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“[N]o branch, no leaf, no fruit”: Writing about Infertility and Assisted Reproduction in the Poetry of Monica Youn’s *Blackacre* (2016) and Allison Cobb’s *Green-Wood* (2010)

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Abstract

Barren, sterile, infertile. How does a female poet navigate these culturally inherited metaphors and descriptions of their bodies and experiences? This essay argues that the upswell in contemporary poetry exploring the many facets of infertility and assisted reproductive technologies (ART) demands consideration as a new strand of writing. This new strand creates new linguistic, poetic, and infertile subjectivities by adapting, challenging, rejecting, and co-opting inherited cultural linguistic tools. By examining how two contemporary female writers have explored the language and cultural symbolism of assisted reproduction in their poetry, this essay considers how their innovative and iconoclastic approaches to cultural and linguistic commonplaces ask us to reexamine our assumptions about the topic, ultimately arguing that it is precisely their interrogative process that defines the poetry itself.

Barren, sterile, infertile. How does a female poet navigate these culturally inherited metaphors and descriptions of their bodies and experiences? The language that we use to talk about infertility and assisted reproductive technologies (ART) in the West has a long and complex cultural history and an equally tangled linguistic present. As people access ART in increasing numbers, there has been a growth in writings on the topic across various genres. In vitro

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Contemporary Women’s Writing

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1 In 2019, almost 53,000 patients in the UK underwent treatment and there have been vast increases over the past few years in use of this technology by same-sex couples as well as a tenfold increase in women freezing their eggs to future-proof their fertility (“Fertility Treatment 2019”).

2 “330,773 ART cycles performed at 448 reporting clinics in the United States during 2019” (“ART Success Rates”).

3 For example, de Boer Archetti and Solbraekke; Conley; Kendal; Venkatesan and Murali.

fertilization (IVF) birth rates in 2019 in the UK, for example, were three times higher than in 1991, when The Human Fertilisation and Embryology Authority (HFEA) began recording data (“Fertility Treatment 2019”).¹ In the USA the Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) reports that rates of ART use have more the doubled over the last decade (“ART Success Rates”).²

In the arts, memoir is a common form for exploring ART. Prominent examples include Belle Boggs’s *The Art of Waiting: On Fertility, Medicine, and Motherhood* (2016), Amie Klemptauer Miller’s *She Looks Just Like You: A Memoir of (Nonbiological Lesbian) Motherhood* (2010), and Michelle Tea’s *Knocking Myself Up* (2020), as well as Maggie Nelson’s genre-bending work *The Argonauts* (2015), Hadara Bar-Nadav’s lyrical essays *Babyland* (2020), and Torri Peter’s autofiction *Detransition, Baby* (2021). There are also significant publications in graphic memoir addressing this topic: Phoebe Potts’s *Good Eggs* (2009), Emily Steinberg’s *Broken Eggs* (2014), Paula Knight’s *The Facts of Life* (2017), and A. K. Summers’s *The Pregnant Butch: Nine Long Months Spent in Drag* (2014). The last decade has likewise seen an increase in poetry written about conception through ART with a marked increase in the last few years. This includes collections and pamphlets/chapbooks that contain short sequences on the subject such as Allison Cobb’s *Green-Wood* (2010), Julia Copus’s *The World’s Two Smallest Humans* (2012), Ada Limón’s *The Carrying* (2018), Keetje Kuipers’s *All Its Charms* (2019), Allison Bevins’s *A Season for Speaking* (2019), Rachel Matthews’s *do not be lulled by the dainty starlike blossom* (2020), and Erica Gillingham’s *The Human Body Is a Hive* (2021), as well as works that take ART as their main focus, such as Robin Silbergleid’s *The Baby Book* (2015), Monica Youn’s *Blackacre* (2016), Gail McConnell’s *Fothermather* (2019), Julia Bloch’s *The Sacramento of Desire* (2020), Kerry Priest’s *The Bone Staircase* (2020), and anthologies such as *Unspoken: Writers on Infertility, Miscarriage, and Stillbirth* (2020), although such experiences are often still left out of anthologies on motherhood more broadly.

For the most part, critical works on assisted reproduction have come from the disciplines of biosciences, social sciences, ethics, law, and psychology. There is little developed consideration of the subject in literary studies; however, the work that exists testifies to the potential richness of the field—addressing topics such as Frankenstein, utopic fiction, graphic novels, and reality TV.³ There is almost no analysis of contemporary poetry—an absence that this research aims to begin to address. In this essay, I argue that the upswell in contemporary poetry exploring the many facets of ART demands consideration as a new strand of writing that transforms older adjacent poetic concerns such as illness narratives, pregnancy-as-creativity metaphors, and technology and the body. In doing so, this new strand creates new linguistic, poetic, infertile subjectivities by adapting, challenging, rejecting, and co-opting inherited cultural linguistic tools. Significantly, I suggest that poetry’s dense form, rich with metaphoric language, makes it the perfect vehicle in which to interrogate such languages. Further than this, poetry’s tendency as a genre to engage with and rethink poetic forms that have been used for hundreds of years gives it a vehicle for its direct critical interrogation

