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COMMENTARY RACE

# How False Narratives of Margaret Sanger Are Being Used to Shame Black Women

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Anti-choicers wield misattributed and often outright false quotes about Sanger as weapons to shame Black women for exercising their right to choose, and even more nonsensically, to shame them for supporting Planned Parenthood.

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In the wake of the attacks by the Center for Medical Progress, Planned Parenthood's origins and its founder, Margaret Sanger, have once again become the center of conversations regarding Black women and abortion. And since anti-choice fanatics seem utterly incapable of making an honest argument in support of their position that Black women should be forced into childbirth rather than permitted to make their own decisions about what to do with their bodies, they resort to lies, misinformation, and half-truths about Sanger and the organization she founded.

Anti-choicers wield misattributed and often outright false quotes about Sanger as weapons to shame Black women for exercising their right to choose, and even more nonsensically, to shame them for supporting Planned Parenthood.


"Margaret Sanger was a racist and a eugenicist! She wanted to exterminate the Black race!" Such is the clarion call of these anti-choicers.

At the outset, I'd be remiss if I didn't point out that whether or not Planned Parenthood had its roots in anti-Blackness is irrelevant in a discussion of the services that Planned

Parenthood provides in 2015, ranging from abortion care to prevention and treatment of sexually transmitted infections, to Pap smears and other forms of cancer screening. The United States is rooted in anti-Blackness. Anti-Blackness was built into the U.S. Constitution by this country's Founding Fathers. Nearly every major corporation that exists today was either founded by racists, employed racists, built their business on anti-Blackness and slavery, or all of the above. Any argument that Black women in America should disavow Planned Parenthood because of some history of anti-Blackness would necessarily require that Black women disavow the very country in which we live.



Anti-choicers wield misattributed and often outright false quotes about exercising their right to choose, and even more nonsensically, to shame Planned Parenthood.

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But on to the truth about Margaret Sanger.

Sanger was pro-birth control and anti-abortion. This may surprise you, considering that Planned Parenthood opponents frequently accuse Sanger of erecting abortion clinics in Black neighborhoods, a practice they claim the organization continues to this day.

But this is simply not true.

Sanger opposed abortion. She believed it to be a barbaric practice. In her own words, “[a]lthough abortion may be resorted to in order to save the life of the mother, the practice of it merely for limitation of offspring is dangerous and vicious.” Her views are, ironically, in keeping with the views of many of the anti-choicers who malign and distort her legacy.

In fact, Planned Parenthood did not even begin performing abortions until after 1973, when the U.S. Supreme Court’s decision in *Roe v. Wade* legalized the practice. Margaret Sanger had been dead for four years by then. And currently, less than 4 percent of Planned Parenthood clinics that offer abortion services are located in communities where more than one-third of the population is Black, according to a recent analysis conducted by Planned Parenthood that Alencia Johnson, assistant director of constituency communications at Planned Parenthood, shared with me via email. A broader analysis conducted by the Guttmacher Institute in 2011 based on data available from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention shows that fewer than one in ten abortion providers overall are located in neighborhoods where more than half of residents are Black. It is simply false that Planned Parenthood is targeting Black women by setting up clinics primarily in Black neighborhoods.

It is true that Sanger was a proponent of eugenics, and pro-choice advocates do themselves no favors by attempting to whitewash this fact and paint Sanger as some infallible feminist hero. Sanger was passionate about contraception—perhaps to a fault—and her fervor about promoting her birth control agenda led her to align herself with eugenicists, along with racists and an assortment of people of questionable character.

But it is simply untrue that Margaret Sanger wanted to exterminate the Black race. This is a flat-out lie. Yet it is one that is repeated ad nauseum, both by anti-choice activists and the politicians who support them, most recently Ben Carson.

In propagating this lie, anti-choicers infantilize Black women and strip them of their agency: They portray Margaret Sanger’s birth control agenda as something that was done

to Black women, rather than something in which Black women and much of the Black community as a whole enthusiastically participated.

## **The Negro Project**

In her seminal book *Killing the Black Body*, Dorothy Roberts points out that leaders in the Black community actually welcomed Sanger's birth control agenda in the 1930s, and even criticized it for not going far enough to serve Black people.

W. E. B. Du Bois, who was one of the first Black leaders to publicly support birth control and who worked closely with Sanger to advocate for it, even serving on the board of a clinic that Sanger opened up in Harlem, criticized the wider birth control movement because of its failure to address Black people's needs as well.

It was this failure that gave birth to the sinister-sounding Negro Project.

