intermittently whines and plays hostess. Stephen is caught amid these gendered extremes:

> She stood there an enraged and ridiculous figure in her Liberty smock, with her hard, boyish forearms. Her long hair had partly escaped its ribbon, and the bow sagged down limply, crooked and foolish. All that was heavy in her face sprang into view, the strong line of the jaw, the square massive brow, the eyebrows, too thick and too wide for beauty. And there was a kind of large splendor about her—absurd though she was, she was splendid at that moment—grotesque and splendid, like some primitive thing conceived in a turbulent age of transition. (52)[9]

The thick, wide primitivism of Stephen's face marks gender non-conformity via racial phenotypes, in keeping with the prevailing scientific models of racial and sexual deviance of Hall's time. Stephen's longterm preoccupation through the narrative is to overcome this primitivism by putting her large splendor to civilized use. Though my reading focuses on how this plays out with Mary and to a lesser extent Martin, it is important to

[9] Hall must have been very pleased with aptness of the phrasing "some primitive thing conceived in a turbulent age of transition." She chooses to use it again, verbatim, when describing Stephen in the midst of pleading with her lover Angela to leave her marriage so that they can be together honorably. The second usage appears on page 150 and the scene is discussed below. She uses similar language yet again in the scene featuring Lincoln and Henry Jones, the singers. Besides characterizing Lincoln as having "the patient, questioning expression common to the eye of most animals and to those of all slowly evolving races" (362) the narrator further relates that "A crude animal Henry could be at times, with a taste for liquor and a lust for women—just a primitive force rendered dangerous by drink, rendered offensive by civilization" (363).

contextualize this by looking at Stephen's earlier experiences with Martin and with her first lover, Angela Crossby. In moving Stephen through a series of situations with Martin, Angela, her mother, war, Mary, and then onto the conflict between Stephen and Martin over Mary, Hall sets up the novel as a bildungsroman that demands an ever-increasing suffering from Stephen. It is through this suffering and ultimately self-sacrifice that Stephen expurgates her own primitivism.

In childhood, Stephen's experiences continue to be dissonant with her peers, and she has virtually no friends until she meets Martin Hallam. Martin shows an immediate interest in Stephen's accomplishments and intellect, and he was "a queer sensitive fellow … with his strange love of trees and primitive forests—not a man to make many intimate friends" (94). Martin's maleness is patently different from Roger's, but he is never rendered as overtly effeminate, despite his identification with nature, earth, and aesthetic refinement. Stephen and Martin form a brotherly relationship cemented by their "responsive[ness] to beauty" (94). Lady Anna, Sir Philip, and the neighbors prognosticate about the romantic possibilities between Stephen and Martin. What would it be, though, for Martin to *desire* Stephen? If Stephen is written as an essentially *masculine* woman, how can Martin's desire for her be configured along an axis of heterosexuality that relies on desire between masculine men and feminine women? There is strong evidence of homoeroticism in Martin's desire for Stephen. Hall explicitly sets up Martin and Stephen's adolescent friendship as one between brothers, and readers already know that Stephen is disconcertingly masculine in appearance, despite the feminine drag she wore while still at Morton. We cannot blindly accept Martin's attraction to Stephen as heterosexual due

only to the anatomical facts of their bodies. As Judith Butler has so famously asked, "If a sexuality is to be disclosed, what will be taken as the true determinant of its meaning: the phantasy structure, the act, the orifice, the gender, the anatomy?" ("Imitation" 17). I realize that in making the assertion that Martin's attraction to Stephen is queer, I am also running the risk of construing Mary's attraction to Stephen as heterosexual, and at the same time, potentially essentializing the meaning of masculine and feminine self-presentation and behaviors. I do not want to do any of these things, but rather open different pathways for reading the text. Hall writes Stephen's experience of Martin as man-to-man, and Mary's experience of Stephen as woman-to-woman.

Years later, when Martin and Stephen are reunited in Paris, why is Martin so eager to "rescue" Mary from her relationship with Stephen? Is his love for Mary a logical continuation of his "heterosexuality", or a transference of his desire for Stephen? We learn that he has not married, and prior to meeting up with Stephen again, he has visited the Paris bars known for their queer clientele—which registers as suspicious behavior for a heterosexual man. These questions about Martin go unanswered in the text, but hover around the love triangle that quickly forms. Martin is/was attracted to Stephen's performance of masculinity, but also threatened by it: threatened by his own desire and also by feelings of inadequacy at her rejection. It is from this threat that Mary becomes the treasured prize, because she is the only trophy that can prove Martin's manhood, and likewise becomes the contested territory through which Stephen can prove her moralistic allegiance to the Empire, rather than to the queer exiles she is forced to walk among.

The Well contains at least two significant examples of shunning and exile due to

homoerotic passion. The first is when Stephen Gordon is cast out of her home, Morton, by her mother. The second scene, which mirrors the first, is Stephen's ostracizing of Mary at the novel's denouement. There are uncanny parallels between the construction of the two episodes, almost to the point of cliché, and both result in deliberate rejection. Lady Anna becomes a monstrous mother who rejects her child out of fear and spite when she learns that Stephen has had an affair with Angela. Later, as the narrator figures Stephen as a parental figure to Mary, Stephen's rejection of Mary is written as a form of loving, after Stephen leads Mary to believe she has been unfaithful.

Stephen rebuffs Martin's marriage proposal and a while later meets Angela Crossby. Angela is an American actress married to Ralph Crossby, a business magnate who has recently taken up residence in the area. Ralph Crossby's new money and Angela's storied past make them a poor match to the reserved and ancient families of Upton, and Lady Anna seems quite reluctant to make acquaintance with them. It is quite by accident that Stephen meets Angela, after Angela's dog has been in a fight, and Stephen is given the opportunity to rescue the pair. From there, they make a string of social calls to one another, Angela commenting, "It's a curious thing, but I feel as though I've known you for ages. I don't want to behave as though we were strangers—do you think that's very American of me? Ought I to be more formal and stand-offish and British? I will if you say so, but I don't feel very British" (139). So Angela's lack of British decorum invites an easy intimacy that springs up between the two women. Furthermore, witnessing Stephen's bashfulness during a visit to the Crossbys' estate, "[Angela] exerted all of her subtlety and skill to make this queer guest of hers talk more freely, and Angela's subtlety was no mean

thing, neither was her skill if she chose to exert it… she [Stephen] found that she was learning many thing about her hostess; for instance she learned that Angela was lonely and very badly in need of her friendship. Most of Angela's troubles seemed to centre around Ralph" (140). So in their initial meetings, Angela is set up as the seductress—lonely, foreign, in a bad marriage, and leading the innocent Stephen on, because at this point in the novel, Stephen is written as knowing that she is different somehow, but not understanding the sexual specificity of that difference. It is Angela's flirtatious flexibility that is able to awaken Stephen's passions and spurs her self-discovery, a dynamic that Stephen later falsely believes she creates with the Mary, whom she views as child-like and virginal.

As the courtship quickly advances (narrated romantically rather than platonically, in contrast to the sections about Martin), Angela continues to be portrayed as the seductress while the inexperienced and sincere Stephen is led on by Angela's greater worldly knowledge. When Angela questions Stephen about her nervousness:

> Stephen answered slowly: "I'm frightened now—I'm frightened of you."
>
> "Yet you are stronger then I am—"
>
> "Yes, that's why I am frightened, you make me feel strong—do you want to do that?"
>
> "Well—perhaps—you're so very unusual, Stephen."
>
> "Am I?"
>
> "Of course, don't you know that you are? Why you are altogether different from other people."

Stephen trembled a little: "Do you mind?" she faltered.

"I know that you're you," teased Angela, smiling again, but she reached out and took Stephen's hand. (144)

Emboldened by Angela's flirtatious acceptance and the romantic walk through the grounds of her beloved home, Stephen engages in a phantasmagorical soliloquy that merges the estate of Morton and the English countryside with her love for Angela, into her own prelapsarian love reverie. "We're both filled with the old peace of Morton, because we love each other so deeply—and because we're perfect, a perfect thing, you and I—not two separate people but one. And our love has lit a great comforting beacon, so that we need never be afraid of the dark any more—we can warm ourselves at our love, we can lie down together and my arms will be round you—" (145). Stephen's immature innocence is contrasted here with Angela's worldly and carnal awareness, taking Stephen's hand and literally leading her on. Yet, as Stephen's awareness buds, the narrative switches the two women's positions so that Stephen's desires become primary:

> Angela moved a step nearer to Stephen, then another, until their hands were touching. And all that she was, and all that she had been and would be again, perhaps even to-morrow, was fused at that moment into one mighty impulse, one imperative need, and that need was Stephen. Stephen's need was now hers, by sheer force of its blind and uncomprehending will to appeasement. Then Stephen took Angela into her arms, and she kissed her full on the lips, as a lover. (146)

The agency that swerves between the two women here is important, especially within the narrative logic's opposition of masculine and feminine, and privileging of

Stephen's aristocratic point of view. In her article "'Articulate Silences': Femme Subjectivity and Class Relations in *The Well of Loneliness*," Leslie J. Henson explores how the novel "sexualizes and dismisses Stephen's first femme lover, Angela Crossby, primarily for her working-class status. The text uses Angela's working-class status to explain a feminine woman's willingness to experiment sexually and romantically with Stephen… Indeed, Angela embodies the classist stereotype of 'working-class sexual amorality' as opposed to the asexuality ascribed to bourgeois women" (62). Angela is able to provoke and invite Stephen's desire, but only Stephen's desire can bring their attraction to consummation, and moreover, elevate it beyond the plane of lust. Stephen's aristocratic masculinity assure that "she fell quite simply and naturally in love, in accordance with the dictates of her nature" while she "saw [in Angela] a patient endurance that was purely fictitious, and conceived of a loyalty far beyond the limits of Angela's nature" (146). The remarkable contrast that Hall draws is between a masculine, noble, protective, and all-consuming love ("a fine selfless thing of great beauty and courage" 146) and a feminine, working-class, and fickle pastime: "Stephen was becoming a kind of anodyne against boredom. And then Angela knew her own power to subdue; she could play with fire yet remain unscathed by it" (147) It is in fact the contrast of these qualities that leads to the demise of the relationship, and[10] Stephen's expulsion from Morton.

As the affair continues, Stephen becomes concerned that it is dishonorable not because it is lesbian, but because Angela is married, and they must behave surreptitiously.

[10] With her husband Ralph, too, Angela is portrayed as duplicitous and manipulative: "Ralph's not much of a man, but he's better than nothing, and I've managed him so far without any trouble. The great thing with him is to blaze a false trail, that distracts his mind, it works like a charm. He'll follow any trail that I want him to follow" (149).

Stephen wants to reveal the affair to Ralph, and to leave with Angela, an exodus rather than an expulsion. Angela is appalled and tells Stephen, "I will not have you interfering in my home!" emphasizing *home* several times in the argument (149-50). Stephen emphasizes her wealth, and promises to take care of Angela, as "All that was heavy in her face sprang into view, the strong line of the jaw, the square, massive brow, the eyebrows too think and too wide for beauty; she was like some curious, primitive thing conceived in a turbulent age of transition" (150). (Again Hall uses the exact same phrasing that she has earlier in the novel, when describing Stephen at her playdate at the Antrims'.) Angela uses her cruelest and most effective argument against Stephen: "Could you marry me, Stephen?" (150). This entreaty is a blow to Stephen not just because it highlights her "gender inversion" but because it also strikes at her notions of class propriety. Thanks in large part to Stephen's own belief in the purity of her love, she is chastened by the reminder that a long-term partnership would be born out of mutual sexual desire, and not through the desexualized channels of marriage and heir production that provide Roger Antrim (with whom Angela also commences an affair) and other members of the married gentry free license to copulate—as long as they have produced legitimate heirs—behind a fabricated veneer of purity.

After Angela's repudiation, Stephen grows unsure and fretful, unable to square her absolute belief in the purity of her love, and herself, and the stigma and silence that suppress it. Lovesick for Angela, Stephen makes a reconciliation in order to continue their affair. When the two are separated by their different summer holidays (in Cornwall and Scotland) Stephen grows restless for their reunion, "oppressed by doubts and vague fears;

bewildered, uncertain of her power to hold; uncertain, too, of Angela's will to be held by this dangerous yet bloodless loving. Her defrauded body had been troubling her sorely … trying to trample down her hot youth and only succeeding in augmenting its vigour" (163). Upon the pair's reunion, Angela's continued reticence to leave her marriage and new flirtations with Stephen's arch-nemesis Roger Antrim leave Stephen pensive and brooding, and she turns to the estate for comfort: "Going home, she made her way to the lakes, and there she quite suddenly started weeping. Her whole body seemed to dissolve itself into weeping; and she flung herself down on the kind earth of Morton, shedding tears as if of blood" (186). This act of osmotic mourning—to a "Mother Earth" that belongs to Stephen, that Stephen can use and possess—comes packed into a few pages in which Stephen travels to London and spends extravagantly on men's clothing, a new car, a diamond-bedazzled handbag for Angela, and upon her return to Morton, enacts the above-discussed "mirror scene." The juxtaposition of all of these corporeal acts highlights the intensity of Stephen's identification with her status as a member of the English gentry: she has the spending power and the pedigree; all that she lacks is a marriage license.

The growing tension between Stephen and Angela is exacerbated by Stephen's increasing brashness and desire to possess Angela fully, and to protect her completely from Ralph, and indeed any criticism. Here, Stephen's feelings are at odds with the narrator's; Stephen is constructed as loyal and forgiving, if foolish, and while the reader garners some sympathy for Angela in learning that she was reduced to a penniless dancer and sex worker at a young age and leapt at the opportunity, poor and sick, to gain stability through marrying Ralph. We are still presented with a contrast of character attributes

between the two women, a difference that is inflected through their different gender presentations, sexual needs, and especially class positions. It is not just for cruelty's sake that Angela laments:

> You see why I've got to be careful how I act; he's awfully suspicious. He thinks that because I took a lover when I was literally down and out, I'm likely to do the same thing now. … I'd be scared if he really turned nasty. He knows that, I think, so he's not afraid to bully—he's bullied me many a time over you—but of course you're a woman so he couldn't divorce me—except that's what makes him so angry. All the same, when you asked me to leave him for you, I hadn't the courage to face that either. I couldn't have faced the public scandal that Ralph would have made; he'd have hounded us down to the ends of the earth, he'd have branded us. I know him, he's revengeful, he'd stop at nothing, that weak sort of a man is often that way. … Every time Ralph looks at me I am frightened, because he knows that I hate him most when he tries to make love—" She broke off abruptly. (181)

Stephen is able to pity Angela's position, but she is not able to discern any shrewdness in her decisions—again we as readers are shown a contrast between Stephen's strength and Angela's weakness. In a narrative twist that anticipates Martin's re-entry and interference with Stephen and Mary's relationship towards the end of the novel, Roger Antrim is reintroduced here, to duel with Stephen for Angela's affections. As Angela is visited more frequently by Roger, "Sometimes he and Stephen would look at each other covertly, and their youthful faces would be marred by a very abominable thing; the instinctive repulsion of two human bodies, one for the other, which neither could help—

not now that those bodies were stirred by a woman." When Ralph enters the complex geometry of these clashing liaisons, "the two male creatures who hated each other, would be shamefully united in the bond of their deeper hatred of Stephen" (184). Struck by the torment of the situation, and after spying Angela and Roger kissing in Angela's garden, Stephen decides to write a lengthy letter to Angela, begging, "I'm just a poor, heart-broken freak of a creature who loves you and needs you much more than its life" and the narrator continues, "Some fine instinct of utterly selfless protection towards this woman had managed to survive all the anguish and all the madness of that day. The letter was a terrible indictment against Stephen, a complete vindication of Angela Crossby" (197). Because of this critical flaw, Angela is able to exploit the letter to finally end her affair with Stephen, and to maintain her own innocence with Ralph. After showing him the letter and asking his advice on how to proceed, Ralph swears, "I'll hound her out of the county before I've done—and with luck out of England; the same as I'd hound you out if I thought that there'd ever been anything between you two women" (198). It is Stephen's words that out her, just as she hopes by the end of the novel that her authorial voice will carry merit on behalf of "inverts" everywhere.

Bypassing Stephen altogether, Ralph writes to Lady Anna, showing her Stephen's letter. The enraged Lady Anna[11] tells Stephen:

> "All your life I've felt very strangely towards you"; she was saying, "I've felt a kind of physical repulsion, a desire not to touch or to be touched by you—a terrible thing

[11] In this scene, Lady Anna becomes configured as the monstrous mother that Stephen must break away from in order to be herself. Yet as Hall indicts Lady Anna and naturalizes the invert herself, by writing Mary out of the conclusion, Hall suggests that there is something indeed monstrous about loving an invert.

for a mother to feel—it has often made me deeply unhappy. I've often felt that I was being unjust, unnatural—but now I know that my instinct was right; it is you who are unnatural, not I …"

"Mother-stop!"

"It is you who are unnatural, not I. In that letter you say things that may only be said between man and woman and coming from you they are vile and filthy words of corruption—against nature, against God who created nature." (200)

Lady Anna asks Stephen to leave Morton, though she is not cut off from the family fortune. Angela, while still venerated by Stephen, figures into the narrative as Eve, the woman whose all-too-much knowledge and willfulness force pathology into a pure love and a pure land.[12] This longing for a pure love and pure land is mimicked in the Scottish impoverished "lassbairn" (354) couple Barbara and Jamie, who have also exiled themselves to Paris: "At times Jamie gave way to deep depression, hating the beautiful city of her exile. Homesick unto death she would suddenly feel for the dour little Highland village of Beedles" (360). Curiously, it is the butch Jamie, like Stephen, who is overly identified with the motherland; both Mary and the feminine Barbara seem willing to take

[12] In one of the pivotal scenes between Anna and the young Stephen, Stephen entreats Lady Anna to move carefully so that she does not hurt the "white smell" of Morton's earth. While most critics read this scene alongside the nationalist narrative of *The Well*. Sally Munt, however, provides a fascinating counter-interpretation: "The scene clearly articulates Stephen's sexualized dissmell/disgust. Indeed, the color white, and unpleasant smells, recur in the novel to connote sexual disgust (this is repeated ad nauseum in the descriptions of Brockett's white hands). In this scene, Stephen recognizes the sexual potency of Anna as something disgusting and dangerous to her, which later she will recast as all femininity." (203). In this context, Stephen disgust with Mary's sexual potency is all the more entangled with the problematic construct of whiteness and women's bodies as the gatekeepers of sexual and racial purity.

on expatriate identities. When Barbara dies of pneumonia and Jamie subsequently commits suicide, it is as much from grief for Beedles and for her exile as it is for Barbara:

> Bewailing the life of hardship and exile that had sapped Barbara's strength and weakened her spirit; bewailing the cruel dispensation of fate that had forced them to leave their home in the Highlands; bewailing the terrible thing that is death to those who, still loving, must look upon it. Yet all the exquisite pain of this parting seemed as nothing to the anguish that was far more subtle: 'I can't mourn her without bringing shame on her name—I can't go back home now and mourn her,' wailed Jamie; 'oh, I want to go back to Beedles, I want to be home among our own people … I want to grieve for her home there in Beedles.' (401)

Like Stephen, Jamie wants to enter the social order in her homeland, even though Paris has offered her a measure of freedom as well as a chance to develop her musical talents. Barbara and Jamie's relationship is ended through illness; Jamie cannot endure the separation from both love and home, and takes her own life—a result of both self-pity and self-sacrifice. Stephen herself takes on the mantle of ersatz self-sacrifice and self-pity (incorporating the class-inflected narrative of Jamie and Barbara, as well as a false narrative about Mary's "womanly" needs) when she banishes Mary.

The second incidence of expulsion from the home is, structurally, an "inverted" version of the tale of Stephen's expulsion from Morton, with many of the same elements: the lovesick woman, the distracted lover, the unusual triangulation, the overdetermined ending—and a resolution that puts aright normative gender and sexual expression. Only in this second instance, it is Stephen who possesses the agency to effect these events,

making choices that recapitulate her past, and ultimately casting Mary from their home.

Mary is a difficult character to analyze, because Hall's descriptions of her widely vacillate. Despite her femininity, which Stephen consistently conflates with passivity, it is actually Mary who initiates the sexual relationship between herself and Stephen, asking Stephen to kiss her. Later, she confronts Stephen's rebuffs of her advances: "Every time I come near you, you shrink or push me away… it torments me to be always with you and to feel you've literally grown to hate me." Stephen counters that Mary "can't understand" that love between them would be carnal. Mary retorts, "What do I care for the world's opinion?" (312). Mary shows active desire that is incomprehensible to Stephen; Stephen is utterly unprepared to acknowledge that Mary could actually read her as lesbian, and more importantly, desire her. Stephen is likewise unable to read Mary as lesbian. Mary's character is in sharp contrast to Angela's. Though they both exhibit a femininity that attracts Stephen, Angela's sexual history and storied past lead to Stephen's adoration, but she is ultimately written as a deceitful seductress who gets Stephen thrown out of her home; it's clearly an unhappy Adam and Eve tale. There is something that is always already illicit about Angela; Mary on the other hand is virginal, and Stephen feels both pride and anguish at being the person who has "taken" Mary's virginity. Upon their return from Tenerife (where their relationship is consummated) to Paris,[13] Stephen observes

[13] It is important to keep in mind that Mary and Stephen's initial sexual forays are fostered not only by Mary's persistence, but by the location. As Sarah Chinn has pointed out, "Hall sets up a complicated series of analogies are oppositions, mediated by sexology and imperialist racism (an invert's "Orientalism," to use Said's influential term), in which Tenerife, representing one set of terms, is transformed into a combination of Garden of Eden, tourist resort, and colonial plantation, and Stephen and Mary—embodying the other side of the opposition—are lesbianism's First Parents, sightseers, and blissfully unaware

Mary, a young-looking twenty-two year old, and thinks, "there was something quite new in her face, a soft, wise expression that Stephen has put there, so that she suddenly felt pitiful to see her so young, yet so full of wisdom; for sometimes the coming of passion to you, in spite of its glory, will be strangely pathetic" (323).

Stephen feels that taking Mary into a life of lesbianism would be a repulsive and crippling twist of fate: "It seemed to her that what she must say to this creature she loved would come as a death-blow, that all youth and all joy would be slain in Mary" (311). Hall describes Mary in only the most gendered and romanticized terms:

> And Stephen as she held the girl in her arms, she would feel that indeed she was all things to Mary; *father, mother, friend and lover, all things*; and Mary all things to her—*the child, the friend, the beloved, all things*. But Mary, because she was *perfect woman*, would rest without thought, without exultation, without question; finding no need to question since for her there was now only one thing—Stephen. (314, emphasis added)

For Stephen, "being everything" means that she will be parental, which forces Mary into an infantilized dependence. Mary's individuality is subsumed into her love for Stephen, in a model that mirrors the worst of patriarchal marriages. Mary becomes the faithful, childlike wife and muse who enables Stephen to write her books. As the relationship

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imperialists. … The primitive atmosphere of Orotava allows Stephen to loosen her self-control, to give in to the primitive self that has previously only surfaced at times of extreme stress. Moreover, Tenerife's exoticism allows Mary to push beyond the sexual limits of British femininity and Stephen to experience desire in an untroubled way for the first time" (306).

continues, the gendered positions of Stephen and Mary become even more exacerbated:

> "There comes a time in all passionate attachments when life, real life, must be faced once again with its varied and endless obligations, when the lover knows in his innermost heart that the halcyon days are over. He may well regret this prosaic intrusion, yet to him it will usually seem quite natural, so that while loving not one whit less, he will bend his neck to the yoke of existence. But the woman, for whom love is an end in itself, finds it harder to submit thus calmly. To every devoted and ardent woman there comes this moment of poignant regretting; and struggle she must to hold it at bay. 'Not yet, not yet—just a little longer'; until Nature, abhorring her idleness, forces on her the labour of procreation.
>
> But in such relationships as Mary and Stephen's, Nature must pay for experimenting; she may even have to pay very dearly—it largely depends on the sexual mixture. A drop too little of the male in the lover, and mighty indeed will be the wastage. And yet there are cases—and Stephen's was one—in which the male will emerge triumphant; in which passion combined with a real devotion will become a spur rather than deterrent; in which love and endeavour will fight side by side in a desperate struggle to find some solution." (338-9)

Here, the man (played by Stephen) turns away from his relationship and returns to his life as it had been before; for the woman (played by Mary) life must be completely reconfigured as she adapts to motherhood—there is no other role. Mary will "become a spur rather than a deterrent" for Stephen, but there is no reciprocal outcome for Mary—as Stephen's partner, she can neither take up meaningful work, nor mother. Instead, Mary's

days are filled with "the household, the paying of bills, the filing of receipts, the answering of *unimportant* letters" which culminates in "long hours of idleness" because the servants do much of the housekeeping and money is plentiful[14] (340, emphasis added). Thus cloistered in Stephen's house, Mary becomes the epitome of a clinging, languid wife.

This passage is curiously placed, cropping up upon Stephen's return from an obligatory trip to Morton. The disruption to Stephen and Mary's peace is caused by two things: Stephen's inability to bring Mary to Morton, and Stephen's writer's block—notably, not by Stephen's inability to impregnate Mary. In fact, nowhere in the text does Mary express a desire to bear a child, yet it becomes a constant refrain for Stephen and the narrator. Stephen's brief return to England ignites her anxiety about Mary's childlessness. Stephen's newly articulated belief in maternalism is in sharp contrast to to her earlier thinking about Mary:

> Men—they were selfish, arrogant, and possessive. What could they do for Mary Llewellyn? What could a man give that she could not? A child? But she would give Mary such a love as would be complete in itself without children. Mary would have no room in her heart, in her life, for a child, if she came to Stephen. … She could bind Mary fast and the pain would be sweetness, so that the girl would cry out for that sweetness, hugging her chains always closer to her. (300)

As Mary's position in Stephen's life moves from that of the perfect beloved (and perhaps, per the above quote, a willing slave) to that of the ignored wife, her happiness dwindles—but it is for lack of Stephen's attention, and not for want of a child. This makes Stephen's

[14] There is even romanticization of poverty, as if the money in the household deprives Mary of the opportunity to play a budgeting game.

actions at the denouement of the narrative all the more perplexing, showing that Stephen is allowing her own flawed and sexist understanding of Mary's needs to come between them. Above all, Stephen is putting her own writing and Mary's ability to have children on the same plane, and concocting a scheme that will ensure that those vocations will occupy the utmost importance for both women. Stephen views her career as a writer to have a nationalistic sort of importance, she she thinks her novel, once written, will make great strides towards bringing respect to inverts. Stephen thinks that Mary can only likewise contribute to the Empire by breeding. Stephen will not explore any of the systems of alternative kinship offered by the queer culture of Paris. It takes Brockett's urging to bring the women into the queer life of Paris:

> But you've [Stephen] got your work, whereas Mary's got nothing—not a soul does that miserable kid know in Paris. … You and she have decided to make a ménage—as far as I can see it's as bad as marriage! But if you were a man it would be rather different; you'd have a dozen friends as a matter of course. Mary might even be looking to have an infant. Oh, for God's sake Stephen, don't look so shocked. Mary's a perfectly normal young woman; she can't live by love alone, that's all rot—especially as I shrewdly suspect that when you're working the diet's pretty meagre. (346)

It is important to note here that Brockett does not say that Mary wants a baby. He says that because Stephen and Mary are not privy to the social assurances and typical course of events that a married heterosexual couple enjoys, they must work to create community for themselves. His quip that "it's as bad as marriage" cuts to the core of what Stephen wants:

she wants it to be as *good* as marriage.[15] Stephen is humiliated that she can't give Mary a marriage or a baby. It is because of the feminine Brockett's intervention that Stephen takes Mary to Valérie Seymour's omnisexual, multi-gendered salon, where Stephen feels revulsion and Mary feels community.