of languages and metaphors about fertility that have persisted in various ways to the present day. I examine how two contemporary female writers—American poet Allison Cobb and Korean American poet Monica Youn—have explored and reformed the language and cultural symbolism of assisted reproduction in their poetry. Youn is an attorney-turned-poet who has published four poetry collections. Two of her works have been finalists for the National Book Award in Poetry. She currently teaches poetry at Princeton University. Cobb has published four books across diverse genres, often focusing on environmental themes, for example, *Plastic: An Autobiography* (2021), which won the Oregon Book Award for creative nonfiction. She is the Associate Vice President (Equity and Justice) for the Environmental Defense Fund. This essay discusses Youn’s and Cobb’s work not as exemplars of the field, but rather as exceptional examples of poets working on this theme as they sit within what Kimberly Quiogue Andrews proposes as a distinct genre: “the academic avant-garde.” In their poetry, they engage with what Quiogue Andrews describes as “intellection via poetry” or “a form of lyricized critical thinking” (2, 11). I consider the ways that their innovative and iconoclastic approaches to cultural and linguistic commonplaces ask us to reexamine our assumptions about the topic, ultimately arguing that it is precisely their interrogative process that defines the poetry itself. With due skepticism of conflating the lyrical “I” and autobiographical “I” and, more particularly, acknowledging the power and the ambiguity of the space between them, this essay for the most part chooses to read the two “I”s as palimpsests of each other, both still visible as separate entities and yet also indivisible. I have chosen this partly because of the poets’ own autobiographical discussion of their work on fertility treatment and partly because of the way that feminist discussions of critical theory and medical humanities often choose to draw the personal and autobiographical into creative and critical writing as part of a feminist project.

Both *Blackacre* and *Green-Wood* are collections interested in etymology, form, articulation, and literary criticism as methods of seeking out and unraveling origins to interrogate language choices and the histories of those choices. Cobb and Youn both draw frequently on etymologies; they include dictionary definitions in their work that break the words into stems giving histories, nationalities, and usages. Dictionary entries at once demand linear fixed readings and yet also make visible the way that literary texts can “mean” in multiple ways, across different time periods, and in different contexts. This suggestion of fixity that is paradoxically ever changing as language lives and evolves has been key to the work of queer lexicographers with whose work these collections find parallels.⁴ As well as reflecting on meaning, etymologies are also a formal device within Cobb’s and Youn’s poems. Definitions and etymologies have a set form themselves—word, classification, meaning, submeaning, and so on—that progresses down the hierarchy of meanings often traversing sideways to indicate historical changes in this hierarchy as well as giving space to obscure or no longer used meanings. I have chosen to examine the collections’ exploration of two key ideas in relation

4 For example Blank; Magnani and Watt; and Turton.

to assisted reproduction: nature/naturalness and speech/articulation. In Cobb's work, she mines words for unexpected connections and resonances to highlight violence lurking within seemingly innocuous words. For Youn, etymology offers a way to undo the stigma attached to infertility by exposing the origins of words in land possession and capitalism. Both writers have spoken either in the collections themselves or in interviews about their use of donor gametes in fertility treatment; as such, etymology also offers a queering of our obsession with origins and lineage to reveal the strangeness of language in its root, branch, and tree.

Youn: "Nothing is germinating in the raw dirt"

Monica Youn's *Blackacre* is an experimental poetry collection composed of four numerically titled poetic sequences. This essay focuses on the fourth sequence, which is comprised of two poems both titled "Blackacre." The first is a short square-shaped poem and the second is a long prose poem split into fourteen numbered parts, and each part is titled with the final word from each line of Milton's poem "Sonnet 19." Youn uses these words as springboards for analysis of his poem and her own infertility. In an essay Youn describes the second long "Blackacre" poem as having the unwritten subtitle "on my barrenness" ("On 'Blackacre'"), echoing the subtitle often given to Milton's sonnet 19, "on his blindness." These last two poems of the collection explicitly address her infertility, building on references to growth and barrenness in the vegetal world in the third sequence. Youn's title *Blackacre* refers, as she explains, to a legal term "to denote a fictional plot of land, often a bequest, much as the term 'John Doe' is used to indicate a fictional or anonymous individual" (83). The third sequence, comprised of "–acre" poems ("Greenacre," "Brownacre," "Goldacre," and so on), opens with a quotation from Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari: "The rhizome is an anti-genealogy" (*Blackacre* 39). The quotation suggests a rhizomatic form of conception, which opposes our focus on the descending genealogical family tree and instead posits a kind of horizontal conception. It asks us to rethink our hierarchical ideas of conception and think anew about what lies within the soil spreading unexamined underfoot. In these poems, Youn turns to the vegetal world to redefine hierarchies of conception as well as to address traditional cultural metaphors of infertility such as "barrenness." She uses these topics as a catalyst for a broader consideration of what we understand as "natural," in the final poem of the collection deconstructing Milton's sonnet to think about the craft of poetry as a way of exploring the idea of "craft" in conception, complicating the natural/unnatural dichotomy as well as disrupting male discourses of canonical poetry and literary criticism.

The poem "Brownacre" begins with artificial plant cultivation and the preparation of the soil by removing old roots and other natural detritus, but by the end of the poem, "Nothing is germinating in the raw dirt," so there is "No

need for further labor” (42). These images of the land and of barrenness have a long history when considering infertility. Robin E. Jensen points out that the agrarian communities of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Europe and their American colonies were dependent on new generations of children to be able to work the land, as such:

metaphorical descriptions of childbearing women as rich soil, fostering sustained growth and prosperity, would have corresponded with communities’ overarching interests and values. Likewise, descriptions of childless, married women as “barren,” unable to produce or nourish the next generation, would have played into widespread anxieties about communities’ longevity and survival. (28–29)

The quoted lines from “Brownacre” distill some of the major focuses of Youn’s poems of infertility: the loss of boundaries of the body, the complex problems that arise from the time-old fusion of the female body and the fertile earth, the word “labor” twisting effort, birth, and work under capitalism into an uncomfortable braid where in certain lights each colored strand seems to take on the hue of the other.⁵

