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When the Past is Prologue

Involuntary Sterilization in Recent American Women's Historical Fiction

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Abstract

This article analyzes representations of involuntary sterilization in recent historical fiction by American women writers. Focusing on novels published in the past two decades, it examines how authors engage with the legacies of eugenics and the forced sterilization practices carried out in twentieth-century America. Part of a growing number of popular novels representing involuntary sterilization in the larger context of reproductive health, choice, and justice, *A Mother's Promise* by K.D. Alden (2021), *Only the Beautiful* by Susan Meissner (2023), *Necessary Lies* by Diane Chamberlain (2013), and *Take My Hand* (2022) by Dolen Perkins-Valdez use point of view, characterization, and dramatic structure to engage contemporary readers. They foreground themes of class, disability, race, gender, and sexuality, illustrating how intersecting systems of oppression shaped reproductive policies and their enforcement. These novels effectively employ the tropes of historical fiction, reimagining historical figures such as Carrie Buck and institutions such as the Virginia State Colony for Epileptics and Feebleminded, connecting dramatic action to actual events including American legal cases and Nazi sterilization protocols, and including personal reflections in author's notes as well as educational material such as Reading Group Guides. Through an analysis of narrative technique, the article highlights the complex ways in which these works address bodily autonomy, reproductive justice, and resistance. The analysis situates these novels within the broader context of American social and legal history as well

as feminist and literary theory, considering the ongoing relevance of sterilization as a tool of state control and its cultural resonance in American society. By examining how historical fiction functions to remember and reimage past injustices, the article also reflects on the power of fiction to counter dominant historical narratives and foster a deeper understanding of reproductive rights and justice. Ultimately, it argues that these novels serve not only as artistic expressions and popular entertainments but also as interventions in public memory.

KEYWORDS

Involuntary Sterilization, Eugenics, Reproductive Justice, Historical Fiction, American Women Writers

To scholars of American literature, Donald Trump's campaign slogan to "Make America Great Again" ominously recalled its use in Octavia Butler's 1998 dystopian novel *Parable of the Talents* by a Christian fundamentalist administration which institutes enslavement, reeducation camps, and systemic rape. The recent loss of reproductive rights in America combined with the Trump decrees to eliminate diversity initiatives and deport immigrants suggest the eugenic ideology of earlier twentieth-century America. Eugenic policy combined unproven theories of heredity with economic anxiety, sexism, and xenophobia to determine reproductive "fitness." Sterilization was one tool employed in the name of national progress to stop "mental defectives" and those with other undesirable traits from reproducing. From the 1880s until the 1970s, the United States forcibly sterilized hundreds of thousands of people (Hansen and King 3). According to reproductive justice scholar Loretta Ross, the US was the first nation "to permit mass sterilization as part of an effort to 'purify the race,'" and "Black people, Catholics, poor white women, and others such as the mentally or physically disabled were singled out for planned population reductions through both government and privately financed means" ("Trust Black Women" 66). Legal challenges and growing public awareness of the effects of Nazi Germany's eugenic policy quieted public support by the 1940s, but coerced sterilization of marginalized women continues.[1] For example, a whistleblower reported involuntary sterilizations at an Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) detention

[1] See Roberts; Ross and Solinger.

facility in 2020 (Ghandakly and Fabi). The movement for reproductive justice, which addresses how structural inequalities deny "the human right to maintain personal bodily autonomy, have children, not have children, and parent the children we have in safe and sustainable communities" (SisterSong), identifies coerced or forced sterilization as well as denial of informed voluntary sterilization as human rights violations.[2]

While speculative novels such as *Parable of the Talents* warn readers of possible futures, historical fiction, characterized "largely by literary realism, verisimilitude, and historical accuracy," serves to educate readers of a "usable past" that is prologue to our contemporary moment (Sheffer 1). This article analyzes four recent historical novels about eugenic sterilization by American women writers.[3] While literary scholars such as Karen Keely, Barbara Ewa Luczak, Daylanne English, and Lois A. Cuddy and Claire M. Roche have analyzed the intersection of canonical authors and the American eugenic movement, little has been written on popular genres that rely on familiar narrative tropes. But, as Karen Weingarten has argued, "popular fiction is also a place to tell women stories about themselves and a means to circulate dominant ideologies, in particular, those regarding the ties among reproduction, race, and class" (85). *A Mother's Promise* by K.D. Alden (2021), *Only the Beautiful* by Susan Meissner (2023), *Necessary Lies* by Diane Chamberlain (2013), and *Take My Hand* (2022) by Dolen Perkins-Valdez use point of view, characterization, and dramatic structure to offer "readers the pleasure of emotionally experiencing the past in streamlined, simplified form" (Sheffer 1) while creating empathy and educating readers to recognize injustice.