It is against this backdrop of seeking that the final drama of *The Well*—Stephen's rejection of Mary—plays out. As the couple seeks to form more bonds in the queer Parisian demimonde, Stephen becomes ever more anxious about Mary's place in it, and ever more reviled by her "brethren." Soon after their initial visit to Valérie Seymour's, Stephen and Mary attend an evening of Negro Spiritual performances at Jamie and Barbara's. Jean Walton has demonstrated how this event is an adaptation of a similar event attended by Hall and Troubridge, and one that once again—as the Orotava idyll did earlier—allows Stephen to occupy a colonialist position: "By having the Negroes present a model that will inform Stephen's discovery of the form for which she has been searching as an invert-novelist, Hall employs a cultural ventriloquism that has by now become a familiar trope in a white modernist tradition that is characterized by the invention of, and fascination with, the 'primitive' "(289). The spiritual gives Stephen (and Hall) a particular and Christian form for performing suffering, as exiles whose songs yearn for home and for mother. The evening allows Stephen to see a way of expressing her own suffering, which she will eventually channel into her own spiritual, her novel about inverts. Moreover, as the evening's performance continues, Henry Jones (described as a "crude animal" and "primitive force" (363)) commingles popular songs with the spirituals, singing, "*Oh, my,*

[15] It's important to remember how acutely Stephen felt Angela Crossby's cutting remarks about marriage. Marriage isn't just a matter of love, but of class and propriety for Stephen.

help, help, ain't I nobody's baby?/Oh, my, what a shame, I ain't nobody's baby" (365). Walton points out, "While the slang lyrics of the popular tune ostensibly bewail the protagonist's lack of a lover… they also resonate the with theme of kinship that has been running through he chapter. … Once again Hall uses Henry to ventriloquize the plight of disparate, white inverts, bereft of a sense of kinship upon which to base a plea for salvation" (293). Hall appropriates the form of the spiritual protest in her novel (and probably the one that Stephen will come to write) but does so by distancing herself from the perceived primitivism of her sexual expression, and while deliberately eschewing the kinship offered up not only by Mary, but by the community of artists (including Jamie, Valérie, Henry, and Lincoln) she finds in Paris. She sees herself alone as an artist.[16]

As Mary and Stephen "made their first real acquaintances with the garish and tragic nightlife of Paris that lies open to people such as Stephen Gordon," Stephen is ashamed and humiliated by the tawdry denizens,[17] while "Mary seemed frantically eager to proclaim her allegiance to Pat's[18] miserable army" (378). Stephen even becomes so enthralled in her own homosexual panic—always returning to longing for Morton and the sensibility it represents— that she forbids Mary to go visit even Jamie and Barbara without explicit permission. Many of the women they meet in Paris, women in Valerie's circle

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[16] The next chapter of *The Well* is about Stephen's current novel *The Furrow* and the success she achieves in England and the United States, an achievement that makes Stephen "quite famous" (365), unlike the other artists she knows in Paris.

[17] The title *The Well of Loneliness* mostly likely draws from Elsa Lanchester's queer London cabaret, the Cave of Harmony, where Hall and Troubridge were frequent patrons, and about which Sylvia Townsend Warner wrote a poem. See Marcus, *Virginia Woolf and the Languages of Patriarchy*. While the Cave itself was a class-bound refuge for gays and lesbians who, like Hall, could afford it, Hall's lampoon of its name suggests self-pity and self-disgust rather than critique.

[18] Pat is one of the lesbians Mary and Stephen meet through Valérie.

(modeled after Natalie Barney's salon) are politicized women who have fought for suffrage rights and espouse much more libertine values than Stephen—unlike Hall and Stephen, they are not interested in "conform[ing] in all ways to the social code as it exists at present." Stephen wants Mary to behave like an aristocratic wife—domesticated, unemployed, and passive—qualities that are entirely discordant with the people and places around them. Paris becomes configured as the hellish home of exiles, a city that has itself been defiled by the invasion of war—a raped woman with her halfbreed children—unlike the pristine, unviolated English countryside that Stephen longs to return to. Mary must be sheltered from the violation and politicization (perhaps even radicalization) represented by Paris.[19] There are contaminants at every turn; Stephen will protect Mary from these contaminants. This sets the stage for the narrative's re-introduction of Martin Hallam.

When Martin Hallam unexpectedly reappears in Stephen's life, Stephen seizes upon him as a normalizing force—for Mary, of course. Discontented and disidentified with her erstwhile "brethren," Martin presents as a solution to Stephen's (and therefore Mary's) social isolation. Stephen is glad of his company, and also glad to have a reliable chaperone for Mary, keeping her out of corruption's way when she needs an outing but Stephen is too embroiled in work to go. At the same time, it appears that Mary is attempting to acculturate herself to the very society that Stephen and Martin attempt to keep clear of: "Only sometimes, when Mary would talk to him freely as she did very often of such people as Wanda, of the night life of the cafes and bars of Paris—most of which it

[19] My thanks to Jane Marcus for her particular insights on this point.

transpired that he had been to—of the tragedy of Barbara and Jamie that was never very far from her mind … when Mary would talk to him of these things, Martin would look rather gravely at Stephen" (417). The trio dines out together, Stephen glad of the neighboring tables' assumptions that Mary is Martin's, rather than hers. The crosswriting/doppelgänger aspect of the narrative begins to emerge, such that Stephen idealizes the possibility of love between Martin and Mary, and the tension between the primitive (Stephen and Mary as a dyad, Martin as an onlooker) and the normative (Mary and Martin as a dyad, with Stephen as celibate) is heightened. The Gilbert and Gubar "anxiety of authorship" paradigm of the Madwoman in the Attic is itself inverted: instead of creating an Other, Hall creates in Martin one who can pass freely in the most respectable society; the protagonist is herself othered.

In the atmosphere of trust that develops between Stephen and Martin, Stephen confides in Martin about the reasons she left England, and does not go to Morton: the affair with Angela Crossby (though because of "honour" she does not name Angela). Stephen of course projects so that Mary is the victim of this ousting, not herself: "Of course it's terribly hard on Mary,' she finished; 'think of it, Mary's never seen Morton; she's not met Puddle in all these years! … But the whole thing seems too outrageous to Mary!" (418). This supposed longing of Mary's to visit Morton is not fleshed out in the novel; the desire for reunion with the beloved earth of England is Stephen's. It is this very longing that convinces Stephen that turning Mary over to Martin is the right choice: Martin can take Mary to Morton. When Martin confronts Stephen and reveals that he has feelings for Mary (feelings that he suspects she reciprocates—but again, are never verified by Mary

in the novel), Stephen at first rises to the challenge, proclaiming, "I defy you to take her from me" (425) and two vow to engage in protracted, secret psychological warfare, using Mary as the battlefield.

As Mary cleaves more heavily to Stephen, however, Stephen begins to imagine that giving Mary to Martin will be a great act of love, and begins her great act of "sacrifice." She withdraws from Mary, makes it appear that she is having an affair with Valérie, "she ceased to respond to the girl's tenderness, nor would she consent that they two should be lovers. Ruthless as the world she became, and almost as cruel in this ceaseless wounding" (430) til war/love finally Mary breaks down: " 'I won't let you go—I won't let you, I tell you! … I can't do without you, and now …' In half-shamed, half-defiant words she must stand there and plead for what Stephen withheld, and Stephen must listen to such pleading from Mary. Then before the girl realized it she had said: 'But for you, I could have loved Martin Hallam!' … Mary flung despairing arms round her neck: 'No, no! Not that, I don't know what I'm saying'"(431).

In the final scene, when Stephen decides to oust Mary by falsely admitting to an affair with Valérie Seymour, and stations Martin outside to take Mary away, Clare Hemmings argues, "Depending on one's position, this movement is seen either as a suitable resolution of the heterosexual plot or as a failure of the lesbian narrative; Mary's 'return' itself is never questioned." But, as Hemmings points out, we are only shown the scene through Stephen's perspective, and "Stephen gives us her interpretation [of Mary joining with Martin] as truth…but what she actually sees is the following: Mary rushing away and stumbling; Martin Hallam's hands on her shoulders; her movement away while

Martin looks back in Stephen's direction and then rushes to catch up with Mary; and finally, in departure, Martin gripping Mary's arm" (193). Hemmings calls Stephen's assessment a "rather desperate overreading" and argues that, "there is no evidence for her presumed heterosexuality outside a masculine viewpoint," and concludes, "As the *passante* in a masculine narrative, Mary's future is as opaque as her past" (194).

While it is lovely to imagine a queer ending for Mary (and Martin), Stephen's focus on social acceptability and marriage imply that the outcome Stephen wishes for the pair is heteronormative, and in an England that that has never been corrupted or occupied. Since the narrative is strongly focalized through Stephen, it takes a great deal of reader resistance to imagine an alternate ending. I read the conclusion not as a testament to Mary's would-be heterosexuality, but as the result of Stephen's goading and sexual withholding. Stephen has isolated Mary to the point of having few friends, and nobody to turn to but Martin—as Stephen has repeatedly encouraged. That Mary should think of him is not the result of desire, but of manipulation, and the rhetorical positioning of Stephen and Martin as doubles. Stephen is not a second-best Martin: Martin is a second-best Stephen. The narrative logic and congruence of Stephen's actions are nevertheless pointed: Stephen lost Angela Crossby to her childhood nemesis Roger Antrim, and then seeks to donate Mary to her childhood friend, Martin. When Stephen asks Valérie for her help in the scheme, she explains to the baffled Valérie: "I can't give her protection or happiness, and yet she won't leave me. There is only one way" (434). Mary is to be returned to England, the homeland that could not protect or make Stephen happy, and yet the one that she won't leave. Like all good mothers, she will give her child for her

country. Like all good men, she will fight for her country's honor. And as a invert, it is in the final, ghastly moments of the novel that Stephen feels her calling as a champion of the inverts as their spectral selves appear fantastically before her: "They possessed her. Her barren womb became fruitful—it ached with its fearful and sterile burden. It ached with the fierce yet helpless children who would clamour in vain for their right to salvation. They would turn first to God, then to the world, and then to her" (437).

I want to take a moment to belabor the point that Stephen could have chosen a different sort of life. The novel propels melodramatically to this overwrought and predictable conclusion, but also provides glimpses of alternative forms of family and kinship. Valérie Seymour and her wide social circle are presented as neither discontent or dispossessed; with the exception of Valérie herself, however, they are presented as undesirable, amoral, shiftless, and/or pathetic. It is from this alternative world that Stephen must exculpate Mary. Stephen's "womb becomes fruitful" only in Mary's absence, and we can assume vice versa. Because of the heightened position played by *The Well* in the forming a popular understanding of what a lesbian is and what a lesbian looks like—making the idea of the lesbian a "reified cultural concept" (Doan *Fashioning* xvii)—it is of utmost importance that the vision Hall leaves us with is of Stephen alone, both barren and fruitful, pleading with God, rather than of Stephen and Mary together, or Valérie hosting a soirée for exiled women of all classes, proclivities, and gender presentations. While Hall could not have predicted the extent and longevity of her book's notoriety, it could not possibly have escaped her that she was carefully choosing to present Stephen as a martyr, and as such, to take an apologist's stance and arguing for a

limited amount of acceptance for certain inverts.

The Well supports the oppositional split women's sexual autonomy and reproductive capabilities. They cannot co-exist, whether the children are metaphorical, as Stephen's novel is, or physical, as we are encouraged to presume Mary's will be. This outcome refocuses the tropes of national, racial and sexual purity: children will be provided for the empire, and children will also be shielded from the corruption of homosexuality that James Douglas so infamously warned of. The threat of sexual pleasure and of queerness itself—of its disruption to the national character, nuclear family, the military, work ethic, and social order—is neatly contained. Hall rejects the unruly potential of queer kinship, or even pleasure, into the chaste pursuit of moderate acceptance for those inverts seeking to assimilate to prevailing hierarchies.

Chapter Two

The Nursing-Mother of Revolutions: Maternity, Race, and Lesbian Identity in Sylvia Townsend Warner's *Summer Will Show*

In *The Well of Loneliness,* the family is primarily characterized as a benevolent institution from which Stephen and other inverts experience an unfortunate exile. In contrast, I now turn my attention to Sylvia Townsend Warner's 1936 novel *Summer Will Show,* in which the family is a far more damaging social system from which the protagonist, Sophia, escapes. While both authors focus on white, upper-class, English women, Hall uses the drive towards patriotic motherhood as the pretext for dismantling lesbianism, but in *Summer Will Show*, lesbian bonding and politicization is predicated on the removal of children from the narrative. Like Hall, Warner creates a series of triangulations that propel her plot forward—but here, the triangulations focus more clearly on the family (and its destruction) as a crucible for fomenting revolutionary politics. Explicitly concerned with the rise of fascism throughout Europe, Warner, a leftist, lesbian, and prolific intellectual, remarked at the Third American Writers Congress in 1939 that fascism was "as deadly to those it would cherish as to those it would destroy, … it teaches race hatred to children, … says to women, *Be fruitful and multiply and replenish the battlefield*, [and] drives out its artists and thinkers" (qtd. in Hackett 88, emphasis added). So how does her intellectual, political novel about a woman deal with children, reproduction, and sexuality?

The novel, set in 1847-48, chronicles the unlikely transformation of its heroine

Sophia Willoughby from aristocratic English wife, mother, and heiress to penniless lesbian revolutionary. *Summer Will Show* closes with Sophia reading the opening words of *The Communist Manifesto*, and while critical readings invariably discuss Warner's use of mutually developing themes of sexual awakening and personal politicization, less attention is generally paid to the way that family politics and children, in particular, are deployed to evince Sophia's burgeoning radicalism. I would like to propose a reading that is informed by Marxist theories of the family, and examines the novel's narrative through Sophia's relationship to the children in the novel: her own children Damian and Augusta, and Caspar, the "half-caste" nephew who becomes her ward. While their roles in the novel seem relatively minor or rote, I want to demonstrate that children and motherhood are central to the issues that Warner grapples with and reveal both her political devotions and a deep uneasiness within the plot's arc.

Compared with other works that I am exploring in my project, *Summer Will Show*'s relative obscurity might make it seem like an unusual counterpoint when there are certainly other lesbian novels from the interwar period that could be considered, chief among them Djuna Barnes' *Nightwood* (in which the gynecologist Dr Matthew O'Connor says, "Love of woman for woman, what insane passion for unmitigated anguish and motherhood brought that to her mind?" (75)) and Virginia Woolf's *Orlando,* with its florid descriptions of Orlando's pregnancy and the birth of her son. But *Summer Will Show* is, like *The Well*, an agenda-driven novel that is riddled with bedeviling inconsistencies. When I first read it, I recall being delighted by the story of a woman radically breaking with numerous expectations, but deeply unsettled by the conclusion: on the barricades,

Sophia's lover, Minna, is stabbed by Caspar, and in turn, Sophia shoots him in the head. Sophia lost Minna and killed the boy she was supposed to care for, and yet the novel ends on a note of triumph as Sophia goes back to Minna's apartment and begins to read Marx. I was never sure what to make of this.

I was interested and surprised when I found that Terry Castle uses *Summer Will Show* to postulate about the qualities that make a novel "lesbian" in her 1995 work *The Apparitional Lesbian*. In a brave re-imagining of Eve Sedgwick's homosocial triangle,[1] Castle takes up the most prominent triangle in the *Summer Will Show*—that between protagonist Sophia Willoughby, her estranged husband Frederick, and Minna, the woman who is Frederick's and then Sophia's lover—and uses it to theorize what is "lesbian" about a "lesbian novel." While *The Well* stands in as a historical exemplar of a well-known lesbian novel, Castle pushes Warner's work to the center of a philosophical question about the qualities of "lesbian fiction," noting that the very concept has been "undertheorized"—and proceeds to mount a theoretical argument about *Summer Will Show*'s success as a paradigm of "lesbian fiction"—something that she insists cannot be determined by lesbian characters or a lesbian author, both of which "lie too heavily on the opacities of biography and eros, and lack a certain psychic and political specificity" (67). Working off of Sedgwick, Castle identifies a "female homosocial structure" in which "the possibility of male bonding is radically suppressed" and in which the "most radical

[1] Sedgwick demonstrates the centrality of male homosociality to the Anglo literature canon, where patriarchal order is maintained via male-female-male triangles predicated on male homosociality and suppressed homosexuality. Castle creates a female-male-female triangle that eradicates the need for the male figure, a move that allows expression of lesbianism.

transformation of bonding" is lesbian. Castle argues that this is what happens in *Summer Will Show*.

I find Castle's intervention fascinating if not definitive. Castle focuses almost exclusively on Sophia and Minna's relationship and glosses over other elements of the narrative, including the ways that breeding, pregnancy, and motherhood are used. Where Hall used an undergirding of eugenics, racial motherhood, and sexual puritanism to propel the climax of the novel and to make a plea for the childless, white, monastic invert's inclusion in mainstream society, Warner uses Sophia's varying motherhood status to demonstrate her evolving politics, celebrating her removal (rather than integration) from white, capitalist society—but this is a troubling process that often takes place through exploitation of racial and class Others. We follow her transition from an adherent to the principles of imperial/racial motherhood, to childless lesbian, to a leftist ersatz mother, and then back to childless again. Warner's work brings up important questions about the coexistence of lesbian political life and childrearing: how do they inform one another, and can they be balanced? These questions anticipate the work of radical lesbian feminists later in the 20th century.

Castle's reworking of Sedgwick is useful, but skips over an equally important set of triangles: those involving children and family structure. Sophia's improbable development from childhood, through marriage, and into lesbian communist revolutionary is predicated on the roles she plays as a child herself, and then vis-a-vis the children in her life. Sophia is radicalized by the introduction of two racial Others in the text: first her "blackamoor" nephew Caspar, and then the "bohemian Jewess" Minna. Minna, Sophia, and Caspar live

briefly as a chosen family, and this briefly serves to strengthen the women's bond as they unite to clash with Frederick. While Caspar's presence initially helps bring the women together, he literally becomes an agent of death, stabbing Minna as he screams, "Drab! … Jewess! This is the end of you." Sophia has just enough time to fatally shoot Caspar before she is taken prisoner (311). Where Hall's focus came to lie on the conspicuous (and for Stephen Gordon, deeply troubling) impossibility of reproduction for lesbians, Warner uses children as a catalyst for change. The children, however, do not survive these processes, creating an opposite effect from Hall, whose vision is ultimately pronatalist. Where lesbianism buckled under the strain of compulsory reproduction in *The Well*, children must be eradicated for lesbianism to survive in *Summer Will Show*. And once Sophia has been radicalized, she is also able to shed her interdependence with those who midwived her transformation, namely Minna, leaving a rather unsettling portrait of the white woman activist. Warner consistently points to Marx's axiom that "Violence is the midwife of every old society pregnant with a new one."

We are first introduced to Sophia Willoughby (née Aspen) of Blandamer House, Dorset, on July 13, 1847. She recalls the same day 21 years earlier, when she as a child was taken to meet the Duke of Wellington. By 1847, she (or rather, her husband) has inherited the estate, has two children of her own, Damian and Augusta, and resides as the seething bland dame of the unchanging Blandamer. Sophia is married to the absent[2] and feckless Frederick, and she rules the estate with an exacting and business-like authoritarianism. She approaches her children in the same way:

[2] After he has a series of affairs, Frederick and Sophia formally agree to live apart, with her assuming responsibility for Blandamer.

> For all that doctors and valetudinarian ladies might say, Sophia held by old-fashioned manners with children. Crusts, cold water, cold rooms, scanty clothing, rough romping games to harden them, philosophical conversations to enlarge their minds. She herself had been brought up under the dispensation of [Rousseau's] *Emile*, and it had answered amiably. Walking swiftly under the gashes of sunlight that striped the avenue [the language figuring the estate itself as supplying a sort of corporeal punishment] she smiled to think that the stables and sheepfolds and kennels of Blandamer house had not produced a more vigorous or better-trained animal than she. (9)

Sophia's philosophy of estate management and mothering boils down to a shrewd and detached husbandry. She sells her extra tomatoes even though "it might not be genteel to sell one's superfluous fruit. Neither was it genteel to live apart from one's husband. But the one and the other was sensible, was rational, was concordant with Sophia's views as to the conduct of life" (24). Sophia's other chief concerns include gelding a blaring bull, finding a position for a servant's adolescent daughter that will prevent her from "hanging about among the farmhands" (21), and ridding her regrettably frail children of their lingering whooping cough.

Sophia approaches her children and her estate with the same calculating precision; besides the crusts and cold water, Augusta's hair is cropped "to make it grow more strongly" and Damian must not be indulged to ensure that he is not a "milksop"(11). Her mothering is a form of husbandry. While Sophia has been able to admirably shed the trappings of the overly-feminine sentimentality, her predilection for more masculine

behavior was neatly assimilated into a philosophy of sensibility and work; Damian is like her in his subtle gender non-conformity, but his feminine tendencies are a source of anxiety for Sophia—even as she recognizes, though inarticulately—that they share a form of kinship that transcends the mother-son bond. He is seemingly immune to all of the masculine accessories Sophia has provided since his birth: ponies and carts, toolboxes, a cricket pitch, guns, and fishing rods have failed to produce a suitably rugged boy. Despite her best efforts, "The hardening system, so admirable, so well-proved and well-accredited, so successful in her own case, did not apply too perfectly to her own children. On the nursery door the notches recording her own growth from year to year were still visible; and year by year Damian and Augusta fell short of them" (11). Sophia harbors similar feelings about Blandamer itself: "it had the cowed ungainly lines of a woman gone lean with over-much childbearing. … However it was all familiar to her, and a considerable part of it belonged to her, and did its duty and was productive" (13). Both her children and her land struggle to yield what is required of them, but Sophia resides over them to enforce a ruthless sense of duty, discipline, and production as she envisions Damian's coming of age and the increased power she will have when the land is ceded from Frederick to Damian: "Further plantations, and improved breed of cows at the home farm…" (9). Sophia's thoughts return always to a pride and righteousness in duty and enforced productivity, like a Stephen Gordon without the sentiment.

On the opening day of the novel, Sophia is taking Damian and Augusta to breathe fumes from the estate's lime kiln, believed to be a remedy for pertussis. The lingering nature of the children's illness is an annoyance to Sophia, who remembers that her body

dealt with illness (as with corporal punishment) quickly, efficiently, and with little damage. She furthermore will allow herself no emotional indulgences about her children's health, but expects them to conform to the treatment. The lime kiln man appears as a fearful specter, described by Augusta as "queer" (17) and accused by Hannah, the nurse-maid, of being drunk. She steps to him and says, "Can't you get up? Don't you know you're wanted?" (16). His reluctance to get up on this day for Sophia proves significant later. The man insists that the sores on his wrists are from bug bites, and that he is not drunk (nor can he afford to drink during the day, he says) but suffering from a severe headache. The scared children are held over the flames and breathe the smoke, but their coughs do not improve.

In the meantime, Sophia is charged with the care of her Uncle Julius Rathbone's "illegitimate son, half-caste," who at age 14 is shipped to Sophia from the Caribbean, along with guava jelly, preserved pineapple, molasses, and rum from the Rathbone plantation. Caspar lingers somewhere between a person and a commodity, and he is being sent to England for a "sound commercial education" (32). Sophia expects that Caspar's arrival will be dealt with in a business-like manner; he will enter and pass through her house like so many imports. She prepares her children for Caspar's arrival: "They had been told something of the colour question, and of the rational humanitarianism which forbids that any race should toil as slaves when they would toil more readily as servants" (34-5). But upon Caspar's arrival, we see Sophia's stony exterior begin to crumble for the first time. Caspar is described as being of extreme beauty, and immediately captures the attention of both Sophia and Damian. Caspar is a "dusky piece

of romance" and "Sophia found herself moved towards her son not as child but as a companion" (35).

Caspar stays a week before he is sent to Trebbenick Academy, and in that time is shown to preternaturally talented at all things: he is athletic, intellectual, artistic, and beautiful. The whole family, and nearly the whole village, seems to coast on the warm exotic breeze that he brings with him. "It was not possible, while Caspar was in the house, to do anything but enjoy: enjoy the ample summer weather, the smooth striped lawns over which they traveled, the waving of the full-flourished boughs, the baskets of warm raspberries…" The list continues—referencing peaches, flowers, and jewels. He serves as an "unbinding spell" and puts her "into a holiday state of mind" (39). Caspar seems to breathe the very exoticized and idealized landscape of the colonies right into Blandamer, giving the careworn ground an exotic fecundity that had been missing before ("the cowed ungainly lines of a woman gone lean with over-much childbearing") are replaced with Sophia's visions of Caspar's mother, "some unknown quadroon, passionate and servile, her gold ear-rings swinging proudly, and the marks of the lash maybe on her back" (37). This erotic vision of the mother's marked back is not for nothing, evocative as it is of fantasies of black women's buttocks and flagellation fetishes and the frequent iconographic use of "black servants [to] mark the presence of illicit sexuality" (Gilman 79—see his chapter "The Hottentot and the Prostitute").[3]

[3] Warner's use of primitivism is a salient feature across her works. Warner is, after all, the author of the 1925 poem "Caves of Harmony," titled after the eponymous London cabaret that served as a refuge for rich lesbians and gays who liked jazz, the the probable inspiration for the title of Hall's *The Well of Loneliness*. In the poem, she describes dancing with her lover to the "almost human" sounds of a Black musician's saxophone

The spell, however, is broken when Caspar's presence unsettles Augusta. Unlike Sophia's worries prior to Caspar's arrival that he could corrupt her children, it is Augusta who breaks the peace. After a fight with Damian, she says: "Caspar is a fool. He ought to have knocked you down. But he can do nothing, he can only play his silly guitar"—she explicitly identifies Caspar as a minstrel—and turning to Caspar, she says, "Go away! I don't want you. You're *black*!" (40-1, emphasis original). The minstrel Caspar is also the contaminant Caspar, an example of what Robin Hackett has noted as Warner's "paradoxical combination of primitivism and anti-imperialism" (94). When Damian hears Augusta's jab, he goes into a rage and attacks Augusta (one of several events in the novel demonstrating a close association between *blackness* and *violence*), bringing Sophia running, and then punishing her children by forcing them to kneel down before her as she reads them the story of a nine-year-old chimney sweep who suffocated after a fire was lit underneath him to force him up the chimney to clean it. She then sends them to bed, with the additional punishment that they will not see Caspar again; she is taking him to his boarding school the following morning. Damian, with his childish crush on Caspar (he is described as "like an entranced dog" (39)) is especially affected by this.

