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The Economics of Desire and Despair

Birth Control and the Depression Era

> *Because* it enables parents to limit their children to those they can properly support. Over-large families lead to under-nourishment, overcrowding, child labor, low wages, unemployment; they are one of the most potent causes of poverty.
>
> *Because* it makes possible the elimination of the unfit, who place such a heavy burden upon the resources of the community. It is estimated that taxpayers spend close to two billon dollars per year for the care of dependency, much of which is preventable.
>
> —*Birth Control Review,* August 1931

"One thing's sure and nothing's surer / The rich get richer and the poor get—children," went a popular song of the 1920s. As much of the fiction under discussion reveals, class often determined access to birth control; the wealthy circumvented the law, leading to fears of "race suicide" as the poor and immigrant populations out-reproduced them. Caroline H. Robinson warned of "Collegians' Race Suicide" in 1933, claiming that "the majority of graduates from the big women's colleges never bear a child" (48).

The Depression brought changes not only to the national economy but also to public perceptions of contraception. Many industries declined during the 1920s even as stock market speculation increased, creating an unstable economy that imploded in 1929. In the following four years the "average family's income had fallen 40 percent" (Solinger, *Pregnancy and Power* 103). The birth control movement flourished during the 1930s

as economic conditions worsened. While Margaret Sanger lobbied for a "doctors only" bill that would allow doctors to prescribe contraceptives at their discretion, the movement deployed an official rhetoric of economic arguments. The *Birth Control Review* reported, "In April, 1933, a total of 4,445,338 families were being given relief, according to reports of the Federal Emergency Relief Administration" (Bossard 1). Birth control would end the burden of "relief babies" on the taxpayers.

During the Depression, young couples postponed marriage and avoided pregnancy because of the economic conditions. Married women sought relief at the rising number of birth control clinics; in 1932 there were 145 clinics. Alice Dunbar-Nelson wrote, "Negro women are exercising birth control in order to preserve their new economic independence. Or, because of the poverty of the family, they are compelled to limit their offspring" (289). The Depression also affected single women, who often depended on "dates" with men for meals and other gifts such as clothing. More single women worked in industrial centers, which contributed to their greater sense of individual freedom.[1] These economic conditions hastened public acceptance of changes to birth control law. Contemporary polls revealed this growing acceptance; the 1936 Gallup poll "showed that 63 percent favored the teaching and practice of birth control" and a *Ladies' Home Journal* poll revealed that 79 percent of American women "believe in birth control" (Ware 7; J. Reed, "The Birth Control Movement before *Roe v. Wade*" 35). These cultural changes put public pressure on the government to lift legal restrictions, including *U.S. v. One Package of Japanese Pessaries,* the 1936 decision removing the federal ban on the medical profession's dissemination of contraceptives for "the purpose of saving a life or promoting the patient's well-being."[2]

A narrowing of the labor market affected women: soon competition for federal funds was matched by competition for jobs. A 1936 Gallup poll found that 82 percent of respondents thought a wife should not work if her husband was employed (Coiner, *Better Red* 41). But women, who could be paid less than men, often found work more easily.

1. See Peiss.

2. The 1936 *United States v. One Package* decision reinterpreted the Comstock Act in favor of the birth control movement. Judge Augustus Hand ruled that the Comstock Act of 1873 should be applied to "only such articles as congress would have denounced as immoral if it had understood all the conditions under which they were to be used. Its design, in our opinion, was not to prevent the importation, sale, or carriage by mail of things which might intelligently be employed by conscientious and competent physicians for the purpose of saving life or promoting the well-being of their patients" (qtd. in Kennedy 249). An earlier decision, the 1930 *Youngs Rubber Corporation v. C. I. Lee & Co, Inc.*, decided that transporting contraceptive devices under certain conditions was legal.

Paula Rabinowitz argues, "categories of differences—gender, class—are not mutually exclusive but, instead, remain fundamentally implicated within each other as re-presentations of themselves and each other" ("Difference/Different Endings" 65).[3] Families that had once been middle class were now experiencing what the poor had long known: each new child could prove an unwelcome burden to scarce resources. Class and gender, production and reproduction, are mutually constituted in the public discourse and much of the fiction of the 1930s.

The birth control movement continued to make sentimental appeals for why the poor needed contraception. But during the Depression Era the movement fortified this approach with broader appeals to position birth control as a vital part of social policy. We can see this shift in two examples, both of which use a wolf as symbol of the savage effects of poverty. "The Stork and the Wolf," a poem by Florence Wayne Hickey in the April 1925 *Birth Control Review,* offers a first-person account of this problem. The narrative voice of the poem describes a poor mother's situation:

> The stork is at my chimney
> And the wolf is at my door,
> Hush my wailing one!
> My hungry brood is huddled
> In a corner of the floor. (109)

The stork indicates that the woman is pregnant yet again, while the wolf is the danger of poverty that could take the lives of her children. Already there are nine children, including a young toddler. She has "no bread" for "the brood about me pressed," and "no milk" for "the yearling at my breast." Without the ability to control fertility, the economics of poverty, hunger, and despair result. The use of a first-person voice and the woman's isolation create a sense of urgency and despair. A May 1932 drawing in the *Review* also used the image of wolves (fig. 12). This time, multiple wolves not only symbolize hunger but also bear the labels of disease, ignorance, overpopulation, and unemployment. They menace

3. Rabinowitz makes this argument more fully in *Labor and Desire: Women's Revolutionary Fiction in Depression America* (1991). Her stance on women in the economy echoes that of Luce Irigaray in her analysis of women as commodity exchanged among men. Irigaray writes: "all the social regimes of 'history' are based upon the exploitation of one 'class' of producers, namely, women. Whose reproductive use value (reproduction of children and of the labor force) and whose constitution as exchange value underwrite the symbolic order as such, without any compensation in kind going to them for that 'work'" (173).

