

Purposeful Nonsense, Intersectionality, and the Mission to Save Black Babies

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The competing expressions of ideology flooding the contemporary political landscape have taken a turn toward the absurd. The Radiance Foundation's recent anti-abortion campaign targeting African-American women, including a series of billboards bearing the slogan "The most dangerous place for an African-American child is in the womb", is just one example of political "discourse" that is both infuriating and confounding. Discourse with these features – problematic intelligibility, disinterest in the truth, and inflammatory rhetoric – has become increasingly common in politics, the press, and even the arguments made by ordinary folk. It is often criticized for its falsehood or its hurtfulness; however, these critiques tend to miss its pernicious potential. This essay characterizes this insidious discourse as *purposeful nonsense*.

Part of the way that purposeful nonsense functions, we argue, relies on taking advantage of harmful stereotypes and denigrating narratives that are *already* present in our culture. Purposeful nonsense both draws upon harmful ideology and fortifies it. The effect is that members of oppressed social groups are confronted with disparaging ideology, while its authors are free to deny responsibility for it. Black feminist and intersectional analysis – particularly in the discussion of race, abortion, and reproductive justice – are useful in identifying and criticizing the harmful subtext in the Radiance Foundation's billboard campaign. The notion of purposeful nonsense serves to extend the reach of these criticisms.

Purposeful nonsense – disguised as merely logically confused discourse – is a key factor in maintaining an oppressive and unjust society; however, feminist, black feminist, and intersectional analysis contextualizes purposeful nonsense, potentially disrupting its harmful influence. We conclude that purposeful nonsense employs a variation on *stereotype threat*, a phenomenon in which being reminded of negative stereotypes about one's social group causes stereotypical performance failures. We suggest that the notion of stereotype threat combined with intersectional analysis offers a fruitful avenue along which research on this sort of discourse might be expanded.

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PURPOSEFUL NONSENSE, INTERSECTIONALITY, AND THE MISSION TO SAVE BLACK BABIES

nonsense |ˈnʌnsɛns|

noun

1 spoken or written words that have no meaning or make no sense: *he was talking absolute nonsense.*

- [as exclamation] used to show strong disagreement: “*Nonsense! No one can do that.*”
- [as modifier] denoting verse or other writing intended to be amusing by virtue of its absurd or whimsical language: *nonsense poetry.*

2 foolish or unacceptable behavior: *put a stop to that nonsense, will you?*

INTRODUCTION

Outrage arose when Representative Todd Akin of Missouri argued against making exceptions to abortion restriction for rape victims on the grounds that due to a woman’s physiology “legitimate rape” was unlikely to result in pregnancy.¹ Although thoroughly denounced², the claim that there is some feature of biology that prevents rapes from resulting in pregnancy has taken root in the political and popular imagination.³ This falsehood has proven so irrepressible that one reporter at Slate.com has repeatedly written about the ultimate source of this idea: a confabulated Nazi experiment.⁴ Discourse with these features – a “strange” genealogy; bad reasoning; persistence despite, at best, specious proof; and exploitation for what are, to some minds, malicious purposes – has become increasingly common in political discourse, the press, and even the arguments made by ordinary folk.

Such discourse is often criticized for its falsehood or its hurtfulness; these critiques – aimed at singular features of this discourse – tend to miss its pernicious potential. This essay endeavors to characterize this insidious trend and expose its real impact. Unraveling the complexity of this rhetoric and characterizing the danger it poses, however, is only possible in the context of analysis founded upon and informed by feminist and black feminist theory. Of particular import to our project are the contributions feminist theory has made to understanding

the complexity of oppression. In keeping with the theme of this volume, perhaps of most significance to our analysis is the notion of intersectionality. Our analysis benefits both from the work theorizing intersectionality⁵ and from prior intersectional research.⁶ We also rely upon and extend black feminist analysis by focusing on the unique oppression faced by black women whose objectification makes them at once invisible and hyper-visible.