The story of the chimney sweep reinforces a negative image of the lime kiln, where the children were held over fire to purify their lungs. This is one in a series of ironies that Warner sets up around the relationship between Sophia, her own children, and Caspar.

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and describing him, "How leers the blackamoor,/Exhaling his melodious delight!" but also as an "Ambassador from the U.S.A." See Marcus, *Virginia Woolf and the Languages of Patriarchy*, 168. Like Hall, Warner uses African-American music as a soundtrack for English lesbian protest. The result in both cases feels more like colonialism than community.

As Sophia drops off Caspar at his school, she fears that he will die and she will never see him again. What she does not yet know is that Damain and Augusta lay dying at the very moment, both having contracted smallpox from the limekiln man, whose sores turn out not to be bug bites after all. That which was meant to cure them hastens their death, and Sophia's feelings of delight in Caspar poignantly underscore the dutiful sort of love that she has for her children, in which there had "never… been the slightest yielding of the heart to these whims of behavior and feeling" (25). For Sophia, romantic behavior (during her courtship with Frederick) is undertaken as a parodic act of social compliance, not for its own sake. She loves her children, but feels detached from them in some significant way. When Augusta becomes upset remembering the trip to the lime kiln, Sophia is disconcerted:

> The child's long shudders vibrated against her bosom, this life she encompassed with her anxious arms was separate and inarticulate to her as an animal's, it was as though the fiddle should suddenly take a personal life upon it, wailing against the player's shoulder. … Though a child be born, nursed, the creature and study of endless nourishing days, she thought, it is never one's own to understand. Its every movement bruises one, is as terrifying and incomprehensible as the first movements in the womb, as alien as that first announcement of a separate life in the womb. And as though it were her own mysterious pain she rocked and comforted, Sophia rocked and comforted her child. Her mind, despairingly detached from her emotions, surveyed the lawn before her, noticed that a bough had withered on the copper beech and must be lopped off … (36)

Sophia's thoughts inevitably return to cultivation (both cultural and agricultural) and management, fence-keeping against sentiment and emotional indulgence. "So deeply had this hallucination of puppetry and rote enforced itself upon her" that Sophia cannot deviate from expected decorum (44). Even before the revolutionary and Marxist elements are brought into the novel's narrative, Warner sets up aristocratic motherhood as a state of alienation. Motherhood is figured as a manufacturing system replete with division of labor between the bourgeois mother and her proletarian servants. In the agrarian scene that Warner adheres to, the urban factory is replaced by the cycles of reproduction among both human and animal. We see in Sophia a prime example of Marx's assertion that "The bourgeoisie has torn away from the family its sentimental veil, and has reduced the family relation to a mere money relation."

With the death of her children, however, Sophia becomes willing to dispense with the decorum that has kept her emotions and goals neatly in check. The deaths introduce a great deal of sentimentality and emotion for Sophia. I would like to revisit the timeline that is set out at the beginning of the narrative. First, Sophia takes her children to the lime kiln. Sophia is introduced as a pinnacle of protocol and anti-sentimentality during that walk to the kiln; she is proud of the way that she can master whatever seethes within her. It is at the lime kiln that the children are exposed to smallpox. Immediately thereafter, Caspar arrives, and Sophia begins to unravel. Her children's illness incubates during this seemingly joyous interlude with Caspar, and the very moment when Caspar is whisked away, the children's become ill and quickly die. The narrative points to a definitive cause of the children's illness—the lime kiln man—but the stealthy development of their disease

is closely linked with Caspar's arrival. While this follows closely the well-worn narrative of racial impurity, death, and decay, I think that Warner's personal anti-imperial politics and the novel's secondary function as a parable and subtle critique of the racial politics of the Communist Party (of which Warner was a devoted member) means that this white supremacist logic was woven into the novel quite deliberately and with the overall intention of critique—yet one that, for the 21st century reader, still retains the unpalatability of the personal and institutional racism that it purports to expose. While Warner might theoretically celebrate the decay of the British Empire and exult in class rebellion, the mournful and moving passages about the deaths of Damian and Augusta temper the critique almost to the point of imperceptibility. This, combined with Caspar (as a mulatto) and Minna (as Jew) being highly exoticized and closely associated with sensuality in the novel, make Warner's agenda harder to percept.

Importantly, too, the positioning of children within the narrative should be interrogated. Why children at all? The story likely could have proceeded without their presence. The story of Sophia as a woman who embraces radical political and sexual attitudes could have emerged in a younger, unmarried woman, or a childless married woman. But the use of children to propel the narrative serves an important function in creating a family drama focused on women without men. Though she shows quiet rage at the philandering Frederick, Sophia is quite happy to live without him—to rule Blandamer and be a mother—to grow the next crop of Aspens.[4] Sophia is disconnected with

[4] At Blandamer, Aspens flourish, as the land itself does. Once the estate comes under the traditional aristocratic Willoughby name, the family and the estate die off. Sophia rues that her children did not inherit the stalwart Aspen constitution.

emotional motherhood, but deeply invested in what Lee Edelman has dubbed "reproductive futurism" and Sophia has linked this inextricably with the health and wealth of Blandamer, and by extension, mother England's imperial progeny round the globe. If Caspar's lovely and idyllic visit is the period of creeping, insidious sickness, then we can read this as a metaphor of imperial rot: the beautiful colonies are not sustainable and are blight upon England. On the other hand, Caspar has the power to spread this sickness—racial commingling seems to do no good in this narrative. And while Warner sets a tableau of female masculinity for Sophia, direct discussion of lesbianism is introduced at the time that Damian and Augusta become ill—at this point queerness, racial and class alterity and the death of the children become intermingled such that Warner seems to anticipate Edelman's argument that "*queerness* names the side of those *not* 'fighting for the children,' the side outside the consensus by which all politics confirms the absolute value of reproductive futurism" (3, italics original).

And yet this opening salvo of sapphistry is introduced by a pregnant woman,[5] and concerns Sophia's ill children: Dr. Hervey, who has been treating them, has written to Frederick, recalling him to Blandamer. Mrs. Hervey is outraged by her husband's attempt to go over Sophia's head, and steals the letter, bringing it to Sophia. She brings it to Sophia and begins a strange speech, telling her: "I have thought of you day and night, ever since that first evening when your children were taken ill and my husband sent me to you. You can't understand, and I can't express it. It's more than pity, than sympathy, for I have

[5] As a plot point, Mrs. Hervey's pregnancy is not revealed in the narrative until Sophia's visit to her, after Damian and Augusta have died, but she is pregnant at the time that this conversation takes place.

heard other people pitying you, people who know you better than I, women with children of their own. But they do not feel as I do" (61). As Mrs. Hervey continues, Sophia thinks, "But we might be two schoolgirls… two romantic misses, stolen from our white beds to exchange illicit comfits… The letter, lying so calmly on her lap, seemed to have no real part in this to-do." The sexual suggestion of the letter lying in Mrs. Hervey's lap is sharpened as she declares, "What right have they to interfere, to discuss and plot, and settle what they think best to be done? … As if you needed a man!" (62). Sophia thanks Mrs. Hervey for her kindness and honesty about the doctor's actions, and admits that she no longer wishes to associate with Frederick, but asks her to leave and post the letter, as if it she had never stolen it. Sophia cleans the refreshments from the room herself, covering all traces of the visit, but walks Mrs. Hervey and the purloined letter part of the way home, hand-in-hand.

> Once she is gone, Sophia ponders the visit and its possible meanings, but concludes: No! However touching, such escapades were intolerable. One could not have such young women frisking about one, babbling as to whether or no one needed a husband, declaring on one's behalf that one didn't. From a woman of the village she could have heard such words without offense. Down there, in that lowest class, sexual decorum could be kilted out of the way like an impeding petticoat; and Mary Bugler, whose husband was in jail, and Carrie Westmacott, whose husband should be, might declare without offense that a woman was as good as a man, and better. In her own heart, too, unreproved, could lodge the conviction that a Sophia might well discard a Frederick, and in her life she had been ready, calmly enough, to put

this into effect. But into words, never! Such things could be done, but not said. (64) It is the articulation that interrupts the erotic possibility, not the acts themselves that are verboten. Continuing to ruminate, Sophia considers what she is to do once her children have died. She considers gaming, traveling (possibly with Mrs. Hervey: "A woman cannot travel alone, but two women may travel together"), intellectual pursuits, thinks of Mrs. Hervey again, and considers bringing Caspar to live with her and be heir to Blandamer, but decides that she cannot have a "pretty soft wagging spaniel in the place of my children" (67-8).

After the children's deaths, Sophia pays a social call to thank Mrs. Hervey—purportedly for her emotional support during the children's illness, but actually in gratitude for the incident with the letter. This time, the sexual possibility to them is represented by a melon, rather than the letter in the lap, with a double-entendre-laden rationalization: "a hothouse melon would be the properest acknowledgement of that evening visit and the misguided impulse which had prompted it" (75). Instead of seeing Mrs. Hervey, however, Sophia is received by Mrs. Hervey's mother, Mrs. Ingleby, who reports that Mrs. Hervey is expecting (in approximately six months) and unable to entertain guests. Warner narrates fragments of the formalities that the two women exchange in a small stream: "My dear Mrs. Willoughby, dear madam, my daughter will be so delighted, such a superb melon, inexpressibly grieved… her favorite fruit, condescension, the necessity of a hot-bed…" (76). The melon carries the burden of Sophia's and Mrs. Hervey's sexual possibility, a possibility that is foreclosed by Mrs. Hervey's pregnancy, which is itself also a hothouse melon, if we take seriously the

possibility of Mrs. Hervey as a lesbian, the incubation of her baby can be seen as a hothouse melon, intentionally cultivated where it would not otherwise grow.

This subtle indignity of Mrs. Hervey's pregnancy in the face of Sophia's own grief spurs her on to consider further possibilities. She decides that she will "hunt again" and seems to embrace the possibility with the passion of Artemis, knowing that it will scandalize the community and prove her autonomy. In the course of the hunt, however, Sophia comes to identify with the fox, and cannot shake her father's pronouncement that the females of the family should marry and bear children. Racked with the urge to re-reproduce heirs to Blandamer, Sophia's hunt turns to a quest for children, but specifically *not* to reconcile with Frederick: she will grow a hothouse melon of her own. To that end, Sophia makes a reckless trip back to the lime kiln, knowing that women in the village go to the lime kiln man for sex. She says to herself, "I will go to him, as those other women do. He robbed me of my children, he shall give me others" and furthermore, "It seemed to her that she was in a perfectly rational state of mind" (80). This is again the exact joylessness of heteronormative procreation and investment in reproductive futurism that Edelman's work points to: "all sensory experience, all pleasure of the flesh, must be born away from this fantasy of futurity secured" (41).

But Sophia's fantasy of futurity secured is broken by this visit. Noticing her he says, "This is a queer time for a lady like you to be out a-walking—for you are a lady, I reckon" (81). While Augusta had described the lime kiln man as queer on their initial trip, it is now he who evokes the queerness of Sophia's journey. She reminds him of who she is, and informs him that her children died of smallpox that they contracted from him. The

scene juxtaposes Sophia's aristocracy and deliberate decisions—her need of a sperm donor, but not a husband—and the strangely joyless sexual autonomy she now possesses with the lime kiln man's territorial prowess. He has a "dull look of resentment" and moves "luxuriously." In a scene where Sophia should dominate, she is reduced and humiliated; he won't get up for her, in any way:

> "Children do die hereabouts," he said. "There's the small pox, and the typhus, and the cholera. There's the low fever, and the quick consumption, And there's starvation. Plenty of things for children to die of."
>
> "You speak with little pity, my man."
>
> "I'm like the gentry, then. Like the parsons, and the justices, and the lords and ladies. Like that proud besom down to Blandamer." …
>
> "Plenty more children, they say, where the dead ones come from. If they die like cattle, the poor, they breed like cattle, too. Plenty more children. That's what I say to you. Rich and poor can breed alike, I suppose." (82)

As if to complete her disgrace, Sophia hears a woman laughing, and knows that the lime kiln man has been entertaining other company. The futurity represented by children and the sacredness of the bodily acts that produce them is tempered by the futility of poverty and the ever-present mortality of children, and is replaced by the need for the release of the flesh. As she walks away, Sophia can hear the woman and the man, the woman's laugh becoming "coarse and free-hearted," reminding Sophia of an owl or a fox—animalistic. Sophia wonders about the trysts of the lime kiln man: "loves bitter and violent as the man's furious mind, but in the upleaping of that undaunted lust of a strength which

could outface violence and bitterness" she thinks. Sophia immediately recalls the Labourers' Uprising of 1830, and her parents' instruction that "the labouring classes were insolent, mutinous, and violent." The lime kiln man's actions have proved this, yet the incident "seemed to have done her good… she found herself tautened and stimulated, as though a well-administered slap in the face had roused her from a fainting-fit" (82-83).

Nevertheless, the lime kiln man "father[ed] a determination in her mind" and she resolves to go to Paris to extort a child from Frederick, plainly deciding that she will explain her needs and "strike a bargain" with him. The whole scene is complicated, though, by Sophia's latent sexual curiosity: the animalism she ascribes to the other woman, the slapped feeling she has, the shades of humiliation, and her wondering about what pleasures would compel a woman to seek out a man on a cold, wet November night: "But one could not hope for everything; and what she wanted, what she must have, was a child" (83-84). This again evokes Edelman's configuration. To complete the quote from above, Edelman asserts, "No fucking could ever effect such creation: all sensory experience, all pleasure of the flesh must be borne away from this fantasy of futurity secured, eternity's plan fulfilled, as 'a new generation is carried forward' " (41). Sophia implicitly understands the difference between fucking and procreating, and determines to settle for the latter, in accordance with her own father's pronouncement that "women marry, bear children, guide the house" (77). But not for long.

Sophia arrives in Paris, a city that "entertained her like a fair and welcomed her like a nursery" (89), unwittingly, on the eve of the 1848 revolts. With her plan to make Frederick sire a child for her ("As other people go to Paris to buy gloves, she was going to

Paris to bargain for a child" (90)), she seeks him out, hoping to avoid Minna altogether. But as she searches him out, she finds herself asking her driver to take her to Minna's, since that is where Frederick is for the evening. Sophia enters the crowded salon, unnoticed by Frederick and Minna, and hears Minna tell a grand tale about a pogrom that she survived in her childhood—a harrowing tale of herself as a persecuted, underdog child and takes up over ten pages completely in Minna's voice, the only first-person section in the book, which otherwise uses third person and is predominantly focalized through Sophia. Renowned for her skills as a story teller, Minna has a spellbinding effect on her whole audience, and entrances Sophia. Expecting to find Minna ugly and repulsive, she finds her electrifying and alluring. And coincidentally, as Minna's story comes to its climax, the concierge bursts into the salon, announcing that mobs are requesting carriages to build the barricades on the streets below. There is confusion and excitement; guests run out into the streets to help (or, in the case of Frederick, to flee). Sophia is unable to return to her hotel and is obliged to stay the night with Minna; they immediately develop a charged friendship. Minna hands Sophia a cup of hot spiced wine and it "was like a caress. Round the first sip she felt her being close, haggard and hungry" (115). When they are alone:

> Never in her life had she [Sophia] felt such curiosity or dreamed it possible. She… stared at the averted head, the large eloquent hands, the thick, milk-coffee coloured throat that housed that siren voice. Her curiosity went beyond speculation, a thing not of the brain but in the blood. It burned in her like a furnace, with a steadfast compulsive heat that must presently catch Minna in its draught, hale her in, and

devour her. (120)

Lesbian erotics are configured along a continuum of revolutionary politics—Sophia asks Minna why she wants the revolution to come before she falls asleep with Minna stroking her and calling her "my beauty, my falcon" (124)—tinged with the everyday warmth of companionship and over next few days: two women talking, two women making coffee, two women eating dinner, two women sitting on a pink sofa and arranging each other's hair.

Sophia's initial infatuation with Minna also brings to her a greater awareness of her own power, a power that she can wield both socially and sexually, but also couched in a rather ridiculous announcement that she is going to take Minna out to dinner. Sophia has forgotten that the revolts have shut down much of the city ('But why should everything be shut?' (131)) and it will be a struggle to find an open restaurant. They do manage to find a restaurant, and once out in public, Sophia begins to become more aware of the extraordinary way in which she is behaving:

> It was only when she had ordered the fillet-steak that Sophia realised that she has commandeered Minna's evening as high-handedly as she had taken her day. Never in my life, thought she, studying the wine list, have I acted quite like this. For though no doubt I have always been strong-minded, and lately seeing no one but my inferiors , may have got into a trick of domineering, nothing in my past, nothing in my upbringing, parallels this. For she is older than I am, she is a woman of some eminence, and she is my husband's mistress—and here I am, taking her out to dinner and allowing her to see a little of her revolution as though she were a child to be

given a treat—as though she were Caspar. … Nothing in her past, nothing in her upbringing, would have prepared her to sit unescorted in a restaurant, or to walk at night through the streets of Paris. However, with the probable poorness of the wine went probable security from molestation. The restaurant was crowded, humble, and uninterested in the two women. (131-32)

Warner packs the scene of Sophia and Minna's public debut with almost too many metaphors to unpack. There is Sophia's burgeoning awareness of her own masculinity as she escorts Minna, orders steak, oysters and wine, and begins to realize her own paternalism in the situation ("allowing her to see a little of her revolution…") the understanding that she is being both domineering and giving up something, becoming and undoing at the same moment, and full of introspection. Power exchanges between the women also occur along more complicated lines, with Minna *allowing* herself to be dominated, to be taken, but holding the power to grant Sophia the permission to dominate, to invite the behavior and reassure Sophia:

"How much I like being with English people! They manage everything so quietly and so well."

"Am I as good as Frederick?"

"You are much better."

For an answer to an outrageous insult, it was dextrous. (132)

While the two women continue to speak of Frederick's lack of appeal (this feels somewhat like a forced and necessary disavowal on both women's parts: as the wife and mistress of the same man, they must be accountable to each other in some way) and

deride his lesser qualities, Sophia does—in her ability manage things so quietly and so well—acknowledge Minna's influence on him. She says, "You did him an immense amount of good. I have never known him so pleasant, so rational, as he was on his last visit to England—his last visit to me, I mean." When Sophia confirms that this was the visit when the children died, Minna diffuses her influence, claiming, "Men, who are so suspicious, so much ashamed, of any other emotion, have no shame in the feeling of fatherhood. It was his Volkslied that he was singing then. And it is no wonder that he was singing it well" (134). It is curious that what Sophia interprets as Minna's good influence—which is a feminized refinement of manners and better French—Minna deflects as an ultimate expression of masculinity. She proves herself again dextrous by exculpating herself.

I would like to return here to the scene of Damian and Augusta's deaths, when Frederick and Sophia are briefly reunited. Warner uses the deaths of the children to draw attention to the differentiated roles played by Sophia and Frederick, which in turn demonstrate the shortcomings of pre-feminist Marxist thought, in which class relations were figured as unnatural, but gender roles were accepted and naturalized. In Frederick and Sophia, Warner has produced a sort of perfect storm to show the perils of not only capitalism, but patriarchy and heteronormativity. Sophia's family, the Aspens, holds the money and the land upon which Blandamer sits, but Sophia, of course, cannot own it. By virtue of his gender, Frederick can abandon the manor to Sophia's care while reaping the benefits of her management of the land. This is mirrored in their parental roles, in which Sophia oversees the day-to-day care of the children, but (unfairly) Frederick can attach to

the children in different and sentimental ways that contrast with her scrupulously cultivating philosophy of childrearing. Sophia's alienation is a result of her class, gender, and training, but it is an alienation that she is not able to realize until the system fails. Just as Sophia's children can be taken from her, Frederick is able to take Blandamer and her money from her. It is gender that allows Warner to fashion Sophia into a revolutionary later—and it is gender that allows Warner to fully figure Frederick into an enemy—an enemy of *the people* and not only of women—rather than a mere cad.

The importance of the intersection of class and gender *within the family* becomes apparent upon the deaths of the children. Readers are initially presented with Sophia as the willing and competent instrument of a capitalist, patriarchal system and Frederick as the profligate beneficiary of this system. Sophia and Frederick's marriage has failed, but this has made room for Sophia to achieve a great degree of autonomy, and this seems to suit her ambitions and personality quite well. But as the children's deaths approach, Sophia begins to think of the differences between them:

> His heart's blood would run freely, where hers stagnated like old Seneca's. For as she had given birth to her children, she would lose them: with throe after sickening throe, with effort, and humiliation, with clumsy, furious, disgraceful striving, with hideous afterbirth of all hopes. But for Frederick it would be all an emotion, a something that afterwards music could call up, or the first snowdrops, or a page of poetry. (55)

It is gender that allows Warner to stratify the family such that Frederick can remain an idle aristocrat while Sophia, believing she has control, is pushed into a managerial petite-

bourgeoisie position, a setup that will ultimately enable her to make the leap to proletarianism. Later, after Sophia has gone to Paris, met Minna, and the women have started their affair, it is this class stratification within the family that allows Frederick to deprive Sophia of home and money, exposing the dangers of this system.

When Frederick arrives at Blandamer, Damian is already dead, but he is taken to see Augusta. The child is blinded by her fever and disease, but can hear her father and Sophia encourages him to speak to her.

> "*Ma fleur*," he said. The small hand stirred on the coverlet, closed as though closing in on the words, and presently fell open again.
>
> After he had gone back to Paris and she was left alone with the leisure of the childless, those words, and the tone in which they were spoken, haunted her memory—according to her mood, an enigma, a nettle-sting, a caress. It was as though, at that moment, not Frederick but some one unknown to her stood by the bed of her dying child and said, *Ma fleur*. (71)[6]

The real significance of these words are deep for Sophia; they refrain through four full pages of the novel, carrying Sophia through Frederick's visit, the funerals, and his departure. They become a sort of talisman or fetish for her, and she imagines their origins: "Modeled on that Minna's Jewish contralto, she told herself, angrily stopping her east against those two grave harp-notes" (71). And to drive home the point further, "As in that *Ma fleur*, which for all she could do still rang in her head, Minna Lemuel's voice

[6] This recurrent strain of *Ma Fleur* calls up Stephen Gordon's moment of self-hatred as being called *Ma sœur* in the bar. The moment of queer transmission—of infection—is reflected in these two phrases. The names Sophia and Minna also recall Stephen and Mary.

resounded, in everything he has said or done he had borne witness to Minna, trailed her invisible presence through the house. Every alternation in him made up a portrait of her" (73).

Sophia is already attracted to Minna and her sonorous voice through Frederick. Frederick has never been so attractive to Sophia as he has been when he is a "portrait of her" [Minna]. Minna infects Frederick like Caspar infects Sophia—these events happen in chronological parallel. While the Sophia/Caspar narrative is necessarily foregrounded in the text, significantly, the deaths of the children have paradoxical effects on the married couple. For Sophia, it is the first stage in being politicized, revolutionized; for Frederick, it is the beginning of his movement back towards a class- and gender-dominate position. With the removal of Sophia's children, Warner is able to argue beyond the restoration of the mother-right and for the economic autonomy of women outside of motherhood or marital status.

While critical work on the novel often diverges around the two themes of realism versus fantasy[7], proletarianization/radicalization and lesbianism (how fantastical is it that an aristocrat from Dorset becomes a lesbian communist?), the motherhood theme that I have outlined conjoins the class and sexual narratives neatly, and shows how they are mutually informing. While Sophia had originally taken herself to Paris in order to mate with Frederick, a move that would have allowed her to return to Blandamer to raise a new heir, her coupling with Minna allows her to reconsider the opportunity to mother from a new perspective. Caspar somewhat magically finds his way to Sophia in Paris, following a

[7] These themes are explored in Castle's *Apparitional Lesbian*, Love's *Feeling Backwards*, and Mulford's *This Narrow Place*.

journey after he ran away from Trebbenick Academy in Cornwall, returned to Blandamer to find it empty and shuttered (a move instigated by Frederick), and traveled to Sophia's hotel address in Paris, before finally arriving at Minna's. He arrives much battered—dirty, ripped clothes, tangled hair, poor skin, and a missing tooth. Sophia recoils, but "'It is a romance,' said Minna, 'how this child has come to us!'" (240).

The return of Caspar allows Sophia and Minna to attempt to function, briefly, as a family group, and for Minna to attempt to fully impress a sense of personal politics on Sophia. Minna becomes figured as a mother figure who loves Caspar even when he spurns her, and puts up with his rudeness to her and idolization of Sophia. The chain of events that Caspar's return sets off also constitute Sophia's greatest failures of judgment and action in the novel. The decisions that Sophia makes about Caspar, particularly her determination to remove him from her home with Minna and to place him back in another institution that will provide a "sound commercial education" against Minna's pleas that he stay with them and apprentice in a trade, quite possibly contribute to Minna's death. This leads up to the novel's ambiguous ending in which Caspar (almost certainly) kills Minna, and Sophia kills Caspar. Sophia is then poised to become a committed communist, but Warner sets this up at the expense of both Minna and Caspar. It is in the interactions between Caspar, Minna, and Sophia that Warner perhaps mounts a subtle argument about the shortcomings of communism's intervention in white supremacy, as well as in kinship arrangements. While this argument is embedded within the narrative, the ambiguous, infectious way in which Caspar is figured throughout the novel also plays upon primitivist and racist tropes, such that it becomes nearly impossible

to comprehend whether Warner is complicit with those tropes or critiquing them. I find this to be one of the novel's shortcomings, but also a rich demonstration of the sometimes complicated priorities of her own politics at the time. Biographer Wendy Mulford has noted that Warner was writing this novel at a time when she was becoming fiercely committed to leftist politics—she hoped it would encourage rural workers in Dorset to become Communist Party members (Hackett 95)— but Robin Hackett has also explained that "Warner is overtly critical of ideology that displaces sexuality onto working-class women and black people," but, "when it comes to representing homosexuality and representing characters discovering homosexuality, Warner relies on class- and race-primitivist stereotypes" (92)

Procreation is the driving force between the sexual relationship between Frederick and Sophia; they represent pure genetic futurism in Edelman's sense. When the children die, Sophia briefly entertains the idea of adopting Caspar and making him heir to Blandamer, despite the improbability of that scenario. But when Caspar comes to Minna and Sophia, he comes to represent a *revolutionary* futurity that Minna encourages in Sophia. By the time Caspar arrives in Paris, Frederick knows about Sophia's relationship with Minna, has stripped Sophia of her income, and is withholding her valuables and jewelry. When Caspar informs her that Blandamer is also abandoned, Sophia realizes how completely Frederick—who has abandoned the estate and Sophia yet still retained rights— controls her financial life. With Caspar, though, Sophia has been directly charged by Uncle Julius to oversee his education. In some ways, this is a chance for Sophia to re-assert paternalistic authority as she had at Blandamer, and she and Minna discuss what is

best for Caspar as parents might. Interestingly, Minna uses Caspar as a tool to bring Sophia further into revolutionary politics, seeing his arrival as fortuitous and showcasing her maternal attitude towards both Sophia and Caspar.

