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*Aristotle's Master-Piece*, or *The Secrets of Generation*, was first published in 1684 and quickly became the most popular medical book about “sex and babies” from its publication through the 19<sup>th</sup> century (Fissell 114). The frontispiece in many editions of this text depicts a black infant and woman covered in hair, alongside a description: “The Effgies of a Maid all Hairy, and an Infant that was Black by the Imagination of their Parents.” As Chapter 3, “The Reason why Children are often like their Parent, and what the Mother’s Imagination contributes thereto,” goes on to explain, it is the pregnant person’s imagination, in particular, that causes “Warts, Moldfpots, Stains, Dashes, and the Figures of strange things” (20). The anonymous author writes:

Many Women there are, that feeing a Hare cross them when great with Child, will through the strength of Imagination bring forth a Child with a hairy lip. Some Children again are born with flat Noses, wry Mouths, great blubber Lips, and ill-shap’d Bodies, and inoft ascribe the reason to the strange conceit of the Mother, who has busied her Eyes and Mind upon some ill shaped or distorted Creature; therefore it greatly behoves all Women with Child, to avoid any monstrous sight, or at least, to have a steadfast mind, not easily fixed upon any one thing more than another. (20-21)

In this passage, the hairy woman and black child are aligned with “distorted creatures” whose bodies are “ill-shap’d,” unclassifiable. The woman covered in hair is a hybrid of male and female,

the masculine and the feminine, as John Bulwer asserts in *Anthropometamorphosis* (1650) a “Woman is by Nature smoothe and delicate; and if she have many haire she is a monster” (qtd. in Loomba and Burton 215). The black child reflects pervasive anxieties about miscegenation, “mixing and mingling with foreign entities,” “fear of heathens,” and “the threat of racial contamination” (Shahani 122). Their respective bodies upset the systems that define legitimacy and progeny, embodying the anxious attempts of early modern England to define itself against various “Others.” The language used to describe “distorted” facial features in the aforementioned passage is a clear historical prelude to “modern” racist, derogatory language.

In an earlier version of *The Secrets of Generation*, the image is reproduced in Chapter 5 where it is grouped alongside other depictions of monstrous children. The chapter is titled, “Of Monsters and Monstrous Births” (31). In this edition, the bringing forth of “an Aethiopian” child by white English parents is not only represented visually, twice, but specifically discussed. This black child is caused, according to the author, by:

...the imaginative power at the time of Conceptions, which is of such force that it stamps the Character of the thing imagined upon the Child: So that the Children of an Adultres may be like unto her own Husband, tho’ begotten by another man; which is caused through the force of the Imagination which the Woman hath of her own Husband in the Act of Coition. And I have heard of a Woman, who at the time of Conception beholding the Picture of a Black-more, conceived and brought forth an Aethiopian. (38)

In order to avoid the true cause of a black child born to white parents, a possibility the anonymous author of this text was certainly aware of, this passage endows the female imagination with great creative power. Although “the mother’s imagination was only one of several elements believed to cause monstrous births” (5), Marie-Hélène Huet argues in *Monstrous Imagination*, “no theory was more debated, more passionately attacked or defended, than the power of the maternal imagination over the formation of the fetus” (6). In particular, as the text notes in Chapter 3, the cause of these abnormalities is the result of the mother’s failure to have “a steadfast mind.” Consequently, the attempts by physicians to regulate pregnant bodies extended as far as the imagination, as far as what pregnant people should feel and think.

Modern gynecological manuals have moved on from “monstrous sight,” from the imaginative power of the mother, but they do acknowledge the impact stress might have on an unborn child. In *Obstetrics: Normal and Problem Pregnancies* (2017), the research on maternal stress and anxiety is summarized: Depending on the trimester, maternal stress has been linked to stress responsiveness, altered cortisol levels, signs of behavioral distress, childhood asthma, increased eczema, and lower neonatal dopamine and serotonin levels in children (92-3). The text notes, however, that “maternal nurturing” can offset all of these effects, and although much of the information that made these findings possible came from amniocentesis, a diagnostic test that screens for specific genetic disorders, there is no mention of just how stressful this test, in which a

needle enters the amniotic sac, is for pregnant people in and of itself—let alone the experience of waiting up to a few weeks for the results.

