

WAKE UP LITTLE S

SINGLE PREGNANCY
AND RACE BEFORE
ROE V. WADE



ICKIE SOLINGE

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ROUTLEDGE
NEW YORK & LONDON

Published in 1992

Paperback edition published in 1994 by

Routledge
29 West 35th Street
New York, NY 10001

Published in Great Britain by

Routledge
11 New Fetter Lane
London EC4P 4EE

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Printed in the United States of America

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Solinger, Rickie, 1947—

Wake up little Susie : single pregnancy and race before Roe v.
Wade / Rickie Solinger.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 0-415-90448-X (hardback) ISBN 0-415-90894-9 (paperback)

1. Illegitimacy—United States—History. 2. Unmarried mothers—
United States—History. I. Title.

HQ999.U6S65 1992

306.85'6'097309045—dc20

91-25068

CIP

For Jim Geiser and Sylvia Zuckerman, and to
the memory of Herbert Gutman—my three
best teachers.

It is not sexuality which haunts society, but society which haunts the body's sexuality. Sex-related differences between bodies are continually summoned as testimony to social relations and phenomena that have nothing to do with sexuality. Not only as testimony to, but also testimony for—in other words, as legitimization.

Maurice Godelier
“The Origins of Male Domination”

In Peyton Place there were three sources of scandal: suicide, murder and the impregnation of an unmarried girl.

Grace Metalious
Peyton Place

Having babies for profit is a lie that only men could make up, and only men could believe.

Johnnie Tillmon
“Welfare Is a Woman's Issue”

Preface

From the day I began to think about this book, it was first a political project and second an academic project, but always both. The several years I have worked on *Wake Up Little Susie* have not been a time of progress for the issues this study addresses. As of the summer of 1991, the Supreme Court's 1973 decision legalizing abortion, *Roe v. Wade*, is under severe attack in many states. Louisiana and Utah have virtually outlawed abortions, and the recent Supreme Court decision, *Rust v. Sullivan*, will have disastrous consequences for thousands of pregnant girls and women and, potentially, others depending on First Amendment guarantees. Reagan-Bush social policy regarding civil rights, welfare, taxes, education, contraception, health, housing, and programs to assist poor women and children has deliberately eroded past gains in these areas. Women—often especially single mothers—are targets and victims of this federal agenda.

For many readers of *Susie*, the postwar era will be sepia-toned, a time before they were born, or at least very long ago. Some will find the treatment of “unwed mothers” in that era terrible, but almost quaint. But my political project here is to show that the treatment of unmarried pregnant girls and women in the era that preceded *Roe*, a period contemporaneous with the postwar phase of the civil rights movement, reflected a powerful and enduring willingness in our culture to use women's bodies to promote conservative political goals. Without adequate opposition, this willingness *could* outlive the vitality of both *Roe* and the civil rights movement. In the end, while I have tried to be scrupulous, academically, in preparing this study, the final product is addressed to all those who care about justice and equal rights.

As I moved toward imagining this book I was very lucky to have been associated with a number of people who care deeply about *these* social and political goals. Despite the fact that I have already named Herbert Gutman in the dedication, I feel compelled, as have so many of his students and colleagues, to honor his memory by naming him again here, and calling to mind his striking talents as a teacher and an historian. I went to the Graduate Center to study with Herb, and every Monday for several years his class was a tremendously exciting adventure. Though he died before I began this work,

I count a number of his stern injunctions as the foundation material of *Susie*. I slipped into the Graduate Center in time to study with Eric Foner, as well, whose teaching inspired me then, and whose work continues to inspire me today. A special thank you to Carol Berkin who tried to teach me to exercise restraint, and in some ways succeeded. Carol also deserves thanks for helping out Herb Gutman's students after he died; without her the landscape would have been forbidding. I have thanked Alan Brinkley several times in private for his involvement with this project. In public I'd like to add that this man is a natural-born mentor.

