From Eugenics to Planned Parenthood: How a Black Feminist can reconcile a Troubled Past in order to accept a Promising Future

Ebony Davenport
Science has long debunked genetic differences between races but prior to this knowledge several hundred thousand people believed otherwise. Fueled by Social Darwinism and evolutionary theories the Eugenics Movement emerged. This school of thought turned into a social movement and began as a method of reducing society to its most fit members. This scientific racism employed an insidious agenda to reduce procreation amongst blacks in America. This ethnic cleansing was rather overt except toward the thousands upon thousands of black women being sterilized unbeknownst to them. Key figures of the American Eugenics Movement contributed large amounts of funds to found the institution known as The American Birth Control League, which later developed into Planned Parenthood.

In light of various explanations for racial differences to justify hierarchal social systems based on race, eugenics served as a method to strengthen numbers of the elite while reducing the “unfit.” There is literature that argues that there is genetic material responsible for race and racial difference. Such scientific evidence would be used to affirm the notion of blacks having inferior intelligence. In its early days, eugenics claimed that selectively breeding the human species would essentially fast track its evolution to an all-superior grouping of people. The medical community was not exempt from perpetuating that racism. Practitioners enforced compulsory sterilization of the poor and “unfit.” White male practitioners and allied health professionals would agree to
deliver black babies on the condition that the women get sterilized on the table.

Proponents of eugenics employed codified rhetoric to camouflage their racist efforts. Terms such as “unfit” and “feeble-minded” became politically, emotionally, and racially loaded. Eugenics relied heavily on protecting the status quo and was extremely successful due to the ingrained anxiety toward and misunderstanding of black people.

Since the organization serves millions of Black women across the country it is imperative to address the muddied history of the organization rather than ignore it. Using Black Feminist theoretical framework, which perfected intersectionality, this paper examines how this particular issue intersects areas of gender, race, and class. An analysis of the history of the American Eugenics Movement presents an issue to the Black feminist community. Through careful negotiation using Black Feminist Theory it is possible to reconcile that history in order to support an organization now aimed toward providing quality healthcare to women.

Planned Parenthood prides itself on providing high quality healthcare services to women across the country. One of its largest contributions to women is providing affordable birth control to women of all ages. PBS’s documentary “The Pill” documents the development of the birth control pill and its controversial association with eugenic ideologies. Margaret Sanger was a huge proponent of birth control in the U.S. and on the surface it seemed to have stemmed from her desire to broaden women’s reproductive choices. However, black feminists like Angela Davis “have exposed Sanger’s adherence to eugenics doctrine[s]” (Ordover xxv).

The organization Black Genocide cited a statement made by Margaret Sanger in 1921 on their website. The pioneer for birth control in the U.S. wrote, “The most urgent
problem today is how to limit and discourage the over-fertility of the mentally and physically defective” (blackgenocide.org). Sanger was quoted using the same emotionally, politically, and racially loaded rhetoric as those advocating for eugenics. Early eugenic ideologies portrayed the unfit/defective/feeble-minded as those experiencing economic strife. However it ignored the various social institutions that created such meager economic conditions. Historically speaking poverty has been and continues to be a highly gendered and racialized experience in our country. Black Feminist Theory requires one to critically examine issues from several angles. The issue of reproductive rights within the black community intersects race, gender, and class boundaries.

Patricia Hill Collins has been pivotal in the development of Black Feminist Theory. In her article “Defining Black Feminist Thought” she asserts that the theory “encompasses theoretical interpretations of Black women’s reality by those who live it” (381). Collins draws attention to the core themes of Black Feminist Theory: experience and consciousness. Cultivating an identity based on experience allows black women to raise one another’s consciousness in order to combat the various forms of oppression they experience. Black women’s shared experiences have allowed them to develop a platform to reclaim their bodies and their lives.