I want to make a small sidetrack here into the ways that Warner makes use of pregnancy and birth metaphors as Sophia's love for Minna and understanding of revolutionary politics deepen. Looking at a book of poems together in a bookstall, Sophia lingers over Marvell's words "My love is of a birth as rare/As 'tis of object strange and high/It was begotten by despair/Upon impossibility" and the words "seemed in some way to sum up the quality of her improbable happiness" (236-7). Clearly here, instead of begetting children, Sophia's journey has begotten love and happiness, if only briefly. Likewise, during the June uprising, when Sophia demonstrates her devotion to the cause by agreeing to smuggle tracts of Inglebrecht, she passes by a midwife's offices and over to the barricades, where a "woman far-gone in pregnancy kept digging her elbow into Sophia's ribs, and enquiring 'What is it, what is it'/'Twins, mother,' a voice replied (300). Moreover, when the ammunition runs low, "This is how one felt when one's children were starving, when there was no more bread in the cupboard, no more milk in the breast" (310). There are many types of birth and mothering in *Summer Will Show*—there are literal, biological children, there is love, there is politics. Sophia and Minna have different approaches to these different sorts of offspring.

Caspar becomes a point of conflict between the two women when they disagree over how he should be educated and where he should live. The women are living on very little—"counting anchovies," Sophia says (252)—when Caspar arrives. In his state of

disrepair and in her reduced circumstances, Sophia does not react to him with the warm attraction that she did when he arrived at Blandamer. Caspar is unkind towards Minna; he views her as competition for Sophia's affection (and in turn, Sophia resents the intrusion into her life with Minna); he snubs Minna, despite her consistent advocating on his behalf. Sophia regards them, "With a sensation that the cat was cajoling on behalf of its kitten" and thinks, 'This brat must go, and soon' " (252). So Caspar is reconfigured, metaphorically, as Minna's child and Sophia is determined to cast him out over her protestations. Sophia no longer requires his eroticizing force: she has to a great extent internalized the sensuality that Caspar and Minna both bring to her. She has, however, only a fledgling understanding of the political implications of their needs and allegiances. The narrator articulates, "Sophia had been brought up in a world policed by oughts. … Behind every love or respect stood a monitorial reason, and one's emotions were the expression of a bargaining between demand and supply, a sort of political economy. At a stroke, Minna had freed her from all of this" (237-8).

Minna's friend, the philosopher Inglebrecht (Engels-Brecht) reads to the women from his work in progress about communism, noting that each woman has shortcomings as a revolutionary. For artist-activists like Minna, "the imagination is too rich, the emotional force too turbulent. The anger which they undoubtedly feel is neutralised by the pleasure they experience in expressing it" (220). When Minna argues that she has done her part by recruiting Sophia, Inglebrecht counters by reading from his own footnote:

> It must be stated, however, that these bourgeois disciples are often both wealthy and generous. Since the character of the party is at all times more important than

its finances, this should never be thought of as a reason for welcoming such recruits. If the party be sufficiently strong it does render their introduction less undesirable, but a weak party should arm itself against them as a pestilence. (222)

At this point in the novel, Sophia's failure to fully understand the revolution does lead her to make significant blunders when it comes to Caspar and her desperation to rid herself of him. But along with the overarching logic of the narrative that posits blackness as a contaminant (or pestilence, in Inglebrecht's words), Sophia's mistakes have tragic consequences for Sophia and Caspar, but few for her, just as her belief that the trip to the lime kiln will cure Damian and Augusta hastens their death. Though it seems that Sophia goes on a fantastic journey of self-discovery and sexual liberation—a gestation of the self, riddled with metaphors of pregnancy and breastfeeding— the symmetry of the plot points is striking.

Sophia arrives in Paris in February 1848. The first wave of revolts that she witnessed were those that ended the Orleans monarchy and established the conservative Second Republic, and the story develops over the months leading to the next wave of revolts in June 1848, which were unsuccessful. During that interlude and in parallel to earlier events, Caspar arrives in Paris as Minna is recovering from the flu, just as he arrived at Blandamer when Damian and Augusta were supposed to have been recovering from whooping cough. While Minna has been sick, Sophia has attended to her, in scenes of great tenderness. This is the kind of attention that she could not show her children, and a type of care that strengthens the bond between the women. She lies beside Minna, holds her, comforts her, checks her pulse and her temperature by rubbing her own body against

Minna's. ("And here, in Paris, lay Sophia Willoughby, lying on the floor in the draughty passage-way between bedroom and dressing-closet, her body pressed against the body of her husband's mistress" (206).) Curiously, Minna will not eat or drink, but only smoke cigars as she recovers, reminiscent of the children's treatment at the lime kiln. Because Minna is sick and Frederick has cut off Sophia's access to money, going so far as to remove the gold embellishments from her trunk before he has it sent to her, Sophia is obliged to confront him, just as she was obliged to write him when the children were sick. She is outraged that he has not only cut off her access to money, money that comes from her family, but that he has also ceased supporting Minna, who was financially dependent on him as his mistress.

Like Damian, Minna wants to keep Caspar. Unlike Caspar's visit to Blandamer, though, Sophia perceives his arrival as an intrusion, not an interlude, and is determined to put him back in school. Despite Minna's protestations, Sophia wants to be rid of Caspar because he interrupts her time with Minna; as much as Sophia is able to entertain Minna's entreaties that Caspar stay with them and learn a trade, Sophia still insists on sending him away, thinking, "It was a dubious deed, all her dealings with that luckless mulatto were shoddy enough" (251). Ironically, the headmaster of the school she has selected (a place similar to Trebbenick, just in France this time) interprets her as Caspar's mother: "These Englishwomen, thought he … how shameless they are! One would say that she had no maternal feeling, no warmth at all. And yes she had had an illegitimate child by a negro. Strange! Strange of the negro, too" (247). Here, the "shame" he percepts is lack of maternal affection, not the shame of illegitimate childbearing or interracial sexual

relations.

While Uncle Julius continues to pay for Caspar's needs, Sophia is obliged to go to Frederick to have the funds released to the school. Minna entreats her to send the request through the Aspen lawyer, but Sophia's haste makes her go directly to Frederick. He assures her that the tuition is paid, but instead enlists Caspar in the revolt-supressing Gardes Mobiles. When the July revolts come, Warner stages a rather contrived moment when Caspar, in his government uniform, leaps over the barricade and kills Minna, then Sophia shoots him. Like the visit to the lime kiln man was supposed to cure Damian and Augusta, but instead made them far more ill and ultimately die, Sophia again makes a rather grave misstep in her attempt to remedy the problem that Caspar represents when he reappears in Paris. Sophia in both cases is attached to old ways and received wisdom that she hasn't yet found the conviction to question: in her world, children are cured of whooping cough with lime smoke and troublesome illegitimate children are sent away. In both cases, Sophia's prideful ignorance (or perhaps just inflexibility?) leads ineluctably to fatal consequences.

The conclusion of the book is always, for me, the most difficult and sticky part of my understanding and analysis of Warner's goals. At the end, we have a body count that includes Minna who is killed by Caspar,[8] and Caspar, who is killed by Sophia. Sophia

[8] Several critics, most notably Castle, have argued that Minna is perhaps not dead because her body is not at the barricades, and noting that Sophia goes out to look for her, and hopes she will return. This seems to me an over-reach; I read Sophia as looking for Minna's body, and in her grief and trauma, experiencing normal feelings to denial. Several people tell her that Minna is dead; one claims that Minna was carried away, alive and in pain. Caspar stabs Minna in the chest and it seems that the likelihood of survival is exceedingly low.

herself is rounded up with the revolutionaries and dragged off to be executed but in a final ironic indignity, is spared at a priest's request because she is a "lady." Though she argues vociferously against the reasoning, his ruling stands and Sophia is released. In the final few pages of the novel, she briefly searches for Minna, takes a few days to physically recover, rejects her Great Aunt Leocadie's offer to bring her back into the fold of luxury and money (and also learns from her that Frederick has run off with an Irish woman) and settles herself into Minna's apartment to commence reading *The Communist Manifesto*. The final line of the novel, as Sophia reads, tell us that she was"obdurately attentive and by degrees absorbed" (329).

Sophia here, is a singular—and single—woman who is presented as a heroine, but whose deep flaws and astounding obdurateness have wrought death and destruction through the pages of the novel. I'm troubled that Minna has to die for Sophia's story to be complete. My reading differs somewhat from Warner biographer Wendy Mulford, who notes that:

> Whether the choice of ending was influenced by external, non-artisitc reasons—whether Sylvia [Townsend Warner] chose to end it with Sophia alone because she wished he emphasis to fall on dedication to her chosen politics (and she was writing the end at the height of her new-found political ardour); because Minna as Jewish victim must exemplify the doom of her race; because Minna as romantic revolutionary had to swept aside for the forces of new Communist realism represented by Sophia—is immaterial to one's sense of the novel's achievement. What is material is the fault in the realization of Minna's death, which suggests a

more deep-seated uncertainty or unease. (120).

Mulford sees this struggle as the necessity of Sophia's personal development: "Sophia must also pursue her own free path… The choices at some point come to be between love, artistic freedom and serious political engagement"and finally declares that at the conclusion of the novel, "Sylvia's artistic nerve failed" (120-21) especially because Warner herself did not have to choose between love, politics, and art. While I think her characterization is accurate—especially in light of matching the development of the novel with Warner's own personal arc of political engagement and in the context of Warner's "effusive joy" in her relationship with Valentine Ackland (118)—Mulford doesn't consider Caspar's death with the same curiosity as Minna's.

In the first section of the novel, the part dealing with her life at Blandamer, Damian and Augusta's deaths make sense as a plot point, for character development, and to establish the mise-en-scene of a decaying and unethical class system and its attendant exploitations of both land and workers. As Sophia grows, why then, does the plot replicate itself? We are encouraged to see Sophia as a victim not so much of Frederick himself, but of a sex-gender and capital system that deny her autonomy, and the story is primarily concerned with her struggle to overcome that limitation. Is it a natural extension of this theme, then, that Caspar and Minna are also victims of the same forces that attempt to constrain Sophia? The obvious answer is, of course, a resounding yes, but also a troublesome one. Sophia is explicitly saved because of her white *lady*-ness (in arguing with the priest at the executions, a distinction is made between *women* and *ladies*). With white lady-ness being the established parameters by which one can participate in

revolution *and* be exhonerated—have cake and eat it, too—then I would like to raise the question of whether or not Warner meant this to be a critical reflection of the uneven application of standards in a time of imperialism, or if she fell back on an imperialist, primitivist trope again that allows us to celebrate Sophia, mourn for Minna, completely discard Caspar, and turn our attentions to the continuation of Sophia's development. Is Caspar—whose two arrivals in the novel precipitate death—a character meant to invoke a deep and abiding rejection of colonialism as a deathly injustice, or is he simply a minstrel?

Where this goes further awry for me is in Minna's death. Minna, called "the nursing mother of revolutions" (267) is practically usurped by Sophia. Sophia, who goes to Paris to impregnate herself, instead births her politics, and after three days' confinement—she stays in the apartment, delirious after Minna's stabbing and Caspar's death—she has her new baby: the surprise and delight of *The Communist Manifesto*, which she had unknowingly smuggled (a bodily act suggestive of gestation) for Inglebrecht. Minna, who worked and fed and supported the revolution is presumed dead and Sophia thinks of the "icy pain in her [own] bosom … the counterpart to that flowering crimson on Minna's white muslin gown, that flowering of her warm and generous blood" (318). Revolutionary milk is red. Sophia was a "bad" mother who could only love her biological children as a duty and gave them goat milk instead of nursing them. Sophia is a womb, a hothouse, but Minna was the warm and lively mother of her band of revolutionary misfits, giving milk, blood, nourishment, even to Sophia (as with the cup of warm wine at their initial meeting). Just as Sophia's life as a mother was ended in the first part of the book, so too does Warner end the maternal presence of Minna in its close.

While this is in some ways a utopian ending—Heather Love reminds us that "Sophia loses her lover, but gains a party" and that the descriptions of Sophia reading highlight the sensory experiences of feeling the and smelling the pages, evocative of her experience of Minna's body, and her hope that Minna might be alive and return is also a hope for revolution in the face of loss and despair (144-5). Sophia's original mission to Paris—to get pregnant—was quickly discarded and replaced with a more exhilarating tale of unapologetic sex, love, and politics. Freedom from the duty of mothering feels like a necessary step for Sophia, the conclusion also seems to sacrifice much. While there had first seemed revolutionary and emancipatory possibilities in autonomous decisions about mothering (a mother without being a wife, in Frederick's absence), pregnancy (pursuit of the lime kiln man as sperm donor), and alternative forms of family formation (a family composed of Sophia, Minna, and Caspar), Warner seems ultimately to reject familial bonds, suggesting that political allegiances trump them in the end. Perhaps a happy lesbian ending is also waiting on the revolution.

Chapter Three

Gestating Confusion: Motherhood and Reproduction in Nella Larsen's Novels

My previous two chapters have examined the way that two white Englishwomen, Radclyffe Hall and Sylvia Townsend Warner, have used intertwined motifs of race and reproduction as cyphers for lesbian identity. In this chapter, I turn my attention to American writer Nella Larsen, to examine scholarship around women of color, domesticity and desire, especially Larsen's deployment of mixed race and "tragic mulatta" characters. Like many critics, I come to focus Larsen's work as a watershed in exploring the inextricable qualities of race, gender, and sexuality, but my emphasis in this chapter is on how maternity plays a key role in her critique of family entrapment, especially in 1929's *Passing*. This exploration provides a crucial link to the concluding chapter of my work, in which I look at ways in which the tragic mulatta genre is foundational to the current ways in which we narrativize lesbian marriage and family: forbidden desire, forbidden courtship, forbidden marriage, and impossible children, sometimes shameful and sometimes in search of respect. It is not my intent to demonstrate that lesbian families today are "like" black or interracial families of the past, but that the patterning delineated in those narratives is foundational to how we now create narratives about lesbian families, showing that both allow family to serve as a palimpsest for race, gender, and desire. While both Warner and Hall, especially, made use of *birth* metaphors, Larsen's novel is structured like an unwanted *pregnancy* that suggests entrapment of the body within racial, sexual, and familial structures.

The primacy of domestic narratives in American fiction of the 19th century has

already been established by a wide range of scholarship, and is typically linked to the emergence of a marketable "women's culture," what Lauren Berlant calles "mass-mediated femininity." The rise of abolitionism and the Cult of True Womanhood against the backdrop of philosophical and political clashes, violence, war and Reconstruction and the concomitant legal issues surrounding race, family, and nation made for a particularly rich and risky tableau for writers. The classic beloved and maligned example of this is, of course, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. But looking at the tradition of writing by women of color, we see domesticity as both an urgent and fraught issue in the face of the restrictive, punitive, and cruel realities of marriage and reproduction.

In *Domestic Allegories of Political Desire: The Black Heroine's Text at the Turn of the Century*, Claudia Tate traces the importance of "maternal discourse" in antebellum and abolitionist literature, notably in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, and *Our Nig*. Importantly, she susses out the underlying animus of Stowe's constructions: "[Stowe's] audience readily discerned the parallel between a disorderly house and an immoral nation. But Stowe's ambition was not just to duplicate the symbolic, moral function of true womanhood; she attempted to transform the virtuous woman into the arbiter of national morality" (23-4). But as Tate's title suggests, black women bore a different relationship to the maternal and national imaginary than white women. Freedom was defined "not simply as an escape from the political condition of slavery but as gaining access to the social institutions of motherhood, family, and home" (32). But in the post-Reconstruction era and into the 20th century, the idealization of domestic narratives lost appeal as the contrasting realities of violent and ongoing racial

oppression and interrogations of patriarchal family structures took hold. Tate characterizes Larsen's work as belonging to the genres of "domestic parodies and tragic satires" (15).

In Larsen's 1928 *Quicksand*,[1] the protagonist Helga Crane probably dies in rural poverty as a result of five rapidly successive pregnancies that erode both her body and mind. I will discuss Helga at greater length later, but an important aspect of her demise is that, like many women, historically, she does not have the means or technology to control the spacing of her children's births. Clare and Irene, however, the bourgeois, urban main characters of 1929's *Passing* are readily able to control the number of children they will have: Irene has two sons and Clare has one daughter. Though Helga, Irene, and Clare are all women of African decent, their reproductive lives should be understood within the framework of the maternalism and pronatalism that was gripping both the USA and Europe in the early 20th century as birthrates were declining. Fittingly, in the same time period where Tate identifies this drop-off in domestic narratives of novels, there was intense official anxiety about declining white birth rates and romanticization of large white families, fueled by fears that immigrant and black populations would eclipse whites'. These fears were pithily summarized by the idea of "race suicide," a term coined by economist and sociologist Edward Ross, who believed that "as nations or races became 'more civilized' their birthrates declined" (Lovett 85).

Ross's ideas were popularized by President Theodore Roosevelt. Urban, educated,

[1] References to *Quicksand* are drawn from *An Intimation of Things Distant: The Collected Fiction of Nella Larsen*, edited by Charles Larson. References to *Passing* are drawn from the stand-alone Penguin edition.

wealthy, white women were the ones who were typically accused of indulging themselves in too much leisure, not enough child bearing and therefore, race suicide.[2] (See Lovett, in particular 78-108, for general discussion.) In response, policies, child welfare programs and conservancy efforts constructed the ideal family as large, white, and rural and focused on a maternalist rhetoric, emphasizing women's duty to the family as their duty to both race and nation. As Laura Lovett states in her book *Conceiving the Future*, "Inherent in nostalgic ideologies of the home, motherhood, and family were assumptions about race. Pronatalism in the early 20th century was not about reproduction per se but about racial reproduction and its regulation" (8). Of course the flip side of this, as Dorothy Roberts has demonstrated in her book *Killing the Black Body*, is an attempt to control, manipulate, and impose restrictions on black women's reproductive freedoms.

Steven Martinot sees the conflict over black and white women's reproductive capacities as the cornerstone of of white identity, tracing a direct line between ways that current reproductive issues are racialized and the Virginia colony's 17th century attempts to control interracial coupling through direct prohibition, and through establishing slavery as a matrilineal institution. This served to construct English women as cultural producers, and African women as economic producers, and to polarize "black" and "white" as identities. "The birth of American whiteness and national identity," he says, "converge across and through the race-marked bodies of women" (92, also see Hodes for discussion of race, reproduction, and slavery in the colonies). These ideas were carried forward from the colonial period and post-slavery racial segregation was codified through the 1896

[2] And in this reproductive context, what could be more suicidal than lesbianism?

Plessy v. Ferguson case and in miscegenation laws. Of course Martinot observes that from the outset, prohibitions on interracial coupling and reproduction were not particularly effective—but the ramifications of the regulations were profound, and cultural anxieties adhered to mixed-race bodies. It is against this heavy backdrop that Nella Larsen writes.

Passing is relatively well-known as the work has come into vogue over the past decades, appearing often on college syllabi and providing multiple hooks for approaching race, gender, class, and sexuality issues. It is the tale of two light-skinned women of African descent, Irene Redfield (née Westover) and Clare Kendry (persistently referred to by her maiden name, Kendry, though her married name is Clare Bellew), who grew up together in Chicago. Though both women are light skinned enough to pass for white, they take different approaches to it. Irene lives as a moneyed African-American woman in Harlem, married to a doctor and volunteering in the Negro Welfare League; she passes from time to time as a matter of luxury. Clare has broken ties to the black community and lives as a white woman, married to a white man who believes she is white. After a long period of being out of touch, Clare and Irene run into each other. From there, they develop a mutual homosocial and homoerotic fascination with each other and Irene begins unravelling as Clare becomes an ever more frequent presence in her life. In the final scene, Clare's husband confronts her about her race, and Clare plunges six stories from an open window to her death under ambiguous circumstances—it is possible that her husband pushed her, that Irene pushed her, that she willingly let herself fall, or that it was a complete accident.

My approach to *Passing* lays out some of the background, history, and critical

approaches to Larsen and the text first before moving on to close readings of a few passages. Before delving into it, I want to linger for a moment on the formal structure of the novel. Though scarcely more than 100 pages, it is divided into three sections: "Encounter," "Re-encounter," and "Finale," and each section is further divided into four chapters. The opening section, "Encounter" takes place as a flashback when, one October morning, Irene Redfield receives a letter from Clare Kendry, and is forced to remember their coincidental meeting, "that time in Chicago," (11)[3] in Clare's sexualized language, in August two years prior. The next segment, "Re-Encounter," takes place primarily in the October during which Irene received the letter, and "Finale" rushes through the end of the year, picking up in December and moving into the winter, as Irene anticipates Clare's departure in March. Clare's death takes place sometime around January; it is noted that the new year has come and there is also snow on the ground when she falls from the window.

The tripartite structure of the novel mimics the unfolding of a forbidden pregnancy, conceived on a hotel rooftop, hinted at through letters and signs that Irene wants to ignore, and then suspensefully growing, building, bursting, until the inevitable final push—unnaturally early. The three parts are suggestive of a pregnancy's three trimesters, and could be reclassified as Conception, Gestation, and Termination. In my reading, a scene taking place in "Encounter," about one third way through the book, provides the guiding metaphor for the novel. That scene, which I consider in detail in this chapter, is the afternoon tea and discussion shared by Clare, Irene, and Gertrude. Gertrude is

[3] "That time…" is evocative of language used to pinpoint a conception date for an unplanned pregnancy. "What is that time in…" etc.

another woman who passes fulltime, though her white husband is aware that she does so. Clare and Gertrude discuss how terrifying it was for them to be pregnant because of the possibility of having a dark child; each has limited herself to one pregnancy, though Gertrude has twins. For both of these women, pregnancy was marked by an extreme apprehension about race, and about a baby's unwitting ability to out them. The structure and language of the plot hew to that of pregnancy, and the paranoia experienced by Gertrude and Clare during pregnancy is mimicked in Irene's growing agitation as she begins to view Clare—and her attraction to Clare—as a problem to rid herself of, to relieve herself of. Clare's fall out the window, her descent, is the termination of that terrifying burden, the end of the pregnant possibilities of Irene's fantasies and obsessions. It serves us well to remember that the novel dictates that having one's passing uncloaked is a form of *queering*. After Clare's husband sees Irene on the street with Felise Freeland, who cannot pass, Felise remarks, "Aha! Been 'passing' have you? Well I've queered that" (99). The word "queer" is used frequently and conspicuously throughout the novel, drawing repeated attention to the confusing sexual tangle of race and gender that exists between the characters.

In his illuminating study *Neither Black Nor White But Both*, Werner Sollors couches Clare's choices in terms of life and death. While Clare expresses a longing for "that other life," Sollors conjectures that, "Symbolically, this yearning for black life may stand for a yearning for the warmth of *life*, and "passing" may resemble the experience of death, or may at least be experienced as a form of *social* death" (252, emphasis original). Sollors does, however, habitually and usefully trouble facile analyses, and goes on to note

that the passing characters can also experience a sense of triumph at their infiltration of white culture, with an intent to ultimately undo the damaging results of racial categorization by acting as trickster figures (252-54). It does seem to me that Clare is exhilarated by the danger of her passing, but her choices don't transcend the personal. The contrast is greater with Irene, who has chosen not to pass and also to make racial uplift a mechanism for organizing her social life.

In *Workings of the Spirit: the Poetics of Afro-American Women's Writing*, Houston Baker rails against literary "departed daughters," (such as Pauline Hopkins) whom he categorizes as choosing to turn their backs on their southern, black roots. He frequently invokes the specter of "white face" and charges that, "rather than return to a southern place, the daughters chose to dream dreams and project visions of a universal white-faced American *noplace*—a mulatto utopia" (30). Jacquelyn McLendon, however, takes Baker to task in her study *The Politics of Race in the Fiction of Jessie Fauset and Nella Larsen*, countering that Baker's analysis is grounded in "static constructs of black women." She instead locates a dogged resistance in the writing of women like Larsen, asserting that "they wrote from a political need to counter representations of blackness and black female sexuality created by racism" (3-4). Baker does, however, admit that there is a"genuine complexity of Larsen's and Fauset's authorial decisions" that "required, at least, a more syntactically complex discourse than the mere term 'passing' seems to suggest" (35). Indeed, McLendon insists that "Larsen recognized the possibilities of revising this figure [of the mixed-race woman] to explore the concept of doubleness as it inheres in the experience of African-Americans general, not just in the mulatto's experience" (11).

Passing is a novel about passing but it is not an appeal to the "just like you" line of reasoning delineated by Sollors and damned by Baker, in which the sympathy of the white reader is evoked because she comes to see how the passing character is human by virtue of her similarity to white people. *Passing* doesn't do this. To appropriate Baker's language of the "departed daughter" and apply it to the characters (rather than the author) of *Passing*, Clare (who is herself motherless) embodies the literal departure and Irene the loyal and dutiful daughter, even though Irene's loyalties lie in a severely class-bound conceptualization of racial uplift and an espousal of maternalist discourse. Formally, Larsen explores doubleness through the development of literal doubles, building Clare and Irene as doppelgängers who each represent different choices but are similarly constrained and dissatisfied. There is nothing instructive about the lives that Clare and Irene live because there is no suitable personal solution to the institutional problems they face.[4] Larsen's work instead stays firmly located within bourgeois marriage and motherhood, creating a world that is frustrating and claustrophobic for the reader. Though Clare and Irene both maintain fantasies of their own agency, the reader is required to witness how constrained their choices are, and how ineffective their attempts to overcome their racial and sexual dilemmas are.

But there is another and more narratively subtle form of doubling in the text: reproduction. The women reproduce children who synecdochically represent their

[4] Here, Larsen is in contrast to both Hall and Warner, who had explicit agendas in writing *The Well* and *Summer Will Show*. Hall wanted to help certain sorts of inverts integrate into the social order, and Warner wanted agrarian workers to join the Communist Party. Though they were politically disparate from one another, they both developed characters who are at odds with familial and political institutions and whose character arcs dealt with that outsiderness.

choices. The motherhood status of Larsen's characters is not incidental. Understanding their reproductive choices and attitudes is key to the critique embedded in *Passing*. This picks up from Larsen's earlier character, Helga Crane, the protagonist in 1928's *Quicksand*. For Helga, birth *is* death, and the two are inextricable as she tries to live a life as an interracial person; she tries out numerous occupations and identities and is unable to settle. She longs to abandon her marriage and it is her implied childbirth-related death that stops her. In *Passing* the women's selection of one racial identity over the other provides for a death and *re*birth, and then the births of children solidify new life, rather than killing the mothers. Entrapment in the family becomes the central issue as libidinal currents haunt the women.

When I first read of Larsen, nearly 15 years ago, I remember my faintly uncomfortable excitement in encountering the eroticized language that marks the descriptions of Clare and that Clare uses in her letters: her red mouth, her beautiful and enticing body, her floral effervescence, her magnetism and "wild desire." I rechecked the publication dates several times and debated with myself if I was imagining or over-reading. It was a relief, then, to read both Deborah McDowell's work on the novel and Judith Butler's "Passing, Queering: Nella Larsen's Psychoanalytic Challenge" in *Bodies that Matter*. Larsen's work provides an excellent and varied critique of heterosexual imperative across race and gender lines. I would like to reiterate that this imperative is very much invested in not only gender and sexual fixedness, but also racial/ethnic purity. The fact that interracial marriage was criminalized in this country until relatively recently, and the current intense debates regarding marriage equality underscore our deep cultural

belief in the normalcy of white heterosexuality, the use of state apparatuses to police those categories and maintain them as cultural benchmarks. Clare Kendry pointedly underscores the paranoia of policing heterosexuality and the inseparability of racist and heterosexist ideologies.