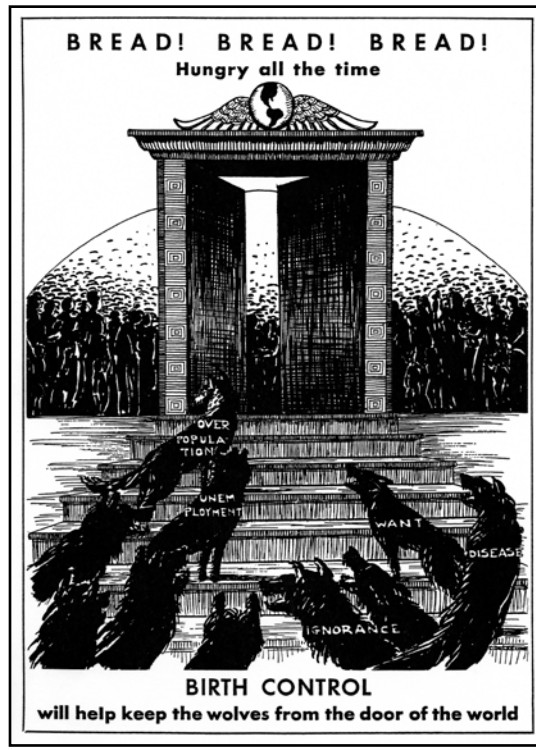

FIGURE 12. "Bread! Bread! Bread! Hungry all the time," *Birth Control Review,* May 1932: 6. Reprinted with permission of Alexander Sanger.

a group of people huddled behind an opening door. "Birth Control," the caption reads, "will help keep the wolves from the door of the world." The illustration suggests contraception as part of a larger social policy needed during the Depression, and moves beyond appeals to sentimentality to join the scientific and political arguments gaining currency.

While the Depression's effects were felt nationwide, geography exacerbated the ignorance of class and served as another layer of difference within economic strata. Birth control advocates could not reach women in rural and southern communities as quickly. Margaret Jarman Hagood's documentary study of southern tenant farmwomen in the 1930s established that birth control information was not circulating to all women even twenty years after Sanger had begun her fight. By 1936 the American Birth Control League had succeeded in establishing nearly 250 birth control clinics, mostly located in urban areas. Hagood found that "[t]he modal attitude of not wanting children is not accompanied

by a modal practice of preventing them. Certain difficulties inhered in the securing of information on contraceptive practices" (122–23). These "difficulties" included neither having private physicians or public clinics to go to nor having the education and money to research the issue. Instead, these women often relied on the oral grapevine for information. Hagood reports, "One woman told how her mother scrimped and saved $10 to buy her a very special sort of "serene" (syringe), which did no good at all. Most have heard that there are effective methods now, but they do not know what they are nor where to go to get reliable information about them" (124). This economic split had racial links as well. Studies conducted in 1938–39 and 1941 revealed that white, urban women with at least elementary-level education reported an 83 to 89 percent contraceptive use: "In all socioeconomic groups, except for the 6 percent with the least income and education, a majority of white women attempted to control their fertility. Black women were much less likely to employ contraception. Poverty and lack of education denied many of them access to information and materials" (Hartmann 171).

For this reason, the birth control movement argued that contraception should be part of federal New Deal programs (Gordon, *The Moral Property of Women* 211). They succeeded in getting birth control into the 1936 Farm Security Administration program. Until the early 1940s, "FSA agents, home supervisors, and public health nurses began to offer contraceptive advice to their clients and to residents in migrant labor camps across the country" (Schoen 37). Individual states such as North Carolina integrated birth control into their public health programs late in the 1930s to aid the rural poor.[4] As the birth control movement entered more fully into policy debates, the *Birth Control Review* ceased publishing fiction, making more space for updates from local birth control leagues and clinics, international news, and conferences.[5] However, American authors such as William Faulkner, Tess Slesinger, Agnes Smedley, and Meridel Le Sueur integrated the issue of contraception into their novels of the 1930s.

When Contraception Fails

Despite a growing acceptance of the necessity for birth control during the

4. In *Choice & Coercion: Birth Control, Sterilization, and Abortion in Public Health and Welfare,* Schoen focuses on North Carolina's public health program but provides context on the national picture.

5. Margaret Sanger ceased editing the *Review* in 1929.

1930s, the court system did not overthrow the Comstock Act until 1936. Access to contraception was thus still uneven at best, and the number of illegal abortions rose during the 1930s (Solinger, *Pregnancy and Power* 118). According to Linda Gordon, "Among a thousand women who went to a birth control clinic in the Bronx, New York, in 1931, 35 percent had had at least one illegal abortion, a proportion that applied to Catholics as well as Protestants and Jews" (*The Moral Property of Women* 25). The clinics kept these statistics, among many others, to accumulate data that would appease the scientific community and aid their cause. The movement could use this information to demonstrate that birth control prevented the evil of abortion and provided an economic boon to families and to society at large. But authors such as Tess Slesinger, Kay Boyle, and William Faulkner bring a greater complexity to their explorations of birth control, abortion, and economic necessity, including in their plots elements of ignorance and duplicity, failed contraception, and indecision.

Slesinger, a socialist who traveled in leftist intellectual circles, depicts birth control and abortion within a middle-class marriage in her 1934 novel, *The Unpossessed.* Her characters understand contraceptive practices: the abortion is the result of marital discord and indecision rather than ignorance. The main character, Margaret, has been considering having children ("Twenty-nine! what was the deadline for babies?"), but her Marxist intellectual husband, Miles, believes bringing children into the world is cruel (6). Slesinger undermines his argument, however, by depicting him as self-centered and self-satisfied. Margaret, tempted to have an affair, struggles with both her husband's "revolutionary" thinking and her mother's conventional ideology. She thinks "[c]onvention, her mother's sweet and trustful code, dictated that denial. But it might be one thing for her mother and another for her mother's child" (61). Although Margaret and her friends talk about sex, the intellectual banter covers a fear of mental and physical sterility and male misogyny. For instance, the character Jeffrey thinks "wombs, not souls—that's what women have" (96). The main female characters, Margaret, Norah, and Elizabeth, are childless despite their sexual activity. An exchange between Margaret and Norah reveals this knowledge and use of birth control:

> "oh Norah listen; I've got the silliest thing to tell you: I'm going to have a baby." Norah dropped her arm in alarm and they stood stock still on the fringe of the dancers. "A *baby?* have you tried everything?" "Why, Norah Meadows Blake, you *cynic!* I want it, I did it on purpose." (305)

Norah's reference to "have you tried everything" reveals knowledge of

abortion and induced miscarriage, and Margaret's reply that she did it "on purpose" reveals a cessation of normal contraceptive practices.

For these educated, middle-class Marxists, pregnancy is a choice. But they make decisions under pressure from society and from Margaret's husband. The last chapter depicts the abortion.[6] Here we find that Margaret's joy in her pregnancy was short-lived, because her husband, Miles, is "frightened" and convinces Margaret to have an abortion so that they can maintain their economic and intellectual freedom.