Black feminists have perfected the intersectionality approach in an effort to reclaim their identities and distinguish their lived experiences from black men and white women. Professor Kimberlé Crenshaw is an expert in both feminist theory and critical race theory. Crenshaw explains the multilateral effects patriarchy has on black women in her article “Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence
Against Women of Color.” Crenshaw writes, “[t]he concept of political intersectionality highlights the fact that women of color are situated within at least two subordinated groups that frequently pursue conflicting political agendas” (360). Race and gender are social constructions so deeply and intricately woven into our society. While neither has any biological basis they are very real, yet intangible things that we cannot ignore or simply refuse to participate in. Therefore a political agenda aimed at resolving the issue at hand must appreciate the independence and interdependence of the two categories.

Angela Davis has situated herself within several social movements over the years. Davis emphasizes the need for a conscious political identity of black women that is active in society in order to reconcile their long history of oppression. Davis exemplifies the feminist agenda of connecting the personal with the political in her essay “Sick and Tired of Being Sick and Tired: The Politics of Black Women’s Health.” She argues that “while our health is undeniably assaulted by natural forces frequently beyond our control, all too often the enemies of our physical and emotional well-being are social and political” (55). Recognizing the pervasiveness of politics in one’s life is instrumental in the reconciliation process.

Black feminist literature uses theory to poignantly illustrate the possibility of resolving deep-rooted issues. Kimberlé Crenshaw provides assistance for a black feminist seeking to make that reconciliation in her article “Intersectionality and Identity Politics: Learning from Violence against Women of Color”. Crenshaw stresses that “although there are significant political and conceptual obstacles to moving against structures of domination with an intersectional sensibility … the effort to do so should be a central theoretical and political objective of both anti-racism and feminism” (484). Working
toward fully accepting Planned Parenthood a black feminist must connect theory with social engagement.

Patricia Hill Collins discussed the definitional issues within Black Feminist Theory that may work to divide black women. The label “black feminist” implies that those identifying as such have a working knowledge of feminist ideologies. Akiba Solomon shares her experiences to describe the divide a theory-only approach can create in her article “The Personal is Political: That’s the Challenge”. Suspended between excitement and apprehension Solomon explains, “non-conscious’ black people outnumbered us, and I lived in mortal fear of intra-racial ridicule” (62). This division mirrors the counterproductive notion of the talented tenth that W.E.B. DuBois introduced. Black feminists may feel immense pressure to uplift their entire communities due to the often-inaccessible nature of theory. Crenshaw suggests that “rather than viewing this as a threat to group solidarity, we should view it as an opportunity for bridge building and coalition politics” (“Intersectionality and Identity Politics” 485).

Resolution requires effort from both the black feminist community as well as the organization itself. Black Genocide writes, “The Planned Parenthood Federation has been protective of Margaret Sanger’s reputation and defensive of allegations that she was a racist.” This is especially insulting to black feminists who are familiar with the racial context from which Sanger wrote when promoting birth control. Choosing to protect her reputation and ignore her association with eugenic rhetoric and ideologies is disrespectful to the black feminist community. The organization, understandably so, does not seem to go to extreme lengths to air its dirty laundry, so to speak. However omitting details can be regarded as lying. Recognition of the history seems more authentic. For my own
reconciliation it is essential for the organization to be more forthcoming with its early affiliation with eugenics. Once black feminists have addressed the troubling history of the organization and are willing to wholly support its efforts it is up to Planned Parenthood to match those endeavors.

Historically speaking black women have exhibited a compulsory resilience in response to the oppression they experience. Black Feminist Theory has been formed from those very experiences. Women’s voices are often silenced and black women especially have had their voices muzzled by racism and sexism. Incorporating intersectional theory with shared experiences black women can effectively reclaim their identities. One of feminism’s defining ideologies is that the personal is the political. Black feminists have woven that into their theoretical fabrics to guide theory into social practice. Black Feminist Theory has effectively expanded the intersectional approach when it comes to examining the inner mechanisms of oppression, specifically that of patriarchy. Black Feminist Theory provides the theoretical and sociopolitical groundings to foster reconciliation of the racist eugenics agendas of the past in order to support advancements Planned Parenthood is making in women’s healthcare.
Works Cited