Clare Kendry and Irene Redfield have been referred to as "dual protagonists" in *Passing*, but I find this not entirely accurate. It is primarily focalized through Irene, but contains enough narrative gaps that readers are not granted a special intimacy with her. So even though the story is narrated from Irene's point of view, the reader is not completely invited to identify with one and against the other, in a traditional protagonist-antagonist conflict. Larsen portrays neither woman as convincingly sympathetic, often leading to reader frustration with both characters. Clare's psyche, beliefs, and motivations are not explored, but rather interpreted through Irene. On a broader level, however, it is clear that Irene is very much the societal protagonist—the "racial uplift woman" clinging to bourgeois values of upward social mobility, while Clare behaves antagonistically, if in a covert way, to just about all of Irene's bourgeois conventions.

As *Passing* opens, we find Irene Redfield sorting through her mail, and discovering an oversized envelope, addressed in purple ink, with no return address: "Furtive, yet in some peculiar, determined way a little flaunting" (143). Knowing that the letter is from Clare instantly produces and uneasiness in Irene. The reader's first impressions of Clare come through Irene and reveal a duality between the women. Clare is "[s]tepping always on the edge of danger" in ways that Irene is "wholly unable to comprehend" (143). Once Irene opens the letter, its content proves very dangerous indeed. The excerpts of letter that

are shared in the text establish an intensely eroticized relationship between the two women on the basis of their racialized interactions. Clare "cannot help longing to be with you [Irene, and by extension, black people] again, as I have never longed for anything before … It's like an ache, a pain that never ceases… and it's all your fault…this wild desire" (145). As for Irene, "[b]rilliant red patches flamed in [her] warm olive cheeks" (145).

Much ink has been spilt over what *Passing* is "about."[5] Is it just another tragic mulatto story? A cautionary tale about racial passing as such? Is it about racial identity? Is it really about lesbian desire but passing itself as being about race? This letter at the beginning of the story provides a framework in which the racial and the sexual operate together *and* in tandem with the domestic. Clare desires Irene on the basis of Irene's racial identity as a Negro woman: the longing is overtly homosocial and verges on homosexual. Irene's blush betrays her excitement at the prospect of seeing Clare, while she at the same time shuns her. Like the letter, Clare herself is a dangerous mystery flaunting whiteness and furtively hiding her "dark" past—"indeed, is always hiding *in* that very flaunting" (Butler 169, emphasis hers). Irene repudiates Clare, but desires her all the same.

This matter is further complicated by Irene's own conflicted stance on passing. Her reunion with Clare occurs on a hotel rooftop where they are *both* passing. Irene is alone, but Clare appears with someone Irene perceives to be a white man, indicating that she is

[5] Among others, see Butler's chapter; Deborah McDowell's "Not Safe, Not Safe at All"; Cheryl Wall's "Passing for What?"; and Beverly Haviland's "Passing from Paranoia to Plagiarism."

not passing (as Irene purports to) as a matter of occasional convenience, but as a matter of lifestyle. Irene notices the beautiful and as-yet-unidentified Clare staring at her in a very flirtatiously described scene. We find that Irene is also flaunting in her hiding: trying to deduce why Clare is staring at her, she wonders if Clare knows she is passing. "Absurd! Impossible!" she thinks. "White people are so stupid about such things" (16). Nevertheless, Irene is also unable to tell that Clare is passing. Larsen constructs racial confusion through this scene. Irene believes that because she is black, that she understands the codes of racial passing, but because Irene mistakenly perceives Clare as being authentically white, she assumes that Clare is unable to correctly read her.

Passing as a matter of convenience or indulgence is not an ethical problem for Irene. It is when the passing crosses a sexual and even worse, a marital line that it becomes a fraught issue for Irene. In his article "Nella Larsen and the Veil of Race," George Hutchinson points out that miscegenation, besides its obvious attack on whiteness, was also very much disdained by the black bourgeoisie that Irene Redfield organized her identity around. Since miscegenation was largely officially illegal, it meant that directly "interracial" relationships and children were illegitimate and therefore an affront to the respectability that the "racial uplift-ers" were avidly promoting (339-341). The problem for Irene is *not* that she adheres to models that pathologized interracial attraction, but that she believes in marriage, the nuclear family, and the laws that govern those institutions, and above all believes that conforming to those regulations is the surest way to overcoming inequalities. Larsen's implication (quite different from Irene's beliefs) is that the racially pure heterosexual relationship is an impossible construct. Larsen

systematically explores this through Clare's relationship with her husband, John Bellew, Irene's relationship to her husband, Brian, and in turn, Clare's interference with the Redfield's marriage.

Clare is married to an outright racist. Larsen does not develop John's character beyond the first scene in which Irene (again, passing for white) meets him while at Clare's for afternoon tea. We learn that John's pet name for Clare is "Nig;" he chose the name because he perceives a darkening of her skin over the years. But, he tells Clare, "You can get as black as you please because I know you're no nigger….No niggers in my family. Never have been and never will be" (40). As the horrified Irene looks on, he calls blacks "scrimy devils." He has never known any blacks, but has "read in the papers about them. Always robbing and killing people. And … worse" (41), implying that rape is worse than murder.

This brief but intensely uncomfortable scene underscores John's paranoia about maintaining white identity. His sense of his white self is constructed through a constant need to derogate blacks. He fetishizes (to use Butler's language) color by avowing his stalwart belief in Clare's whiteness while at the same time introducing the possibility of its demise in the appellation "Nig." Butler observes that "this term of degradation and disavowal is passed between them as a kind of love toy" (171). John shows a particular preoccupation with sexual racial purity through his testimony to the racial purity of his family as well as the implication that the worst part about "niggers" is the sexual threat they pose through rape. Here, Larsen exposes the fragility of whiteness for whites, and unmasks the white myth of the Bellews' marriage. Clare's stealthy infiltration into this

white world alludes to a general panic over the state of whiteness: how can its purity possibly be maintained when it does not have visual markers, but instead is built on a fragile construction of families reaching back ad nauseum into an obscure but adamantly cited racially pure background ("no niggers in my family")? Clare has pregnancy panic, John has race panic, and Irene has lesbian panic.

Having rendered "white" marriage a sham, Larsen also turns her attention to the passionless, decorous black bourgeois marriage of Irene and Brian. Irene wants to protect her children from "queer ideas" about sex, and to make sure they don't know about lynching or race riots. Irene and Brian sleep in separate rooms, Brian considers sex a "joke" (59), and there is an air of formality surrounding their interactions. Irene's feelings about her duty to her marriage are sharply contrasted with the intense emotions, both thrilling and repulsive, that she feels towards Clare. We first encounter Brian coming in on Irene's morning dressing routine, hastening her to breakfast, while she relates her upset over the letter from Clare. The first physical description of Brian is extremely odd: "Brian, she was thinking, was extremely good looking. Not, of course, pretty or effeminate" (53). Pretty or effeminate? The words catch the reader off guard, leading me to wonder why Irene feels the necessity to remind herself that he is not pretty or effeminate. Is she attracted to this denied prettiness/effeminacy? Is Brian's masculinity somehow at fault? There is an uneasiness about gender and the marital configuration from the start.

Once the two descend the stairs into the dining room, the morning takes on a very proper tone:

He drew back her chair and she sat down behind the fat-bellied German coffee-pot

…With his long, nervous fingers he picked up the morning paper from his own chair and sat down.

Zulena, a small mahogany-coloured creature, brought in the grapefruit.

They took up their spoons.

Out of the silence Brian spoke. Blandly (54).

This marriage is conducted as a performance. As the breakfast continues, Irene becomes increasingly agitated as she and Brian discuss Clare's letter and whether or not Irene will see her again. Even as Irene's tension escalates, she always pulls away, concealing it in the ritual itself, hiding emotion in the flaunting of marital stability: "She stopped short, suddenly too wrathful for words./ … 'More coffee,' she offered./…Zulena came in bringing more toast" (55). Expecting to find something more akin to a "marriage of equals," in contrast to Clare and John's marriage, the reader instead finds the Redfields' relationship also empty, if not offensive on the order of the Bellews'.

When Clare intrudes into the marriage it becomes destabilized by this dangerous passion that Irene has very much avoided. As Clare ingratiates herself into Irene's world of the Harlem elite, Irene becomes increasingly paranoid that Brian and Clare are having an affair. But the narrator of the story[6] makes it clear that Irene is also very much attracted to Clare. When Clare joins the couple for the Negro Welfare League dance, Irene had initially been extremely annoyed by Clare's joining the couple for an evening out. Once seeing her, Irene is overcome by the loveliness of Clare.

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[6] Throughout *Passing*, Larsen uses a third-person narration that follows Irene's point-of-view. The narrator is often speaking for Irene when she is inarticulate. This proves extremely significant at the scene of Clare's death.

> She [Irene] remembered her own little choked exclamation of admiration, when, on coming downstairs a few minutes later that she had intended, she had rushed into the living-room where was Brian was waiting and had found Clare there too. Clare, exquisite, golden, fragrant, flaunting…" (74)

Moreover, Butler argues, and I agree, that the brilliant construction of the passage demonstrates the extremely triangulated relationship between Irene, Clare and Brian. "[H]ad found Clare there too" is rife with meaning: is Irene herself finding Clare, or is she finding Brian and Clare together, or are Brian and Irene both finding Clare? Here, the marriage wavers between a stultified observance and an adulterous breakdown, but Larsen strongly suggests that heterosexual desire also falters. It is the sexual subversion of whiteness, marriage, and heterosexuality personified by Clare that culminates in her unresolved death/murder at the end of the novel.

While many of these points have been eloquently articulated in critical work, in existent criticism, motherhood is generally treated as incidental rather than central to these thematic elements and plot points. It's important that one of Clare's primary transgressions is reproductive. As a "white" woman, she is abdicating her responsibility to breed the race by limiting herself to one child; as a "black" woman, she is adulterating the gene pool. As an interloper in Irene and Brian's marriage, she is destabilizing their domesticity. She and Irene come to understand that only their children, and not their husbands, serve as guards of their bourgeois, domestic identities. When Irene tries to convince Clare to stop coming to Harlem, she does so in terms of motherhood:

> [Clare]"I'm used to risks. And this isn't such a big one as you're trying to make it."

"Oh, but it is. And it can make all the difference in the world. There's your little girl, Clare. Think of the consequences to her."

Clare's face took on a startled new look, as thought she were totally unprepared for this new weapon with which Irene had assailed her. Seconds passed, during which she sat with stricken eyes and compressed lips. "I think," she said at last, "the being a mother is the cruelest thing in the world." Her clasped hands swayed forward and back again, and her scarlet mouth trembled irrepressibly.

"Yes," Irene softly agreed. For a moment she was unable to say more, so accurately had Clare put into words that which, not so definitely defined, was so often in her own heart of late. At the same time she was conscious that here, to her hand, was a reason which could not be lightly brushed aside. "Yes," she repeated, "and the most responsible, Clare, We mothers are responsible for the security and happiness of our children. Think what it would mean to your Margery if Mr. Bellew should find out. You'd probably lose her. And even if you didn't, nothing that concerned her would ever be the same again. He'd never forget that she had Negro blood. And if she should learn—Well, I believe that after twelve is too late to learn a thing like that. She'd never forgive you. You may be used to taking risks, but this is one that you mustn't take, Clare." (67-8)

So motherhood for both women is cruel and limiting, but this is the only place in the text where Irene expresses her displeasure. But Irene deflects her feelings by indicting Clare and invoking the rhetoric of responsibility and maternity. And in choosing the age of twelve as a cutoff, Irene has also implied that as children approach adolescence and

sexual maturity, it is too late for them to learn the ruthless rules that govern the choices of people of color under Jim Crow. In the midst of this conversation, Clare has been crying and Irene thinks that not many women "wept as attractively as Clare" and then goes on to say, "No one is ever completely happy, or free, or safe" (67). It is *Clare* who evokes these dangerous feelings in Irene and who threatens the protective bubble she has spun around herself and her family—at this point *not* because Irene has suspicions about Clare and Brian. Irene is possibly successful *as* a mother, but motherhood has failed her. We should consider this collaterally with the disillusionment of African-American soldiers returning from WWI: following DuBois's summons to military service, many who served believed that they "would come home to more than pensions and broken promises… The lynching must cease, the ballot booth open, and the jobs go to anyone who could work" (Levering Lewis 8) after such heroic demonstrations of their patriotism and civic duty. If producing children amid this tide of optimistic patriotism was women's duty, then Irene, like the soldiers who returned home to a parade but reinvigorated racism, is similarly shaken by war and pronatalism.

Where motherhood is mentioned in Larsen studies, it typically focuses on her first novel, *Quicksand* (1928), in which the protagonist, Helga Crane, goes through a series of vignette-like episodes of personal and professional possibilities. Like Larsen herself, Helga is born of a white Danish immigrant mother and a black father, and struggles with the integration of her black and Scandinavian heritages. Helga begins as a teacher in a Southern black university, flees to Chicago and then New York and becomes an assistant to a prominent woman in the racial uplift movement, relocates to Copenhagen to live with

her aunt and uncle before returning to the United States, marrying an evangelical preacher, moving to the country, having a number of children in quick succession, and almost certainly dying in childbirth,[7] in rural obscurity. Motherhood, per se, is not even figured into the plot, but is the end of Helga's story: the portion of Helga's life during which she is a mother is not developed in the novel; it takes mere pages and focuses on her fading strength and not her identity as a mother. Obviously, *Quicksand* configures reproduction as a symbolic and literal death of Helga's personhood, as her potential and ambition is dissolved away through pregnancy and birth: it's a black ending, literally. Yet Helga's articulations of her distaste for marriage, the church, and the community around her are sharp: "The thought of her husband roused in her a deep and contemptuous hatred… She meant to leave him. And it was, she had to concede, all her own doing, this marriage. Nevertheless, she hated him" (160-61). Her thoughts continue to take on the "church folk": "She hated their raucous laughter, their stupid acceptance of all things, and their unfailing trust in 'de Lawd'" (161). And yet, "Of the children, Helga tried not to think. She wanted not to leave them—if that were possible" (161). Her children are held as a separate thing from her marriage, and even in her last days, she seems to be overwhelmed not by some anomalous feeling of oppression but precisely by the clarity of her own understanding of the interlocking systems of race, gender, and class stratification and her own compliance with them.

In contrast, *Passing*'s treatment of marriage, motherhood is more multivalent and complicated. Beginning with the epigraph of *Passing*, special attention is given to familial

[7] While Helga's death is not confirmed in the novel, it is strongly implied and widely accepted in critical work on *Quicksand*.

status in all of its complexities and ambivalences. The excerpt from Countee Cullen's *Color* is evocative of both desire, lineage, and ambiguity: "One three centuries removed/From the scenes his fathers loved/Spicy grove, cinnamon tree,/What is Africa to me?" The lines focus in on the patrilineal transference of solidarity and its dissolution, and interestingly associates Africa with fathers, in contrast to the oft-used Mother Africa trope. For both Clare and Irene, their childhoods are also overshadowed by fathers and not mothers. Clare's mother is dead and her father is a temperamental, explosive alcoholic. Clare goes to live with her father's white aunts after he dies in a barroom fight. Irene's mother is alive throughout her childhood, but her father, depicted as an unassailably moral and reliable gentleman, is the stronger presence. Though their early years are not fully depicted in the novel, the contexts of their childhoods provide more or less straightforward paths into their married lives: Clare marries her way into white society while Irene uses her marriage to secure her place within black bourgeois culture. The epigraph also alludes to the duality of Irene and Clare, highlighting the dubious nature of their own allegiances: for Clare, her choice to break away and pass while still yearning to be part of Harlem culture, and for Irene, the conflict of her desires to out Clare and to protect her. The novel is also dedicated to Harlem Renaissance patron Carl Van Vechten and his wife, Fania Marinoff, a pair who were both well known to be gay, and whose queered marriage allowed them to indulge in queer and, especially for Van Vechten, cross-racial affairs (see Herrmann for more discussion). The dedication, so primly given to a patron and his wife, more obliquely suggests the judicious use of marriage as a mask or cover—a way to flaunt in hiding, as the dedication itself does.

The initial rooftop meeting between the two women on the Drayton rooftop[8] is, structured through family and community ties, saturated with mundane talk of friends and relatives:

> And so for an hour or more they had sat there smoking and drinking tea and filling the gap of twelve years with talk. That is, Irene did. She told Clare about her marriage and removal to New York, about her husband, and about her two sons, who were having their first experience of being separated from their parents at summer camp, and about her mother's death and about the marriages of her two brothers. She told of the marriage, births, and deaths in other families that Clare had known , opening up, for her, new vistas on the lives of old friends and acquaintances. (22)

Irene actually avoids asking questions about Clare's life, remembering the rumors she had heard: "There was the one about Clare Kendry's having been seen at the dinner hour in a

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[8] The women's meeting is indicative of the danger that both of them are in of falling out of domesticity. They meet in public, *in a hotel*! Despite their family-oriented talk, their bodily and domestic boundaries are already porous; Irene is in a whites-only hotel where should could not be with her family; Clare is escorted there by a man who is not her husband. In *Conjugal Union*, Robert Reid-Pharr traces the mutuality of the body and the domestic in free black antebellum discourse and novels, and asserts that, "One might argue, in fact, that since the idea of the domestic is intimately tied to bourgeois articulations of an essential difference between public and private, that the marketplace, an important, if not the important, location for the production of the bourgeois, always encroaches upon domestic life. … Promiscuous money dirties his hands, strangers of 'alien' classes and races press upon his person, fallen women threaten his morality and health" and hence his home and self must be ruthlessly cleaned (66). Here, it is not the men leaving the home to make money, but the women leaving home to spend it. Irene uses the chatter about families to exculpate herself from the dirtiness. As the plot progresses and Clare pays more frequent visits to Irene's home, she often spends her time with the household servants, bringing Irene into contact with the household and racial secrets—uncleanliness—that she otherwise avoids.

fashionable hotel in company with another woman and two men, all of them white… And there was another which told of her driving in Lincoln Park with a man, unmistakably white, and evidently rich… People did not take their servants to the Shelby for dinner. Certainly not all dressed up like that!" (19). Clare's self-exile from her peers points to her decision to pass, and possibly to prostitute herself.

From the way in which the history is constructed, it appears that Irene's family, the Westovers, played a special role in Clare's life, especially after her father's death, but that Clare decided not to approach them with her plans to pass (which she describes as going "away to stay") because she was worried they would snub her: "Somehow, good as all of you, the whole family, had always been to the poor forlorn child that was me, I felt I shouldn't be able to bear it" (21). It is a curious reversal of positions in that Clare was making the purposeful choice to dissociate herself from the black community, but worries that she will be the one who will be disavowed and unable to tolerate it. Clare seems to manipulate her orphan status in recollecting her adolescence so that her decisions seem correct and inevitable, and that she was powerless—a child. As the novel goes on, Irene also thinks condescendingly of Clare's behavior as childish, but casting Clare as a child and Irene as a mother also shores up the feelings of both dutiful protection and resentment of Clare that fester in Irene.

Clare's aunts, white and religious, task Clare with hard work in the house—to cleanse her blackness—and "They forbade me to mention Negroes to the neighbors, or even to mention the south side… When the chance came for me to get away, that omission was of great value. After he [Jack, her white husband] came, I stopped slipping

off to the south side and slipped off to meet him instead. I couldn't manage both" (27). On her eighteenth birthday, Clare marries Jack. Irene is shocked that Clare has never had to account for her past in her new life, but Clare informs her, "You'd be surprised, 'Rene, how much easier that is with white people than with us. Maybe because there are so many of them, or maybe because they are secure and don't have to bother" (25). In all of the accounting of lineage, it is strange that Clare's mother and her race and appearance are not mentioned. All that we know is that she died, and it is mentioned that if she hadn't died, she probably would have abandoned the family, meaning that Clare's kin is drawn only from the Kendry side of the family, which is predominantly white. Her white grandfather had "ruined a Negro girl", and it is implied that Clare's black characteristics come from this grandmother, and the logic of scientific racism and degenerate blood resonate through the beliefs held by Clare's aunts, who hold that Bob Kendry and Clare are always already spoiled by "the curse of Ham."

All of this set up in terms of familial longing and belonging deserves a greater emphasis within the queer readings of *Passing* that exist. The ways in which Clare is enmeshed in Irene's family of origin, the Westovers, and then Irene's marital family, the Redfields, should be read in tandem with the eroticism of the relationship between the women. Larsen's writing seems to prefigure Adrienne Rich's work in "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence," which argues that heterosexuality is a violent political institution and not a mere set of desires or sexual practices. Larsen had the uncanny ability to draw attention to institutional prejudices in a disarming, self-reflexive manner, that showed the multiple interpolations of desire, race, and family. This should

absolutely not be separated from the cultural context of the 1920s, in which multiple new technologies gave both a veneer of modern advancement and global intimacy (via radio, film, photographs, photojournalism etc.) *and* in which there was an urgency to define and control perceived racial and sexual deviance. Pamela Caughie points to the literal border crossings that were enabled during the modernist period: cars and airplanes could move people quickly; radios and gramophones could transmit the same information to people in different continents. Caughie locates "the crossover identities inspired and sometimes compelled by popular and scientific notions of racial and sexual 'character' as well as by new media and new markets… in those twin cultural icons of the modernist generation, the androgyne and the mulatto" (373). However, I think Caughie casts too wide a net in exploring the mobility that passing as a social practice (besides a literary motif) *could* facilitate. Her own examples of two widely publicized court cases illustrate this: the 1925 Rhinelander case in the USA (which Larsen was definitely familiar with), in which Kip Rhinelander sought to have his marriage annulled because he alleged that he learned his wife Alice was "colored" after they got married[9] and the 1929 Colonel Victor Barker/Valerie Arkell-Smith case in England. Barker/Arkell-Smith was biologically female but lived as a man and married a woman, and was convicted for lying on a marriage certificate. The sensationalism of these cases demonstrates the perceived exigency of regulation in this period. Both Clare and Irene have urges to explore their border-crossing abilities, yet they simultaneously seek to self-regulate via the domestic institutions of

[9] Kip Rhinelander lost the case, but Alice was compelled to show the jury her nipples—apparently Kip must have known she was "colored" because of the color of her nipples, which he saw prior to their marriage.

marriage and especially motherhood.

In other chapters in this project, I examine *The Well of Loneliness* and *Summer Will Show*, both of which deal with characters who are developed as explicitly lesbian, and both make use of struggle within domestic spaces as a literal and allegorical plot development devices. I pay special attention to the roles that children, motherhood, and reproduction (or failure to reproduce) play within those plots, as well as how those categories are entwined with racial and national identity. *Passing* takes up the mantle of these motifs, but is also obviously different in that the deep ambivalence and ambiguity literally embodied in both Clare and Irene makes the development of these themes more subtle and complex, and more difficult for readers to fix in meaning. Its setting and author—American rather than English—also mean that the novel was developed and takes place in a different cultural and legal milieu, but I am less concerned about highlighting those differences than I am with seeing how these three novels establish different sets of beliefs about race, gender, and sexuality within or against domesticity. Queerness is the perfect medium for growing these ghostly allegiances because it plays off the sameness/difference motif as well as the mutually constitutive aspects of what creates socially intelligible races, genders, couplings, and offspring. Despite their differences, they all work in a context in which a widely held belief about the body was

> That the physical body offers transparent evidence of its history, identity, and behavior … During the nineteenth century, human anatomy was treated as a legible text, over which various fields of science, including the nascent field of sexology, competed for authority as literate readers and interpreters of meaning. …

> [S]exology became a privileged, though not exclusive, site for the articulation of newly emerging models of homo- and heterosexuality. Although most of the population many not have had direct knowledge of the texts produced by sexologists and the earlier "experts" of scientific racism (comparative anatomists), their theories and conclusions increasingly assumed enormous cultural power to organize and pathologize those marked as sexually deviant and racially "other." (Somerville, 9-10)

Larsen's work clearly militates against the "legibility of the body," by creating characters who are specifically *not* legible—not even to each other.

Again, in the flashback that provides the springboard for the novel's plot, Irene and Clare are on the Drayton rooftop, where Irene has sought solace from an afternoon of extreme heat. They are sitting near each other, but have not placed one another as old friends. Irene' has ordered iced tea, and "it was all that she had desired and expected. In fact, so much was it what she had desired and expected that after the first deep cooling drink she was about to forget it, only now and then sipping, a little absently, from the tall green glass" (13). Tea is used a few times throughout the novel, notably toward the conclusion, when Irene drops a cup of tea and it breaks, sending it splashing out across the carpet as Irene convinces herself that Clare is having an affair with her husband, Brian (93). The color of the tea in the cup plainly represents race—besides the direct references to the beverages, Clare always visits Irene for afternoon tea, goes with her to tea dances and so forth. The dark liquid in the white vessel is an allusion to the women's abilities to carry darkness—both corporeal and reproductive, blood and babies—in their white

bodies, a darkness that feels metaphorical to modern readers but would have had a literal meaning to subscribers of scientific racism. But on the Drayton rooftop, the tea is in the glass, content and cooling, and Irene can forget it, as she can settle into her surroundings and ignore that she is passing. Lauren Berlant succinctly identifies that "What Irene wants is relief from the body she has" (109) and ties that freedom from the body, historically ascribed to white heterosexual men, to "the sign of real authority according to constitutional fashion" (111).

Like the iced tea, Clare breezes in: "a husky voice … a sweetly scented woman in a fluttering dress of green chiffon whose mingled pattern of narcissuses, jonquils, and hyacinths was a reminder of pleasantly chill spring days" (14). Focalized through Irene, there is a series of indulgent, sexualized descriptions of the as-yet unidentified Clare: "lips parted in some answer… the peculiar caressing smile … an attractive-looking woman … with those dark, almost black, eyes and that wide mouth like a scarlet flower against the ivory of her skin" (14). The attention that Irene pays to Clare's lips and mouth is especially noticeable, as she continues, "Irene couldn't quite define it, but she was sure that she would have classed it, coming from another woman as being just a shade too provocative for a waiter. About this one, however, there was something that made her hesitate to name it that" (15). Irene's observations of Clare are intensely sexualized, voyeuristic, verging into the masturbatory: "Irene watched her spread out her napkin, saw the silver spoon in the white hand slit the dull gold of the melon" (15). As she becomes aware that she is staring, Irene tries to stop but feels herself compelled to keep looking and eventually the women make eye contact.