In the 2021 novel *A Mother's Promise,* K.D. Alden reimagines the life of Carrie Buck, the young white woman named in the 1924 Supreme Court case *Buck v. Bell.* This case, which historian Nancy Ordover argues was

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[2] Sterilization can be an individual choice for permanent contraception: for instance, a recent study found that "surgical sterilization has significantly increased since the change in abortion banning laws in Texas" (Mohr-Sasson et al.).

[3] Other recent historical works by American women writers related to sterilization and eugenics include *All Waiting is Long* by Barbara J. Taylor (2016), *The Foundling* by Ann Leary (2022), *The Last Carolina Girl* by Meagan Church (2023), *Butcher* by Joyce Carol Oates (2024), and *The Lies They Told* by Ellen Marie Wiseman (2025).

"part of a deliberate and determined effort to situate women as the primary candidates for sterilization" (135), upheld a Virginia law authorizing the involuntary sterilization of the "unfit" to protect the "public welfare" ("*Buck v. Bell*"). Alden tells the story from the point of view of the victim and creates a memorable, sympathetic character to humanize the victim. Narrator Ruth Ann Riley, the Carrie Buck proxy, has a lively, intelligent, and humorous voice. The direct first-person perspective helps readers understand her innocence and bravery as a poor girl in Virginia educated through the sixth grade, pregnant from rape by her foster parent's nephew, and involuntarily institutionalized in the Virginia Colony for Epileptics and Feeble-Minded.[4] Lack of education, poverty, and unwed pregnancy transform a young girl into a "feebleminded" threat to public safety. Despite her initial naivete, Ruth Ann's native intelligence allows her to analyze the self-serving institutional rhetoric as at odds with the reality of inmate care. She comes to realize, "I ain't feebleminded, no matter how many times they tell me I am. I can read, I can write, I can do my figures. They just brought me here because I got knocked up and couldn't be around decent folk" (Alden 310-11). Observant, she notes the number of women and girls as young as nine in the hospital with abdominal scars because "Dr. Price took out my appendix" (153) and concludes that they are being sterilized without their knowledge or consent. Indeed, her friend (and eventual love interest) Clarence, the one-handed handyman, informs her that these "YouGenic" operations have been occurring for years (33). When Dr. Price tells Ruth Ann "We're going to do an operation on you" "for the greater good" (5; 6), she firmly replies, "I don't want this" (9). Readers, invested in Ruth Ann's perspective, must consider her reactions and reasoning while sharing her powerlessness.

In its following of historical events and use of secondary characters, *A Mother's Promise* reveals the collusion of law with medicine in denying

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[4] Many of the historical novels depicting eugenics in America are set at least partially in an institution that adds to the negative portrayal of eugenics as the institutions range from patronizing and oppressive (*All Waiting is Long* by Taylor*; The Last Carolina Girl* by Church) to abusive (*The Foundling* by Leary, *A Mother's Promise* by Alden) to lethal (*Butcher* by Oates).

reproductive justice.[5] Dr. Price teams up with an attorney on the Colony board, another ambitious and elitist male authority. Dramatic irony warns readers that Ruth Ann will not be fairly represented. As her case progresses to the Supreme Court, the reader learns about eugenic legislation alongside Ruth Ann. "Very recently," Mr. Stringer, the defense attorney, announced, "the Commonwealth of Virginia passed a law authorizing the compulsory sterilization of the intellectually disabled. This progressive and ultimately compassionate statute is based on sound legal precedent: similar laws were adopted by Indiana in 1907, California in 1909, Nevada in 1911, Kansas in 1913. Several other states are in the process of enacting them" (Alden 269). While Stringer presents this litany as evidence of the reasonable and progressive nature of eugenics, Ruth Ann's response centers the individuals effected by these laws: "What a load of mumbo jumbo. She sure would love to get her some of that commonwealth. She didn't have a penny to her name" (269). While the statement is humorous, the first-person insight into the role of poverty in determining reproductive fitness is astute, reinforcing the injustice at the root of eugenic policy. Her insight that "Maybe they call it medicine, but it sure seemed like violence" reflects the novel's message against involuntary sterilization (105). Ruth Ann's ability to articulate her experience as counter to what "they say" situates the reader in opposition to the dominant discourse.

