



Mothering the Race: Women's Narratives of Reproduction, 1890-1930

Allison Berg

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From Reconstruction through the Progressive Era, African American and white women were encouraged to view motherhood as a national racial imperative. Tracing the diverse strategies by which women writers and activists responded to this imperative, "Mothering the Race" examines fictional portrayals of motherhood as they reflect and contribute to broader public debates about race, reproduction, and female agency. Allison Berg argues that the most extended and explicit depictions of motherhood in the early twentieth century seek to present mothers as active agents rather than passive instruments of reproduction. This agency comes at a price, however, and is continually constrained by fixed gender roles and social expectations. Pauline Hopkins reclaims the joys of black motherhood from the brutalizing effects of slavery, while Edith Summers Kelley explores the tensions between artistry and maternity for a Kentucky tenant farmer. Novels of sexual awakening by Kate Chopin and Edith Wharton depict motherhood as personally limiting but racially necessary, while Nella Larsen's bleak picture of maternity reflects the frustrated desires of a biracial New Woman. Berg places these and other fictional representations of maternity in the context of debates over birth control, feminism, and eugenics, revealing motherhood and race as key tropes for discussions of social progress and decline. Beginning with speeches delivered at the 1893 World's Congress of Representative Women, and continuing with close readings of literary and nonliterary texts, Berg shows how the notion of 'universal' motherhood fostered cross-racial conversations even as it reinforced racial hierarchy. In an epilogue that brings us to the present moment, Berg demonstrates how two recent films, "Beloved and One True Thing", reveal the persistence of racially specific notions of motherhood and the social order they support.

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