Having given this lengthy description of Irene's spectacular enjoyment in watching Clare, it suddenly and ironically becomes "Irene who was put out. Feeling her colour heighten under the continued inspection, she slid her eyes down. What, she wondered, could be the reason for such persistent attention?" (15) Irene tries to avoid looking at Clare, but finds herself transfixed—"What strange languorous eyes she had!" (16)—until Irene begins to suspect that Clare knows that Irene is passing. In language that clearly dismisses theories of anatomical and corporeal legibility, Irene debates the plausibility of this suspicion, but rejects it because, "White people were so stupid about such things for that they usually asserted that they were able to tell; and by the most ridiculous means,"—scientific racism—"finger-nails, palms of the hands, shapes of ears, teeth, and other equally sill rot. They always took her for an Italian, a Spaniard, a Mexican, or a gipsy. Never, when she was alone, had they even remotely seemed to suspect that she was a Negro. No, the woman sitting there staring at her couldn't possibly know" (16). But the intelligence of Larsen's critique layered onto Irene's is that while Irene sees the inability to detect "passing" as a deficiency common to white people, she is herself also unable to read Clare as also passing, underscoring the hazards of believing in an *essential* affiliation and understanding within identity groups. Irene considers herself unreadable to Clare because she is unable to read Clare. Even after Clare approaches her, Irene needs more prompting to be able to place her, largely because Irene believes that Clare is white, wondering if they might have met in Europe at some point. Irene aptly summarizes this confusion by remarking to Irene, "You are changed you know. And yet, in a way, you're just the same" (18).

Despite the racial indeterminacy of Clare's body, the descriptions of her from childhood and adulthood are consistent. It would seem that Clare is not changed, but Irene's perception of her is—and, as the novel repeatedly underscores, it is perception of race that creates its realities, not anything irreducible within the body or society. If Irene sees Clare as changed, then Clare is effectively changed, even if her body remains the same. Nevertheless, when Irene tries to deduce what is extraordinary about Clare, the "polite insolence… [she] hadn't got by passing" Irene comes to settle on Clare's eyes. So while "white people were so stupid" Irene squares the circle by allowing that Clare's eyes are not white eyes: "Yes, Clare Kendry's loveliness was absolute, beyond challenge, thanks to those eyes which her grandmother and later her mother and father had given to her. Into those eyes there came a smile and over Irene the sense of being petted and caressed. She smiled back." (28-9). To settle her own confusion, Irene imposes an organizational schema over their interaction and Clare's body—one that Clare continually undermines, and that Larsen generally demonstrates to be unworkable.

When Clare and Irene part from the hotel rooftop, Clare begs Irene to see her again: "'I may never see you again! Think of that 'Rene!' … At that moment it seemed an awful dreadful thing to think of never seeing Clare again. Standing there under the appeal, the caress, of her eyes…" (29). Once the hypnotic effects of Clare's "negro eyes" have been removed, Irene internally vows that she will not see Clare again, but Clare repeatedly calls her and asks her to tea. Of course once she arrives, Irene finds Clare's voice "seductive" and "under her potent smile a part of Irene's annoyance with herself fled. She was even a little glad she had come" (33). Irene finds, however, that they are

not alone. Another old acquaintance, Gertrude is there, too. Gertrude[10] like Clare and Irene is of mixed racial heritage and can pass for white.

We see two contrasting options in Clare and Irene's lives and marriages: black ("You're just the same, Irene. Not changed a bit," remarks Gertrude (33)) and white (the same and yet changed, as discussed above). Gertrude represents a third choice. While she has married a white man, she has not concealed her background from him. Though they live as white and in violation of miscegenation laws, she is not "passing" in the same manner as Clare, for whom the revelation of her family's composition would be a disaster. Despite this, Larsen develops the scene to show that Gertrude's option doesn't offer any viable form of escape.

When Irene reluctantly comes to tea at Clare's house (under the auspices of meeting Clare's daughter, who is not there, afterall) Irene is extremely irritated by the presence of Gertrude, but it is hard to tell which of her criticisms are true to Gertrude's character, and which are those that are filtered through Irene's fit of jealousy, annoyance, and classism. The fact that Gertrude's husband is a butcher and owns a meat market also lends an element of classism to Irene's objections. Her thoughts allude to some vague unsavory past: "Still, of course, Clare couldn't have known. Twelve years since they had met" (34) and Irene finds Gertrude's face "broad, flat … prematurely aging" and her dress too short, and her stockings "sleazy" (35). Clare, however, steers the conversation to family and children, just as tea arrives and Clare pours "the rich amber fluid from the tall

[10] George Hutchinson has elegantly compared *Passing* and Stein's *Three Lives*, and Larsen and Stein are connected via Van Vechten. Could it be that Gertrude's name is an inside joke?

glass pitcher into stately slim glasses" (35-6). The repeated flow of tea into glasses, the careful containment of a potentially creeping, crawling, nebulous substance, seems to beg Berlant's question of, "What would it take to produce the political dignity of corporeal difference in American culture, where public embodiment is in itself a sign of inadequacy to proper citizenship?" (112). Berlant sites the "surplus corporeality of racialized and gendered subjects" as barriers to political and social power, yet the surplus corporeality of pregnancy is curiously absent from her work.

Over tea, Gertrude and Clare discuss the terrors of pregnancy, identifying their bodies as potential vessels for the black blood, the dark fluid, the racial secrets that could be transmitted to their offspring. Clare states, "No, I don't have any boys and I don't think I'll ever have any. I'm afraid. I nearly died of terror the whole nine months before Margery was born for fear that she might be dark. Thank goodness, she turned out all right. But I'll never risk it again. It's simply too—too hellish." Gertrude emphatically agrees, despite her husband's acceptance: "Fred said I was silly, and so did his mother. But, of course, they thought it was just a notion I'd gotten into my head and they blamed it on my condition. They don't know like we do, how it might go way back, and turn out dark no matter what colour the father and mother are." Gertrude also concludes that she would never take the risk of having another child, even though her husband tells her that he doesn't care about the child's skin color: "But, of course, nobody wants a dark child" she says. When Irene reveals that not only is one of her children dark, but that her husband is too, "Gertrude jumped as if she'd been shot at. Her eyes goggled. Her mouth flew open" (37). Then, "Irene, who was struggling with a flood of feelings, resentment,

anger, and contempt, was, however, able to answer as cooly as if she had not that sense of not belonging to and of despising the company in which she found her self drinking iced tea from tall amber glasses on that hot August afternoon" (36-7). Irene here typifies the mask of passing, again set in terms of tea. As someone who has passed at will throughout her life, she is skilled at suppressing her responses so as not to betray identity. Her emotions "flood" but she is able to contain them and drink the tea that is carried in glasses as elegant as Clare's body.

Clare tries to minimize he friction between Gertrude and Irene by claiming, "It's only deserters like me who need to be afraid of freaks of nature" and steers the conversation to another old acquaintance, Claude Jones, at which point Gertrude laughs and tells how "he was no longer a Negro or a Christian, but a Jew … 'You'd die laughing if you saw him. He's really too funny for words'" (37). Only Irene thinks Claude could be sincere in his conversion, while Gertrude and Clare mock it. Irene makes an intervention in their teasing, but Clare points out the Irene should not have expected her to take any such identity change seriously.

It is clear that Clare draws her sense of personal power from believing she can manipulate not only people, but the systems of oppression that surround her, and would assume that any such personal choice would be for the same sort of gain. This is not the case for Gertrude, who cannot share in the flirtatious connection that Clare and Irene have. The character of Gertrude, as Larsen develops her by focalizing through Irene, is rough and blunt not just in appearance, but in understanding. She has neither the confident defiance of Clare, nor the righteous sense of duty that Irene brings. Gertrude's

lack of appeal seems to be Larsen's way of proving that Gertrude's choices, while appearing to be a progressive flouting of convention and law, do not represent any form of advancement towards equality or justice. Gertrude is not trying to hide her past, but she still must get away from it; she is leveraging the social power of whiteness and marriage, and will not risk having a dark child; she is retreating from somatically inflected risks. Gertrude's presence in the novel underscores that racial classification is not personal and corporeal, but systematic. Deborah McDowell has said, "Both passing and marriage are attempts—at times naive and fantasy-ridden—by both women and blacks to overcome the structural inequalities that disempower them. Both marriage and passing are means by which these two disenfranchised groups hope to gain access to power [but] their expectations are frequently unfulfilled" (Introduction to *Plum Bun*, xvi). The fantasy of power is present in the choices of all of these women.

These matrices are apparent in Clare's marriage, too, as we have seen through her husband's unusual and disturbing choice to call her "Nig" and his complete disavowal of the idea that there could be anyone of color within his family. Their daughter, Margery, never appears in the text. She is always somewhere else, and Clare argues that "children aren't everything" (81) when Irene cautions her about her reckless behavior. Margery is referred to a number of times but her constant awayness—away with family, away at boarding school—makes her seem unreal, and relieves Clare of the day to day tasks of parenting. Even though Irene has the household help typical of someone with her wealth, she is involved with her children on a daily basis—they have only just been sent away to summer camp for the first time. When Clare starts visiting the Redfields on a regular basis,

she makes frequent trips to the boys' room and they develop "an admiration that verged on adoration" for her (79), seeming to substitute them for her own child. She is infiltrating all aspects of Irene's life.

Clare Kendry is introduced into the novel in a cloud of confusion: after a near-fainting spell on a hot day, Irene sitting by an open window on the hotel rooftop restaurant, attempting to cool her body and nerves with the iced tea. Here Irene is on the precipice, and this episode marks Irene's plunge into a world of sexual and familial uncertainty, one where she is poised between hating and loving Clare, and clinging to and escaping her family. While the novel at places suggests that Clare and Brian are having an affair, it also casts doubt on Brian's sexuality, and because the narrator is generally focalized through Irene's tangled thoughts and attraction to Clare, the veracity of Irene's suspicions is highly suspect. This culminates in the story's conclusion, when Clare tumbles from the open window to her death, which neatly mirrors its beginning. Irene again becomes confused, uncertain of how Clare went out the window. In the final scene, it is Clare by the window and Clare who plunges, but Irene's consciousness remains shaky. In the end, Clare's body, with its confusing color, attractions, and risks, cannot overcome the structural inequalities that seek to govern it.

The final scene also gives a literal juxtaposition of white and black, with Clare falling into a white snowbank and Irene's grasp on consciousness wavering, represented as a descent into darkness. In the moments leading up to Clare's death, Irene and Brian have arrived with Clare at a party hosted by Dave and Felise Freeland, a Harlem intellectual couple. The day leading up to the party is marked by racial tension within the

Redfield home. There has been a snowstorm throughout the day, surrounding everything with white, but inside, Irene and Brian rage at each other due to differences in opinion about explaining race problems to their children. Brian wants to educate them thoroughly; Irene wants to shelter them from news about race riots, lynchings, and the word "nigger." Brian again references his desire to leave the USA, telling Irene, "If, as you are so determined, they've got to live in this damned country, they'd better find out what they're up against as soon as possible" (103). Irene counters that she just wants her children to be happy, but Brian feels it is his "duty" to protect them by educating them. He again tells her that he has given up his dream to "get them out of this hellish place" but that he has given that up for Irene. When he tells her, "Don't expect me to give up everything" and stalks out of the room, Irene immediately wonders if "everything" means Clare. This is an odd substitution; Brian has not referenced Clare at any point—his focus has been entirely on family, current events, and nation. It suggests that Irene mediates those topics through Clare. Irene lapses into a fit of suspicion (104).

Clare soon arrives and comes up to Irene as she sits at her dressing table. Clare approaches Irene and kisses her bare shoulder, an act that is simply narrated—"Clare kissed a bare shoulder, seeming not to notice a slight shrinking" (105)—but at the same time highly suggestive in its sexual overtones. This is another form of narrative doubling that Larsen employs: where Irene is aroused by Clare's ambiguous sexuality, she tends to project her own attractions onto Brian, Irene's shrinking is ostensibly because of her suspicion of Brian and Clare, but also conveys lesbian panic. Irene asks Clare about what would happen if Bellew found her out, and Clare says that she would be free and come to

live in Harlem. Clare says that the only thing that holds her back from outing herself is Margery, a problem that remains unresolved. Clare also couches the potential to be caught in terms of freedom, rather than in terms of constraint, whereas Irene wonders at her own reluctance to reveal Clare: "That instinctive loyalty to race. Why couldn't she get free of it? Why should it include Clare? "(100). After sending Clare away, the narrator follows Irene's inner monologue, in which she ponders family, security, and citizenship.

> Security. Was it just a word? If not, then was it only by the sacrifice of other things, happiness, love, or some wild ecstasy that she had never known, that could be obtained? And did too much striving, too much faith in safety and permanence, unfit one for these other things?
>
> Irene didn't know; couldn't decide, thought for a long time she sat questioning and trying to understand. Yet all the while, in spite of her searchings and feeling of frustration, she was aware that, to her, security was the most important and desired thing in life. Not for any of the others, or for all of them, would she exchange it. She wanted only to be tranquil. Only, unmolested, to be allowed to direct for their own best good the lives of her sons and her husband. (107)

In her thoughts, she also reconfirms that she will not go to Brazil, and that she specifically is American, while at the same time she believes, "Strange, that she couldn't now be sure that she had ever truly known love. Not even for Brian. … Had she ever wanted or tried for more? In that hour she thought not" (107). As her thoughts return to Clare and Brian again, "Nevertheless, she meant to keep him. Her freshly painted lips narrowed into a thin straight line. True, she had left off trying to believe that he and Clare loved and yet

did not love, but she still intended to hold fast to the outer shell of her marriage " (107-8). This requires releasing Clare.

Clare's final fall is foreshadowed numerous times throughout the novel. In the women's first meeting, they sit high above the streets of Chicago, Irene having just been saved from the plunge of heat exhaustion. There is the flashback of Clare looking down on her dead father's body, Clare cursing her husband and exclaiming, "Damn Jack! He keeps me out of everything. Everything I want. I could kill him! I expect I shall, someday" and as she talks, Irene, "near a rage of impatience and exasperation" arranges flowers on a window sill, with a shaky hand (71). On the evening of Clare's fall, Irene flicks a cigarette out the window and watches its embers fall, and of course there is the matter of the tea.

At the previous party that Clare had attending with Brian and Irene—the Negro Welfare League dance—Irene becomes overwhelmed by her suspicions about Brian and Clare, and her jealous passion for her:

> Rage boiled up in her.
>
> There was a slight crash. On the floor at her feet lay the shattered cup. Dark stains dotted the bright rug. Spread. The chatter stopped. Went on. Before her, Zulena gathered up the white fragments. …
>
> It hurt. Dear God! How the thing hurt her. … She could, she would bear it. She would have to. There were the boys. Her whole body went taut. In that second she saw that she could bear anything, but only if no one knew that she had anything to bear. It hurt. It frightened her, but she could bear it.(94-95)

The "it" here is purportedly an affair between Brian and Clare, but is also tied to Irene's attraction to Clare. She does not want to be caught out, noticed. Irene makes an excuse for dropping the cup, and adamantly declares that it was an ugly "Confederate" cup brought north by her ancestors, and that she wished she had broken it sooner, wondering if her forced explanation is convincing. The language of the scene, though, suggests a quickening and a premature labor, with waves of pain and broken water laying in puddles around her feet: secrets spilling out, and a desperate attempt to hide them. As Irene is more determined to forcefully rid herself of Clare, she begins to have thoughts like, "If only something would happen," and then "She drew a quick, sharp breath. Strange, she had not before realized how easily she could put Clare out of her life! She had only to tell John Bellew that his wife—No. Not that!" (97-8). Irene has a problem, and it takes on the characteristics of a terrifying and unwanted pregnancy. She wishes for a natural end (miscarriage), and she knows she can also end it herself (abortion), and then, like a good mother, she retracts the thoughts. And when she gets what she wants, she must disavow having ever wanted it.

Clare goes out the window, and whether or not Irene caused the fall is unknowable to the reader. Whether Irene acted to cause the fall or whether she is simply overwhelmed by guilt and relief are left intentionally ambiguous. When Clare falls, there was "a sound not quite human, like a beast in agony" that could be Irene or Bellew. Irene stays behind as the other rush downstairs, and thinks, "Gone! … That beauty that had torn at Irene's placid life. Gone!" and her overwhelming fear is that the event has been incomplete: "In the midst of her wonderings and questionings came a thought so

terrifying, so horrible… What if Clare wasn't dead? She felt nauseated, as much at the idea of the glorious body mutilated as from fear" (113). When Clare's death is confirmed, "Irene struggled against the sob of thankfulness that rose in her throat" (113). An undead, mangled, and exposed Clare would be the worst outcome of all: she would be abandoned by her husband, repulsive to Irene, and able to share every secret.

The fear of having monstrous offspring—of being outed by a child's birth—parallels the occlusion of sexual desires within Clare and Irene's bad marriages. The reunion of Clare and Irene begins a process that is as fraught with terror as the pregnancies that Clare and Gertrude experienced. Like the letter from Clare that both hid and flaunted, a pregnant bulge both flaunts and hides the contents within, the exposure of which can rip asunder the delicate connective tissues of a racially and sexually normative family. Placing *Passing* along side the work of Hall and Warner provides a remarkable contrast for a number of reasons: setting, class, race. Hall and Warner both feature protagonists who overtly pursue lesbian relationships, have definitive breaks with their families, and struggle with the meaning of motherhood and its importance. For Larsen, Clare and Irene's sexual identities, like their racial identities, are more ambiguous so that the "passing" can refer to any of a number of markers. But for these three books that are often considered queer classics of the interwar period, only *Passing* mounts a serious argument about motherhood as a status that is complicit with a multifaceted system of oppression. In *The Well of Loneliness*, motherhood is venerated, and in *Summer Will Show*, the troubling aspects of motherhood are problems with sexism, not heterosexism—and maternity is deployed as a frequent metaphor for self development and political awakening. Only in *Passing* does

the author present reproduction as something that plays a significant cultural role in congealing the miasma of heterosexism and white supremacy.

Chapter Four

This is What a (Lesbian) Family Looks Like: Reproductive Identities and *The L Word*

It's been 83 years since Radclyffe Hall disseminated a mythical image of the tragic invert, and only seven since contemporary audiences were first barraged by the Amazonian cast of Showtime's series *The L Word*. Through five years (2004-2009) and six seasons, *The L Word* rained its soapy parade of clichés down on its viewers, who turned up week in and out for more infuriating entertainment. Though the aesthetics of lesbianism that each of these images provides could not be more glaringly contrasted, it is startling to find how closely correlated the family-friendly agenda for each is, underneath the gasps of scandal. While there are numerous points of entry for exploring the dynamics at work in *The L Word*, I'm going to focus most closely on the relationship between Bette (Jennifer Beals) and Tina (Laurel Holloman), the interracial couple whose quest to have a family drives them apart and ultimately back together over the first three seasons of the show, with an emphasis on Bette's character development and trajectory. In parallel, I am going to examine the character Jenny Schecter (Mia Kirschner), the young woman who moves in next to Bette and Tina and serves straight viewers of the show as a tour guide to lesbian life. I will pay special attention to the paradigms of race and reproduction, and the markers of sexual identity established in the pilot episode and carried forth over the subsequent seasons, and how these themes echo tropes I explored in earlier lesbian novels. The series' writers' choice to consider lesbian family making though an interracial couple is the perfect conduit for exploring the entwined strands of racial and sexual

pathologization of the 20th century, yet the show's narrative arc falls quite short of making progressive reparations on the themes it picks up.

My concerns in this chapter are two fold. First, I am uneasy with the way that the show uses tropes of race and biological essentialism, and in doing so, uses rather crude somatic markers to naturalize affiliation between individuals. Moreover, I am troubled by the way the show minimizes issues of cultural and institutional homophobia directed at individual (and in this case, predominantly lesbian) *persons* and instead portrays homophobia and heterosexism as a phenomenon that is largely directed at *families*, which is a rather grave transposition of cause and symptom. The show congeals these disparate strands by positioning viewers—straight and gay— to hope that Bette and Tina will succeed precisely because they are defined as a "family." They are a family because they have a baby. In other words, in *The L Word*, the family takes precedence over the individual.

It has not escaped my attention, of course, that I have made a large temporal leap from my first three chapters to this one, and switched my focus from novels to television. In doing so, I have passed over numerous historical and political events that have engendered the moment we have now: WWII and the Baby Boom, the Civil Rights movement, the development and widespread adoption of reliable contraception, the legalization of abortion, the Women's Movement, the Gay Liberation and lesbian-feminist era, and gay and queer activist and direct action movements throughout the AIDS crisis. The uncoupling of sexual pleasure and reproduction that wide-spread acceptance of contraception following WWII enabled, followed by advancements in assisted

reproductive technologies, were a crucial step towards towards making space for reproduction outside of sexuality. (See D'Emelio and Freedman, *Intimate Matters*, especially their chapter "Beyond Reproduction.").[1] Likewise, the chain of social justice movements in the second half of the 20th century raised visibility and awareness, while trailblazing a path for individuals coming out in subsequent years. These were all crucial steps in creating the "gayby boom."

There are a few reasons that I have decided to jump forward and switch media. One is the similarity in the cultural moments represented by *The Well of Loneliness*'s publication in 1928 and *The L Word*'s premiere in 2004. Despite the intense problematics of each, they have both served as cultural touchstones of lesbianism for the public at large and often for lesbians themselves. Laura Doan establishes the importance of *The Well* in terms of defining lesbianism as an aesthetic category in her book *Fashioning Sapphism*, noting that while most portrayals and interpretations of author Radclyffe Hall's masculine style do not pay due attention to the fashions of the 1920s, it is nevertheless true that Hall "became literally the embodiment of lesbianism. Hall's 'martyrdom' to the cause imposed

[1] While Shane Phelan's *Sexual Strangers: Gays, Lesbians and the Dilemmas of Citizenship* argues that, "In 1968, homosexuals were barely a blip on America's radar screen" and that only since the Stonewall Riots in 1969 "gays and lesbians have come to figure centrally in American debates about national identity, equality, and values" (102). In her book *The Straight State*, however, Margot Canaday takes a longer view, looking at the way that homosexuals did, in fact, figure prominently into national (and specifically, Federal) policies of welfare, military regulation, and immigration. Canaday sees the post-WWII era as one in which "the state's identification of certain sexual behaviors, gender traits, and emotional ties… was a catalyst in the formation of sexual identity" and that the numerous benefits of the GI Bill (from which veterans discharged for homosexuality could be excluded) played an instrumental role in solidifying the linkages between military service, citizenship, and "normal" heterosexual expression in the second half of the 20th century, leading to a sharp binary between heterosexuality and homosexuality that was inflected through governmental policies (Canaday).

a unified and standardized dress code… on her followers who would soon create a self-conscious subculture" and that for the general public, "the meaning of female masculinity would narrow drastically as the subject of lesbianism exploded like a bombshell" (123-4). That narrowing has haunted lesbian representations since. In 1989 Esther Newton reminded us that lesbian feminism, as a political orientation, was concerned foremost with the "woman-identified woman," and that "You see her in old photographs or paintings, with legs solidly planed, wearing a top hot and a man's jacket… squiring a brassily elegant woman on one tattooed arm… She is an embarrassment indeed to a political movement that swears it is the enemy of traditional gender categories and yet validates lesbianism as the ultimate form of femaleness" (8 in *Signs*)[2]. Hall, or at least a certain version of Hall, became an icon, one that later generations of lesbians still contend with, sometimes with reverence and sometimes disdain.

The opening season the *The L Word* provided another such galvanizing moment, although a more media-savvy, orchestrated one. The blitz of advertising and media coverage sought to establish that a new kind of lesbian was the norm, one who was a thin, glamorous, prosperous antidote to that mannish outcast of yore. *New York* magazine, for instance, published a cover story called "Not Your Mother's Lesbians" that declared, "lesbian stereotypes are about to be exploded, thanks to *The L Word*, a wildly sexy new television series" and that, "it will also begin to redress a grievance: that lesbians have long been perceived as interchangeable with hard-core feminists of the humorless

[2] The version of Newton's essay "The Mythic Mannish Lesbian" that appears in Doan and Prosser's *Palatable Poison* differs slightly from the version in *Signs*. The former does not contain the verbiage about "embarrassment" quoted here.

persuasion." The same issue of the magazine featured articles called "Where the Bois Are" that declared that youngish masculine-ish lesbian who identify as "bois"—typified by the character Shane on *The L Word*—have little to do with their lesbian forebears: "Boihood has nothing to do with earth mothers or sisterhood or herbal tea, and everything to do with being young, hip, 'sex positive,' a little masculine, and ready to rock" (Jan 12, 2004 issue). The weekly episodes also made pathways into actual lesbian social life, with viewers gathering in homes, bars, and virtually to view and discuss the show.[3]

The L Word was self-consciously breaking not only with the mannish lesbian of *The Well* but also with the radical feminist lesbian identity that shunned Hall—a lesbianism that was largely invested in functioning as a political identity as well as a sexual one. The era of lesbian feminism (mostly in the 1970s) was one in which there were ongoing and fraught conversations about what it meant to be a woman, a mother, a feminist, and/or a lesbian, epitomized by Adrienne Rich's study of motherhood as an institution, *Of Woman Born*. The answers that activists of the era provided are by turns inspiring, provocative (I'm thinking here of Jill Johnston's humorous astonishment at learning a panel conversation about lesbian motherhood was *not* about celebrating the end of the institution, and her dedication in 1973's *Lesbian Nation*: "This book is for my mother who should've been a lesbian and for my daughter in hopes she will be."), and sometimes dissatisfying to the modern ear, but that doesn't mean the questions should be dismissed. *The L Word*'s sidestep of a previous generation of lesbians is notable in its absence. More

[3] Geographer Jen Gieseking's studies of lesbians' use of spaces in New York City notes that throughout the duration of the series, a number of venues held popular *L Word* viewing parties that drew large crowds; most women who participated in Gieseking's focus groups made reference to the series.

surprising, however, is the way in which it picks up on older motifs that were heavily influenced by the heyday of biological essentialism and scientific racism, and the way that the show uses motherhood as an axis for developing several major plotlines. This is another primary reason that I think it makes sense to look at the series alongside Radclyfee Hall, Sylvia Townsend Warner, and Nella Larsen; it demonstrates the continued significance of the themes of motherhood and race and the relative continuity of the way the concepts of each are shaped in the two eras. While the erasure of the previous generation's work is conspicuous—it's as if these "new" lesbians have sprung, Athena-like, fully formed and empowered—the scripts seem to play out to unaware of how fully infused they are with even older motifs about reproduction and family life.

As a television show, *The L Word* also creates plotlines around characters who are conjured through the actual bodies of the actors who portray them, giving specific faces, bodies and voices to the idea of *the lesbian*. The weekly ritual of viewing an episodic television program has the ability to create intense vectors of identification between viewers and characters. J. Halmberstam contends that, "*The L Word* lesbians 'succeed' within the specular economy of televisual pleasure precisely by catering to conventional notions of visual pleasure," which Halberstam associates with the show's repudiation of the butch (noting that Shane is not butch, but rather, boyish) as a marker of lesbianism that "must be blotted out to provide a free channel for commodification. Indeed, commodification as a process depends completely upon a heteronormative set of visual and erotic expectations" (*Failure* 95-96). *The L Word*'s particular representations of lesbians are mediated through a complex of various writers and producers, and in

collaboration with its network, Showtime. Moreover, it operates in the wake of a well-established critical theory around visual cultures that problematizes the politics of on-screen representations of women gays and lesbians, and people of color.