In addition to her quick intelligence undermining the "feebleminded" label, Ruth Ann's caring nature and desire to be a mother amplify her sympathetic characterization. She wants to keep her baby, whom she names and holds, but it is taken from her and given for adoption. Involuntary sterilization would deny her the future children she dreams of. Alden portrays Ruth Ann as caring for her family (her mother and younger sister are also institutionalized), loyal to her friends, and capable of romantic love. This traditional gendering, referenced in the novel's title, may make her more sympathetic to mainstream female readers of the target audience, and is typical of protagonists in these novels. By humanizing the victim as

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[5] Historians Hansen and King note that lawmakers and the medical board of the Virginia Colony for Epileptics and Feeble-Minded crafted the case to enshrine the legality of involuntary sterilization (102-15).

an intelligent, funny, caring, and moral person, the novel builds narrative momentum and leads readers toward empathy when injustice unfolds: like Carrie Buck, Ruth Ann loses her case and is sterilized, bringing back the trauma of rape and the loss of bodily autonomy as patriarchal malice: "She tried not to think about being naked and helpless and once again under a man's power, even if he was a doctor. Even if the violation to her was for the good of society, and not for the pleasure or sick malice of the man" (324-25). Several scenes in the novel deviate from history to add further dimensions to Ruth Ann as well as drama, such as an escape attempt highlighting her intelligence and courage. An epilogue provides a tidy, happy ending, including marriage and a grandchild, that may satisfy readers who've come to care for Ruth Ann.[6]

A Mother's Promise meets another common trope of historical fiction, the inclusion of educational material such as a Reading Group Guide with the text of Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr.'s majority opinion in *Buck v. Bell* and a discussion of the author's interest in the topic. This material frames the issue with personal and larger contemporary relevance, bridging Alden's fertility struggle, her first hearing about Carrie Buck, and the discovery that "*Buck v. Bell* is still, shockingly, the law of the land. It was cited in 2001 in a Missouri case by the Eighth Circuit Court of Appeals, which ruled that 'involuntary sterilization is not always unconstitutional.' And from 2006 to 2010, *150* (!) inmates of California prisons were sterilized" (366). Discussion questions and book suggestions follow, demonstrating the intended book club potential of the text. As scholar Irina Rabinovitch notes, the novel "may be viewed as offering important insights into the recent #MeToo movement and to the overturning of the *Roe v. Wade* ruling" (110). Given the cascading harm to reproductive justice in the first months of 2025, the novel's plucky protagonist fighting insurmountable odds provides a warning of how the most vulnerable are harmed.

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[6] The author discusses her choice to add these imagined events in an interview (Fink, "*A Mother's Promise*: An Interview with K.D. Alden"). All the novels I've discovered make use of dramatic scenes such as escape or physical violence for narrative interest, and all reach narrative closure by providing a happy ending, often marriage and family or a form of legal justice, for the victims.

Set more than a decade later in the eugenics movement, Susan Meissner's 2023 *Only the Beautiful* also relies on first-person narrative but offers a more complex dramatic structure. Many Americans associate eugenic policies with Nazi Germany, but Meissner accurately depicts how American policy preceded and inspired the Nazis. Part I, set in California in 1939, is narrated by Rosanne, a poor seventeen-year-old orphan denied an education and treated as menial household labor by her caretakers, the Calverts.[7] Impregnated after a single act of intercourse with her kind but unhappy foster father, Rosanne is another innocent but brave young woman. When the pregnancy is discovered, she does not reveal the name of the father to the authorities, leading to charges of her promiscuity. As in *A Mother's Promise,* the trope of the admirable first-person narrator is fulfilled: Rosanne is honest, hardworking, intelligent, and caring. Like Ruth Ann, Rosanne figures out that women are being sterilized after observing them with abdominal stitches from "a procedure," possibly "appendix," that she discovers is a "salpingectomy" after surreptitiously reading medical charts (Meissner 47-48; 78). Rosanne is told she will have to give her baby up for adoption, a baby she immediately names and clearly loves. She is caught trying to escape with the infant a few days after childbirth and wakes up to "just three little incisions," sterilized without consent (161).