Due to segregation policies in the South, the birth control clinics that opened in the 1930s were for white women only. Sanger wanted to change that. She sought to open clinics in the South staffed by Black doctors and nurses, and to educate Black women about contraception. In 1939, after she had been named honorary chairman of the board of Birth Control Federation of America (the precursor to Planned Parenthood), Sanger launched the Negro Project. The Federation's Division of Negro Services, a national advisory council, which included prominent Black leaders like Du Bois, Mary McLeod Bethune, E. Franklin Frazier, Walter White, and Rev. Adam Clayton Powell, worked to manage the Negro Project.

The Negro Project had nothing to do with some nefarious plot to exterminate Black people or to "sterilize unknowing Black women," as claimed by BlackGenocide.org—which is a widely read website seemingly dedicated to spreading false information about Margaret Sanger and Planned Parenthood. Rather, the Negro Project was a concerted effort by Sanger and Black community leaders to bring birth control to the South in a way that would assuage the deep-seated fears of Black birth control opponents like Marcus Garvey, who believed that the use of birth control in the Black community was tantamount to Black genocide.

Many opponents of Planned Parenthood purposefully obfuscate this history in order to paint Sanger, and in turn Planned Parenthood itself, as spearheading a plot to kill off Black people. Anti-choice fanatics typically rely on two quotes as their bread and butter in this

claim, even as they use Black women as weapons in their war against abortion. It's high time to set the record straight.

The first is a Sanger quote in which she defends the Negro Project in seemingly racist language: "The mass of Negroes particularly in the South still breed carelessly."

The second quote can be found in Sanger's infamous letter to Clarence J. Gamble: "We do not want word to go out that we want to exterminate the Negro population."

The first quote, even when read in full and in context, certainly sounds damning:

The mass of Negroes particularly in the South still breed carelessly and disastrously, with the result that the increase among Negroes, even more than among whites, is from that portion of the population least intelligent and fit, and least able to rear children possibly.

But what anti-choicers either don't know or willfully obscure is that Sanger borrowed this quote directly from W. E. B. Du Bois.

Du Bois was a passionate advocate of civil rights and a defender of Black women, specifically. He also publicly supported birth control. Nevertheless, as Dorothy Roberts wrote, "Du Bois and other prominent Blacks were not immune from the elitist thinking of their time. As reflected in Du Bois's statement borrowed by Sanger to promote the Negro Project, they sometimes advocated birth control for poorer segments of their own race in terms painfully similar to eugenic rhetoric."

Does the fact that Sanger borrowed the quote from Du Bois excuse her actions? Maybe. Maybe not. But it certainly provides some much-needed context.

The second quote, "We do not want word to go out that we want to exterminate the Negro population," might be Planned Parenthood opponents' favorite. It is culled from a 1939 letter to Dr. Clarence J. Gamble, heir to the Proctor & Gamble fortune, and is even more damning than the borrowed Du Bois quote—if you ignore the context in which it was written, that is.

That context wasn't about hiding the "true exterminatory purpose" of the Negro Project from Black people. Rather, it was about elucidating the true purpose of the project—

disseminating birth control in Black communities in the South—and training Black doctors to work within their own communities:

It seems to me from my experience where I have been in North Carolina, Georgia, Tennessee and Texas, that while the colored Negroes have great respect for white doctors they can get closer to their own members and more or less lay their cards on the table which means their ignorance, superstitions and doubts. They do not do this with the white people and if we can train the Negro doctor at the Clinic he can go among them with enthusiasm and with knowledge, which, I believe, will have far-reaching results among the colored people. His work in my opinion should be entirely with the Negro profession and the nurses, hospital, social workers, as well as the County's white doctors. His success will depend upon his personality and his training by us.

The minister's work is also important and also he should be trained, perhaps by the Federation as to our ideals and the goal that we hope to reach. We do not want word to go out that we want to exterminate the Negro population and the minister is the man who can straighten out that idea if it ever occurs to any of their more rebellious members.

A related memo written by Dr. Gamble in 1939 clarifies the point:

There is great danger that we [the Negro Project] will fail because the Negroes think it a plan for extermination. Hence let's appear to let the colored run it.

Sanger's full quote in context has the exact opposite meaning that anti-choicers like to attribute to it.

Moreover, Sanger also held some rather forward-thinking views about the oppression of Black people, especially for a white feminist in the early 20th century. In an oft-ignored interview with Earl Conrad for the *Chicago Defender* in 1945, Sanger said:

Discrimination is a world-wide thing. It has to be opposed everywhere. That is why I feel the Negro's plight here is linked with that of the oppressed around the globe.

The big answer, as I see it, is the education of the white man. The white man is the problem. It is the same as with the Nazis. We must change the white attitudes. That is where it lies.