> [I]n a regime like this, Miles said, it is a terrible thing to have a baby—it means the end of independent thought and the turning of everything into a scheme for making money; and there must be institutions such as there are in Russia, I said, for taking care of the babies and their mothers; why in a time like this, we both said, to have a baby would be suicide—goodbye to our plans, goodbye to our working out schemes for each other and the world—our courage would die, our hopes concentrate on the sordid business of keeping three people alive, one of whom would be a burden and an expense for twenty years. (349–50)

Miles reduces the baby to economic terms and pressures Margaret to have the abortion.

Class again comes into play when the folk remedies Margaret tries, "jumping off tables and broiling herself in hot water," are unsuccessful. She finds and is able to afford a sympathetic doctor to perform a therapeutic abortion in a hospital: "What's a D and C between friends?" she said. "Nobody at the hospital gave a damn about my little illegality" (350, 344).[7] Recovering in the maternity ward, Margaret is surrounded by women who have had children or miscarried accidentally. They don't understand Margaret's abortion: *"Whatever did you do it for, Missis Flinders Missis Butter was always saying; if there's nothing the matter with your insides"* (341; italics in original). Margaret herself is conflicted

6. The final chapter, in which the abortion occurs, also appeared separately as the short story "Missis Flinders" in *Story Magazine*, December 1932. The story had been rejected many times before *Story* agreed to print it, and it was "the first fiction dealing with abortion to appear in a magazine of general circulation" (Sharistanian 377). The novel itself was a critical and popular success and underwent four printings, most recently by the Feminist Press in 1984.

7. A therapeutic abortion refers to an abortion done by a medical doctor in a hospital to "prevent mental or physical damage to the woman" (Luker 88). According to Luker, "between 1926 and 1960, the chance of getting a therapeutic abortion seems to have been almost random: abortions became neither easier nor harder to obtain over time; no geographic area had a monopoly on abortion; and abortion in the most liberal settings was fifty-five times more frequent than in the most conservative settings" (46; see also 257–59).

by what she sees as middle-class motherhood and her own desire for children despite her intellectualism. She resents Miles, and resents their selfish reasons for aborting the child. The abortion is a negative force of male control, "a trope for loss and failed promise" (Castro 17). Birth control as a literary trope can also be both a mechanism of control, if enforced by patriarchal forces, and a mechanism of liberation for women, if freely chosen. With her matter-of-fact presentation of birth control and abortion, Slesinger provides an insightful look at sexual politics and pressures on married women during the Depression.

Like Slesinger, expatriate writer Kay Boyle explores the issue of reproductive control and the links between female biology and maternal destiny. In her 1934 novel, *My Next Bride*, Victoria, a young American living in France, joins an artist's commune and meets the wealthy bohemian Anthony Lister. She becomes pregnant after attending drunken parties and goes to two vaudeville dancers who live at the commune for advice. They procure pills to "bring it off," "the kind the girls at the theatre use" (273). Unfortunately for Victoria, the pills do not induce an abortion but serve only to damage her health. The pills "had fine limber blades concealed which they whipped out and flourished once they had reached the nine miles or yards of entrails coiled secretly in the belly's soft white skin. They removed whatever there was to take, but waltzed in their wary abandonment around the small burden of flesh and blood, leaving it sacred, miraculously untouched. They would have food and spirit and the body's pain, but absolute flesh itself they would not have" (276). Although she keeps increasing the dosage, Victoria is not able to abort the tenacious fetus, "the strange, inhuman kernel of life which sucked blind, featureless, unskulled at what they would not let it have" (281). Victoria experiences unwanted pregnancy as a vampire-like invasion. Anthony's wife, Fontana, takes Victoria to a *sage-femme*, a wise woman or midwife. Fontana promises the *sage-femme* will "do something very quick to you and it will be over right away," but, in fact, the woman only puts up unwed mothers and finds homes for the babies (294).

Still determined, Victoria finds another *sage-femme*, one who "had a reputation," a place "three flights up in the dark and on every flight there was the smell of brussel sprouts, left over from the winter-time, perhaps, but strong and rank in the unswept, sagging stairs" (299). The sordid surroundings presage an unsanitary, back-alley abortion, a dirty coat hanger followed by sepsis and hemorrhage. The *sage-femme* "had seen so much that was secret rot and secret disease and suppuration carried month after month in silence" (300). The woman makes Victoria sign a contract that she won't reveal the abortionist's name and that she'll call in a doctor

after the miscarriage begins. Hearing danger in this, Victoria and Fontana leave: "[T]hey were out the door, they were on the landing, and behind them in the silence of the sage-femme's rooms they could hear the dripping, the endless dripping of the life-blood as it left the bodies of those others; the unceasing drip of the stream as it left the wide, bare table and fell, drop by drop, to the planks beneath it, dripping and dripping on for ever like a finger tapping quickly on the floor" (303). In the novel's final pages, Fontana finds a real physician for Victoria, and the novel ends with Victoria crying as they follow the doctor. The implication she undergoes a "therapeutic abortion" is clear. Would birth control have prevented this abortion? Probably not, since the pregnancy was the result of drunken sex, whereas birth control must be planned. Yet, read in the context of the contraceptive movement, both the novel and birth control rhetoric demonstrate the need for reliable methods for women to control their fertility. The description of the pills and abortion evokes public perceptions of quackery and evil that the birth control movement attempted to disassociate from. Boyle's text shows the lengths to which women will go to escape enforced maternity.

William Faulkner also explores female sexuality outside of wedlock, birth control, and abortion in several of his novels of the 1930s. But rather than obliquely criticize the conflict between progressive politics and internal misogyny, as Slesinger does, Faulkner turns his attention to women who are poor and outside of the social mainstream. In his 1930 novel, *As I Lay Dying*, Faulkner presents the seventeen-year-old Dewey Dell Bundren. Dewey Dell has "the female trouble" and seeks an abortion during the family's bizarre trip to bury her dead mother (185). In a series of first-person monologues, Faulkner reveals Dewey's ignorance of birth control and lack of guidance from a distant, unloving mother. Viewing her pregnant body as a repulsive "tub full of guts," she searches for a doctor or druggist who "could do so much for me if he just would" (53). The druggist Moseley represents the self-righteous moral outrage of much anti-abortion rhetoric: "Me, a respectable druggist, that's kept store and raised a family and been a church-member for fifty-six years in this town" (187). He tells Dewey Dell to confess her condition to her father and to find herself a husband.