While Rosanne is a sympathetic character, the narrative structure creates ambiguity. Although Rosanne narrates Part I, the identity of the father, and Rosanne's attempt to resist his sexual advances, are not revealed until later, creating interest and friction as the reader judges the narrator based on incomplete information. Meissner also complicates the protagonist by imbuing her with an unusual "disability," synesthesia, the ability to "see" colors and shapes when she hears sounds. Misunderstood and feared, it is

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[7] First-person protagonists fall into two categories in these works: young female victims who are some combination of poor, orphaned or otherwise parentless, uneducated, disempowered by gender roles, abused, made pregnant despite sexual innocence, and mildly disabled (e.g. *The Last Carolina Girl* by Church) or a more educated and usually older woman who becomes aware of the injustice and acts to rectify it (e.g. *The Foundling* by Leary); a few use multiple narrators, such as *Butcher* by Oates or several of the novels discussed. Secondary characters are usually flat, creating clear villains such as corrupt doctors (E.g. *The Foundling* by Leary; *All Waiting is Long* by Taylor).

treated as a mental illness by her guardian and medical authorities. This condition, combined with her unexplained and unwed pregnancy, lead to her involuntary commitment to the "Sonoma State Home for the Infirm: Caring for the Mentally Encumbered, the Epileptic, the Physically Disabled, and the Psychopathic Delinquent" (10). Pregnant, unwed, poor, mentally "defective," and the orphaned child of Eastern European immigrants, she is a burden on society, echoing the economic imperative of eugenic rhetoric that, as the historian Alexandra Minna Stern notes, guided policy in California at this time: "ideas about the dangers and costs of hereditary degeneracy pervaded California government and culture," she writes, leading to a rise in sterilization from the mid-1930s until 1940 (83-84). Intrigued by her condition, Dr. Townsend experiments on Rosanne with electric shock to "cure" her. To justify the involuntary sterilization, he tells Rosanne, "I have seen what happens to people like you who are burdened and who burden others with an inherited abnormality" (Meissner 164). The novel underlines the bad science underpinning sterilization, revealing late in the novel that Rosanne's daughter did not inherit synesthesia. The reproductive injustice is clear: government policy and patriarchal use of medicine take Rosanne's child and her fertility from her.

The novel also offers a more complex depiction of eugenics by weaving together two separate narratives. The rise of Nazi Germany shadows Part I as Rosanne's guardians receive letters from Mr. Calverts' sister Helen, who is working as a nanny in Austria. Part II shifts to Helen's perspective from 1939 through the late 1950s. Thus, readers leave Rosanne in the middle of the novel, after she is released from the institution, changing setting and narrative voice. The themes of reproduction, eugenics, and power provide coherence: Nazis take the child that Helen cares for, a young girl with a limb difference and developmental delays, institutionalizing her without the family's consent even though her father is himself a Nazi officer; two weeks later she is dead (316). Horrified, Helen responds with action, joining a network to smuggle disabled children into Switzerland. The first smuggling episode provides narrative tension that mirrors the earlier drama of Rosanne's attempted escape. The reader encounters the Nazi euthanasia and eugenic programs after experiencing Rosanne's personal tragedy, inviting readers to understand the similarities between a "progressive"

era policy in America and Germany's full-scale genocide. Reinforcing this connection, Helen returns to America in 1947 and discovers that institutions, like the one Rosanne was sent to, sterilized patients. "You're saying this was happening to people here, in America, long before the Nazis started doing it in Germany?" Helen responds, shocked: "You know that's how Hitler began, right? He began by sterilizing people he didn't want having children" (239). *Only the Beautiful* not only parallels the American history of eugenic sterilization with Nazism but also emphasizes that the American practice was the model. A starred review in *Publishers Weekly* states that "Meissner seamlessly unites the two narratives, drawing striking parallels between Germany's forced euthanasia of disabled people and eugenics in the US. This is riveting" ("Only").