Feminist theorizing of oppression – specifically, its focus on the details of the experience of gender oppression, its analysis of how seemingly benign phenomena function in concert, and its articulation of the ways that oppression is internalized and how that is used to disguise and deny its existence – both inspires and buttresses our case.⁷ We take for granted, to some degree, that a critical analysis of seemingly disparate phenomena – for instance, a falsified theory about rape and pregnancy cited by a Missouri Congressman; a factual error in the rhetoric of an Arizona senator; an online article on a Christian Pregnancy Center in Kansas City; and a series of anti-abortion billboards Posted in Atlanta, Arkansas, Austin, Los Angeles, Milwaukee and Texas – is essential to understanding the oppression of women in general and the unique oppression of black women, in particular. We presume that the claim that a message was well-intended (or even evidence that the message was delivered with neutral intentions or with no intentions at all) does not *by itself* exempt it from moral scrutiny. Among our starting assumptions is the idea that identifying and undermining oppressive ideology's Trojan horses – such as claims that only make sense if certain negative stereotypes are presupposed – is a vital project.

Our analysis also owes a significant debt to black feminist thought. Following Patricia Hill Collins, our interest and focus is on the experiences of the women (and others) who are affected by this problematic discourse; we aim to develop an approach that takes the heterogeneity of experience into account while still aiming to disrupt social oppression.⁸ We will briefly explore and attempt to build upon black feminist analysis of black women's pursuit of reproductive justice. Our work here is indebted to Angela Davis' analysis of the complexity of

the relationship black women must have with mainstream feminism's fight for reproductive rights.⁹

Also central to our analysis is a recognition that there are unique features of the way black women are subjected to gender oppression that distinguish it from the gender oppression imposed upon white women. Black women's oppression stems from a very specific social history and exploits particular and distinct gender and race ideologies. We take for granted that it must be understood as a unique social location and not simply a blend of racial and gender oppression. Remarks like Akin's, we argue, take advantage of the possibility of delivering distinct sexist messages to different social groups using one communication. A clear analysis of such remarks is, thus, *not possible* without presupposing that the experience of black women is "greater than the sum of racism and sexism".¹⁰ This essay brings the critical tools of intersectionality born of black feminism to bear in a new way. Our contention is that this sort of discourse ordinarily functions to subvert and silence direct critical engagement, but feminist, black feminist, and especially intersectional analysis exposes its complexity, potentially disrupting its harmful influence.

We characterize this dangerous discourse as *purposeful nonsense*. Disguised as merely offensive or illogical, these arguments, epithets, memes, and campaigns exploit vulnerabilities that facilitate and sustain oppression. Using the resources of feminist, black feminist, and intersectional theory, we are poised to give a more sophisticated analysis of this discourse. We will characterize its unique features, including the threats it poses to the vulnerable populations that are its true targets.

We will proceed, in the first section, by using a few additional examples to elucidate the notion of purposeful nonsense. The first example is Arizona Senator Jon Kyl's remark on the senate floor that "well over 90%" of Planned Parenthood's services were dedicated to abortion provision.¹¹ Later, in his apology for being so widely off the mark – only 3% of Planned Parenthood services consist of abortion – Kyl said his remark "was not intended to be a factual

statement”.¹² Our second example concerns a thoughtful article examining the recent conservative mission to “save black babies”. In her very careful discussion of the way this phenomenon has manifested itself in Kansas City, MO, Akiba Solomon discusses an anti-abortion propaganda film called “Maafa 21: Black Genocide in the 21st Century” in a way that does not clarify whether certain seemingly extreme claims made in the film are factual or not.¹³ The stark contrast between these two examples clarifies the important features of purposeful nonsense – discourse that has problems with intelligibility, that seems disinterested in the truth, and that employs inflammatory rhetoric – while also revealing its force and complexity as a lens of analysis.

Once we have established the characteristics of the kind of discourse we have in mind, we will then articulate the unique harms of which it is capable. In the second section of the essay, we will identify the unique moral analysis resulting from purposeful nonsense; specifically, we will argue that purposeful nonsense is morally problematic regardless of the intentions of those who produce it. Because of how purposeful nonsense functions as part of a larger discourse, it has the potential to cause genuine harm to the material and social well-being of members of certain social groups.