For Moseley, the solution to Dewey Dell's problem is to follow traditional roles for women as wife and mother. But Dewey Dell, like her mother before her, "rejects the notion that childbirth constitutes the natural fulfillment of feminine collective desire" (Henninger 27). However, Dewey Dell is not a feminist rebel: like the rhetoric of the birth control movement, she reveals that she does want children, just not now: "It's

not that I wouldn't and will not it's that it is too soon too soon too soon" (Faulkner, *As I Lay Dying* 106). What Dewey Dell desires is control over her reproductive destiny. Offered no help from Moseley, she continues her quest, this time encountering sexual exploitation rather than fatherly condescension. The druggist MacGowan gives Dewey Dell a false abortifacient in exchange for sex (230–31). Although still determined to abort her child, Dewey Dell remains ignorant of how to do so by the novel's end, ensnared by her lack of knowledge, her dependence upon male institutions, and an inability to mediate her experience through language.

Faulkner's *If I Forget Thee, Jerusalem* (1939) deals more directly with failed contraception and reflects the climate of American anxiety surrounding abortion. Interestingly, while a number of critics focus on the abortion, none mentions the explicit birth control scene.[8] Joseph Urgo states, "Through the choice of abortion, maternity becomes a matter of consciousness, no longer an exclusively natural function" (255). But birth control itself makes maternity a conscious choice for Charlotte before her decision to have the abortion. Faulkner's illicit lovers, Harry and Charlotte, practice post-coital douching as contraception. According to a 1940 survey, antiseptic douching was one of the most popular methods throughout the United States, in part because the necessary materials could be found at any drugstore (Riley and White 898). Douching is effective for Charlotte, but "[w]hen the stove went out my douche bag was hanging behind it. It froze and when we lit the stove again I forgot it and it burst" (172). Isolated in remote mine country, Charlotte cannot replace her equipment, nor can she find any other technological means of contraception. She has to rely on folklore and hope: "I remember somebody telling me once, I was young then, that when people loved, hard, really loved each other, they didn't have children, the seed got burned up in the love, the passion. Maybe I believed it. Wanted to believe it because I didn't have a douche bag any more" (172).

Because of the failed birth control, Harry performs an abortion on Charlotte, which Faulkner describes in metaphoric language: "you just have to let the air in" (185). This phrase, echoing Hemingway's "Hills Like White Elephants" of 1927, demonstrates the existence of a popular legend of abortion rather than practical knowledge of the procedure.

8. See Eldred, Henninger, Urgo, and Duvall on abortion in *If I Forget Thee, Jerusalem* (*The Wild Palms*). Perhaps the role of birth control in the text has been ignored because critics such as Urgo have insisted on interpreting the novel as "about abortion" rather than about attempts to control fertility, and then read abortion as a trope throughout the novel (Urgo 262).

Faulkner's text continues the popular discourse that abortion is tragic, as Charlotte dies of hemorrhage and Harry is sentenced to prison. But does Faulkner condemn the lovers, or sympathize? I would argue that he intervenes in the ideology of evil abortion by complicating an easy reading of the lovers as careless or selfish. By depicting the economic despair in the mining communities and elucidating Charlotte and Harry's belief that the world was not a good place to bring a child into, Faulkner adopts rhetorical arguments that would resonate with those still feeling economic effects from the Depression. As Charlotte says, "I can starve and you can starve but not it" (185). The scenes of poverty in the mining community and Charlotte's statement echo the letters in the *Birth Control Review* and Sanger's arguments regarding bringing children into the world to starve.

But if Faulkner is sympathetic toward abortion, why kill Charlotte and condemn Harry? As Eldred notes, the novel reflects "the reality of abortion in the 1930s," a time when therapeutic abortions were legal and there was growing acceptance of abortion in general (141). The fate of Harry and Charlotte reflects the contemporary reality. Ware reports that couples could find an illegal abortionist who charged $100–150, but that between 8,000 and 10,000 women died each year from abortions during the 1930s (63). The high mortality rate of abortion was another reason birth control advocates fought it—birth control, they argued, would protect women's health and allow them to bear more children. Charlotte's death after her abortion fits the odds. Harry's fate also aligns itself with reality, although in a more complicated manner. Through the 1930s, the state prosecuted abortionists after the death of the woman, but more so if the woman was unwed. Regan cites a case that is strikingly similar to the tale of Harry and Charlotte: "In 1916 Chicago and Denver newspapers published Ruth Merriweather's love letters to a Chicago medical student, who was on trial for his involvement in her abortion related death" (1257). Faulkner's text is significant for its development of this cultural narrative, exploring the consequences of unmarried sexuality, failed contraception, and the resulting unwanted pregnancy.

If I Forget Thee, Jerusalem contains an implicit pro–birth control message, both in depicting Harry and Charlotte's attempt at douching, and in the knowledge that if it had succeeded abortion would have been prevented. Faulkner's text does not take a definitive stance on abortion. While Faulkner punishes both Charlotte and Harry, despite his seeming sympathy for their illicit love, he does not punish Billie Buckner, on whom Harry performs an earlier abortion. While aligned with the position that birth control would prevent abortions, the text does not explicitly valorize

marriage and motherhood. This is reinforced by Charlotte's abandonment of her two daughters, as well as by the plot of the "Old Man" narrative interwoven into *If I Forget Thee, Jerusalem*. The main character of "Old Man," a convict, is trapped in a flood with a pregnant woman. He views her pregnant body as "monstrous" and "a mass of female meat" (137, 144). Although Faulkner's text resonates with some arguments of the birth control movement, it goes beyond the conservative values of the birth control rhetoric. Because he was not involved with the political movement to repeal the law, Faulkner had greater latitude to challenge social norms and gender roles. This greater license of topic paralleled Faulkner's ability to write outside traditional literary styles, employing modernist experiments such as interwoven narratives. The novel engages with issues of birth control, abortion, and sexuality that were circulating in pubic discourse during the 1930s, including a growing acceptance of economic factors in abortion.[9]

Contraception and Communism

AGNES SMEDLEY AND MERIDEL LE SUEUR

While the official birth control movement cut its overt ties to radical politics, the Socialist and Communist Parties incorporated contraception into their vision of social revolution. The Communist Party USA advocated birth control during the 1930s, and the party magazines *Woman Today* and *Working Woman* carried articles by Sanger and others.[10] This message found its greatest foothold during the Depression. The economic conditions of the 1930s attracted many people to the political left and the Communist and Socialist Parties. While these political groups

9. The critical reception of *If I Forget Thee, Jerusalem* demonstrates Faulkner's engagement with social attitudes. See Eldred, especially 140, 146.