While Part I places the reader in the shoes of a victim of sterilization, Part II expands reader awareness such that ignorance is impossible and inaction is complicity. Unable to locate Rosanne (who has married and moved away), Helen adopts Rosanne's daughter and begins a campaign to change sterilization laws. The novel offers a happy ending to Rosanne, her child, and Helen, a necessity for popular fiction. But through Helen the novel argues that action must be taken against reproductive injustice. Helen writes a book "to bring audiences past the point of saying, 'Isn't it awful what happened over there?' to 'Something awful is happening right here'" (Meissner 374-5). By creating a dramatic presentation of past injustice, *Only the Beautiful* acts similarly, encouraging readers to see that what happened "over there" in the past is only the prologue to the "something awful" happening now. In her Acknowledgements and Author's Note, Meissner notes the history of involuntary sterilization in California on which she based her novel and reinforces the principle of necessary action such as the 2003 formal apology from the governor and money set aside by the state legislature in 2021 as reparations for the over twenty thousand victims (385). Popular fiction such as this provides a subversive vehicle to teach readers about the past and its legacy.

In her 2013 novel *Necessary Lies,* which depicts eugenic sterilization in 1960's North Carolina and its aftermath, Diane Chamberlain uses three first-person narrators and two time periods to create a sense of political urgency. Sections narrated by Brenna in 2011 frame the novel's core story;

Brenna's relationship to the characters narrating the other sections, set in 1960, is only revealed at the end, creating an engaging narrative mystery. Fifteen-year-old Ivy provides the voice of the marginalized victim; like Ruth Ann and Rosanne, she is a sympathetic character whose poverty and innocence create the conditions leading to an unexpected pregnancy. Her family is "dysgenic": social workers have institutionalized her schizophrenic mother and diagnosed her older sister Mary Ella, the mother of a biracial toddler, as "low intelligence" and "promiscuous." Combined with Ivy's childhood epilepsy, her situation marks her as "defective," a judgement belied by the character's unschooled intelligence. Ivy works in the tobacco barns, cares for her family, and worries about her future with the boy she loves, the landowner's son and her lifelong friend: "Me and Henry Allen used to say we'd run off after we finished school, which meant three more years for me and two for him, but I couldn't see how I'd ever be able to leave Mary Ella or Nonnie or Baby William. Everything would fall to pieces without me" (Chamberlain 32). Readers share the excitement of Ivy's coming-of-age balanced against the risk she takes each time Henry Allen "pulls out" as a way of practicing birth control (187). The historical setting builds dramatic irony and primes readers to understand Ivy's reproductive life as shaped both by the economic system of Southern sharecropping and by gender expectations. Like the sympathetic protagonists previously discussed, Ivy wants to be a mother: "I can't imagine having no children. That's crazy. That's what life's about" (173). But under eugenic ideology this is not a choice the young protagonists get to make. As legal guardian, their illiterate and diabetic grandmother provides sterilization consent for Mary Ella and Ivy without asking or informing them. "I can't manage another one of them" (73), she tells the visiting nurse, and asks when Ivy "can get the operation" (71) to get "fixed" (73). Thus, Ivy's story conforms to the tropes previously discussed to create a sympathetic protagonist.

Like *Only the Beautiful, Necessary Lies* offers a second first-person narrator who can react to the victim and offer a contrasting female role for readers to identify with, providing additional narrative complexity. A recent college graduate, Jane is a social worker who wants to make a difference and work to that end before starting a family; she keeps her birth control secret from her pediatrician husband. Her knowledge of pregnancy and contraception, and