Beyond the institution, most of my thanks go to my women friends and colleagues who have read all or parts of this book while it was in progress, or have supported my efforts in general. I thank the WIT group in New Paltz—Lee Bell, Amy Kesselman, Eudora Chikwendu, Elisa Davila, and Lily McNair—for providing five different and wonderful models for what it means to be a serious scholar. Now in Boulder, I likewise thank Martha Hanna, Lee Chambers, Polly Beals, and Barbara Engel. Nancy Hewitt has been encouraging and kind to me since the first day we met, and I appreciate her comments on various parts of the manuscript. I also appreciate Barbara Omolade's careful reading of *Susie* and her very helpful suggestions. Deborah King's meticulous and incisive comments helped me to improve key aspects of the book. I consider my chance meeting with Eileen Boris in the corridors of the National Archives a fortuitous occasion; more than she knows, her proselytizing for CGWH-CCWHP structured *Susie*'s fate. Amy Kesselman and Lee Bell both read every chapter, as each one was written, in an amazingly timely and helpful way. I depended on both of them enormously, as they must know. (More than once, I have been the grateful beneficiary of Lee's skills as a secret pal.) Thank you also to Elizabeth Baker, who has been a thoroughly steadfast friend since the beginning, always interested in my work, and usually willing to go off with me to archives and conferences. A newer friend, Patti Gassaway, not only eagerly read the whole manuscript, but makes me laugh almost every day. Finally, in this category, I'd like to name my oldest friend, Susie Lerner, with whom I spent most days in the fifties. The title and the era of this book make me think of her.

I am very pleased to thank others who have helped me toward *Susie*. Gerald Sorin was among the first to support my decision to study history seriously. Margaret Halsteadt in Interlibrary Loan at SUNY/New Paltz procured many important materials for me, and the research staff of the Sojourner Truth Library often turned me in the right direction as I began the study. In Boulder, the Norlin Library ILL staff has been welcoming and efficient, especially Regina Ahram and Linda Kraft. I received wonderfully professional help from everyone I dealt with at the National Archives; Judith Johnson at the Salvation Army Archives was a serious, interesting, and helpful guide. My stay at the Social Welfare History Archives in Minneapolis was sociable as well as academically fruitful, thanks to Dave Klaassen, a superb archivist. I

also appreciate very much the institutional accommodations that the Women's Studies Program at UC Boulder has provided me. Thanks also to the National Women's Studies Association and the Elizabeth Cady Stanton Foundation, both of which chose to support my work. Cecelia Cancellaro approached me early and most warmly about *Susie*. Her reputation and her spirit would have been hard to resist. I'm glad I didn't.

I cannot write here that my children, Zachary and Nell, ever suffered because their mother would not come down from her writing room. I came down. I had to because I love living with them so much. Being mother to these two has deepened my life profoundly and has touched my scholarship as well. Sylvia and Irving Zuckerman visited often as I worked on this book, but never often enough. I am forever deeply grateful for their confidence in me. Finally, as is customary, I end with the most heartfelt thanks to my husband, Jim Geiser. Jim works more days of the year than anyone else I know, with more intensity, but still thoroughly earned the dedication I've given him. He always made it possible and likely that I would write this book. After ten years, he remains the perfect mate for me.

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Introduction

Female and Fertile in the Fifties

Sally Brown and Brenda Johnson both became pregnant in 1957. Both girls waited desperately for periods that never came. Both worried about angry parents, disloyal boyfriends, and the knowing looks of classmates. Within the year, Sally and Brenda both became unwed mothers. There were limits, however, to what Sally and Brenda shared. In fact, the two girls were separated by race most effectively and more enduringly than by the private burdens of their unwed pregnancies.

Short case histories of Sally and Brenda's pregnancies show the profound commonalities and extreme differences in the experiences of black and white single pregnant females in the United States in the decades after World War II. Sally's story, so familiar to readers of women's magazines in the 1950s, goes like this:

In 1957, Sally Brown was 16. Just before Thanksgiving, she missed her period for the second month in a row. She concluded, in terror, that she was pregnant. Sally was a white girl, the elder daughter of the owners of a small drycleaning establishment in a medium-sized city in western Pennsylvania. The Friday after Thanksgiving, she told her mother. Mrs. Brown told Mr. Brown. Both parents were horrified—furious at Sally and particularly at her boyfriend, Tim, a local “hood” they thought they had forbidden Sally to date. In October, Sally told Tim about the first missed period and in November, the second. It was obvious to Sally that Tim’s interest in her was dwindling rapidly. She felt heartsick and scared.