10. Many historians of the American Socialist and Communist Parties note the ideological fragmentation that prevented these groups from a consistent message. The Socialist Party itself offered different views on birth control. Miller writes of Socialist women: "A majority appeared to support birth control as a necessary factor in the emancipation of human beings, while a minority—perhaps influenced by Clara Zetkin—viewed increasing numbers of workers' children as assets in the class struggle" (109–10). The December 1936 issue of *Woman Today* published "The Soviet Union's Abortion Law" by Margaret Sanger, where she argues against "any woman having children if and when she does not want them" (30). Margaret H. Irish argued for "free clinics with scientific contraceptive information" in her article "Childbirth—A Woman's Problem" in the May 1933 *Working Woman* (17). Nadezhda Krupskaya's "Sane Birth Control" appeared in the *Sunday Worker Magazine* in July 1936.

subordinated "the Woman Question" to class revolution, they welcomed women as members. Sally Miller reports that roughly one-tenth of the membership of the Socialist Party was female, mostly white, middle class, native American, and college educated (97). Many American women writers of the 1930s, including Meridel Le Sueur, Tess Slesinger, and Josephine Herbst, participated in these political movements.[11] They acted as journalists, writing for the *New Masses* and others, and wrote their fiction in the tradition of "Proletarian Realism."

The Third Period of the Communist Party USA (roughly the 1920s and 1930s) witnessed a boom in fiction by, for, and about workers. However, as Paula Rabinowitz argues, radical women's texts are marked by the intersection of gender, class, and sexuality, and thus differ from traditional proletarian fiction, with its formulaic plot of the worker's evolving revolutionary consciousness. Rabinowitz argues that "women's revolutionary writings foregrounded the need for contraception and abortion, the terrors of forced sterilization and rape, and the repression of sexuality as primary determinants of class consciousness among working-class women" (*Labor and Desire* 61). Tillie Olsen's *Yonnondio,* for example, follows a growing family from the mines of Wyoming to tenant farming in South Dakota to the sewers and meatpacking plants of Kansas City. Their poverty and despair lead both parents to be "bitter and brutal" (9) to their children, and repeated childbearing leaves Anna broken: "In her great physical pain and weariness Anna stumbled and lost herself. Remote, she fed and clothed the children, scrubbed, gave herself to Jim, clenching her fists against a pain she had no strength to feel" (80). In a wrenching scene young Maizie overhears her mother try to refuse sex: "It hurts too much. No, Jim, no." "Cant screw my own wife. Expect me to go to a whore? Hold still" (108). Olsen's unfinished novel demonstrates leftist women writers' focus on working-class women and the negative effects of their uncontrolled fertility.[12]

My reading of work by Le Sueur and Smedley supports Rabinowitz's conclusions, but I extend her analysis of the sexualization of hunger and

11. Radical women writers of the thirties (Le Sueur, Herbst, Slesinger, Olsen, and others) were virtually ignored by literary and political history, such as Walter Rideout's *The Radical Novel in the United States, 1900–1954* and Daniel Aaron's *Writers on the Left: Episodes in American Literary Communism*. They were virtually unknown by literary critics until the 1970s, when feminist scholars "rediscovered" them. Much of the critical focus has been on the relationship of these women writers to the Communist Party. I do not discuss this relationship but instead concentrate on the conversation between the texts and the rhetoric of economics in birth control propaganda.

12. Claire M. Roche reads *Yonnondio* alongside some writing by Margaret Sanger and argues that both authors participate in eugenic discourse through their stereotypic representations of the poor.

labor through the politicized female body. Smedley, a friend of Sanger, worked for the *Birth Control Review* and wrote articles on birth control in China and India. Her autobiographical novel, *Daughter of Earth* (1929), should be read in the context of the movement. While Meridel Le Sueur was never an active part of the birth control movement, her writing invokes both feminist and economic themes of women, sexuality, and class. Like Smedley, Le Sueur's novel *The Girl* (written in 1939 but not published until 1978) is based in reality, her own experience and the stories she heard from other women during the Depression. Le Sueur and Smedley, both from working-class backgrounds themselves, offer a complex rendering of the intersections of economics and female sexuality during the Depression. Both the body of Le Sueur's "Girl" and Smedley's Marie Rogers act as sites for cultural critique of economic and reproductive policy.

Agnes Smedley's autobiographical novel, *Daughter of Earth,* invokes many themes of the birth control movement. Although Smedley's main political focus was the nationalist movement for Indian independence, she also became involved with birth control after hearing Emma Goldman lecture, and met Margaret Sanger in 1916 when both were active in the Socialist movement and in liberal Greenwich Village circles.[13] Smedley struggled with her own sexuality throughout her life, and in 1916 "[r]ecently acquired information on birth control gave her the means with which to deal with it physically. She channeled her personal anger in a political direction by blaming the state for keeping the liberating knowledge of birth control out of the hands of poor women" (MacKinnon and MacKinnon 27). On April 1, 1918, Smedley was charged with distributing birth control information in New York; Sanger rallied the movement to try to raise the $10,000 bail. After her release from prison, Smedley worked on the *Birth Control Review* from January 1918 until December 1919. Sanger and Smedley remained correspondents, especially from 1928 to 1931, and Sanger paid for Smedley's psychoanalysis in 1924. In return, Smedley advised Sanger on how to introduce birth control in India, and she worked on establishing birth control clinics in Japan, Germany, and China. She also wrote pieces for the *Review,* including "Babies and Imperialism in Japan," "Margaret Sanger Comes to Berlin," and "Birth Control in Germany."