her relative privilege over Ivy due to her age, education, class, and marital status, demonstrate how eugenic policy preyed on marginalized women. But Jane's precarious position in her marriage adds a feminist message, underlining the relative lack of power all women face within patriarchy, as Jane feels pressure to quit her job, start a family, and satisfy her spouse. Her husband Robert serves as the voice of mainstream medicine which holds itself superior to those who should be sterilized. When Jane tells him about her clients Ivy and Mary Ella, he replies, "It sounds like everybody in that household should be neutered" (Chamberlain 135). Jane questions the validity of the IQ tests that bolster diagnoses of low intelligence and is horrified that these girls are being sterilized without their knowledge or consent. Her reply to Robert's neutering comment – "But she's a human being. All these people I'm working with are human beings. Just like me" – supports their equal humanity, a claim Robert rejects (136). Like Helen Calvert in *Only the Beautiful*, Jane feels a sense of responsibility that leads her to take action. Her supervisor fires her for insubordination after Jane tries to halt the petition to sterilize Ivy. The novel contains a facsimile of a Petition for Sterilization and an Order for Operation of Sterilization (201-11; 235) for Ivy, adding documentary realism to the text. Giving Jane a voice recognizes how "the American eugenics movement offered college-educated white women unique career opportunities" (Hubbs 463) as field workers, social workers, and nurses. Jane's growing consciousness depicts the moral dilemma facing those in a position to implement eugenic policy, including nurses and social workers, adding nuance that other novels, with more simplistic depictions of one-dimensional antagonists, often lack. As a former social worker herself, Chamberlain writes in her Author's Note that "I believe the vast majority of social workers had their clients' best interests at heart" (338); seeing her clients as complex individuals forces Jane to confront her complicity in surveilling and controlling their reproductive lives.

Structurally, *Necessary Lies* alternates chapters between the perspectives of Ivy and Jane, showing readers the miscommunication between and struggles of both characters. It also builds the rising action through a series of fast-paced, dramatic chapters, such as a medical emergency for Baby William, Mary Ella's suicide, and a burning barn. Discovering a plan to

sterilize Ivy and take her newborn immediately after giving birth, Jane takes Ivy to her own house, where Ivy delivers her baby only to be arrested days later. This sequence, juxtaposing the natural drama of a homebirth scene against the violent violation of their created female community, manipulates contrasting emotional tones that, combined with the shifts in perspective to share each character's fear and anger, heightens the intensity of this narrative climax. Like previously discussed novels, dramatic events create the excitement of a popular "beach read" while confronting readers with a sense of injustice. Indeed, *Kirkus Review* refers to the novel as "Socially conscious melodrama at its best" ("*Necessary Lies*"). The third first-person narrator, speaking from 2011, resolves this melodrama by revealing what happened to Jane and Ivy in a satisfying conclusion. As characters prepare to attend a public hearing about the North Carolina eugenics program, the novel ends with a surprising reunion and the larger possibility of public recognition and reparation for victims.

In her Author's Note, Chamberlain recognizes that eugenic policy disproportionately affected African American women in North Carolina until 1974. However, like the previous novels discussed, *Necessary Lies* centers on white characters. While this choice may engage a white female audience that feels protected from reproductive injustice, it obscures the racist underpinnings of eugenics and the disproportionate effects on African American, Native American, and Chicana women who were and continue to be targets of sterilization as a form of reproductive injustice. For instance, according to historian Jennifer Nelson, "In 1970, black women were sterilized at over twice the rate of white women," and a "1973 survey reported that 43 percent of women sterilized in federally financed family planning programs were black" (67). *Necessary Lies* does introduce a neighboring African American family as important secondary characters. Chamberlain creates in Lita, an unmarried Black mother of five, an admirable foil to Ivy's homelife: her house is neat, her children clean and well-behaved. While Ivy and Mary Ella are involuntarily sterilized, Lita seeks sterilization as a form of permanent contraception. This choice exemplifies the right NOT to have children included in reproductive justice. But Lita's access to this choice is not guaranteed. In a conversation with her supervisor, Jane discovers the conditions that qualify

a woman for sterilization included an IQ below 70, promiscuity with an inability to manage the children already born, mental illness, and epilepsy (Chamberlain 50). Lita does not meet these qualifications but is eligible due to the "one hundred and twenty rule" – multiply the woman's age "by the number of children she has and if the result is more than one hundred twenty, she can be sterilized" (51). As Rickie Solinger notes, the American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists used this guide, which also stipulated that "two doctors and a psychiatrist" must approve, "until 1970, when Second Wave feminists successfully pressed for women's right to decide these matters for themselves" (9). Eugenic policy forced sterilization on women viewed as undesirable while denying it to those eugenically "fit" whose "duty" was to reproduce. Through Lita, Chamberlain extends insight into eugenic policy and the importance of personal choice and informed consent for sterilization.