The constant prescription for pregnant people to relax, to maintain a “steadfast mind,” while trying to adhere to countless rules and regulations, is ironic at best—and felt almost insidious to me during my pregnancy. While it’s easy to assume that we have come a long way from believing that “monstrous imagination” can mark a child in prodigious ways, or change the racial make-up of an unborn child, the anxiety around pregnant bodies and their link to children’s health remains—extending to the imagination.

This deep distrust of the pregnant body to nurture a child, to not “mark” it in some way, is evidenced in part by the plethora of guides for pregnant people, who buy them desperate and anxious to give their child the best start possible. Self-help books on “mindful” pregnancies continue to tell readers to grapple with the “fear, negativity, and anger” that get “embedded in your subconscious and become a part of your energy field” so that these negative feelings won’t affect an unborn child (*The Mindful Mom to Be*). A contemporary best-selling guide to pregnancy, *Magical Beginnings, Enchanted Lives: A Holistic Guide to Pregnancy and Childbirth* (2015) is framed in the following way:

Your baby’s sense of self-awareness dawns early as she grows inside your watery womb. As soon as her sensory awareness develops, she perceives and responds to subtle sounds, sensations, sights, tastes, and smells from inside your body. Your interpretations of the world filter through your body to your unborn baby. She readily learns to associate her experiences with feelings and emotions and has pleasures and discomforts of her own. For nine months while your baby is linked to you as her mother ship, she is continually tapping into your database of the world. (4)

Much like the call in *Secrets of Generation* for mothers to have a “steadfast mind,” this guide centers on the unborn baby, arguing that it develops in direct response to the mother’s own interpretation of the world. The impact of the mother’s “sounds, sensations, sights, tastes, and smells” moves beyond the health of the child to its “self-awareness.” The implication of this passage is that the state of the “mother ship,” the pregnant person’s “database of the world,” or, in other words, “fevered and passionate consideration of images” decides who your child will become (Huet 5).

This is a lot of pressure, to say the least. When I was pregnant, I found solace in meditation and yoga, as many people do; while writing this post I began to ask myself, however, how much of the benefit of meditation and yoga had to do with the practices themselves as opposed to the concept of purifying myself, my body and mind—purging and mastering unacceptable desires for the benefit of my child? Practicing yoga and meditation during pregnancy helped me to maintain my own health and sense of calm during a period of bodily instability and change, but as Meredith Nash observes in an examination of pregnant mothers’ relationship to fitness, “My informants negotiated their pregnant identities through exercise, a complex ‘body project’ of pleasure, ambivalence, and, at times, anxiety. With exercise, pregnant women are expected to manage their ‘selves’ in order to symbolise their adherence to cultural models of feminine bodily discipline” (51-

2). My attempts to become the perfect pregnant person on a yoga mat, meditating with a liquid sunshine aura surrounding me, at times distanced me from the messy, unknowable process of becoming and being pregnant—one that deserves respect and inwardness less informed by inhospitable rules and regulations.

In resisting, at least in part, the constant call to purify pregnant minds and bodies, physicians and parents-to-be will *also* challenge the ableist and racist aesthetics that continue to create a poisonous present for so many children and adults. The illusory categorizations of “normal” and “good” have long medical histories that dictate how children and pregnancies are *seen*. Embracing “strange figures,” resisting the illusion of an innocent, pure Child, might in fact lessen the burden pregnant people sometimes navigate, allowing for a far less stressful, and therefore healthy, experience.

*Aristoteles Master-piece, or, The secrets of generation displayed in all the parts thereof.* 1684. Cushing Collection, Yale University Medical School Library. EEBO.

[http://gateway.proquest.com.ezproxy.gc.cuny.edu/openurl?ctx\\_ver=Z39.88-2003&res\\_id=xri:eebo&rft\\_id=xri:eebo:citation:12246855](http://gateway.proquest.com.ezproxy.gc.cuny.edu/openurl?ctx_ver=Z39.88-2003&res_id=xri:eebo&rft_id=xri:eebo:citation:12246855)

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