In that same article, Sanger described an encounter with an “anti-Negro white man”:

When we first started out an anti-Negro white man offered me \$10,000 if I started in Harlem first. His idea was simply to cut down the number of Negroes. ‘Spread it as far as you can among them,’ he said. That is, of course, not our idea. I turned him down. But that is an example of how vicious some people can be about this thing.

Not exactly the words of a woman hell-bent on exterminating Black people, are they?

It is undeniable that Sanger espoused some problematic and racist views about Black people. Certainly her paternalistic attitudes about Black people’s ability to disseminate information about birth control in their own community—along with Sanger’s view that, as Dorothy Roberts wrote, “many Blacks were too ignorant and superstitious to use contraceptives on their own”—were indubitably racist. And although you’d be hard-pressed to find any white person at the time who was completely free of racist thinking, and some of her problematic views echoed the views of prominent Black leaders, that still doesn’t absolve her.

But as Jay Smooth pointed out in his viral video [How to Tell Someone They Sound Racist](#), there’s a difference between being a racist and making racist remarks. Margaret Sanger, without question, made a lot of racist remarks. But was she a capital-R racist? I don’t think so, and that’s a question on which the answer scholars like Dorothy Roberts, Linda Gordon, Carole McCann, and others have been unable to agree.

The truth about Sanger and her birth control crusade is far more complex, and requires a nuanced discussion of the type that your average anti-choice crusader is either incapable or unwilling to engage.

## **Sanger and Eugenics**

Margaret Sanger held many abhorrent ideas about population control and eugenics, ideas that any decent person today would find horrifying.

Yes, she believed that the “reckless breeding” of the “feebleminded” was “the greatest biological menace to the future of civilization.” Yes, she believed that Americans were “paying for and even submitting to the dictates of an ever-increasing, unceasingly spawning class of human beings who never should have been born at all.” Yes she believed that “morons” should be forcibly sterilized to ensure that they could not breed. She also believed that these “morons” could not be trusted to properly use birth control. Frankly, Sanger was far more ableist than she was racist.

But she was also a product of her time. The terms “moron,” “imbecile,” and “idiot” were all medical classifications back then. And eugenics—the theory that intelligence and other traits are genetically predetermined—was very popular at the turn of the century. The concern that “inferior stock” was reproducing at a faster rate than “superior stock,” was widespread. Inferior stock included anyone not viewed as a descendant of good breeding: Black people, immigrants, mentally and physically disabled people, the poor, criminals, and the “feebleminded.”

This widespread concern gave way to a panic about “race suicide,” which saw white people fretting about the deterioration of the race as a result of immigrants and Black people outbreeding good upstanding white Anglo-Saxon Americans. (Echoes of this fear exist today: white conservatives are still urging red-blooded patriotic Americans—i.e., white Americans—to breed, dammit, breed and the Quiverfull movement is very popular among Christian extremists.)

So strong was the fear of “race suicide” that even President Theodore Roosevelt attempted to shame white women of “superior stock,” also known as wealthy white women, into having more children. In his 1903 State of the Union address, Roosevelt proclaimed that “willful sterility is, from the standpoint of the nation, from the standpoint of the human race, the one sin for which there is no atonement.”

The flip side of shaming wealthy white women into reproducing more quickly was figuring out a way to keep the “inferior stock” from breeding, so that healthy and wealthy white women could catch up and forestall the deterioration of the race. The answer to that quandary was forced sterilization on a massive nationwide scale in order to keep “undesirable” people from procreating.

The principle targets of the programs included not only women of color (primarily Southern Black women, although California’s sterilization program targeted many Latina



women), but also criminals, the poor, and any women—including white women—who were believed to be “feeble-minded,” with feeble-mindedness often corresponding to sexual promiscuity.

All of this is to say that concerns about population control weighed heavy on the minds of Americans in the early 20th century. Classes on eugenics were taught in colleges nationwide; eugenics was presented as scientific fact in biology textbooks; and the American Eugenics Society held “Fitter Families Contests” at state fairs throughout the 1920s, during which rural American families were encouraged to compete with one another to determine which family had the best “human stock.” Medals that read “Yea, I have a goodly heritage” were awarded to families that were deemed genetically favorable.

It may seem bizarre and Orwellian to us now, but that was the United States in which Sanger lived. And given the enthusiasm with which ordinary Americans embraced eugenics, it is no surprise that Sanger eventually joined up with them.

Sanger didn’t begin her campaign for birth control as a eugenicist, though. She started out as a relatively hardcore feminist. She believed that women had the right to sexual gratification and the right to choose when to become mothers.

“No woman can call herself free who does not own and control her own body. No woman can call herself free until she can choose consciously whether she will or will not be a mother.” Those are Sanger’s own words.