The final two poems of the collection are both titled “Blackacre.” Youn uses the first “Blackacre” poem, a double-spaced, square-shaped piece, to address her infertile body directly by describing an ultrasound scan. The square shape of the poem mirrors the ultrasound screen. Ultrasound has been debated in feminist discussions as a tool that alienates women from their experiences and bodies rather than connecting them (see Iris Marion Young 41–61). Youn’s poem follows this view by putting the agency of the piece in the hands of the unnamed, multiple “they” of the medical establishment who show her womb to her (67). The advent of X-rays, used to see inside the pregnant woman’s body, in 1896 marked the beginning of the end of doctor’s need to ask for information from the carrying woman about the baby’s movements or “quickening,” thus rendering her knowledge of her own body and the fetus as less valuable in the glow of the patriarchal medical establishment’s gaze. Discussing medical imaging in the twentieth century, Bettyann Holtzmann Kevles describes this as the “visual deflowering” of the female body, echoing a long association between sexual violence and the intrusiveness of medical investigation (118–19). However, as well as being used to examine the growing fetus, ultrasound is also a necessary, central diagnostic tool in the treatment of infertility. In the scan, Youn describes them showing her the “unpeopled galaxies of my trackless grey body” (67). The speaker’s body is rendered in spatial terms as a vast universe drawing on the collection’s tendency to shift between the microscopic and the cosmic in scale as well as emphasizing the isolation of the woman’s body alone in the universe.⁶

The first “Blackacre” poem renders the “body as land” in a well-worn trope, but combined with the cosmic scale, the metaphor is defamiliarized. The second “Blackacre” poem extends the body-as-land metaphor. The first of

5 One of those strands also relates to her place as a Korean American writer. In a key interview on the subject, she discusses her hyperawareness of not wanting to “package Asianness for Western consumption,” which led her to “be overly risk averse in talking about identity at all.” Youn explains that American agriculture is bound up with the history of Chinese, Korean, and Japanese immigrant workers. Although she states that she has not addressed this history directly in much of her poetry, its spectral presence haunts her agricultural metaphors, here the twinning of “labor” on the soil and birth “labor” (K. Young).

6 The use of space metaphors speaks to a tradition in contemporary women’s poetry of the “fetal spaceman” on a pregnancy scan. See Blewitt.

the fourteen parts, titled “Spent,” begins by pondering possession, noting that Milton’s “mistake” was to claim ownership and, in so doing, making light a “finite commodity that by being subject to ownership becomes capable of being ‘spent’” (68). Similarly, she questions whether she had “fashioned” her own body into “a resource that was bounded and, therefore, exhaustible?,” extending the metaphor of the land to the earth itself and its finite, dwindling resources to support human life (68). In the sixth part of the poem, titled “Chide,” she refers to her womb lining as an “allotment” that “leaked out of me, month after month,” expanding the layering of meanings to encompass a leased plot of land, complicating the notion of ownership, as well as a given amount of something that she spends and thus diminishes with each cycle (75).

Throughout the “Blackacre” sequence addressing Milton’s poem, Youn uses metaphors of human craftsmanship to describe processes in nature, drawing on this connection because, conversely, the natural processes she invokes look like they are designed as art. In doing so she highlights the human intervention into what is “meant” to be a natural process, exposing both its unnaturalness and its naturalness. She describes the “star-shaped scar” left when an egg “bursts from the ovary” as “frost embroidering a dark field” (75). The patterns in frost look as though they are designed and crafted despite occurring organically. The frost metaphor used to describe the process looks like “white lacework”—a natural image (frost) used to describe a natural process (ovulation) that becomes akin to intricate craftsmanship (embroidery, lacework) usually undertaken by women’s hands. The white on black of the ultrasound scan here imagined as frost on a dark field mirrors the draining of color from Milton’s world, which he notes in a letter that Youn quotes in the poem: “the dimness which I experience night and day, seems to incline more to white than to black” (*Blackacre* 75).

In the next part of the “Blackacre” poem, the ninth, titled “Need,” the figure of “Patience,” clothed in white, forces the turn of Milton’s sonnet with violent craft by taking the poem’s “stiff tongue like a weaver’s shuttle drawing woolly strands through the warp and weft of Milton’s blindness” (76). The repeated “w” sounds mimic the back-and-forth process of weaving as well as forcing the repeated pursing movement of the mouth of the reader when reading the poem aloud. Differing from the creative beauty of the frost actively embroidering the field, this forced weaving takes the same path backwards and forwards, echoing the repeating nature of fertility treatment as well as the force it takes to draw creative work out of the experience. The flying shuttle was an innovation of the industrial revolution that reduced the number of people needed to attend to a loom, allowing the technology to replace human labor, which parallels the medical, technological intervention into conception. Milton’s poetic articulation is described as “stitched back into his mouth” as the poem both speaks for and silences its creator (76). Youn compares this to her infertility, a state in which her desire to speak is “[w]oven tight” as she has multiple vials of blood drawn for analysis that seem to serve no purpose but to be incinerated (76). In this way

Youn stitches together the natural with the crafted, showing the workings of the process of assisted conception/creation to parallel it with the work of writing the poem for Milton and for herself by exposing and deconstructing the act of poetic creation as well.