Mr. Brown, a businessman for twenty years with deep roots in his community, was bitterly obsessed with what the neighbors, the community and their friends at church would say if they knew about Sally. He proposed a sensible solution: to send Sally away and tell the townspeople that she was dead. The Monday following Thanksgiving, however, Mrs. Brown put her own plan into action. She contacted the high school and informed the principal that Sally would not be returning for the second half of her junior year because she’d been offered the wonderful opportunity to spend the Spring semester with relatives in San Diego. She then called up the Florence Crittenton Home in Philadelphia and arranged for Sally to move in after Christmas vacation.

Before Sally began to “show,” she left home, having spent six weeks with parents who alternately berated her and refused to speak to her. They also forbid her to leave the house.

At the maternity home, Sally took classes in good grooming, sewing, cooking and charm. In her meetings with the Home’s social worker, Sally insisted over and over that she wanted to keep her baby. The social worker diagnosed Sally as borderline schizophrenic with homosexual and masochistic tendencies. She continued to see Sally on a weekly basis.

In mid-June, after the birth of a 7 pound 14 ounce boy, Sally told her social worker that she wanted to put the baby up for adoption because, “I don’t think any unmarried girl has the right to keep her baby. I don’t think it’s fair to the child. I know I don’t have the right.”

On June 21, Sally’s baby was claimed and later adopted by a Philadelphia lawyer and his infertile wife. Before Sally’s 17th birthday in July, she was back home, anticipating her senior year in high school. She had been severely warned by the social worker and her parents never, ever, to tell anyone of this episode and to resume her life as if it had never happened.

Brenda Johnson had quite a different experience in 1957, and, undoubtedly, in the decades that followed.

In February, 1957, Brenda Johnson was 16 and expecting a baby. Brenda was black. She lived near Morningside Park in upper Manhattan with her mother, an older sister, and two younger brothers. Brenda hadn’t had to tell anyone about her pregnancy. Her mother had picked up on it in September when Brenda was beginning her third month. Mrs. Johnson had been concerned and upset about the situation, sorry Brenda would have to leave school and disgusted that her daughter was thinking about marrying Robert, her 19-year-old boyfriend. On the day she discovered the pregnancy, she said to Brenda, “It’s better to be an unwed mother than an unhappy bride. You’ll never be able to point your finger at me and say, ‘If it hadn’t been for her.’”

In October, Brenda had been called into the Dean of Girls office at school, expelled and told not to plan on coming back.

At first, Robert stayed around the neighborhood. He continued to be friendly, and he and Brenda spent time together during the first half of Brenda’s pregnancy. As she got bigger, though, she felt sure that Robert was spending time with other girls too.

During the winter, Brenda hung around her family’s apartment, ran errands and helped her mother who worked as a domestic for a middle-class family downtown. She went for her first pre-natal examination at seven months.

As Brenda got close to her due date, she worried how she would take care of a baby. There was no extra space in the apartment and no extra money in the family budget for a baby. Brenda asked her mother and her older sister about giving the baby up, maybe to her mother’s relatives in South Carolina, but her mother told her firmly, “You put your child away, you might as well kill him. He’ll think no one wants him.”

In early March, Brenda had a girl she named Jean in the maternity ward of the local public hospital. Brenda told the nurse, “I love the baby as much as if I was

married.” Having no money of her own, and having been offered little help from Robert who she heard had left for Florida to find work, Brenda went to the Welfare Office. There she received a long, sharp lecture about young girls having sex that taxpayers have to bear the costs of. She was told she would have to find Robert if she wanted to get on welfare and that the welfare people would be watching her apartment building for him. The welfare worker asked Brenda if she knew what happened in some places to girls in her situation who got a second baby. The worker told her that in some states, a girl with a second illegitimate child would lose her welfare grant. She also said that some people liked the idea of putting a repeater in jail or making it impossible for her to have any more bastards.

The stories of Sally and Brenda suggest that single, pregnant girls and women were a particularly vulnerable class of females in the post–World War II era. Regardless of race, they were defined and treated as deviants threatening to the social order. Single, pregnant girls and women of whatever race shared the debased status of illegitimate mother: a mother with no rights, or a female who had, according to the dominant culture, no right to be a mother. For Sally and Brenda and the several hundred thousand girls and women in their situations each year between 1945 and 1965, illegitimate motherhood was a grim status.