Because this is a television show, the manifestations of style represented on the show in conjunction with political questions are particularly fraught. In a chapter on television representations in his book *Are We Not Men?*, Phillip Brian Harper asserts:

> It is, I think, safe to say that one of the reasons the televisual representation of black people has served for so long as a focus of debate is that it is seen as having effects that extend beyond the domain of signs as such and into the realm of African Americans' material well-being, which comprises, among other factors, the social relations through which black people's status in this country is conditioned. The standard of simulacral realism that has informed popular demands for greater representation of blacks on TV is rooted in the assumption that such representation would have meliorative effect on the objective conditions that characterize daily life for the mass of African Americans living within the scope of television's influence (154)

There are two major strands of representation that Harper unpacks in his chapter. One is the effect of television, as a form of mass media, to reach and influence wide audiences. The second is bound up with financial interests, both in the employment and success of black actors and of the commercial interests of the numerous entities whose monies are bound up with the production and advertising potentialities of a television program. Harper goes on discuss the difference between "simulacral realism"—a mode that seeks to

establish what might be socially possible—versus "mimetic realism," in which "television would 'reflect' the social reality on which it was implicitly modeled" (162). This tension means that representation is always bound by a negotiation between social difference and group solidarity. By way of contrast, Harper notes that "the nuclear family … on U.S. network television has always epitomized the amalgamation of disparate elements into a harmonious social entity" (166).

If we accept that Harper's argument about televisual representation's effects on actual life holds true for lesbians on television, then we should note that the show establishes West Hollywood, Los Angeles as a wealthy lesbian utopia that draws upon the idea of simulacral realism, but balances this with the mimetic realism of the social, medical, and legal obstacles that Bette and Tina face when they decide to have a family. The show builds in several ways in which it meditates on its own commodification and objectification of lesbian bodies,[4] but it doesn't extend this self-analysis to the way it portrays "family." Bette and Tina attempt to make a family that is an "amalgamation of disparate elements" but face numerous challenges. The audience, however, holds onto the idea of "the family" as a relatively uncomplicated "harmonious social entity" which allows viewers to witness the episodic injustices that Bette and Tina face in attempting

[4] In her article "'L' is for Looking Again," Margaret McFadden enumarates a number of these devices that are used in *The L Word*, including many instances of art shows and projects, videos (both homemade and professional), and stories-within-stories. She focuses on Bette's work as a curator. McFadden argues that the show's use of visual art, notably that of photographer Cathy Opie, "offers a counter-narrative to the essentialist notions that might seem to be implicit in *The L Word*'s presentation of lesbian or queer identity" (429). I would counter that the confrontational images that Bette works with professionally actually buoy that essentialism: they are artifacts of professionalization for Bette as much as tokens of lesbianism, and the show's cast stands in stylized contrast to the figures in Opie's portraits.

realize their family dream, such as the hostile social worker who conducts a home visit for Bette's second parent adoption and the ER nurse who won't recognize them both as mothers, as *the* locus of homophobic repression that is currently operating. Bette and Tina do sometimes encounter prejudices because they are lesbian mothers. They have *interpersonal* problems at times because they are an interracial couple, but they never receive any social censure because of it, as they do for being lesbian. The racial dynamic of this relationship is another area in which it is important to note when and how conflict arises for the women. The idea of "the family" that *The L Word* uses creates a lockstep between style, politics, and representation that should be approached with caution. In the logic of the show's storytelling, social conflict surrounding interracial couples (and families) is confined to the past, just as social conflict surrounding gay individuals is. This suggests that because there are no longer codified legal impediments for people of color and interracial couples, that institutionalized racism is a problem of the past, and if LGBT family law could only catch up with the times, that gay people would similarly cease to be burdened by homophobia. But of course this isn't true.

I want to make a lateral move away from this discussion of representation to discuss the mutually constitutive aspects of race and sexuality that are important frames for my analysis. My overall project has been grounded in part by Siobhan Somerville's book *Queering the Color Line: Race and the Invention of Homosexuality in American Culture*, in which she forcefully argues that "questions of race—in particular 'whiteness' and 'blackness'—must be understood as a crucial part of the history and representation of sexual formations, including lesbian and gay identity and compulsory heterosexuality in

the United States" (5). The "mulatto" and the "invert" were originally linked as "intermediate" types. Furthermore, Somerville remarks that sexological and medical models of race and sexuality—which emerged contemporaneously—classified "perversions," such that "interracial desire as a type of congenital abnormal sexual object choice [was]… pathologized by drawing on the emergent models of sexual orientation" (37).

Two prevalent themes in U.S. literature that are of special concern for *The L Word* are those of the "tragic mulatto" (or mulatta, since the protagonists in these stories are most often women) and the related "passing" narrative, both of which were explored in depth in my chapter on Nella Larsen. Put briefly, there is a lengthy tradition in American literature of mixed-race characters who "meet a tragic end" (McLendon 13). Subsequent to Sterling Brown's 1937 work *The Negro in American Fiction*, which first identified "the tragic mulatto" as a recurring theme, contemporary studies by Judith Berzon and Mary Dearborn, among others, also point to the important role given to mulatto women in American fiction. The typical problem of the mixed-race woman (often called "mulatto/a" regardless of the exact mixtures of "black" and "white" blood she has) is one of being caught between her "white blood" and "black blood" (15). Mary Dearborn says, "The tragic mulatto trajectory demands that the mulatto woman desire a white lover and either die (often in white-authored versions) or return to the black community" (qtd. In Somerville 84). Likewise, in a passing novel, "the light-complexioned protagonist attempts to gain economic and social advancement by fleeing the African American family and community and passing for white in a landscape of anonymity" (Somerville

83). Of course a central problem for the passing or mulatta woman is one of partner choice and reproduction, due in part to what Barbara J. Fields calls "the well-known anomaly of American racial convention that considers a white woman capable of giving birth to a black child, but denies that a black woman can give birth to a white child" (qtd. In Hodes 9).

White-looking "colored" women in novels are often concerned with details that could give away their "true" race: "if the octoroon did not confess on her own, one had but to examine her nails, her eyes, and her hair to discover her heritage, because 'blood tells'" (McLendon 14). Yet Werner Sollors cautions us that reading the wide variety of racially diverse characters that exist in proscriptive ways does little to upend racial and racist ideology:

> In other words, the term "Tragic Mulatto" may have come to such prominence in criticism and in the public realm not because it permits a better understanding of past ideologies but because it supports, in the guise of subversive-seeming ideological criticism, the ideologies of racial dualism and the resistance to interracial life that are still more prevalent in the United States than are calls for hybridity. In short, by saying "Tragic Mulatto" and thus devaluing much nineteenth-century interracial literature we may also be supporting racial essentialism, or advocating as "normal" a view of the world that divides people first of all into "black" and "white"—and hence ridicules intermediary categories as "unreal." (242)

The L Word seeks to remove these intermediary categories—biracial, bisexual—and

reinforces a homosexual/heterosexual binary as well as a black/white one. I am concerned that Bette,[5] who has a black father (Melvin, played by Ossie Davis on the series) and a white mother (who is not introduced and is seldom discussed and possibly dead), is an example of exactly what Sollors fears: a reiteration of a formula, and a reification of racial categories. Bette is established in the pilot episode as a biracial character and is strong, ambitious, and successful, yet plagued by racial doubt. Bette is not shown as living in an intermediary category but as vacillating between segregated extremes. While these issues of racial identity, love, reproduction, and kinship are featured prominently in the first seasons (though seldom with satisfying results) the interesting conflicts about these fraught subjects are not so much resolved as diminished, mostly through fading race out of Bette's story line in the final seasons.

In fact, the most prominent marker of Bette's racial identity comes to be her daughter Angelica, who also has a white mother and a black father, and is less ambiguously raced: she has darker skin than Bette and wears her hair in a natural Afro halo. In most of the show's plotlines, the scriptwriting hews closely to biological determinism of race, gender, and sexual behavior and presents institutional homophobia as a problem primarily for families. I want to reinforce that point: the characters on *The L Word* do intermittently experience problems relating to homophobia. However, the most

[5] Beals has played black, white and racially ambiguous characters on screen. I want to be very clear that Beals' own identity as a biracial woman is of little consequence to the argument I am making about the character Bette on *The L Word*. I am interested in Bette in terms of a specific literary tradition, and do not want my analysis to be confused with a judgment about Beals herself. Producer Ilene Chaiken offered Beals the role of Bette or Tina. Bette was not originally written as a biracial character; that element was added at Beals' request. See Warn', "Radical Acts: Biracial Visibility and *The L Word*.

significant problems are not those of everyday discrimination, snubs, and inequalities against individual gay people, but of confrontation between families (mostly Bette and Tina's) and social apparatuses that seek to deny their legitimacy.[6] Though there is a minor Don't Ask, Don't Tell (DADT) subplot related to Alice and her girlfriend Tasha in Season 4,[7] the women by and large live in a utopia where their lesbianism is relatively normalized and problems are interpersonal rather than societal.

The show's sustained critique of homophobia is couched from within the family, suggesting that individual gay people are free to live largely without stigma, and that, as we approach equal protection under the law through marriage and familial protections (such as adoption), homophobia will not be a significant cultural problem. This is underscored in the first and second seasons through a series of vignettes, one serving as a prologue for each episode. Most of these brief accounts, especially in Season 1, show a scene from the past (typically about a generation older than the main characters) in a scene that features some sort of homoeroticism or gay or lesbian sex. The players in these

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[6] A good counter-example is Dana, the tennis player. She is at first closeted because she thinks it will hurt her career to be out, and her homophobic manager pressures her to remain closeted. However, when she gets her first big endorsement deal, it is from Subaru and they actually create a campaign that is based on Dana as a lesbian celebrity. The tagline is "Get out and stay out." So she succeeds not only despite being a lesbian, but is all the more desirable to some sponsors because of it. Dana's family is uncomfortable with her being out, but she reaps professional rewards. So again, homophobia is depicted as a personal problem and not a cultural one.

[7] The DADT plot is similar to the family one in how it presents homophobia as primarily a vestigial problem of old government policies. It also shows the military as a haven for lesbians, as long as they are careful. When Alice visits Tasha on the base, Tasha arranges for them to take a ride in a helicopter. Once they are airborne, she puts her arms around Alice and says, "It's okay. We're all family here," meaning that the entire crew on the helicopter is lesbian. It also points up the existence of families outside the jurisdiction of the state, but positions them as longing to take part rather than wanting to maintain distance or separatism.

scenes are typically halted or punished by the weight of their real or perceived infractions: the teenage girl who tries to kiss her best friend and is rebuffed and shamed, the gay man who accepts an offer of oral sex in a bathroom from a man who turns out to be a cop and arrests him, etc. It always turns out that the story or characters in these prologues are linked (sometimes quite directly and sometimes tangentially) to the main characters. The overall point that each introduction reinforces is that times have changed for the better and a panoply of shame-free sexual identities is available now. They ask us to remember how awful it *used* to be. The structural device of beginning each episode with one of these accounts persists into the second season, but the time periods begin to vacillate between past and present, and some of the sequences from the present are presented as dreams or fantasies. The distinction about the relative quality of gay life in the past and present holds: the scenes set in the past are generally about difficulty, closeting, or shame (a TV producer warning an actor of what would happen if the tabloids learned he was gay) and the ones in the present are about pleasure or letting go of inhibition (the character Helena seducing her therapist, dismissing the therapists objections about professionalism).

In order to move into my reading of the Bette/Tina plot, I want to establish some of the ways that the show defines lesbians and communicates those beliefs to the audience, namely for the benefit of its straight viewers. This happens predominantly through the character of Jenny, but somewhat through Dana, a closeted tennis player, and Alice, the show's only declared bisexual. Despite its ensemble cast, the two most prominent characters in terms of narrative arc are Bette (and as a corollary, Tina) and Jenny. Bette, a sophisticated lesbian curator, and Jenny, a writer and (at first) uninitiated lesbian emerge

as foils for each other, with each coming to be a parallel antagonists whose overall development propel the series. As I will discuss, Jenny's character unfolds for the benefit of heterosexual audiences so that she can be a guide; Bette is more of a native even in her profession. As a curator, she has expert knowledge that allows her to select what people will see and teaches them how to look and interpret.[8]

At the beginning of the series, Bette and Tina's next door neighbor, Tim, has just welcomed his girlfriend, the naive, waifish, and apparently guileless Jenny Schecter, a writer who has just finished an MFA, to Los Angeles, where the show is set. Jenny is a medium for educating the audience about the habits, jokes, quirks, and dangers of lesbians through the first season. The first episode takes Jenny from borderline-homophobic ogling and fascination with the wild herd of lesbians around her, peppered with many sweetly breathless exclamations of "Oh!" and saucer-eyed surprise, to being initiated into the cult of sapphic secrets. When Jenny pulls into the neighborhood with Tim for the first time, she murmurs, "I can't believe this is our home, Tim. It's very traditional" to which he replies, "Wait til you get to know it. … It's just not as traditional

[8] In the later seasons of the show, Jenny has positioned herself to frame the lesbian community around her: she writes a thinly-veiled story about them that is published as fiction, and gets a movie deal to direct it. She is adamant about wanting lesbians on the production team, but startled by the studio's demands about making a hetero-friendly film, and their wish to give the protagonist a heterosexual ending. The film-within-a-tv-show highlights some of the perils of representation: Jenny loses control of the production, alienates her friends, and dies shortly thereafter. This could be a type of meta-commentary on the various critiques lodged at *The L Word* from the lesbian community and the pitfalls of even attempting to create a show representing them, an injunction not to "eat our own." But given Jenny's character and her transformation from heterosexual to homosexual and her occupation of the "intermediary" zone, it also underscores that Jenny is not able to attain mastery over her lesbian identity. It's troubling, to say the least, that the penalty for this is death.

as you might think." Shortly thereafter, Tim leaves for work and Jenny acquaints herself with her new home, including the garage that Tim has converted into a writing studio for her—a room of her own.

Jenny hears people dive into the pool[9] next door. It is Bette and Tina's pool, and Jenny believes she is watching Bette and Tina, but actually she sees Shane, the show's "playboy" character, and one of her mates, who jump in the pool and start having sex. The audience indulges, via Jenny's through-the-fence gaze, in watching the women through the slats of the fence between yards, a first murky and alluring glimpse of forbidden sex—a culture of hedonism with few boundaries. Jenny later reiterates the scene for Tim (who is surprised that Bette and Tina would be having sex in the day light in their pool, but encourages Jenny to keep talking about it) as part of foreplay. This act of voyeurism, followed by its use for the mutual arousal of herself and Tim, are the first steps in Jenny being indoctrinated or contaminated by queerness, and the fence is only a flimsy barrier on the heterosexual/homosexual divide. Later on, when she meets the real Tina, who is snipping her plentiful herbs in the garden (domestic, monogamous, unsexy, earthy, fecund, and as close an approximation to "dowdy" as a thin, blonde, clear-complected woman in a tight tank top can be) and offers Jenny some over the fence—a gesture of invitation that is doubled by a literal invitation to a party at the close of the scene. Jenny is shocked and confused by Tina's revelation that she is trying to get pregnant. Jenny

[9] In her article "Having It All Ways," Candace Moore elaborates the numerous instances in which water and specifically pools are used to represent lesbianism over the first two seasons of the show (the article was published before the series concluded). The pool is a site not just of erotic activity—even though there are a number of pool sex scenes—but of community bonding. Bette and Tina's pool is open for their friends to swim in whenever they want to.

gasps softly, in feminine awe and admiration, but the knits her brows and says, "Really? But Tim said you and [tentatively, as if she is not sure of the name] Bette? Were a couple?" Tina confirms that they are, and says, "Everything still works. We can still have a baby." At that moment, the West Hollywood Dads walking club strolls by the house with their carriages and slings ("Oh my God" whispers Jenny, stunned but delighted).

These initial scenes establish Jenny's innocence—how green and unworldy she is (despite her willingness to watch her neighbors having sex and use the event for erotic fodder). Later, when she attends the party at Bette and Tina's—a party they are hosting to try to find a sperm donor—she is first confronted by one of Shane's jilted lovers and warned that Shane is a liar. Jenny also sees Shane making out with someone else. and says, uncomfortably, "This is a very, uh, a very interesting party." Dana, the closeted tennis player, is there with Harrison, a fellow athlete who is also closeted; they have posed as a couple on a longterm basis. Dana says that the party is interesting because Bette, who is director of an art museum, knows a lot of artists, but the drunk Harrison says that it's because there are a lot of "lezzies." As small talk, Jenny says she knows Bette and Tina are trying to have a baby, Harrison says, "Oh there's a lot of that going around. They even had to change that famous joke. It used to be 'What do lesbians bring on a second date? A moving van.' Now it's 'What do lesbians bring on a second date? A turkey baster!'"

By the end of the party, Jenny finds herself kissing and groping Marina, another party guest, in the bathroom. Jenny leaves the bathroom, grabs Tim in mid-conversation, and drags him home. Significantly, she begins a seduction scene in which she is both sexually

aggressive and penitent, telling Tim that she "felt weird" at the party and dropping to her knees to offer him fellatio. She seems determined to reaffix her own heterosexuality while at the same time she is exorcising or satisfying the arousal she felt with Marina. The exorcism is largely ineffectual, though, since Jenny and Marina escalate their dalliance into a fullblown affair soon thereafter. Jenny begins to assume the position of the "intermediate" person, caught between two identities and cultures, this time straight and gay instead of black and white, a trajectory that leads to a tragic end. At the same time, Tim proposes marriage and Jenny accepts, as she tries to tamp down her feelings for Marina. But as Jenny and Tim's relationship collapses (including an elopement and Tim's calculated morning-after abandonment), so does the affair between Jenny and Marina, leading Jenny into serious emotional turmoil and personal and sexual confusion. Jenny's storyline could be read as liberation or as a shell-shedding sexual awakening—she ultimately comes to identify as lesbian—but Jenny's narrative arc over the six seasons is one of dysfunction, unhappiness, duplicity, and, in the final season, death. She begins to remember childhood sexual abuse, she engages in self injury behaviors, she becomes an insufferable annoyance and diva as she gains success as a writer (something she can only do by pilfering content from her lesbian friends' lives). The story is not so much one of freedom and truth, but of a Pandora's box of queerness. She is more like Eurydice or Lot's wife than a confidant, liberated woman. The effect of using Jenny to serve as an entre, for the audience, into the lesbian world shows that it is full of wonder, titillation and seduction, but also grave danger.

Besides introducing what the show categorizes as the cultural touchmarks of lesbian

culture—moving vans, turkey basters, freewheeling ne'er do wells, dour monogamists—the show also establishes the primacy of comparative anatomy and, as a corollary, fashion. At the same "lezzie" party, one of Bette and Tina's friends is zipping around comparing fingertips, reminding everyone that "A scientist … said if your ring finger is longer than your index finger, that means you're a lesbian." The women all regard their hands and declare themselves gay. Bette jokes that she is glad Tina makes the cutoff, otherwise she would have to leave her. (Ironic because even though Tina is presented as lesbian-identified, she is also bisexual.) Alice, the bisexual character, "makes the team, but just barely." Tim quips that he is a lesbian, and someone grabs Jenny's hand and says, "That is so weird. Your index finger and ring finger are exactly the same length." Alice says that maybe that means Jenny is bisexual. My concern with this scene is not that a group of lesbians are using this as a party game, but that it is being used to establish, for the audience, a concrete set of physical characteristics that denote sexuality, and are based on comparative anatomy. "Comparative anatomy," Siobhan Somerville reminds us, "which had been the chief methodology of nineteenth-century racial science, gave sexologists a ready-made set of procedures and assumptions with which to scan the body visually for discrete markers of difference" (25).[10]

Without entering into a dispute with scientists who are currently working on typing

[10] Somerville looks to Sander Gilman's influential *Difference and Pathology*, in which he traces the connections between nineteenth century comparative anatomists' correlation of blackness and deviance, writ large on the female body: the same patterns of anatomical "pathologies," notably especially large clitorises, were attributed to black women, lesbians, and prostitutes. These ideas were not left behind in the nineteenth century. In fact, Gilman says, "The association of the black with sexuality can be one of the touchstones to any examination of the problem of consciousness among the moderns" (125).

brains, hands, and various body parts—I am not issuing a blanket charge of racism, homophobia, or scientific misconduct—I am noting that there is an ineluctable connection between this type of work and the history of sexology and scientific racism, especially when it is deployed in *this* narrative, with its emphasis on educating Jenny (i.e., the audience) about lesbians. There is at least an allusion, whether or not it is motivated by the same impulse. Moreover, the specific connotations of hands as sexual instruments for lesbians (also amply demonstrated through the sex scenes on the show, which tend to show manual stimulation/penetration as most characters' preferred sex act) makes the comparison all the more akin to the study of genital differentiation that was prevalent in the nineteenth century.

The next scene that brings attention to a specific embodiment of lesbianism involves Dana, the tennis player, and the object of her affection, Lara, a chef whose sexual persuasions are initially unclear. If we recall Nella Larsen's rooftop meeting between Clare and Irene (see chapter 3), one of the most salient aspects of the scene is the ultimate disjuncture between seeing and knowing, and the ultimate illegibility of the body. Irene is worried about being outed for passing but at the same time, cannot identify Clare. She thinks, " White people were so stupid about such things for that they usually asserted that they were able to tell; and by the most ridiculous means, finger-nails, palms of the hands, shapes of ears, teeth, and other equally sill rot." But Larsen proves that it is not only "stupid white people" who fall victim to this misguided way of thinking. The introduction of the ambiguous Lara in *The L Word* sets up a strikingly similar scene as the gang attempts to correct Dana's self-proclaimed lack of "gaydar." They look at women in the

cafe where they are and try to help Dana read them:

Shane: Look at her fingernails? Are they long or short?

Alice: Are they polished or natural?

Dana: Long and polished. So she's …

Shane: Leaning to straight, but you still need more info.

Alice: Look at the shoes.

Dana: High-heeled sandals.

Alice: With tapered jeans! Would you wear high-heeled sandals with tapered jeans?

Dana: Yes?

Alice: No!

So, it would seem that those hyper-sexualized finger tips hold the key once again to deciphering the text of the body. Using the hands and especially finger nails to suss out identity is of course not new. The "bluish tinge in the halfmoon" of the fingernails was once considered so reliable a racial marker and was so thoroughly woven into literatures about mixed-race people and characters that Werner Sollors devotes an entire chapter to it in *Neither Black Nor White Yet Both*. But Lara is particularly difficult. As a chef, her nails are kept short and Dana always sees her in her chef's jacket. Bette, Tina, Alice, and Shane stage a sting operation, going into the club where Dana trains and Lara works. Their observations are: "Kitchen shoes: neutral"; earrings, "Hoops. Hard to read." Bette and Tina kiss, hoping to register a response from her. But she takes little notice. When they reconvene to discuss their findings, Bette says "She gets some good lezzie points for her walk and the way she wields that chopping knife." Shane is also deployed to go flirt with

her, but the results are again hard to read and they decide she must be straight, because no queer woman can resist Shane. But when Dana encounters her in the locker room later, Lara kisses her and says, "Just in case you were still wondering," and strides out with a smile.

So while it at first appears that the scene and the women's inability to accurately classify Lara is based on the unreliability of the signs in which they have placed their faith, it seems that Lara has instead understood their intentions and deliberately obfuscated the clues that they are looking for—essentially choosing to pass for straight, or at least unreadable, for sport. It is not that the signs themselves are false, but that the very knowledge of them is what allows for passing—flaunting in hiding. Lara is perhaps engaging in an act of subversion, but it ultimately reinforces the idea of corporeal intelligibility.

When Dana goes to see her in the kitchen the next day (Season1, Episode 4) Lara gets distracted and cuts her finger slightly. Dana is very upset ("you're disfigured!") and remorseful, but to prove that it is okay, Lara holds up her hand and demonstrates the other injuries she has received to her fingers, each one sheathed in a finger cot, again keeping up with the show's preoccupation with sexualized hands. When Dana asks if there is anything she can do, she tells her, "You can kiss it and make it better." These hands are tough, skilled, queer, phallic, making the invitation much more overtly sexual than it otherwise would be. The point seems to be not to manifest a specific and essential lesbian corporeality, but to remind, over and over again, that lesbians have sex with their hands. The combination of the women's hands' physiological variation and their tactile, carnal

knowledge of other women's bodies make them the show's most potent symbol of sexual difference, veering to fetishism, just as the fingernails were once fetishized as a marker of racial difference.

I want to use Larsen again to segue back into discussion of the particular and complicated dance of race and sexuality between Bette, Tina, and the baby they want. As I discussed in detail in Chapter 3, Irene, Clare, and Gertrude in *Passing* discuss childbearing. For all three, their children serve as markers of the sexual choices they have made. This is especially germane to *The L Word*. Somerville argues that, "In establishing the field[of race and sexuality studies], scholars have been preoccupied with distinguishing and separating categories of gender, race, and sexuality from one another. But it is now necessary to account for the ways in which these formulations have often depended on fixing other categories of difference." Somerville goes on to quote Biddy Martin's observation that attempts to locate the difference between homo and heterosexualities has often resulted in "project[ing] fixity onto race and gender. The challenge is to recognize the instability of multiple categories of difference simultaneously rather than to assume the fixity of one to establish the complexity of the other" (4-5). *The L Word* relies heavily on the fixity of Bette and Tina's lesbianism in order to play out its racial narrative.[11]

[11] As they seek a donor to father the child Tina intends to carry, they engage in a series of improbable attempts to recruit a known donor after their original choice, a white artist, turns out to be infertile. They has been using his sperm for home inseminations for six months with no results, and at the point at which the show begins, they have decided to enlist the help of their doctor. Why it has taken them six months to get a semen analysis done for him, and why they refuse to use purchased donor sperm like many lesbians (either by preference of due to lack of known donors) do, is never addressed in the show.

Characteristic to both their relationship and the narrative style of the first season of the series, it is Tina's gynecologist, a woman of color, who tells Bette (and the audience) that the sperm has no motility, while the unknowing Tina waits in stirrups to be inseminated. This transmission of knowledge is echoed in an important scene later in the season, which I will discuss momentarily. Direct communication between Bette and Tina is rare, and the scripts position the audience to reconstruct the epistemological gaps between the couple. Major issues in their relationship are typically funneled through a third party, so that the audience learns about conflict not by watching Bette and Tina argue, but by seeing one of the two interact with another cast member. Likewise, the parallel story of Bette and Tina's sexual dysfunction and dissatisfaction is directly tied to their inability to conceive and communicate. They enter couples therapy; scheduling their first session on the same day as the insemination . Dana asks them why they are going to therapy because "You two have the best relationship of anyone I know, gay or straight" and Tina assures her, "[It's] Just to check in… I want to make sure we're good." The therapist is a little more pointed: "Do you want to tell me what the thinking is behind trying to have a child together when your sexual relationship has been pretty shitty going on three years?" Bette challenges him, claiming that a straight male therapist cannot understand their needs: "You just obviously don't know what happens in a lesbian relationship," she says. The fact is that Bette and Tina's relationship is not "good." But this is a conflict that is largely obscured for the audience and for their friends because it

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The first episode shows the pair both chasing after a pregnancy and ignorant of many of the common discussions, procedures, and options of which the modern lesbian avails herself. The effect of this makes them look extremely foolish.

gets subsumed into the plot about the baby. At the insemination later that afternoon, the doctor tells them that there is good evidence that conception is more likely if a woman is aroused and then leave the room to examine the semen. An awkward and distinctly unsexy, unsuccessful attempt follows, before the doctor interrupts them to give the bad news about the sperm.