The final poem in the “Blackacre” sequence, titled “Wait,” is a poignant and beautiful poem that takes the threads of the associations that Youn has been building across the collection and draws them taut. It describes the body “in enmity” against itself, permitted “neither ease nor action, nor food nor drink nor any such reprieve”—detailing here the conditions of a prisoner in an “oubliette,” a comparison she has previously used for the womb—“where otherwise fruitful things were sent, to languish, to become lodged, useless”—so that the whole body is trapped and dehumanized by the womb and all it has been subject to (81, 71). The poem then returns to the vegetal imagery from the earlier poems, describing the speaker as akin to a “winter orchard” filled with potential that is inactive, “no branch, no leaf, no fruit” (81). The tree is waiting to be “grafted.” As Ross Knecht explains, discussing Shakespeare’s sonnets, “In the typical grafting process, the gardener sharpens the end of the scion to a point and inserts it into an opening cut in the second plant. . . . It can produce startling effects, such as trees that bear several different types of fruit, berries without seeds, and flowers that blossom out of season or in hostile climates” (287). The infertile body does not perform the seasons of the body “correctly” and is, therefore, out of step with the experience of time and its cycles. The grafting in Youn’s poem is violent, the tree is “stripped” with the “bark peeled back from one exposed split,” drawing a parallel with the invasive procedures of testing for and trying to remedy infertility. The “stripped stick” stands alone in a field of winter snow, the isolation of the scene punctured through by the tree’s “eager[ness]” for the touch of the grafting process (81).

Reading this final poem as a type of sonnet, we reach the volta in the penultimate stanza as “mercy” enters the poem. Mercy “sugars” the soil. It both “stitches” silver beads of rain into the clouds in a feminized act of care and “wields a scalpel” to “forc[e] home the rootless wand” in a moment of phallic, medicalized violence that speaks to human beings’ long history of assisted reproduction in various forms—in animal husbandry and in the cultivating of characteristics in plants and animals (81). The second stanza is filled with soft “s” sounds that find their home in the final lines of the poem, the sonnet couplet by punctuation: “To foster the raw scion as if it were a son; to siphon light down through its body as if it were your own” (81). Beginning with another form of family building the lines turn to “foster” a “scion,” a word which means a young shoot for grafting with the secondary meaning of a descendant of a notable family calling to mind the idea of lineage, the metaphor of the family tree, and the opening cry to rhizomatic antigenealogy. As Youn explains in an interview discussing this final image, “the final resolution—the grafted tree—is intentionally an equivocal image. Can what is ‘unnatural’ truly be ‘your own’? (A question that, now as a mother,

7 This begins to draw on the changing definition of “kinship” in relation to evolving genetic technologies, as Judith Butler writes that “new technologies of genetic identification, management, and patenting intersect with the extension of property law in the service of shoring up paternal rights, racial privilege, and the commodification of women’s reproductive labor and de-realizing the legitimate claims of queer kinship, blended families, and acquired ties” (32).

I can emphatically answer ‘absolutely!’)” (Boggs and Youn). Through the grafting, the parent plant both gives to the new shoot and receives as, once the scion has leafed, it draws light from the sun into the parent plant as well. The poem returns us to the beginning of the sequence where Youn critiqued Milton for attempting to own light; in these final lines the enmeshing of the two separate plants makes the idea of “your own” absurd, thus rendering society’s attachment to the idea of a child of your own biology or to the idea of “natural” conception also absurd.⁷ Youn’s sequence uses plant metaphors and metaphors of cultivation as a model for alternative pathways for conception and as a method for coming to terms with what she calls her “period of barrenness,” leading to her becoming “artificially ‘fertile’” (Boggs and Youn); ART is, as Christine Crowe puts it, “a technological fix for the social condition of ‘childlessness’ rather than for the biological condition of infertility” (38).

In an interview, Youn discusses her engagement with Milton’s poem in violent reproductive language. She states that she turned to the poem to see if she could “force” it into “yielding another crop, using whatever technologies of fertilization, gleaned, grafting that I could devise” (“On ‘Blackacre’”). Her poetic mode, as she describes it, is one of assisted reproduction, taking genetic material from Milton’s poem and combining it with her own situation to produce new work. The expansion of the tightly controlled form of the sonnet using a prose poem, which Michael Delville describes as a “self-consciously deviant form” (8), links the form to the subject as her interrogative, iconoclastic, and unruly form bursts the bounds of Milton’s canonical poem. Within that form she expands the words themselves by drawing on etymology, inflating the words with their multiple potential meanings into three dimensions. The poem manipulates a sense of poetic lineage through resisting the sonnet form via its deconstruction, paralleling the subject matter in which it deconstructs culturally inherited agricultural language and metaphors for infertility.

Youn describes her aims for the long “Blackacre” poem as intimately linked to the etymologies she includes in the piece. She notes in conversation with Belle Boggs that she was “trying to disentangle [her] own personal disappointment ... from the social stigma,” explaining that:

part of that effort was about the words we use to describe fertility (an agricultural term); barrenness (also an agricultural term); and sexuality (possibly from *secare*, “to divide or cut”). How much of what I was feeling had its roots in the division of property, in a system designed to secure an heir to an estate? A system that required woman to be young, fertile, monogamous and thus had to stigmatize age, singlehood, promiscuity? And these stigmatizing terms hadn’t arrived stripped of context, of narrative. They had been embedded in stories, in histories. (Boggs and Youn)

As the second “Blackacre” poem progresses, more and more etymologies creep in as the search for origins, alternative meanings, and historical layers intensifies.