One novel that centers the experience of women of color is *Take My Hand* (2022), by Black American author Dolen Perkins-Valdez. The novel highlights the effects of eugenic ideology on the African American community as well as the community's complicity in eugenic policy. Told from the point of view of Civil Townsend, a nurse at the Montgomery Family Planning Clinic in Alabama in 1973, the novel is similar to *Necessary Lies*, with its first-person narrator a young professional woman and with sections set in the contemporary moment (2016) bookending the eugenic history. By telling the story in Civil's voice, the novel illuminates the ethical dilemma and possible resistance of the professional women administering eugenic policy. But *Take My Hand* also offers a nuanced view of race, including the divisions within Black Montgomery society: Civil reflects, "when we talked about the community, it was something real, something defined by shared experience. Course that doesn't mean we didn't have our fissures. A big one was between the educated and uneducated, the poor and the not-so-poor" (Perkins-Valdez 20). Civil refers to herself as a "bona fide member of the Talented Tenth" and is aware that her education and economic status afford her some reproductive control; she had an illegal abortion in 1972, and although *Roe v. Wade* has now legalized abortion, Civil knows that "Alabama had not yet caught up with the law. And even if safe hospital abortions had been made available, the procedure was expensive and out of

reach for most poor folks. The best solution had always been a prophylactic one" (Perkins-Valdez 120; 14). She views "the miracle of birth control" as a better means for her patients to "plan their pregnancies" (13). In the novel, many family planning nurses look down upon their patients, seeing them as less intelligent and capable, and therefore they prefer to administer a Depo shot every three months until they can obtain consent for sterilization. College educated and the daughter of a physician in the post-Civil Rights South, Civil is aware of the history of medical experimentation on Black bodies; she was a student at Tuskegee University a year after the Tuskegee syphilis experiments were uncovered. The shadow of Dr. J. Marion Sims, "father of gynecology" who developed techniques by repeatedly operating on the unanesthetized bodies of enslaved women, also haunts the text (Perkins-Valdez 74; Owens). Civil's work at the family planning clinic is thus contextualized overtly in the distrust minority populations have for established medicine (Washington).

Readers come to know the young victims of eugenic sterilization through Civil, their nurse. She grows deeply connected to her first patients, eleven- and thirteen-year-old sisters India and Erica Williams, the daughters of a Black tenant farmer, and questions why they are being given shots of Depo Provera for birth control when they are not sexually active (nor even yet menstruating) and the drug is not FDA approved and causes cancer in lab animals (Perkins-Valdez 64-65). Like social worker Jane in *Necessary Lies*, Civil exceeds the boundaries of her professional duty to help the Williams family and questions the governing eugenic policy that seeks to control the girls' fertility. While Civil initially believes in the prevailing ideology that "we had a job to do. Ease the burdens of poverty" (6) and agrees with her supervisor that "Our mission is to help poor people who cannot help themselves" (11), she becomes aware of herself as "the government lady," the mechanism of surveillance and coercion that invades the Williams' family privacy in return for "a sliver of a slice of American pie" they receive on public assistance (51). The secondary characters are humanized, exceeding the generic categorization of "the poor" as Civil builds relationships with them. She grows uneasy with the protocols of her profession and its rhetoric of protection when she discovers that the previous nurse did not explain the shots to the girls, nor fully to the illiterate father and grandmother,

so they have no real understanding of the serious side effects, including near constant bleeding (27). This treatment becomes contextualized in a growing awareness that staff are pressuring clinic patients into tubal ligation, a form of permanent sterilization also known as a "*Mississippi Appendectomy"* (79). Perkins-Valdez accurately depicts the way medical professionals and policymakers discussed sterilization as a cost-effective contraceptive method for groups devalued by eugenic ideology. Historian Rickie Solinger notes that "After *Roe v. Wade,* the federal government paid for the sterilizations (100,000 to 150,000 a year) of poor women but not for their abortions. Welfare officials told many poor women that only if they were sterilized could they keep their welfare benefits, and doctor-led sterilization campaigns emerged in major cities" (12).