Daughter of Earth follows Smedley's own life so closely that most critics read it as autobiography. The novel opens with an immediate claim

13. See MacKinnon and MacKinnon. For the place of *Daughter of Earth* in proletarian fiction, see Rabinowitz, especially *Labor and Desire*.

to realism rather than aestheticism: "It is the story of a life, written in desperation, in unhappiness" (7). But it is not just any life, but both a "lowly" or poor life and specifically a woman's life, indicating the simultaneous experience of class and gender. Smedley infuses the novel with the concerns of poor women, of unhappy marriages, abusive husbands, menial labor, and numerous children. Smedley recounts the story of her own mother, a woman who was once beautiful but whose frail hands have turned black from the labor of other people's laundry. Repeated childbirth causes such physical depletion and weakness that the character Marie believes it contributes to her mother's death. Her mother takes out her frustration from increasing poverty and repeated childbirth on her children: "As the years of her unhappy married life increased, as more children arrived, she whipped me more and more" (11). As in *Yonnondio,* the father moves his wife and children from one failed venture to the next. Unable to provide for his family, he slips into alcohol, abuse, and despair, while the labor of women (the money earned from the mother's laundry and aunt's prostitution) keeps the family alive.

Smedley suffered from a fear of sex due to watching her mother's life and death—constant pregnancy, ill health, and an abusive husband. She feared and despised marriage, equating it with sex and childbearing, and idolized her Aunt Helen, a prostitute who earned her own money and helped the family while the father spent his wages on alcohol. To the character Marie, marriage stripped women of any power and left them as chattel to their husbands, economically and physically at their mercy. Her feelings echo Emma Goldman's arguments about marriage and prostitution in "The Traffic in Women" and "Marriage and Love." As Marie states, "I was proud of Helen. To me her profession seemed as honorable as that of any married woman—she made her living in the same way as they made theirs, except that she made a better living and had more rights over her body and soul" (142). The true evil is not prostitution but an economic system that leaves women at the mercy of men. In Smedley's novel, marriage is no better alternative. To be "married to some working man, borne him a dozen children to wander the face of the earth, and died in my early thirties" was "the fate of all women about me," a fate Marie was determined to escape through education.

Daughter of Earth details the debilitating effects of uncontrolled fertility on female sexuality through its protagonist, Marie. To Marie, education would enable her to leave the crushing poverty of her childhood. She leaves her family to work and go to school, eventually marrying a friend. Her vision of marriage is without sex: "Sex had no place in love. Sex meant violence, marriage or prostitution, and marriage meant chil-

dren, weeping nagging women and complaining men" (188). Twice she becomes pregnant, and twice has an abortion. After the second abortion she divorces her husband and devotes herself to her studies and to political causes. Later she marries a compatriot in the Indian nationalist movement. Because she denies her sexuality in an effort to control her fertility, Marie never enjoys a fulfilling relationship. Smedley's text thus reveals the psychological effects of poverty on developing female sexuality.

But what is the role of birth control within the novel? In the July 1929 *Birth Control Review* a reviewer praised *Daughter of Earth* extravagantly, calling it "a prayer for freedom": "Probably the cause of Birth Control will never find a more frightful and dramatically perfect argument in its favor than that of the conditions in coal-mining communities [depicted in the novel], where swarming human lives are worth a few dollars a head to a bloated and sprawling industry" (Pangborn, "Book Review" 196). Although the *Review* rather conveniently read the novel as a direct argument for birth control, this is true only in regard to the larger economic arguments the movement was using. Smedley herself never mentions contraception, and her involvement with the movement is glossed over in a single page (Smedley, *Daughter of Earth* 340). The novel focuses on how one woman overcame economic restraints to educate herself and join in a larger political movement. However, in another sense, the novel is entirely about the prevention of childbearing. Walt Carmon's review in the *New Masses* reads the novel as a straight "class novel," and on these grounds criticized it for being divisive and affected by "the bitterness of a woman" (17).[14] Both reviewers miss the synthesis that Smedley accomplishes: class and gender are inseparable in her experience and in her work, just as they are in the fight for birth control.

Like Smedley, Meridel Le Sueur simultaneously addresses class and gender in her work. Le Sueur joined the Communist Party in 1924 and became known in the 1930s for her reporting and fiction focusing on working women published in magazines such as *Dial*, *Scribner's*, and *Pagany*. While Le Sueur did not write explicitly about birth control, we can better understand her fiction, and particularly her novel *The Girl*, by placing it in the context of contraceptive and economic arguments during the Depression. Le Sueur was certainly aware of the controversy surrounding contraception: her mother, Marion Wharton, had lectured on birth control before World War I and was arrested for disseminating contraceptive information. Through her parents Le Sueur met such birth

14. This review exemplifies early attempts to fit radical women's fiction within the proletarian genre. These reviewers saw women's writing as failed attempts at the genre, seeing only that it was "about sex" and missing the intersection of gender and economics.

control activists as Margaret Sanger, Emma Goldman, and Theodore Dreiser. Le Sueur's message of female community and birth/rebirth participates in the exchange between leftist politics, feminist theory, and the cultural moment of the American Depression.[15]

Le Sueur depicts the body of the working class, and specifically of working-class women, as innately figured by capitalist exploitation. Working-class women, in their dual roles as workers and the producers of workers/mothers, "pick it up at the source, in the human body, in the making of the body, and the feeding and nurturing of it day in and day out. . . . In that body . . . resides the economy of the world" (Le Sueur, "Annunciation" 172). Working-class women are organically essential to the maintenance of the world economy. If, as Anthony Dawahare argues, Le Sueur writes of a working class with "an unmediated relationship with socio-economic and political knowledge: the working class reads itself to learn about politics and the world economy," how would birth control change the dynamic of this reading (412)? Le Sueur's rendering of the political body focuses on the reproductive aspects of capitalist exploitation and female biology. Through the figure of the Girl, she privileges pregnancy as the site of communal experience. So why read this text in a discussion of birth control? In her exploration of economic conditions and female experience, Le Sueur articulates the issues at the heart of the drive for birth control in the 1930s, thus enabling a contextual reading situated in leftist politics.