8 On using Youn's work to read Milton, see Fickling.

The form of the poem itself speaks to this investigative desire; the poems in the sequence interrogate the final word of each line of Milton's sonnet, drawing out their resonances and rethinking their place in the poem.⁸ Youn's poem dissects and pays attention to small parts rather than the whole, echoing the procedures of ART in which women often feel reduced to body parts, such as ovaries, becoming follicle-producers rather than whole people or even whole bodies. In her poem, Youn disrupts multiple forms. She disrupts our expectation for poetry by writing literary criticism, a mode traditionally associated with the aim of objectivity. She then draws the "I" into the poem, in turn disrupting that assumed objectivity by using the personal mode. This leads us to the feminist project of situating the personal in the critical (what Lauren Fournier calls "theorizing from the first person" [643]) to consider lived experience, emotion, and sensation as important forms of knowledge building alongside enlightenment modes of the rational upon which modern criticism was built. Not requiring herself to have definitive answers in the critical mode, Youn poses an open question at the end of the first poem to lead us into the following poems. She draws the undetermined and the multiple into the poem, challenging our desire for definitive answers, truth, and objectivity. In doing so, we are also suspended in time, as with many forms of infertility treatment, waiting for the blank second half of the space of the page to fill with the answer.

Youn also focuses on meanings of words that are *not* intended in Milton's poem, disrupting the masculine discourse of etymology and of Milton himself. In the second long "Blackacre" poem words cross between the fourteen parts echoing into distorted forms as they are changed with each usage. "Need" is one such word. We find it in multiple forms: "need," "needless," "unneeded," and "unneeding," as the poems test its tensile strength in different contexts.⁹ Following the poem in which she investigates the word "bent," she doubles back exposing her biases in manipulating the etymologies of the word, "But the reader will object. This is all wrong. First of all, in the sonnet, 'bent' doesn't mean to bow down" and finally that "the body never comes into it at all" (72). Similarly bending the poem to her exploration, she also defines homonyms of Milton's word choices alongside the words he does choose. She expands the poem into palimpsestic layers of other poems that might have been, which haunt the poem itself:

To be scooped out, emptied of need and rinsed clean of its greasy smears, pristine as a petri dish on a stainless lab table. Enucleated, the white of the egg awaiting an unknown yolk.

"Yolk" from *geolu* (Old English: yellow). Not to be confused with "yoke" from *geocian* (Old English: to be joined together). A yoke is an implement, meant to be used, to fill a need. But where there is no field to be plowed, no wagon to be pulled, why demand a yoke that is useless, needless? (78)

9 In poem nine, titled "Need," the mouth is "woven tight enough to repel need," and "'Need,' from the high German, for danger" (76). In poem ten, "Best," test tubes stand together in "white hymn of the unneeded, white hum of the unneeding" (78).

Youn's poem of infertility overlays Milton's poem as the yolkless, "enucleated" center of her infertility hovers invisibly "yoked" to his verse. The etymology of the word "yoke" via the term "pass under the yoke" leads Youn to the tale of the Roman origin of the word "subjugate": "to bear a yoke is to be bowed down, oxbowed, cowed. // One day they laid me down on a gurney, my feet strapped in stirrups, my legs bent and splayed like the horns of a white bull" (78). Youn separates this image of her legs in stirrups from the discussion of subjugation by a stanza break. It is connected and yet separate as she transforms what looks like "cowed" subjugation into a powerful image of co-opted male virility as a bull. She discusses this image in an interview, explaining that whilst she was not interested in readers "getting it" from the poem she inserted a "veiled reference to Pasiphaë at the moment of [her] son's conception" (Boggs and Youn). In the myth, Pasiphaë hides in a wooden cow to mate with a bull, which Youn describes as "one of the earlier examples of assisted reproductive technology," resulting in the birth of the minotaur. Youn's interest in this image lies in the condemnation of Pasiphaë as "usurping" male, godly power. Youn's poem refuses the "yoke" of the etymology of the word "subjugation," transforming the vulnerability in the process of conceiving her son by reconceiving the moment. The doctor involved in the procedure is notably absent. In investigating the masculine etymology of the words, she explores, and then refuses, their power over her.

Cobb: "Sperm and speech intertwine—both / come from the root word 'to scatter'"

Allison Cobb's explorations of the boundaries between the natural and the unnatural, the spoken and the unspoken in *Green-Wood* seek to deconstruct assumptions that rest on not looking too closely into things, asking us to fracture our view over the trees and green spaces of Brooklyn's Green-Wood cemetery by seeing their historical layers. In doing so, the collection rolls the film of America backwards so that we see forests restored, tradelines halted, first peoples reanimated and, as Kate Soper puts it discussing the relationship between nature and culture more broadly, we are asked to consider "the ways in which relations to the non-human world are always historically mediated, and indeed 'constructed,' through specific conceptions of human identity and difference" (4). In this essay, I focus predominantly on the final section of Cobb's text, "Part III: The Foreign Birds." *Green-Wood* is a genre-bending text that is part lyrical essay, part poetry—each type of writing flows into the other throughout its pages. It weaves the history of the cemetery through colonial histories, discussions of 9/11, Cobb's mother's chemotherapy, and her own fertility treatment as a queer woman, so that none is separable from the other. The collection investigates origins and naturalness not in pursuit of a return to the "natural"—what Timothy Morton calls "an ideal image, a self-contained form suspended afar, shimmering

and naked behind glass like an expensive painting” (5)—but rather to ask for recognition of the colonial, patriarchal violence infused into such language.