Having established the character of this discourse and its potential dangers, we will then use the notion of purposeful nonsense to analyze our third example. In the third section, we will marshal the resources of feminist and black feminist thought to offer an intersectional analysis of the harm inflicted by a recent anti-abortion billboard campaign by The Radiance Foundation, aimed, ostensibly, at reducing the number of abortions by African-American women. These billboards showed pictures of black infants and children and displayed the following slogans: “Black and Unwanted,” “Endangered Species,” and “The Most Dangerous Place For An African American is in the Womb”.¹⁴ In a brief concluding section, we suggest that purposeful nonsense exploits vulnerabilities in a way that is akin to the function of a phenomenon known as stereotype threat. Stereotype threat occurs when negative stereotypes are made manifest to

their ‘targets’ at crucial moments; for example, reminding women of their gender identity even in innocuous ways before they take a math test negatively affects their test performance.¹⁵ We will suggest that research on stereotype threat, when combined with feminist, black feminist, and intersectional analysis offers compelling new avenues for research that would explore the depth and expanse of the injuries caused by social oppression.

Understanding the potential of purposeful nonsense to sustain and advance oppression requires both the insights and the methodological commitments of feminist and black feminist thought as a precursor. Furthermore, our analysis of the Radiance Foundation’s billboard campaign (and its mission to save black babies) relies upon intersectionality as a lens of analysis that is absolutely necessary to reveal its complexity and perniciousness.

1. PURPOSEFUL NONSENSE

Purposeful Nonsense, Truthiness, and Bullshit

We are not concerned here with run-of-the-mill nonsense. A made up word is more likely to be nonsense (all things considered) than an established term in a shared vernacular. A sentence is more likely to be nonsense the further it is from satisfying the rules of grammar in the relevant language. Purposeful nonsense, by contrast, is not usually gibberish nor does it necessarily violate grammar rules to the point of incoherence. The anti-abortion billboard campaign and remarks like those of Akin and Kyl aren’t literally incomprehensible. While unintelligibility is a standard criterion for ordinary nonsense, purposeful nonsense is characterized by a) *questionable* intelligibility combined with b) an apparent lack of concern with the truth, and finally c) the use of inflammatory rhetoric. Using our opening example and the examples cited above – Akin on “legitimate rape”, Kyl on Planned Parenthood, and Solomon on black genocide and the mission to save black babies – we clarify the unique problem of intelligibility, the disinterest in truth, and the inflammatory rhetoric that distinguishes purposeful nonsense from its ordinary counterpart.

We will return to the issue of the intelligibility of purposeful nonsense and proceed with a discussion of its disinterest in the truth. This type of disinterest is akin to what television persona Stephen Colbert calls *truthiness*¹⁶ or philosopher Harry Frankfurt calls *bullshit*.¹⁷ Truthiness and bullshit are, on our reading, more or less positive and negative framings of the same judgment. In *On Bullshit*, Frankfurt argues that what typifies bullshit is that it is “unconnected to a concern with the truth”.¹⁸ Bullshit, like lying, is a mode of misrepresentation; but whereas the liar “is responding to the truth and ... to that extent respectful of it”, the bullshitter “is neither on the side of the true nor ... the false”; instead, this person “misrepresents what he is up to”.¹⁹ Primarily, this person purports to be engaged in a truth-aimed enterprise, when, in fact, that is not the case. Colbert’s account of truthiness adds a folksy spin to this idea, offering plausible motives for someone who superficially appears to be, but ultimately is not, concerned with truth. Colbert suggests that rather than cede territory to those armed with ‘facts’ and ‘knowledge,’ the “truthi-ful” speak from the heart, and *reject the distinction* between discourse that is aimed at truth, and discourse that is not.²⁰ In an ironic twist, Arizona Senator Jon Kyl tried to explain away his misrepresentation of the facts about Planned Parenthood by claiming truthiness. In claiming that his statistical assertion was “not intended to be a factual statement”²¹, he is backpedalling away from an earnest engagement with the truth. His apology is actually an admission of guilt: he was caught bullshitting and admitted it. His willingness to admit it, however, reflects that room has been made even in official political discourse for truthiness.