Le Sueur's single novel, *The Girl*, is the story of an unnamed "everygirl" coming into womanhood and experiencing sexual desire, pregnancy, and childbirth during the Depression. Critics often read the novel as a powerful narrative of female desire and collectivity, which presents an essentialist view of women as mothers and daughters. Rabinowitz argues that "it invokes women's biological capacity to bear children without interrogating the cultural platitudes surrounding motherhood" ("Maternity as History" 544). Nora Ruth Roberts charges Le Sueur with a "thoroughgoing indigenous feminism" and "identification with all aspects of the wom-

15. Some critics have labeled this vision of female community as "essentialism" or "organicism," "a view of women that relates birth-giving, nurturing and the life-giving forces of organic nature in a way that Le Sueur sees as anti-bourgeois and particularly feminine" (Nora Ruth Roberts, *Three Radical Women* 36; Coiner, *Better Red* 109). See also Coiner's "Literature of Resistance: The Intersection of Feminism and the Communist Left in Meridel Le Sueur and Tillie Olsen." Coiner sees Le Sueur in opposition to Communist Party hierarchy, while Nora Roberts argues that the party had a "rich discussion" on "the woman question" and that women were active in this; therefore Le Sueur's work can be seen as within the party rather than in opposition ("Radical Women Writers of the Thirties and the New Feminist Response" 89).

anly experience" ("Radical Women Writers" 85). While *The Girl* clearly celebrates pregnancy and birth into a community of women, the novel also offers a more complex message of reproductive control, a message that most critics overlook in their call to "essentialism." By looking at the economic conditions in which the Girl finds herself, and examining the other female characters in the novel, we can expand this identification to include control of reproduction. Le Sueur creates a naive character in the Girl and invites the reader to celebrate her youthful ideas of love and birth. But Le Sueur also builds into her narrative a rhetoric that is not so celebratory. Through the stories of the other female characters, we receive a cautionary tale of the economic hardships and abuses suffered by women. In Belle, Clara, and Amelia, Le Sueur embeds the thread of female struggle for reproductive control, strengthening her claim through overlapping variations on the same theme.

Le Sueur paints a poignant picture of the harsh economic reality for women during the Depression. Living in an abandoned warehouse, the Girl survives her conditions only through the support of the community. The stark poverty shadows the notion that community is all one needs; Amelia, the Socialist activist, repeatedly rages that "you can't make bones without milk," referring to the Girl's lack of proper nutrition and its possible effects on her baby (109). This foregrounding of struggle and loss, of hunger and deprivation, darkens any purely "pro-childbirth" reading of the text. While it surely celebrates the power of women to reproduce, the text's criticism of economic conditions inherently supports a contraceptive argument against having children who cannot be fed. Critics such as Roberts have argued that Le Sueur fetishizes the maternal body, yet in this novel it is also a poor, starving body, one grounded in economic lack. While the novel privileges the Girl's pregnant body as the focal point, this suffering body is situated throughout the text among other women. Rather than pregnancy as the site of female community, these women all share a battle for control over their reproductive bodies.

To fully understand the Girl's pregnancy we must first examine the reproductive lives of Clara and Belle, the novel's other two main characters. Le Sueur's presentation of these women is consistent with her earlier writings in which she acknowledges the economic and physical reality of women. In "Women on the Breadlines," Le Sueur states matter-of-factly that the only commodity many women control is their own body and that they often turn to prostitution to survive.[16] Clara, the Girl's first friend in

16. "Women Are Hungry" and "Women on the Breadlines" echo scenes from *The Girl*. "Annunciation" also depicts a pregnant woman during the Depression struggling with poverty and lack of food. These pieces are collected in *Ripening* ("Annunciation" 124–32,

the city, works as both a waitress and a prostitute, feeding men's double desires. Clara clearly has some means of keeping childless: despite her sexual activity she is never pregnant. Le Sueur does not condemn Clara's prostitution but presents her sympathetically as occupying a legitimate place in the labor economy. A runaway, Clara was one of eight children, four of which were taken away from her mother by social workers. This pattern is repeated: women have little control over their bodies or the children they have borne. Clara began work in a sweatshop when she was twelve, the same time she started fooling around with men for attention and presents (8, 49). Thus Clara associates sexuality with labor from a very precocious age. To Clara, her body is "the only thing you got that's valuable" (49). While Clara sells her body for economic gain (for survival as much as for trinkets), the Girl in contrast is a virgin until she falls in love with Butch. Clara also acts as a foil for the Girl in the novel's concluding pages. Weak and suffering from venereal disease, Clara is given electric shock therapy to "cure" her prostitution. She dies in the same moments as the Girl gives birth. Clara's pathetic life and death dramatize the plight of women whose only market value is their sexualized bodies.

The Girl is surrounded by women who attempt to control their bodies in different ways. Besides the dark choice offered by Clara, Le Sueur presents the older character, Belle. During the first half of the novel Belle is jolly, happy in her proprietorship of the bar where Clara and the Girl work, and satisfied in her marriage to Hoink. Indeed, Le Sueur clearly presents a mature couple with an active sex life. But Belle's outward demeanor hides her own dark story of abuse and her struggle to control her sexuality. As a child Belle was abused by her father's friend, resulting in pregnancy and abortion: "He gave me a little money and I come to St. Paul where for ten bucks they'd stick a huge vet's needle into you and start it and then you were on your own" (47). Belle's matter-of-fact statement of a brutal and illegal procedure allows for no escaping from the reality of women's lives. An unwritten condition of her marriage is that she remain childless, and Belle admits to having thirteen abortions. The Girl relates that "Belle says this is a rotten stinking world and for women it is worse, and with your insides rotting out of you and men at you day and night and the welfare workers following you and people having to live off each other like rats" (9). Belle's body is inscribed by her reproductive history and her labor. Birth control could help separate human from rat by dividing female sexuality from pregnancy, raising poor women above the condition of animals.

"Women on the Breadlines" 137–43, "Women Are Hungry" 144–57).

The Girl's full story, including her pregnancy, must be understood within this context. In many ways it echoes the other female voices: a childhood of poverty, constant motion, and abuse as "papa was driven to a fury sitting down with all the mouths to feed. We had to eat in relays" (26). Like Clara, the Girl was sent to work young (age eleven), and like Belle, was sexually assaulted by an adult. With an abusive father and ten siblings, the Girl escapes to the city for employment, where she meets and falls in love with Butch. Ignorant of birth control, their sexual activity leads to a pregnancy that Butch wants to abort. "I could do it myself with a pair of scissors, there's nothing to it," he tells her (70). Although she resists the abortion, the Girl's loses her belief that she controls her own body when she is raped by two men.