We are first introduced to Cobb’s fertility treatment after she encounters pesticide sprayers in the cemetery. She notes that “The word ‘pregnant’ was taboo in written English until the sixteenth century. Euphemisms include ‘poisoned’ (*in reference to the swelling*).” In writing “month number twelve: not pregnant” next to this linguistic observation, she draws attention to the idea of discussing fertility and the struggle to conceive as “taboo” (67). She then punctuates the text at regular intervals with the alphabetical lists of names of pesticides. The first name in the list is “Barren,” beginning the floating association between fertility medication, infertility, and destructive chemicals. She draws the uncomfortable parallel between fighting nature with pesticide and reshaping the body with fertility medications, many of which can also have undesired, harmful side effects on the body.

In Cobb’s text, procedures to diagnose any potential problems with her fertility are placed in the context of the patriarchal control of medicine and centered on the idea of technological intervention into women’s bodies. Of one procedure, she writes “*The pain may be acute, depending on the force with which the doctor injects the liquid*” (70). These explorations connecting the natural and the unnatural also speak to the change in cultural and medical language from “barrenness” to “sterility” to “infertility.” As Jensen explains, medical texts:

traded the metaphor “barren” for the metaphor “sterile” and, correspondingly, traded “soil,” “seed,” and “fruit” for metaphors related to “machinery.” For instance, discourses from this time about human “generation” were inundated with references to “re-production,” a metaphor that functioned to frame conception and birth as elements of a manufacturing process. (34–35)

Cobb’s discussion of the procedure of hysterosalpingogram, in which dye is pushed into the fallopian tubes to assess if the tubes are open, spins out these associations between technology/manufacture and fertility. To explain the process, she focuses on the letters “PING” in the center of the word, which she notes is a term used for sending out a signal through cyberspace to get an answer to show that messages are getting through. In doing so she associates the body with cyberspace, disembodied it before immediately portioning off her reproductive organs into the form of an animal, describing the “*womb as an animal/ on the move in the body*,” hunted by the doctor’s diagnostic techniques (70). At this point, the prose-form of the piece fractures into line breaks. She is removed and alienated from her body under examination as she hears her response to pain as emanating from someone else: “That humiliating cry. It did not come from me.” (70) Technologically induced disembodiment alongside disembodiment forced by pain at the hand of the doctor returns pages later when the results of the hysterosalpingogram are read.¹⁰ Cobb discusses the dissection of an unknown woman in the 1500s, noting that the man

10 For a full discussion of disembodiment and ART, see Lam.

who performed the dissection coined the words for various parts of the female anatomy including the fallopian tubes (eventually named after him by his teacher and still bearing his name): “He called them the *trumpets* of the uterus,” an instrument that sounds by forcing air through the tube similar to the dye forced through Cobb’s fallopian tubes causing her to cry out (74). She links her hunted womb and disembodied cry to the voiceless dissected woman whose insides are named by the male doctor. On the following page, the name listed for a pesticide is “Echo,” reminding us of the description of “pinging” through cyberspace as an “*echo request*,” thus linking the hysterosalpingogram, pesticide, dissection, and violent, destructive male control over women and nature (70, 75).

Cobb describes the resultant image from the hysterosalpingogram as follows: “In the absolute dark of my pelvis, the liquid curls like two ghost question marks” (82). Cobb and the reader are given two spectral question marks without knowing the question that they punctuate. This sense of “being in the dark” is common in treatment of assisted reproduction as patients swim in medical jargon referring to microscopic processes usually hidden inside the body, names of medications, and diagnostic procedures.¹¹ The dark of the pelvis remains “absolute” despite the scans and dyes designed to see inside it. Ultrasounds see through sound not light, maintaining the body’s darkness, which only opens to be named in dissection or operation. The knowledge and power in these exchanges lies with the doctor: “‘Clomid,’ says the doctor, handing me a prescription. It forces the body to produce more than one egg each month, raising the risk of multiple fetuses. I want to know how many. ‘We can make you release as many eggs at once as we want, as many as twenty,’ he tells me. ‘Of course, we would never do that’” (71). The doctor, as in Youn’s ultrasound poem, is part of an anonymous medical “we.” He has the only direct reported speech in this section. Force and desire underlie his speech—“we can make you” and “we want.” The “I” becomes unbodied in his explanation; he does not mention the body or the organs involved the process. Cobb’s unruly body, however, rebels. It overproduces and produces something the doctors did not control or want from it: “On Clomid I produce ten eggs at once and a large cyst, so the doctor won’t inseminate” (73).

Many poets’ extended considerations of assisted reproduction focus on a broad cultural unease with the “unnaturalness” of the process. The final section of *Green Wood*, in which Cobb writes directly about her fertility treatment, ends with an extended poem. She leads into this poem with the following final section of prose: “I spend time on my knees in the yard with my hands in the landlord’s dirt. I jab a trowel in and watch the earthworms recoil. I crumble soil and smell its bacterial funk. I wake every morning thinking about things growing” (102). The soil in which she dreams of growing plants is leased from a “landlord,” chiming with Youn’s use of the legal fiction of ownership in the term “blackacre.” The landlord’s ownership displaces her tilling of the ground, just as she displaces the earthworm, and the earthworm displaces the bacteria. We are returned to the collection’s focus on violence undertaken in the construction of nature, of drawing boundaries around

11 For example, in the notes to Robin Silbergleid’s poetry collection *The Baby Book*, she writes that she “deliberately left ‘untranslated’ many of the acronyms and insurance diagnostic codes that patients encounter” to replicate the “alienating effects of routine life at the fertility clinic” (107).

it and exploiting its resources. Cobb echoes Youn’s notion of the body and the land as “a resource that was bounded and, therefore, exhaustible” (68).