In addition to being truthi bullshit, disengaged from the usual truth-telling practices, purposeful nonsense is also hurtful. Frankfurt is clear that some bullshit is innocuous, and it’s possible that even truthi political rhetoric could be relatively anodyne. An essential feature of the phenomena that we’re tracking is that it employs and relies upon inflammatory rhetoric or ideology. Recall the example of Todd Akin, Congressional Representative from Missouri, explaining away the need for a rape exception to abortion law because “legitimate rape” is

unlikely to result in pregnancy.²² This assertion fails the bullshit test for multiple reasons: different versions of this claim each have different specious explanatory theories²³; medical experts deny the viability of any such theory²⁴; some evidence actually supports the opposite claim²⁵; and because the ultimate source cited appears to be fabricated.²⁶ The extent of the countervailing evidence against this claim justifies the suspicions about whether the claim was ever earnestly aimed at the truth. On our view, this is not a sufficient critique, because it fails to hold the speaker accountable for the potential harm done by the inflammatory nature of the rhetoric. This bit of rhetoric is galling only in part because of its bullshit rating. This criterion points to the inflammatory nature of this assertion and the terrorizing circumstances it reflects and tacitly endorses. The notion of “legitimate rape” is a cruel reminder of the near impossibility of successfully using the judicial system to punish a rapist.²⁷ It is a slap in the face to the many victims of rape.²⁸

The unintelligibility of ordinary nonsense becomes a slightly different problem in purposeful nonsense. As stated earlier, this type of discourse rarely descends into incoherence; nonetheless, there are concerns about its intelligibility. One of the concerns about the statements made by Akin and Kyl is that they trigger “hidden” messages that further aggravate its harmful effects. The notion of a “legitimate rape” calls upon a distasteful set of narratives and presuppositions that it would not be in the interest of any candidate to lay out explicitly: that the majority of the women seeking an abortion resulting from rape must be liars or confused, that intimate partner rapes don’t count, that rape victims are “good girls” who have been viciously attacked and beaten by *strangers*. In short, a “legitimate” rape requires the notion of an “illegitimate” rape in order to make any sense. The speaker of this nonsense need not provide this background, because to a large extent, purposeful nonsense draws upon ideas, beliefs, and images that are already “in play”. While Akin’s notion of legitimate rape summons up tripe that the rest of us are forced to redigest, Kyl launched a factoid that supporters of Planned Parenthood will now have to take time and energy to disprove, repeatedly. Both of

these consequences are very problematic. Purposeful nonsense endures because it can take root in the popular imagination; some of its harms are disguised because it draws from that same imagination. We explore these processes in the next section.

Purposeful Nonsense and the Social Imaginary

In order to elucidate one of the key aspects of purposeful nonsense, it will be useful to borrow a concept from sociology: the social imaginary. At its most basic, the social imaginary includes the stock of shared ideas, beliefs, principles, mores, and so on in a given society or culture. Charles Taylor describes it as “the ways people imagine their social existence, how they fit together with others, how things go on between them and their fellows, the expectations that are normally met, and the deeper normative notions and images that underlie these expectations”.²⁹ Of course, actual societies are quite complex: they may overlap, there may be subcultures. It is often difficult distinguish one from another. Within these overlapping, partially integrated groups not everyone will share the same ideas or experience them in the same way. Despite these obstacles, certain ideas or beliefs are shared by enough members of a society (in the sense of being familiar with, not necessarily endorsing) to characterize them as part of the social imaginary.

Purposeful nonsense relies on the social imaginary: it draws on assumptions, images, and ideas that are already available in society, and uses them in a novel way. Among the shared understandings that purposeful nonsense draws upon are stereotypes and other denigrating narratives that are already harmful to particular social groups. For example, our shared image of poor (especially poor *black*) women as sexually irresponsible lends credence to misperceptions of Planned Parenthood. Kyl’s error exploits this common misperception. By quantifying the misperception of Planned Parenthood as an abortion provider, Kyl takes advantage of the pre-existing stereotype of its clientele as poor, black, and promiscuous. All the criticism heaped on Kyl hasn’t led to the correction of the misperception; that *ninety-seven*

