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Haunted Houses, Haunted Memories: Embodiment, Reproduction, and Narrative Heritage in the Works of African American Women Writers

Bettina Judd, an African American poet, writes in her book *Patient* of her harrowing experience of being ignored by her doctors and finally losing one of her ovaries as a result. In her poem “In 2006 I had an Ordeal with Medicine” Judd writes, “I had an ordeal with medicine and was found innocent or guilty. It feels the same because I live in a haunted house. A house can be a dynasty, a bloodline, a body.” Her poetry, however, is not just her own experience, but also an exploration of the ways in which African American women’s bodies have been exploited, ignored, and abused by the medical profession. Using Judd’s framework of body, bloodline, and dynasty I have launched a yearlong thesis project on the relationship between African American women, the past, and medicine in the works of African American women writers. Many of those works endeavor to reclaim the past and remember the bodily experiences of the women that came before them. By consistently thinking through that painful past each author works to unravel the threads of history and explore the present. Toni Morrison takes up this conversation explicitly in her novel *Home*, set shortly after the Korean War in Georgia. The climax of the novel comes when Cee, Morrison’s female protagonist, is forcibly sterilized by a eugenicist physician. The novel’s tactile expressions of the body in conjunction with the emotional trauma that arises for Cee when her bloodline cannot go on reach back into the past and work to explore current issues of race, medicine, and health in relation to the black, female reproductive body. Works like Morrison’s and Judd’s, published in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, compel their readers to remember the past and the lingering and contemptuous relationship between black women’s bodies and medical doctors.