But feminists at the time disapproved of Sanger’s insistence on women’s rights to sexual gratification. They largely believed that Sanger’s views were unchaste and immoral, and that a woman’s place was in the home, serving her husband and being virtuous. (Not unlike many anti-choicers today who believe that if you are unwilling to deal with an unplanned pregnancy, or as they like to call it “the consequences of sex,” then you should just abstain—forever, if necessary.)

And because Margaret Sanger was passionately committed to her birth control crusade, her fervor led her away from feminism and toward an allyship with racists and eugenicists. This included, as this favored anti-choice meme suggests, giving a speech at a KKK rally in Silver Lake, New Jersey, in 1926.

But before you recoil in abject horror, remember that the KKK was a powerful political movement at the time—five U.S. presidents were members of the KKK at one point or

another—and if Sanger could convince the ladies of the KKK of the benefits of birth control, then it was worth it to her. That certainly doesn't excuse her turning to this country's most notorious domestic terrorist group for support (and personally, I find it deplorable) but there was no one whom Sanger wouldn't talk to about birth control.

Certainly, many of the prominent eugenicists with whom Sanger worked were virulently racist. Their attraction to birth control was that it would lead to "racial betterment" if promoted in immigrant and Black communities, and Sanger was OK with that.

Sanger herself promoted birth control as a way to reduce the birth rate of undesirable classes—"morons" and such—but the fact that many eugenicists viewed Black people as an undesirable class didn't seem to bother her. In other words, so long as eugenicists continued to disseminate information about birth control, she didn't appear to care about their reasons for doing so. (Notably, many prominent eugenicists at the time didn't believe that *all* Black people were unfit, but rather they believed in "selective migration"—that the intelligent and desirable Black people tended to migrate to the North, leaving the less intelligent Black people behind.)

Some scholars have called her allyship a savvy political move. It enabled her to couch her birth control agenda in terms that the "race suicide" fearmongerers could understand. Other scholars view it as racist.

Whether or not she was a capital-R racist is ultimately of little concern, because as Dorothy Roberts points out, her allyship with eugenicists facilitated the goals of eugenicists, and that is something that the reproductive rights community should never gloss over:

It appears that Sanger was motivated by a genuine concern to improve the health of the poor mothers she served rather than a desire to eliminate their stock. Sanger believed that all their afflictions arose from their unrestrained fertility, not their genes or racial heritage ... Sanger nevertheless promoted two of the most perverse tenets of eugenic thinking: that social problems are caused by reproduction of the socially disadvantaged and that their childbearing should therefore be deterred. In a society marked by racial hierarchy, these principles inevitably produced policies designed to reduce Black women's fertility.

Alas, such nuanced arguments are not suitable for the 140-character soundbite world in which the abortion wars are currently being waged.

Ultimately, Margaret Sanger was a complicated woman living in a complicated time.

But to hear anti-choice zealots tell it, she was the American version of Hitler, proposing a “final solution” to the “Black question.” This is nonsense.

Anti-choicers also like to claim that Sanger was closely associated with the eugenics program in Nazi Germany. While she may be loosely associated with the program, in the same way that every American who promoted eugenics was loosely associated with the Nazis, the Nazis specifically modeled their eugenics laws on California’s sterilization law, not on Sanger’s beliefs or writings. The United States, after all, led the world in compulsory sterilization until Hitler took up the practice.

In 1927, the United States Supreme Court ruled that Virginia’s compulsory sterilization law was constitutional in *Buck v. Bell*, a stunningly awful decision in which Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes proclaimed “[t]hree generations of imbeciles are enough.” That decision set the stage for state after state to enact compulsory sterilization laws. By the time the Nazis embarked on their eugenics program, more than 30 states had such laws on their books. It wasn’t Sanger personally who influenced the Nazis. It was the United States as a whole.

In fact, the Nazis were not fans of Sanger. They even burned her books, as Gerald V. O’Brien points out in his article, “Margaret Sanger and the Nazis: How Many Degrees of Separation.” Moreover, as Amita Kelly writing for NPR recently pointed out, “Sanger herself wrote in 1939 that she had joined the Anti-Nazi Committee ‘and gave money, my name and any influence I had with writers and others, to combat Hitler’s rise to power in Germany.’”

Undoubtedly, Sanger held a lot of beliefs that are repugnant to us now.

But that doesn’t mean supporters of Planned Parenthood and abortion rights activists shouldn’t push back on the abject falsehoods that anti-choicers spread about Planned Parenthood and its founder while at the same time reckoning with Sanger’s more deplorable beliefs.

We can do both. We *must* do both.

**CORRECTION:** The article has been updated to clarify the number of years between Margaret Sanger’s death and when the first Planned Parenthood

had begun offering abortions.



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