Take My Hand follows the expected dramatic pattern with a series of quickly-escalating events leading to tragedy in the novel's first half: Civil discovers that despite her role as a nurse she has little power: the assumption that Black girls are sexually active (Perkins Valdez 115-16) combined with India's muteness leads the white nursing supervisor to convince their illiterate and ill grandmother to consent to their sterilization. Perkins-Valdez intensifies the drama with the unexpected: a car accident following her discovery of the sterilization plan prevents Civil from intervening, and an injured and distraught Civil discovers the girls in the hospital frightened and in pain. "Blood-soaked bandages were wrapped around her abdomen" as Erica tearfully says, "they done something to us, Miss Civil. I thought we was coming for shots. But they done something to us. They say we can't have no babies" (136). The scene maximizes pathos: Civil is too late to prevent injustice, and two innocent girls have been denied a chance for future motherhood. At this point *Take My Hand* turns from the dramatic case of injustice against individuals to fighting against reproductive injustice as federal policy. Like *A Mother's Promise,* the novel is based on a real legal case and educates readers on American history; like *Only the Beautiful,* the narrator becomes an advocate for social change after witnessing the effects of eugenic sterilization on young girls. Fired for insubordination, Civil convinces the other nurses to help gather evidence for a legal case against the Montgomery clinic, which becomes

a federal class action suit against the secretary of Health, Education, and Welfare and the Office of Economic Opportunity. In her Author's Note, Perkins-Valdez notes that the "real-life case of *Relf v. Weinberger,"* a 1973 case of two young sisters sterilized in Montgomery without their consent by a federally funded agency, inspired her novel (353). Through the courtroom scenes, Perkins-Valdez educates readers about the legacy of racism and eugenic thinking; as one expert testifies, "over the past few years, nearly one hundred fifty thousand low-income women from all over the nation have been sterilized under federally funded programs" (294). A spectator at the trial, Civil's outrage shapes the reader's reaction. Her sense of complicity, that "As long as these injustices continued, all of us were culpable" (307), is a broader claim implicating the reader. But the novel does not close with the completion of the trial, recognizing the much greater work needed to remedy the legacy of eugenics. The novel's structure interweaves sections of Civil in 2016 as she returns to Montgomery to find closure with Erika, India, and others from that period of her life now that she is an established obstetrician-gynecologist "working on [a study] about reducing the high rate of maternal morbidity among black women" (197). As an individual, she has shaped her life to fight for reproductive justice but suffers a lingering sense of guilt. With its awareness of the intersections of race, class, and gender, the novel offers a nuanced understanding of the long history of reproductive injustice in the United States.

In a range of settings across the United States, this sampling of historical fiction demonstrates how popular tropes can educate readers about the past and alert them to current challenges to reproductive justice. The use of dramatic pacing, narrative perspective, and characterization create engaging stories of the past in order to engage contemporary audiences. In the extra-textual apparatus and interviews, these American women writers indicate that they are inspired to write on eugenic sterilization because it is still relevant to our contemporary situation – both public opinion and government policy regarding who has the right to be a mother are shaped by lingering prejudice. Perkins-Valdez, for example, pointedly relates the history depicted in her novel to our contemporary moment: "The moral and ethical questions

I explore in *Take My Hand* remain salient today," she states, citing several recent cases such as that of over 100 imprisoned women in California who were sterilized (353). Can this fiction do more than raise awareness and inspire lively book club discussions? Several of these authors fervently hope so, and their first-person protagonists are model forms of activism. "My hope," continues Perkins-Valdez, "is that this novel will provoke discussions about culpability in a society that still deems poor, Black, and disabled as categories unfit for motherhood. In a world inundated by information about these tragedies and more, I still passionately believe in the power of the novel (and its readers!) to raise the alarm, influence hearts, and impact lives" (355). These novels contain a message that is especially important to the medical and legal professionals who design and carry out reproductive policy. In a Mayo Clinic podcast, Perkins-Valdez discusses the complexity of agency and continued silencing of women in a way that invites listeners in rather than casting blame: "I wanted us all to think about how we've walked that fine line between help and harm. I hope that we think about that in this discussion over reproductive justice too. We want women to have reproductive control over their bodies. But that also means that we have to listen and we have to respect the very women that we're trying to help" (Mayo Foundation). The two podcast hosts, both physicians, model how fiction can help medical professionals explore ethical issues and shape provider practice. Amid rising nationalist sentiment and patriarchal authoritarianism that dehumanizes women, immigrants, minorities, and the differently abled, these novels use the tropes of historical fiction pitched to popular audiences to create counternarratives for reproductive justice.

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