percent of Planned Parenthood's province is health care *unrelated* to abortion remains hidden in a darkened corner of common perception. Meanwhile, the misperception remains as part of the social imaginary: a widely available, extensively shared, routinely reinforced falsehood. Even with the criticism, Kyl's number, though false, reinforces the stereotype – after all, he was an authority speaking in his official capacity – fortifying it for its next use. That the stereotype wasn't made explicit, that it isn't universally accepted (or even universally known), doesn't blunt its force. The stereotype functions problematically simply because it is available in the social imaginary. That purposeful nonsense exploits elements of the social imaginary – racist, sexist and otherwise hateful imagery and ideology – often without explicit reference to them allows it and its authors to occupy a kind of moral asylum, in multiple senses. In one sense, messages they deliver – by conjuring them from the social imaginary – without actually uttering are those for which they are free to deny responsibility. In another sense, such nonsense is often characterized as merely hurtful or too aimless to bother criticizing; in other words, it's too ridiculous to even engage. We intend to revoke purposeful nonsense's free pass. Regardless of how one interprets the intentions of the speakers, purposeful nonsense functions to sustain oppression.

2. THE PURPOSE OF NONSENSE

A standard response to nonsense is to disregard it; after all, it doesn't make a useful contribution to the conversation, and time spent cataloging and correcting factual errors in such rhetoric is a dangerous distraction. Identifying and criticizing the specious science behind the legitimate-rape-doesn't-cause-pregnancy theory, for example, simply reinforces the notion of "legitimate rape" and sustains the problematic framing of the abortion debate away from women's authority over their bodies. At best we could focus on the offense – the implications are hurtful – and insist upon an apology or at least an acknowledgement of the affront. This seems to be the right response even to inflammatory nonsense, but it presumes that all

nonsense is equally harmless or, at least, that its harm is fleeting. Furthermore, there are practical reasons to curb our responses to run-of-the-mill nonsense. The debates with which we are concerned – about race, sex, gender, and identity more generally – are delicate to begin with. Accusations and nitpicking are more likely to derail such discussions than to advance them. Treating purposeful nonsense as harmless, however, would be a mistake. Though its impact is often mistakenly or misleadingly characterized as benign, this nonsense has an insidious function.

To further clarify our conception of purposeful nonsense, we will contrast it with a different but natural reading: understanding nonsense as *purposeful* means that there must be direct intention behind it. Such discourse must be aimed at some specific goal, and its authors must be aware of that goal. On this reading, Kyl must have intended to trade on people's classist, racist presuppositions about the communities served by Planned Parenthood in order to persuade them to believe the false claim that Planned Parenthood is primarily an abortion provider. As a bonus, he also succeeds in shaming the community Planned Parenthood serves. Alternatively, one can read Kyl as only intending to protect unborn children and exaggerating what he earnestly believes to be a true claim: that Planned Parenthood is primarily an abortion provider.

On this understanding, it is on the basis of some specific intention that we should judge Kyl's (praise or) blameworthiness. If Kyl had the first intention (to deceive if not outright lie), for example, we can take him to task for reinforcing stereotypes that oppress poor (and by extension minority) women. If his was the second intention, we may mitigate blame if we conclude that his well-intentioned (if misguided) action, nevertheless, brought about a disastrous result. However, this is *not* the conception of purposeful that we are using here; in our view, the "purposefulness" of nonsense is not contingent upon intentions, good or bad. *Even if* purposeful nonsense involved neither lying nor deliberate deception, it would still function as a catalyst for social oppression. To view purposeful nonsense as merely a form of

lying or deception (even though it may sometimes involve both) would be to miss key aspects of how such nonsense works; how, precisely, it perpetuates certain forms of social oppression.