In the final verse section of Cobb’s text she draws on Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* (1818), a novel which has been read as exploring fears about artificial reproduction (see Conley):

Hardwood and softwood aspen birch fir
and larch torn fiber from fiber reborn monster-like
as books. *Look the creature speaks!* (104)

In Cobb’s verse, the physical book itself emerges as a result of ART through violent processes, drawing our attention to the use of natural resources to preserve “culture” such as her own book printed on the pulp of trees. Describing Barbara Weiden Boyd’s work on Ovid, Cobb explains her own technique to us in the text: “[Weiden Boyd] discerns patterns in the seemingly unrelated episodes that *keep sending us back, inviting us to make new connections between previously unconnected phenomena*” (78). Returning us full circle to the connection between fertility medication and poisonous chemicals that fight against nature, Cobb discusses timber in the US which was impregnated with arsenic to preserve it, a practice that was eventually stopped as people were being poisoned by their own houses. As Cobb tells us early on, a former synonym for “pregnant” was poisoned. All of these flowing connected ideas are the voices of Cobb’s creature-book made through assisted reproduction from the wood of the trees “torn fiber from fiber.”

A key phrase that Cobb explores throughout the text is “to speak.” The etymology of the word returns repeatedly. In Cobb, etymology behaves as David-Antoine Williams suggests it functions in modern poetry more broadly: “etymology supplies a historical axis of connection between ideas that may not at first blush appear to be connected at all. In so doing, it makes available an additional connotative dimension of poetic language, alongside the acoustic or the referential, opening up a field of figurative potential” (12). At the beginning of the section that addresses her infertility Cobb notes:

“Speak” echoes
the Latin verb “to scatter.” A metaphor. Say words
came from a whole before a tree

or flying thing (66)

The words scatter across the page asking the reader to read backwards and forwards and across gaps. The words as seeds come from a tree or the excrement of a bird in a cycle of reproduction that asks if the seed or the tree comes first. The definition given suggests that the words were once part of a larger whole ejected to plant and grow elsewhere to begin the cycle anew. It is both a comforting fiction of wholeness and a troubling one of fragmentation.

The etymology of “to speak” as scattering is immediately followed by pesticide spraying in the cemetery, seeping poison into the speaking of words.

The etymology of “to speak” returns just before the ghostly scan results of her hysterosalpingogram. At this point, she discusses the origin of the word “infant,” “From the Latin ‘unable to speak,’” connecting it to the way that women botanists were described in male-authored texts as mothers to plants and warned that inattention could cause them to kill the “*frail infants*” (82). She parallels these warnings to plant mothers with a discussion of the nineteenth-century mortality rate for children, which was blamed on the “moral decay” of the mothers (82). These movements between subject matters link the ghostly question marks of her fallopian tubes with moral judgement on women’s bodies and the “infants” speechlessness that scatters no seeds of growth in the world. The etymology of the verb “to speak” returns later in the text in connection to a different kind of seed:

The doctor concludes that nothing is wrong with me, except, of course, for the fact that I am female, and so is my partner. Our sperm arrives by FedEx, purchased frozen from a far away bank.

(Sperm and speech intertwine—both come from the root word “to scatter.”) (100)

Repeating the origin of the word “to speak” as “to scatter,” Cobb links in a further word that shares its beginnings. Through using the word “root,” she draws on a set of associations including the root of a family tree queered by the introduction of a sperm donor as the origins of a child’s DNA. The construction of the sentence that pauses after “there is nothing wrong with me except,” only to link it to “the fact that I am female” speaks to the medical establishment’s inclination to view problems with conception and fertility as the woman’s problem. This cultural fallacy about the origin of infertility still exists. Men are often not tested in the first round of fertility tests; instead, women are subject to grueling invasive fertility tests even though in opposite-sex couples “only 30% of infertility is attributed to female factors” (Palmer-Wackerly and Krieger 612). Combining speech and sperm echoes her previous encounters with the medical establishment in which male doctors had the active voice within her own treatment and in her historical exploration of the dissection of female corpses whose living stories were only partly known.

Queering and opposing the etymological connection between speech and sperm, Cobb draws on classical mythology in which Flora makes Juno pregnant at her request. After hearing of Jupiter having a child without a woman (Minerva comes from his forehead), echoing the language of modern fertility medicine, Juno cries, “If Jupiter has become a father without the use of a wife ... why should I despair of becoming a mother without a husband ...? I will try all the drugs in the wide world” (71). Flora cannot speak for fear of Jupiter, but she makes Juno pregnant by touch:

touch which
 doesn't speak *come thumb*
to swell the belly dreamed I (78)

Cobb draws on mute, tactile communication between the two women that bypasses the need for speech/sperm fertilization, creating a fantasy of female-to-female queer reproduction. Cobb's use of Classical mythology speaks as well to what Carolyn Dinshaw describes as "constructing queer histories that are constituted" by "affective relations across time" (1). It is a mute touch through and across time to speak in a different way. The touch occurs in the blank spaces in between the words. In the word "thumb" we also hear the echo of "dumb" to mean "unspeaking"; the touch of the thumb to create the pregnancy evokes the writing hand which both does and does not "speak" but by which means Juno is made pregnant on the page.

In *Green-Wood*, Cobb's queerness also becomes a lens through which to consider her complicity in the retaliatory violence that follows 9/11 by using birth and reproduction as a metaphor and drawing once more on the resonances of speak/unspeaking. References to the graves of soldiers killed in the following war punctuate the text alongside their nineteenth-century grave fellows. In the final poem, Cobb describes emerging out of the subway after 9/11:

I came up, yes, like the myth, from under the earth
flames paper as rain a smell the brain contains
no name for. Diesel I guess. Steel, carpeting and
furniture, clothing, bones.