If, as I have argued, these women are struggling for reproductive control of their own bodies, whom are they struggling against? Economic conditions also trap the male characters (Butch, Hoink, etc.), and they exit the novel after a failed bank robbery, leaving the female characters to form their own community. But within this female enclave the women still struggle against a "relief system" that seeks control. Thus, a larger economic system, not men in particular or in general, threatens their bodily control. The threat is not class or gender but the conjunction of both. In *The Girl* it is dangerous to be unemployed and a woman, dangerous to walk alone in the city streets. The authorities assume such women are prostitutes without rights to their bodies or their sexuality: "They will pick you up, Clara told me, and give you tests and sterilize you or send you to the women's prison" (1). In both options the state takes bodily control of the working-class woman. Seeking work and milk, the Girl visits a relief office where the worker writes in a report, "She should be tested for sterilization after her baby is born. In our opinion sterilization is advisable" (114). When she protests, the Girl is forcibly taken to a Salvation Army home for unwed mothers. Scheduled to be sterilized immediately after giving birth, the Girl is rescued by Amelia, literally saved by socialism. Her future fertility salvaged (for now), the Girl gives birth on the floor of an abandoned warehouse, surrounded by other women. The social welfare system does not help these women but takes away their control over their own bodies.

Amelia, the voice of the Workers Alliance, articulates the party line with a feminist slant: "What are we? Just goods to be bought and sold? Yes, she answered herself cursing, that's what they think, buy and sell you and then use your body after you're dead! It's too bad, it's too bad they can't kill our babies and eat them like suckling pigs" (120). Amelia herself has had six children but leaves unclear whether they are alive or still in

her care. This articulation of the female body as a product corresponds to the economic conditions of the characters to reinforce the idea that women are objectified by economic means, losing all subjectivity and power. Thus, to Amelia, the threatened sterilization is both an economic and eugenic measure dependent upon the whim of the ruling class: "It's because they don't need any more children from workers. They don't need us to reproduce our kind" (124). One could easily read this and other comments made by Amelia as pro–birth control. The high value Amelia places on life is consistent with the arguments of birth control advocates regarding morality, especially when read in the context of the devastating effects of poverty on childbearing.

Both Meridel Le Sueur and Agnes Smedley made explicit the relationship among gender and class, politics and experience. They develop implicit arguments for contraception through and on the bodies of women. Embedded in a larger politics, *The Girl* and *Daughter of Earth* reveal traces of the conflict over birth control. The effects of economic conditions on the control of women's bodies and lives implicate this "proletariat" or "revolutionary" fiction in the larger argument for contraception as empowering to women.

Conclusions

THE ECONOMICS OF DESIRE

The issue of birth control cannot be separated from economics and politics during the Depression.[17] Even as birth control advocates lobbied to change the law, commercial enterprises saw money to be made in contraceptives. What had once been a moral issue grew more acceptable as practical economic pressures became mainstream. Elizabeth Garrett stated in 1934, "the contraceptive business has outgrown the birth control movement" (271). Despite repressive laws, "an extensive

17. Birth control remains grounded in economics. This logic of controlling reproduction for economic reasons still circulates in public rhetoric today. In December 1990, following FDA approval of Norplant, an editorial in the *Philadelphia Inquirer* called Norplant a "tool in the fight against African American Poverty" (quoted in Kapsalis 54). This logic is now being turned on male bodies as well. In July 2001 the Wisconsin Supreme Court "upheld a probation order that bars a man convicted of failure to pay child support from having more children unless he shows that he can support all his offspring" (Lewin A14). Interestingly, the court split along gender lines, with male justices finding the condition reasonable while the female justices "opposed it as an unconstitutional intrusion on a basic right to procreate" (Lewin).

and thriving business is being done in every variety of contraception," and contraceptives were being sold under the moniker "prophylactic" and "feminine hygiene" (269).[18] The birth control business boomed, and "preventatives" found their way into the Sears and Roebuck catalog and the local five-and-dime shop (Solinger, *Pregnancy and Power* 126). By 1934 over three hundred manufacturers were producing contraceptive devices, in addition to druggists, doctors, and firms selling door-to-door and by mail order, and *Fortune* magazine reported the annual sales of the birth control industry at over $250 million in 1938 (Garrett 269; "Accident of Birth" 84). The harsh economic reality of the Depression Era had a direct influence on public opinion regarding birth control. And the fiction of the period, whether explicitly propagandistic or more nuanced, helped bring the economic effects of birth control into public discourse. However, despite growing commercial availability, ignorance and poverty kept contraceptives out of reach of many women such as Faulkner's Dewey Dell. According to Andrea Tone, in the 1930s, "[w]hile the going rate for a diaphragm and a companion tube of jelly ranged from four to six dollars, a dollar purchased a dozen suppositories, ten foaming tablets, or, most alluring of all, up to three douching units, depending on the brand" ("Contraceptive Consumers" 492).

Birth control has the potential to disrupt a sexual economy that values the female body only for its reproductive capacity. It also has the potential to disrupt conditions of female sexual passivity. However, one of the many contradictions of the birth control movement is that advocates often ignored its revolutionary potential in favor of a rhetoric that reinscribed cultural norms. Thus, the movement marketed contraception both as a way for poor women to escape the cycle of poverty and for the wealthy to control the number of people needing social welfare.

By the time the United States emerged from the Depression in 1939, the once-radical movement for birth control had been replaced by the Birth Control Federation of America, an organization dedicated to family planning and the interests of public health. Women were safely inscribed as mothers who scientifically planned their families with the aid of clinics and physicians. As the caption for a 1937 photograph in the *Birth Control Review* promises, "We want another as soon as we can afford it" (fig. 13).[19]

18. See Tone, *Devices and Desires,* for a discussion of how manufacturers created a mass market for contraceptives during the Depression despite the laws. For an analysis of feminine hygiene and birth control marketing in the 1920s and 1930s, see Sarch.

19. Recent contraceptive ads echo this assumption that women naturally want children and want to space them. A Norplant ad depicts a woman holding a smiling toddler with the caption, "I'd like to have another child, but we also want some time before the next one."

FIGURE 13. Ruth Rozaffy, "We want another as soon as we can afford it," *Birth Control Review* 12.1 (1937): 12. Reprinted with permission of Alexander Sanger.

The image shows a smiling young mother leaning over a baby's crib, but the caption is more telling: "we" indicates a decision made within a happy marriage, "want" shows the natural attitude of couples toward children, and "afford" highlights that the couple is planning their family with an eye toward economic responsibility. But while the *Birth Control Review* stopped running fiction and moved toward science and public policy for its own increasingly mainstream message during the Depression, a wide variety of authors explored the complications of contraception, sexuality, and economics. The topic fit the two main literary modes of the period: modernists such as Faulkner developed new narrative techniques to capture the current psychological and sexual reality, and the leftist writers of the 1930s, such as Smedley and Olsen, employed social realism to elicit political change for the working class. This fiction provided another vehicle for contraceptive arguments to enter public consciousness.