The stories of Brenda and Sally also suggest that the scenarios prepared for white and black unmarried mothers diverged dramatically. This was, in part, because in the immediate pre–*Roe v. Wade* period, politicians, service providers, the media, and communities constructed the experiences of unwed mothers, black and white, in new ways. By considering the nature of these constructions, we can understand why and how racially specific prescriptions for unwed mothers emerged in the postwar era, took the particular forms that they did, and were institutionalized. In addition, we can explore the major, though still race-based, changes in the ways that black and white single pregnancy were constructed by substantial and influential segments of the public in the United States between 1945 and 1965. *Wake Up Little Susie* provides a case study of the plasticity of the social construction of “unwed mothers” in the United States. In sum, this study of unwed motherhood in the postwar era argues that many politicians and academicians, the popular media, social service professionals, and sizable segments of the public-at-large incorporated unwed mothers into the political arena and assigned them political value by race. In this way, the reproductive capacity and activity of single girls and women in this period were used to explain and present solutions for a number of social problems identified in the chapters that follow.

Being an Unwed Mother

In *The Feminine Mystique*, Betty Friedan identified the socially sanctioned (and presumably racially neutral) career ladder for women in the post–World

War II years: Having a baby is the only way to become a heroine.² But consider the response to black and white unwed mothers to see what was really demanded of women in the era of family togetherness. An unwed mother was not part of a legal, domestic, and subordinate relation to a man, and so she could be scorned and punished, shamed, and blamed. She gave birth to the baby, but she was nobody's heroine.

Many unmarried girls and women got pregnant and for one of a number of possible reasons did not get an illegal or "therapeutic" abortion. So many spent most of their months of pregnancy in some or all of the following ways: futilely appealing to a hospital abortion committee; being diagnosed as neurotic, even psychotic by a mental health professional; expelled from school (by law until 1972); unemployed; in a Salvation Army or some other maternity home; poor, alone, ashamed, threatened by the law. If a girl were so reckless as to get herself pregnant outside of a legally subordinate relation to a man in the postwar era, all of society had the right to subordinate her human dignity to her shame.³

By taking a closer look at a few of the slim alternatives open to a single, pregnant woman in the two decades after World War II, we can evoke the desperate character of her predicament. We can also see how her capacity to bear children was used against her.

Consider the possibility in the mid-1950s of getting a safe, legal, hospital abortion. If a girl or woman knew about this possibility, she might appeal to a hospital abortion committee, a (male) panel of the director of obstetrics/gynecology, and the chiefs of medicine, surgery, neuropsychiatry, and pediatrics. In hospitals, including Mt. Sinai in New York, which set up an abortion committee in 1952, the panel of doctors met once a week and considered cases of women who could bring letters from two specialists diagnosing them as psychologically impaired and unfit to be mothers.⁴

By the early 1950s, procedures and medications had eliminated the need for almost all medically indicated abortions.⁵ That left only psychiatric grounds, which might have seemed promising for girls and women desperate not to have a child.⁶ After all, psychiatric explanations were in vogue, and white unwed mothers were categorically diagnosed as deeply neurotic, or worse. There was, however, a catch. These abortion committees had been set up to begin with because their very existence was meant to reduce requests for "therapeutic" abortions, which they did.⁷ It was, in fact, a matter of pride and competition among hospitals to have the highest ratio of births to abortions on record.⁸ But even though psychiatric illness was the only remaining acceptable basis for request, many doctors did not believe in these grounds. A professor of obstetrics in a large university hospital said, "We haven't done a therapeutic abortion for psychiatric reasons in ten years. . . . We don't recognize psychiatric indications."⁹ So an unwed pregnant girl or woman could be diagnosed and certified as disturbed, probably at considerable cost, but she couldn't convince the panel that she was sick enough. The

committee may have, in fact, agreed with the outside specialists that the abortion petitioner was psychotic, but the panel often claimed the problem was temporary, with sanity recoverable upon delivery.¹⁰

The doctors were apparently not concerned with questions about when life begins. They were very concerned with what they took to be their responsibility to protect and preserve the links between femininity, maternity, and marriage. One doctor spoke for many of his colleagues when he complained of the “clever, scheming women, simply trying to hoodwink the psychiatrist and obstetrician” in their appeals for permission for abortions.¹¹ The mere request, in fact, was taken, according to another doctor, “as proof [of the petitioner’s] inability and failure to live through the destiny of being a woman.”¹² If such permission were granted, one claimed, the woman “will become an unpleasant person to live with and possibly lose her glamour as a wife. She will gradually lose conviction in playing a female role.”¹³ An angry committee member, refusing to grant permission to one woman, asserted, “Now that she has had her fun, she wants us to launder her dirty underwear. From my standpoint, she can sweat this one out.”¹⁴