She describes being in a taxi following the incident:

Don't cry, says the guy at the wheel. *We'll bomb them
off the face of the earth.*
 Slapped, I step back. Smelling blood
the excitement of that. I I I
I didn't want to be fucked like that,
not to give birth

[page break]

to rivers of blood. But I was. I did.
So I clamped my mouth shut around it. Right then.
It was done. (103–04)

This section comes at the end of the text which has repeatedly established white colonial violence and massacre of both peoples and animals. Her "excitement" at the violent sentiment shifts into erotic excitement and a stuttering, orgasmic assertion of individuality, the "I" that lies at the heart of American individualism. The next line however separates sex from conception; as Laura Mamo writes, queer use of assisted reproductive technology allows "sex without reproduction

and reproduction without sex” (18). The page break after the word “birth” for a moment suspends us in the center of the crossing point between sex and reproduction refusing the violence, coded here as a heterosexual erotic from the male taxi driver, but turning the page the line completes to “I didn’t want to be fucked like that, not to give birth / to rivers of blood”—the rivers of blood that followed in the war feeding the graves in the cemetery and here imagined as a miscarriage. She closes her mouth; the act of not speaking leads us into the final section of the poem where all the etymologies of “to speak” that have run throughout the collection come to the fore.

Green-Wood begins and ends with an interrogation of the word *fact*. It opens the first section, “Fact means not ‘true’ but ‘to make.’ *The fact of art a trace*” (5). It begins with the idea that truth is constructed by the teller. This principle of treating “truth” as “made” governs the collection’s investigations throughout. Later she writes “*Every fact is a new / word, a god / of mercurial mind*”: this follows the “fact” that “approximately one quarter of the Cherokees died” after the government removed them from their territories but “Official recorders,” or we might say fact-makers, “don’t keep track of worthless lives” (23). In the penultimate stanza of the final section of the book, she returns to her opening consideration of the origin of the word “fact.” This time, “fact” comes up against “metaphor”:

That fails. It’s metaphor. But there is this fact.
 Not fact, a sense, from to find one’s way: a body
 in pain or joy without thought before
 thought wants to sound
 resound. So I open my mouth (106)

She shifts “fact” to “sense” to involve the body in the “making” that she identified as central to the word “fact” in its first entry into the text. The senses offer a path via the body to the making of a new kind of knowledge that bypasses the rational, enlightenment mind present in her discussion in a previous stanza of light and blindness in various forms. Instead, she returns to the body as an instrument of sound as speech, reclaiming it from its medical disembodiment earlier in the text. The gaps in the lines that detail what the senses know literalize the breaking up of the knowledge imparted by the linear flow of spoken and written text. The stacked words “sound” and “resound” echo and reverberate in the center of the lines. She opens her mouth here reversing the moment she closed her mouth during the encounter with the taxi driver after 9/11.

After a full stop pause, she finally releases speech into a “breath forced wail,” abandoning “history,” “the law,” “comfort,” “logic,” “custom,” and “poetry” to “grow strange” into:

. . . a cry
 and nothing else, the force that

through the darkness moves the breath.

I let it go

it comes back.

After not returning to the cemetery for “nine months,” she becomes a cry beyond speech, removing her from the etymological loop of speech/scatter/sperm and the discourses of infertility, which she describes earlier in the poem as “not futile, not / infertile,” forcing the mouth to contort around the u/e difference (105). This birth cry is echoed back to her by the child’s first cry in the world. The final poem is filled with etymologies and draws on etymologies previously expanded in the text (“all it’s pregnant with [see / ‘poisoned’ in reference to]”) (103). The use of etymologies in her work opens out new pathways through the text “to make new connections between previously unconnected phenomena,” a technique common to the genre of the lyrical essay, a genre with which the collection certainly interacts. Tracing the many different ways that the same word comes up across *Green-Wood* is a dizzying task. The etymologies begin by interrupting the form of the text and then, as they become regular interruptions, they form part of its internal rhythm, a pause to see where this newly found history of the word will take you. They create new, often resistant or revisionary, meanings. Finally, though, the text empties out all its etymologies into a wordless, historyless cry of a newborn child.

Conclusion

This essay’s analysis of Youn’s and Cobb’s work has demonstrated that to write poetry about assisted reproduction and infertility demands engagement with the linguistic-cultural commonplaces, and more specifically the metaphorical languages, that have shaped these topics more broadly in the western imagination. These poets test the languages of nature and naturalness and strategies of articulation to find their weak points, points of access that allow them to shine light on their histories and biases rooted in ownership, capitalism, and patriarchy. They reflect on both who has built those languages and their usefulness in creating contemporary poetry on these topics. It is key to these texts that they draw the critical into the poetic and the poetic into the critical to make their interrogation overt, shaping both the subject and its expression. Their use of poetry as a vehicle for this exploration is integral as they deconstruct traditional forms and metaphors to understand the language used to shape received ideas. I have argued that their interrogative mode is foundational to their consideration of these subjects in order to intervene to remake the culture through exposure of its workings. I suggest that what defines these collections’ interactions with traditional discourses of ART and infertility is not reclamation, but rather intervention by holding them up for critical examination. In doing so, their poetry is confrontational in what it demands of a reader in its form and subject matter, asking us to feel discomfort in how we are taught to accept normative boundaries

of lineage, biology, naturalness, and most importantly, the voicing of those categories through poetry. This argument forms the foundation for a rich new field of study of contemporary poetry in this area, necessitating future analysis of the work of these and other poets.

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