As the pilot wears on, Bette and Tina begin asking practically every man with whom they come into contact—all white—to father a child for them, waving a donor agreement in his face. They even throw a "donor party" asking their friends to invite potential donors (this is the party where Tim and Jenny learn about lesbian finger tips). One man agrees, but then reneges when he discovers that Bette and Tina want to perform the insemination themselves, and that he won't get to have sex with Tina. As their desperation becomes more apparent, Bette meets a black artist, Marcus, whom she feels is a good candidate, although the many other men they have solicited have all been white. Bette tells Tina that she has found a donor at another therapy session—again the communication is mediated—abut does not share Marcus's racial identity. When she sends him, on his own, to meet Tina and make a deposit at the sperm bank, Tina is shocked, but goes along with Bette's choice. Later, again in therapy, the therapist points out that Tina's hesitation might be experienced by Bette as a rejection of Bette's identity. The narrative then focuses on Tina's feeling that if they decide to use a black donor, they should discuss the matter further, and her feeling that it's "a lot of otherness to put on one child."

While the script suggests that Tina's hesitation signals maladjustment to being in an

interracial relationship and latent racism (neither of which I would dispute), I would like to suggest that enveloped in this "safe" story of lesbian family-making is a more dangerous story about racial identity. In her work on *Passing*, Deborah McDowell notes that Nella Larsen "uses a technique found commonly in narratives by Afro-American and women novelists with a 'dangerous' story to tell: 'safe' themes, plots, and conventions are used as the protective cover underneath which lie more dangerous subplots. Larsen envelops the subplot of Irene's developing if unnamed and unacknowledged desire for Clare in a safe and familiar plot of racial passing" (624). *The L Word* carries, perhaps unintentionally, an inverted version of this technique: a story of racial identity is concealed within what is now, at least for lesbians, fast becoming a very safe and pedestrian narrative: the attempt to conceive a child.

The confrontation between Bette and Tina about using Marcus as the donor is the show's first confirmation that Bette identifies herself as "biracial." What confirms for viewers and will, in effect, out Bette as a person of color, is the child, in much the same way that the specter of producing a dark child haunts many passing women, or white women having sex with black men, in American literature and history. Prior to this, we know that Kit (Pam Grier) is her half sister, but one could reasonably believe that either Kit *or* Bette is biracial—they could feasibly share a white parent or a black one, or one of any multitude of racial or ethnic identities. While it is safe to condemn Tina's misgivings and her rather disingenuous protestations that she does "not feel equipped to be the mother of a biracial child" it is far more dangerous to question Bette's desire for a dark child. When Bette complains to Kit about Tina's reaction, Kit offends Bette by pointing out to her that

she is not always eager to put her biracial identity on display.

This interlude does not prevent Bette and Tina from making one last-ditch attempt to get a white baby. One month passes in the pilot episode. It is bookended by Tina's ovulation. The first spoken words in the entire series are between Bette and Tina. Tina calls Bette into the bathroom to observe the ovulation prediction test. Bette looks at it and murmurs, "You're ovulating." "I'm ovulating," Tina echoes. "Let's make a baby, " Bette says and again, "Let's make a baby" Tina echoes, all of the speech soft and loving. In the second instance, Bette learns Tina is ovulating by finding the positive test stick in the garbage, signaling that she might want to throw away her chance now that she is expected to bear a child of color. Despite the fact that they have already iced Marcus's sperm, they later take home a man they meet at Bette's art museum for a one-night stand in hopes of his impregnating Tina without his knowledge. While he initially approaches them for "drinks" and they reject him, upon further consideration and at Bette's urging, they take him home. But when he gets out a condom, they ask him not to use it. He catches on and abruptly leaves, saying to them angrily, "Why is it every time dykes want to have sex with a guy, it's only because they want to steal his sperm? It ain't happening, guys." After he leaves, Bette says her idea was "crazy" but Tina says it was "genius." Bette worries that Tina was turned on by him, but she assures Bette that she was not, and the two begin passionately kissing, petting, and moaning in a scene that builds to simultaneous orgasm. Their sexuality has been rekindled by this strange attempt to impregnate Tina. Just as in therapy, only with the help of a third can they achieve a measure of union.

Further, this scene with Bette and Tina is spliced together with a scene of Jenny and

Marina consummating their relationship. Jenny goes home afterwards and crawls into bed with Tim who sleepily tells her that she smells different. When she says that it is a new perfume, he says, "I liked the old one better." In this case, the queering of Jenny continues to be portrayed as a process of contamination, the stench of sex seeping from her skin, recalling the use of smells to signal illicit sexuality in *The Well of Loneliness* (see Chapter 1). Lesbian sex corrupts Jenny and infiltrates her relationship with Tim but an attempted heterosexual encounter revives lesbian sex for Bette and Tina.

As the episode closes, Shane passes by Tina and Bette on their porch in the morning drinking their coffee, saying that she is just headed home after a night out. "You totally just got laid, didn't you?" she asks them. "See, that gives me hope. Because I love knowing that two people who have been together for so long can still make each other that happy." The pilot episode imbues the unconceived child with the symbolic ability to represent the love between the couple, and act as a receptacle for the intimacy that they cannot express directly to each other. They are forced to admit that they have sexual problems because the therapist asks them. Their sexual relationship is jumpstarted by a preposterous threesome gone haywire. They learn that their first donor is infertile through the doctor, who passes the knowledge to Bette rather than the couple, reminiscent of the ways knowledge about interracial relationships and parentage of "mulatto" children used to circulate through households and neighbors (see Martha Hodes, *White Women, Black Men*). Tina learned that Marcus is black and that Bette wants a biracial baby by meeting Marcus, not from Bette. Complicated by their inability to frankly discuss the signficance of creating an interracial family and, the phantom fetus tests Bette and Tina's ability to

love each other and brings Bette into a confrontation with her own identity that echoes the motifs of the tragic mulatta genre, in which the passing character is often torn between white assimilation and black familiarity. Just as the birth of a pale child has the ability to cement whiteness, this child is supposed to stabilize the tenuous domesticity that Bette and Tina want to deny is faltering.

Though Bette and Tina quickly dispatch with the discomfort they feel about these unresolved issues and do use Marcus's sperm—so potent that Tina becomes pregnant after the first home insemination—the difficulties associated with racial identity reassert themselves later. Our intrepid couple join a therapy group for new and expectant parents, where they meet Yolanda, an African-American woman who is pregnant and planning single motherhood by choice. Yolanda becomes frustrated with Bette and takes her to task for what she perceives as Bette's racial passing. In fact, she points out that the rest of the group is confused by the conversation because they perceive Bette as white, which also handily bolsters the idea that just like lesbians can read each other's bodies, that essential blackness is also recognizable to all blacks, no matter what color the skin. The next week, Yolanda and Bette get into a battle of one-upmanship. Yolanda derides Bette for passing, and Bette defends herself by outing Yolanda as a lesbian accusing Yolanda of passing for straight. Bette claims that she is not trying to hide herself, protesting that she should be able to "move more freely in the world" and "not be defined by the white man's one-drop rule." Bette also snaps at Tina when Tina tries to defend her. As Yolanda becomes more agitated and accuses Bette of "lying," the therapist admonishes Yolanda for being "confrontational," at which point Yolanda angrily asks, "Why is it whenever a black

woman has an opinion she's being confrontational?"[12] Later in the session, in Bette's inner monologue, she wonders if she is nervous about the baby or if she is actually falling out of love with Tina. So on the heels of a major confrontation about her racial identity, Bette starts to have major doubts not just about parenthood, but about her feelings about partner, feelings that in the narrative are implicitly tied to Tina's whiteness.

Soon thereafter, Tina miscarries. But just as when we learned that Bette and Tina's original donor was infertile, the audience does not learn this with Tina. Bette arrives at the doctor's office too late to be there with Tina for her appointment. The same doctor tells Bette that during the appointment, she was unable to find the baby's heartbeat, and that is how the audience learns of the fetus's demise.[13] In the meantime, in the following days while Tina is at home mourning, Bette is flirty with another woman of color, Yolanda's ex, Candace, whom she meets in at one of Kit's shows, where the audience is mostly black.

Running parallel to this story is *The L Word*'s other major family drama, wherein Kit

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[12] When the camera pans the participants and gives a few lines from their inner monologues. Yolanda thinks: "Fuck this group. You want an angry black woman? You got 'er." This might be a a calculated move on the part of the writers to make the presence of the "angry black woman" more ironic or critical of the trope, but I found it ineffective: Yolanda remains a typical angry black woman stereotype.

[13] In the next episode, Alice, the bisexual, is late for her period and suspects she might be pregnant. The father is perhaps Lisa, the "lesbian-identified man" (one of the shows most confusing characters—he not presented as a transgendered or transsexual person, and he is quickly dropped from the plot) or another garden-variety man she has been sleeping with. Although she does not tell Bette and Tina about her possible pregnancy, she plans to give the baby to them if she is indeed with child. She tells her other friends that giving Bette and Tina the baby will reflect a new way to make families and will be an act of love. While Alice turns out to not be pregnant, the temporary replacement of Tina's biracial, insemination-begotten baby with Alice's white, intercourse-begotten one is significant. It underscores the difficulty that Bette and Tina are having making a baby, and reinforces the idea that a baby makes a family.

is trying to reunite with her estranged father and son. Kit and Bette's overbearing father, who seems to have raised, or possibly taken, Kit's son David as well, will not relent in his distrust of Kit as a recovering addict, and will not admit to the possibility of Bette and Tina's child as his grandchild, which he says is "biologically impossible… I cannot realistically be asked to participate in this fiction of your creation." When Tina tries to win his favor by telling him that they chose an African-American donor he says, "A black man is the father of this child? An African-American? And because of that I am supposed to feel closer to this child? Because all of us blacks are somehow connected? Maybe traced back to some tribe in Africa, where we were beating drums? That is absurd" (Season 1 Episode 6). Bette is very much Daddy's Little Girl (she even calls him Daddy), flaunting her accomplishments and buying him lavish gifts to curry his favor, but also struggling with his rejection of Tina and their child, and unwilling to confront him. Later, it is Kit who seeks out her father to implore him to accept Bette and Tina and their child, but this is not to be.

A quick recap of the logic of the plot will be helpful here. First of all, the interracial couple is sexually dead. The white sperm donor turns out to be infertile. The black man is so intensely virile that Tina gets pregnant from one single insemination with his previously frozen sperm, which is, biologically speaking, very difficult, and recalls "the historic associations of blackness with… excessive threatening fertility" (Gilroy, *Against* 22). And yet, the baby cannot thrive. I would strongly argue that in the way the scenes are scripted, it is the baby, and not Tina's body, that fails. The end of the pregnancy is not initially described in terms of Tina, such as "Tina miscarried," but rather in terms of the

baby: "The baby had no heartbeat." That baby, conceived through insemination rather than sex, and of mixed race rather than purportedly white or black, is set up to be possibly usurped by an adopted white baby, and it seems that Bette might have be "seeing the bright pictures of that other [life]" and having "this terrible, this wild desire" (*Passing*, 145) for Candace, or more pointedly, for a non-white lover. For Bette, this is a crisis of racial identity, played out sexually. In the meantime, the baby carries so much importance that it can, for a time, both substitute for the true intimacy between Bette and Tina. It also holds the possibility of reconstituting the disarrayed Porter family. The child seems nothing less than a vessel for inexpressible emotions with all energies focused on misplacing or replacing lost love in its heart, which stops beating.

The season ends with Bette and Tina breaking up after Bette begins an affair with Candace. Significantly, the tragic mulatta motif has been reproduced and adapted in this narrative, with Bette and the baby trading and recirculating the role. Bette completes the version of the narrative in which the passing character breaks with whiteness, while the baby reenacts the version in which the racially transgressive mulatto must die. Constructs of race and sexuality that could potentially complicate and critique each other are instead both moved closer to fixed positions. While the show's dialogue allows Kit to tell Bette that race does not matter when we are united by love, *The L Word's* larger narrative evacuates and sterilizes the possibility of the interracial love and lesbian reproduction. Absent their ability to make a child, Bette and Tina seemed doomed not to love. While it seems that this argument could be stretched out to the point that it can be read as a critique of obstacles in modern lesbian and/or interracial relationships, I cannot in all

seriousness twist the teleology that far. Season 1 ends with the demise of Bette and Tina's relationship, after Bette had an affair with Candace, precipitating a breakup with Tina. The twist, however is that before she has learned of the affair, Tina has secretly made another attempt at conception, and again, Marcus's potent sperm does the trick. The pregnancy is successful when the couple fails; highlighting the literal and figurative sterility of their union.

As Season 2 begins, Tina is pregnant via Marcus's sperm. Bette doesn't know. Let's go back to the sperm bank for a moment, before Tina ever got pregnant, but was having misgivings about having a biracial child. When Marcus has left to make his deposit, the receptionist says to Tina, "Wow. That's a pretty serious decision to make." "Isn't it?" Tina says, thinking they are talking about race, but the receptionist comes back with, "You must have given it a lot of thought. Because big men like that tend to make really big babies. You'll probably be looking at a c-section." While this seems to be a statement that flips race on its head, making size and not color the issue, (Beals and Chaiken's commentary on the DVD maintain that idea, with Beals saying "It was really thrilling to take on that subject and tell them those stories in a way I think they haven't been told") another possible reading is that the very largeness of Marcus's body is already racialized. Just as Caspar introduced (by way of race) chaos into the Willoughby family's home in *Summer Will Show,* the baby that Marcus's sperm will create is poised to potentially damage Tina's white body. The black man still has the power to rip her body asunder, without even touching her. Of course this exact scenario comes to pass when Tina is dramatically transported to the hospital in an ambulance for a c-section, after a failed

attempt at a homebirth. But that's not all—the reason for the transport is that the baby has passed meconium prior to birth. This situation in real life poses far more health risks to the baby than it does to the mother (minus other complications), typically requiring intubation, antibiotics, and a NICU stay for the baby, while the mother recovers normally (depending on what interventions were required to deliver the baby). Yet when the audience is taken to the hospital, we see Bette holding the baby and showing her off to their friends while Tina is supposedly still in recovery and under observation, and possibly very ill; some viewers even wondered if she had died.

While accuracy has never been a strong suit with dramatic television endings, I am troubled by the racial connotations of this error. The baby, Angelica, is hale and hearty, while Tina has been put in danger through the risk of allowing herself to be impregnated with Marcus's sperm. Tina's two pregnancies have opposite outcomes, but they are suffused by similar beliefs about whiteness, blackness, and sexuality. It seems that the three are pathologically unable to be a family. Tina is unable to have a physiological normal birth, her body contaminated, figuratively by blackness and literally by fecal matter. I want to back off an argument in which I suggest that these plot points and metaphors were deliberately planted, but instead call attention to the casual way in which they are dropped into the story, with seeming disregard for the historic significance of these connotations. Tina and Bette begin to bond again while Tina is pregnant and Bette is caring for her dying father. At one point he sees Bette and Tina sitting together by his bed and smiles, telling Tina, "Take good care of my girl." But it turns out that he has mistaken Tina for Bette's mother and he begs her not to leave them again. He dies in

Bette's house, before the baby is born, after calling out "Mama." His death seems to remove a major obstacle in Tina and Bette's ability to be a family. Melvin articulated the only major philosophical challenge (however homophobically motivated) to them about a biracial baby's ability to compel connections between them. Significantly, when Tina tells Bette that she wants to move back in, it is because she wants to have a *home*birth. "I'm having a homebirth, and I want to have it in my home " she says. "What, you want to give birth in your apartment?" Bette says. "No. I want to move back into our house. I want to have our baby in our home. I want all of us to have a home together" Tina tells her. Needless to say, this birth doesn't bode well.[14]

While we might hope that for Bette and Tina it gets better, it doesn't. In Season 3, Bette and Tina are living together again, and raising their daughter. But there is trouble again! When a social worker comes to complete a second parent adoption homestudy, she suggests to Tina that it might be a poor idea because it would give Bette equal parental rights with Tina. It seems that being pregnant has rekindled Tina's attraction to men—another instance of the biological reasserting itself, in that heterosexuality is again tied to pregnancy.[15] Tina also breastfeeds Angelica and pumps milk for her, but the scenes showing or discussing nursing tend to focus on the way that it constrains Tina and makes her captive to her femaleness. After Tina's revelation about men and Bette's discovery of an online flirtation Tina has been having, Bette decides to end their

[14] Tina is planning to have a waterbirth; she and Bette need to set up the pool for it. Looking at the supplies, Bette says, "Sometimes I really hate being a lesbian." In that pools and water connote lesbianism throughout the series, a waterbirth would have demonstrated the baby being born into the community, possibly even born lesbian.
[15] This isn't presented as a complication or a queering of lesbian identity—it is presented as a fairly abrupt break for Tina, and she explicitly ties it to the pregnancy.

relationship again. Tina moves out and begins a relationship with Henry, a single white dad. Like the social worker, Henry doubts the legitimacy of Bette's claims to motherhood. Bette becomes concerned that Tina will not agree to joint custody, and decides to pursue full custody, explicitly citing that she does not want her child raised in a straight, white family. Tina is enraged and vows not to cooperate with the second parent adoption at all. Despite Bette's affair, Tina's betrayal is portrayed as the greater one: she can withhold not just her love, but her child, and sympathy accumulates for Bette who is read as Angelica's mother not just because of her relationship with Tina, but because she and Angelica share racial characteristics. It acknowledges that Tina *as a straight, white woman* does wield more power than Bette in the legal system, but also implies that a lesbian would not do this to another woman—to a sister. Tina has broken not just with Bette but with the lesbian community as a family.

Later in the season, the plot has the ensemble cast travel to Canada for a gay wedding and Bette takes the opportunity to essentially kidnap Angelica. The resonances of a woman of color and her child running from the straight white man, north of the border, are deep. Later, back in the US but still on the lam with Angelica, Bette speaks with her lawyer and tries to make a plan. Bette claims that it was easy for her to cross the border with Angelica despite the lack of paperwork because both she and the child are biracial, implying that even without Tina's cooperation in a second-parent adoption, her claim as a parent is legitimized and naturalized through the shared racial identity that she and Angelica have. It emphasizes that there are two layers to the biological: that of genetics (Tina's claim to motherhood) and that of race (Bette's claim). The two ideas are

put at odds with each other, but not in a way that seriously questions or critiques the validity of either. Over the next seasons, the two are split up and then come back together yet again, but only when Bette is in another relationship and has an affair with Tina; there is something always already illicit between them, something always broken, yet the audience is prompted to hope for their success. Once reunited (again) they decide to adopt a second child, but the birth mother backs out. They ineluctably cannot have a child that is not "theirs."[16]

Tina and Bette's relationship is not the only reproductive drama on the show, nor is it the only interracial relationship. Other interracial relationships include Kit and Angus, baby Angelica's white "manny," white Shane and Latina Carmen, and white Alice and African-American Tasha, a soldier who is being investigated under DADT after her relationship with Alice is outed. Alice's storyline as a bisexual is faded out after the first couple of seasons, and it seems that she has made a choice to pursue women only. In fact, all of the women who have had major heterosexual relationships—Alice, Jenny, even Tina—eventually disavow their attraction to men altogether, as if bisexuality were impossible. While Alice's Season 1 pregnancy scare turns out to be just that, a scare (and apparently, she is scared gay afterwards) in Season 4, Kit becomes pregnant with Angus's baby, but decides to have an abortion. (The two care for Angelica so frequently, though,

[16] They choose a birth mother in Nevada, but Nevada state law will not allow them to jointly adopt the child. Rejecting their lawyer's advice to have one of the two adopt in Nevada and then other other complete a second-parent adoption in California, they decide to move the birth mother into their home so that the baby can be born in California. The birth mother agrees, but when they go to pick her up, she is not on the bus. This is another is another event that demonstrates homophobic affect as a product of laws that act mainly on families. Only Tasha the soldier experiences the same degree of personal and emotional upheaval as Bette and Tina due to institutionalized homophobia.

that they are practically surrogate parents.) In later seasons, the show's only transsexual character, an FTM named Max who is introduced as a butch lesbian but after transitioning comes to identify as a bisexual man, becomes pregnant as the result of his relationship with another man (both of them white), the narrative again coming to rest on the inescapability of the "natural" body. Those characters (Kit, Max) who engage in possibly reproductive sex do end up pregnant, both in unlikely, if not impossible, situations: Kit is menopausal (a fact that is discussed) and Max is on hormone therapy that typically suppresses menstruation. This is symptomatic of a major thread of essentialism that runs through the show, especially evident in many of the parent-child relationships and the reproductive capacities of characters.[17]

I am reminded of *The Well's* insistence that "perfect" women require babies, as well as the tragic mulatta/passing genre's frequent insistence that bodies and blood will "tell." *The L Word* portrays transsexuality not as a form of legitimate and persistent gender identity, but as a type of passing that can be easily undone by the body's topography. Jenny (who, ironically, had been dating Max at the time of his transition but broke up with

[17] Not only are bodies portrayed as biologically rigid and intractable, but personality traits are shown to be genetically transmissible. For example, Shane, who was raised by a single mother, reunites with her estranged father on the eve of her own gay wedding. Shane's father has settled down with a wife and has a school-aged son, Shae, but the marriage is shaky. She learns that her father is a philanderer; that she is just like him. While many characters doubt Shane's ability to settle down with one woman, it is her father's presence that breaks her resolve, showing her that her urges are not just individual and behavioral, but in her blood. Shane and her father are both portrayed as having nearly magical seductive power over women. He comes to Canada to attend Shane and Carmen's wedding, but after he and Shane spend the night drinking and gambling, Shane abandons Carmen at the alter. Though Shane did not even know her father while growing up, it is clear that she inherited much from him, and is suited for womanizing but not for marriage. Her father's marriage also ends shortly thereafter, as he is reminded somehow of his greater personal truth by being reconnected with Shane.

him because she felt that to date him was to deny the truth of her own lesbianism) pointedly and deliberately adds to Max's anguish by repeatedly referring to him as "she" and "a beautiful mother to be." At his baby shower (Season 6, Episode 6) Bette and Tina advise him about the importance of having a birth plan and breastfeeding, and several women also advise him to have an episiotomy, telling him that it's better than tearing during the birth (which is also medically inaccurate)—nevertheless, the point of the conversation, even for those who accept Max's gender identity, is to constantly redirect Max and the audience to the fact that Max has a vagina. Jenny also gives Max a breast pump as a gift and when he says he's not going to breastfeed, Tina tries to encourage him by saying, "Oh Max, you do want to breastfeed—you do. It's what's best for the baby." Jenny tells him, "I understand that you might identify as a man, but I think it's important that as a parent, you can't be selfish for the child." The scene ends in Max having a panic attack and begging Bette and Tina to adopt his child. They refuse because they are already in the process of adopting a second child and have been matched with a birth mother. The series ends before Max's baby is born, seeming to leave his body in a cruel, interminable pregnancy. In the Season 1 donor search, a would-be donor who refuses because he wants to have sex instead of a specimen cup, tells Bette and Tina that "to have a baby there is no other way… the penis, the pussy, the baby [emphatic groan]." Through the pregnancies of Kit and Max, this thought, if not these words, are echoed through the seasons, marking a stunning, uncontrollable corporeal will to reproduce and, especially in Max's storyline, the inevitability and immutability of the body and assigned gender.

In the final season the show, Jenny Schecter dies. She drowns in Bette and Tina's

pool. She has become such a deeply unliked character, by both the audience and the other characters, that any of the characters could be culpable in her death, or it could be accidental, reminiscent of Clare Kendry.[18] While Jenny has not been the focus of my argument, I want to pull back to the first scene, when she sees Shane with someone in Bette and Tina's pool. She drowns in that very same pool. That pool that she ogled, that pool that she dove into (leaving behind Tim, who worked as a swimming coach), and that pool that she died in. It's the lesbian pool, and it's deadly. It's odd to find that a show written by and about lesbians would ultimately come to be so damning, or at least one would hope that the damn comes with a purpose or a palpable critique. But it seems to show only the perils of becoming a lesbian. Jenny gets famous by writing a novel about her lesbian adventures, she gets a movie deal, and she loses her friends and her life. She is in a downward spiral from the moment she kisses Marina. On the flip side, it seems that we are supposed to root for Bette and Tina to make it, to reconcile, to adopt another child *just* because they are a "family," despite the fact that they communicate poorly, struggle with their sex life, and break up several times over.

In a sort of epilogue to the series, Showtime released a series of short clips of each major character's interview at a police station after Jenny's death. Each character is bizarrely compelled through the interview to reveal a major secret about herself to the sergeant. Tina reveals that as a teenager, she had a years-long consensual sexual relationship with her sister. The extraordinary revelation is especially strange given the number of times that people ask if she and Bette are sisters in the final season, and the

[18] After the series finale aired, "I killed Jenny" buttons, t-shirts, and avatars were available.

overall casual slippage between the idea of lesbians as sisters and as family. But in Bette's interview, in response to the question, "Do you think you're arrogant?" she responds, "I think I'm lucky. To be with someone who can tolerate a lot more than my mother did." Bette says that there is no such thing as a perfect relationship, but that a good partner is someone "Who sees you more truly than anyone has ever seen you. And when she fails to see you, then you just take a deep breath and you remind yourself not to expect perfection." Instead of getting back to Jenny's death, the sergeant asks, "How did she fail you, Bette?" This could be a throwback to the unperceptive way that Tina had interacted with Bette's racial identity in Season 1, but Bette responds, in a tearful and quivering whisper, "How could you have not asked me, how could it not even have occurred to you to ask me if I might want to conceive and give birth to our second child? How could you have not asked me? She didn't ask me." Given that Bette is portrayed throughout the series as domineering, it's hard to believe that if she wanted to have a baby, she didn't speak up for herself. Bette is "meeting a tragic end" (to return to the language of the tragic mulatto) because, even though she is a mother, she has not experienced pregnancy and birth. But this strangely phrased second-person accusation, moving Bette's central dilemma from the color line to the baby line (and of course not communicated directly to Tina) points to a belief in the ability of babies to make families—to make *adults*—whole, and Bette's forceful emotions suggest that without having conceived and birthed, a piece of her will always be missing. It is just such sentiment that I believe must be deflected, even by those of us who choose to have children. In collapsing parenthood, including lesbian parenthood, into this sort of treacle that smacks of compulsory reproduction, we

lose the ability to think critically about the exciting possibilities of choosing or rejecting motherhood, and re-evaluating what parenting and family means. Hopefully we can stop failing, and see mothers and motherhood with more clarity than anyone ever has.

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