For many doctors, however, condemning the petitioner to sweat it out was not sufficient punishment. In the mid-1950s, in Maryland, a doctor would almost never agree to perform a therapeutic abortion unless he sterilized the woman at the same time.¹⁵ The records of a large, midwestern general hospital showed that between 1941 and 1950, 75 percent of the abortions performed there were accompanied by sterilization.¹⁶ The bottom line was that if you were single and pregnant (and without rich or influential parents who might, for example, make a significant philanthropic gesture to the hospital), your chances with the abortion committee were pretty bleak.

If a girl were white and broadly middle class, and failed to obtain a therapeutic abortion, or never sought one, there was a pretty fair chance her parents would pack her off to a maternity home just before she began to “show.” Her destination was terrifying and likely out of town, but the silent interval before the departure was equally chilling. A woman, in her late fifties, remembers the freezing day in 1952 when she stood alone, outside, at the top of the majestic stairs of the law school where she was a student. Certain that she was pregnant, she considered throwing herself down the icy steps because, “You just couldn’t have a baby.”¹⁷ A Radcliffe student in the same era needed to tell someone about her pregnancy. Jean chose a close male friend who’d been her pal for years, a “regular guy.” But hearing the news, he became so aroused that he attacked her sexually. Horrified, Jean rebuffed the attack and faced the young man’s petulant anger: “You’re pregnant, aren’t you? So what’s the worry, let’s have some fun.” Jean felt that she had “gotten herself pregnant.” She thought, “I wanted to die, but he was right. I got what I deserved.”¹⁸

It is important to understand why it was so easy for young white women to blame themselves. Many aspects of the culture supported such feelings, but

two were explicitly and immediately to the point. A single, pregnant woman was expected to take responsibility for violating norms against premarital sex and conception. Plus, she was expected to acknowledge, as a condition of changing herself, that her pregnancy was a “neurotic symptom.” The experts—social workers, psychologists, psychiatrists, clergy, and others—insisted that unmarried girls and women got pregnant willfully and spitefully, if unconsciously. Professionals particularly stressed that the young woman was determined, through her pregnancy, to get back at her domineering mother. The blame was out there, authoritative and easily internalized.

Once a girl or woman entered a maternity home, there was safety and protection of a sort. Many residents appreciated the protection but felt they paid a very high price. Among some young women, it appeared to be a toss-up whether the loneliness or the lie were worse. Karen, at a Salvation Army home in California in the early 1960s said, “I think the worst part of it has been the damned loneliness. I’ve adjusted pretty well to the hiding and the lying to the outside world, but I’ve just never gotten used to being all alone inside.” A recent arrival in the same Salvation Army home, angered by a moment of good-spirited camaraderie among the girls, expressed her frustration. “We’re all in here to have babies we don’t want. We’re hiding it from the world and we’ll leave here pretending it didn’t happen. I hate those lies—and you just laugh.”¹⁹

One experience that the overwhelming majority of maternity-home residents, and many white unwed mothers who did not make it to these homes, did share was the experience of giving their babies up for adoption. In the years before *Roe v. Wade*, the experts were, again, pretty unanimously agreed that only the most profoundly disturbed unwed mothers kept their babies, instead of turning them over to a nice, middle-class man and woman who could provide the baby with a proper family. Leontine Young, the prominent authority on social casework theory in the area of unwed mothers, cautioned in 1954, “The caseworker has to clarify for herself the differences between the feelings of the normal [married] woman for her baby and the fantasy use of the child by the neurotic unmarried mother.”²⁰

For complex cultural, historical, and economic reasons, black, single, pregnant women were not, in general, spurned by their families or shunted out of their communities into maternity homes, which usually had “white only” policies in any case. For the most part, black families accepted the pregnancy and made a place for the new mother and child. As one Chicago mother of a single black pregnant teenager said at the time, “It would be immoral to place the baby [for adoption]. That would be throwing away your own flesh and blood.”²¹ In contrast to the very large percentage of white girls and women who gave up their babies for adoption, about nine out of ten blacks kept theirs. In a postwar New York study, 96 percent of blacks keeping their babies reported deep satisfaction with this decision eighteen months later.²² Yet welfare and social caseworkers persisted for years in their claims

that the only reason why blacks kept their babies was that no one would adopt them.

Social workers and other human service professionals claimed repeatedly that black single pregnancy was the product of family and community disorganization. Yet in comparing the family and community responses among blacks and whites to out-of-wedlock pregnancy and childbearing, it is striking how the black community organized itself to accommodate mother and child while the white community was totally unwilling and unable to do so. The white community simply organized itself to expel them. Still, black girls and women who became pregnant while single faced a forceful array of prejudices and policies threatening to the well-being of poor, minority, single mothers and their children.

Most women in this situation felt that lack of money and adequate housing were their biggest problems, but many got hassles and worse from the agencies meant to help them. One black unwed mother said, "When I needed financial assistance, all Welfare did was to give me a hard time. They wanted me to place the baby and go to work to support myself. Also they made matters worse for me by trying to drag the baby's father to court. I probably would have been able to work if there had been a daycare center where I could have left the baby." A young woman in New York who needed a place to live with her baby said, "Well, I think maybe the Housing Authority could let an unmarried mother apply for an apartment. I am not going to hurt anyone if I get into a project." Another, seventeen years old, described the death of her education. "I wanted to finish my commercial course, but when the truant officer came to see me after the baby was born, he said, 'I suppose you're NOT going back to school,' and he gave me such a dirty look I felt bad and decided not to go back."²³

A black woman in her twenties summed up the public treatment she and others faced: "I don't know. I feel that wherever you go or whatever you do, if they find out you are an unwed mother, you've had it! Like when you go to Welfare, I know they would treat you like you were nothing. I bet if I went to look for another place right now and they know I wasn't married and I had a kid, they'd refuse to even talk to me. It's just in little ways that you're looked down upon and that's what really begins to work on you."²⁴

Howard Osofsky, an obstetrician in Syracuse devoting his career during this period to improving services for poor single mothers, described the attitude of his colleagues who use "anthropological and cultural data to equate [the nonwhite unwed mother] with the savage who must be protected by the more capable and learned members of society."²⁵ A young, black, single, pregnant teenager showed how her sensitivity to this attitude shaped her expectations when she reported to a social worker, "I don't need nothing from nobody. I don't want nobody messing around my life. I just want to be left alone."

But in the late 1950s and early 1960s, there was a burst of activity in

numerous state legislatures that reflected a determination not to leave single, poor, mostly black, unwed mothers alone. In every section of the country, state legislators either passed or tried to pass laws mandating substantial fines and prosecution, incarceration, and sterilization of women who “persisted” in having children without being married.²⁶ There was enthusiastic public support among some whites in every region for these legislative efforts because they explicitly tied illegitimacy to such concerns as the “population explosion,” crime in the cities, welfare costs, and integration.

The Population

The unwed mothers whose experiences form the basis of this study do not necessarily stand for all unwed mothers in the United States during the twenty years following World War II. The experiences of poor whites, middle-class blacks, and well-to-do whites are absent or not central to this study, although Chapter Five, particularly, focuses on the experiences of lower-class white girls and women. But the study *is* based on what was undoubtedly considered, by a wide range of experts and nonexperts, as the racially specific *representative* experiences.

The issue of unwed motherhood was a growing concern of various professional and academic communities, government agencies and foundations, and the community-at-large during the period of this study. As these various constituencies worked to account for the rising rate of illegitimate pregnancy and to address the need and costs for services to unwed mothers, members of these groups relied on race- and class-defined stereotypes of single pregnant girls and women as they structured their particular missions. The representative white unwed mother—the one described by academic studies, government officials, agency personnel, and the media as typical, was, in general, broadly middle class, in the sense that she was perceived as having resources of value to her credit. That is, she was perceived as having parents who could and would, in her behalf, negotiate with helping institutions and underwrite their daughter’s care. She had, despite her unfortunate sexual misstep, the likely potential to become a wife and mother in the postcrisis phase of her life. And most important, she was in the process of producing a white baby of value on the postwar adoption market.

The representative black unwed mother, according to the same influential groups, was a poor, Aid to Dependent Children grant recipient who kept her illegitimate child or children. This unwed mother was most often perceived as bereft of resources. She was, rather, perceived as burdened by her illegitimate child, by her financial dependency, and by the social and cultural pathology allegedly infecting the black population in the United States.

In the postwar era, the site of the problem afflicting the typical white unwed mother was relocated from her body to her mind. The white unwed