A different example will be helpful here: up to this point, we have focused on examples involving professional politicians whose motives and integrity may already be suspect. We want to explore an entirely different kind of example in order to make clear that the problems of purposeful nonsense go beyond the realm of professional politics into public discourse. In 2013, Akiba Solomon wrote a careful analysis of the development and opening of a Christian pregnancy crisis center in Kansas City, MO and the local political imbroglio swirling around it. The article was published on COLORLINES, a racial justice daily news blog, which could not be accused of having a conservative agenda.³⁰ In her article, Solomon discusses an anti-abortion propaganda film titled, “Maafa 21: Black Genocide in the 21st Century.” She *reports* this claim from the film: targeting by abortion providers has resulted in “over 15 million black lives eliminated”.³¹ While Solomon is careful throughout the article to correct misinformation with cited statistics, in this instance she does not. She talks about the difficulty in determining rates of abortion by race, but she neither confirms nor denies this particular claim.

On our view, this would be purposeful nonsense; perhaps the most well-intentioned instance of such, but purposeful nonsense nonetheless. First, Solomon has reproduced a factoid that she has neither confirmed nor denied (thus, truthiness). When a progressive author in a progressive venue fails to dispute such a claim, this lends it an air of credibility. Second, the quantity involved makes the claim inflammatory. Fifteen million is certainly a number that legitimates use of the term ‘genocide’, but talk of genocide is inflammatory. The final criterion is intelligibility. The claim itself is intelligible, but the context raises questions. In most instances, she states explicitly when claims she’s reporting are false, but in this one she does not. This raises questions about how this particular claim should be interpreted: Is it true? Is she just trying to convey the ideology of this group? If so, why not verify (or falsify) it? One would be at great pains to find fault with Solomon’s intentions; however, the context allows the claim to be

read in multiple ways. Thus, another bit of inflammatory rhetoric has been reinforced in the social imaginary: repeated, not clearly denounced, and ready to be absorbed or exploited as needed by politicians, the press, and the public at large.

Purposeful nonsense *is* what it *does*. The moral significance of purposeful nonsense has to be located in its function, its role. When viewed in isolation, and abstracted from the social context that is necessary to make sense of such statements, the reporting of this factoid might be benign; when viewed as purposeful nonsense, it appears more problematic. These two sections have allowed us to give a full account of purposeful nonsense. Our goal has been to a) identify the features typical to purposeful nonsense and b) characterize the unique way that purposeful nonsense harms and the kinds of injuries it might impose. Purposeful nonsense is characterized by problems with intelligibility, a disinterest or orientation away from the truth, and the use of inflammatory rhetoric. These three features in combination have the capacity to allow harmful and denigrating narratives (including stereotypes) to be invoked as subtext, thus, conveying hidden injurious messages that are challenging to critique. This also allows superficially innocent or well-meaning speech to subtly reinforce these stereotypes, again while minimizing their exposure to criticism.

3. THE MOST DANGEROUS DISCOURSE

Having characterized and clarified the powerful lens of analysis that the notion of purposeful nonsense offers, we will now turn that lens onto the Radiance Foundation's anti-abortion billboard campaign. The Radiance Foundation's co-founders, Ryan and Lisa Bomberger, have made it their mission to work towards ending "the black genocide" and exposing the campaign of misinformation that has tricked the black community into believing that Planned Parenthood is their ally rather than their enemy.³² This campaign is especially interesting from our point of view, as it highlights a number of the complexities of purposeful nonsense: its messages are not easily categorized as lies or even as deception; the messages

are nonetheless harmful. This is important to keep in mind, as we argue that these aspects of purposeful nonsense are key to mapping out an effective response to its harms.

Many of the Bombergers' claims are not mistaken: for example, that the abortion rate among black women is higher than that of their white counterparts³³ and that there is a persistent racial gap in infant and maternal mortality rates.³⁴ Planned Parenthood's history is tainted by association with racist eugenics.³⁵ There is a case to be made for racism in the bureaucracy of adoption, including continued unwillingness to place children of one race into families of another.³⁶ Critics of the Radiance Foundation may very well agree that structural racism is at the heart of these issues while disagreeing with the conclusions and general message set forth in the Foundation's anti-abortion campaign. Consider the Foundation's use of the word "genocide" to describe these facts of life for black women and children in the United States. Genocide is a very strong characterization, evocative of mass killing (or "letting die") or rape, and more specifically a planned campaign of destroying a racial, ethnic, national, or other cultural group.³⁷ A common reaction to this description of the situation would be one of surprise and chagrin, perhaps especially from those who consider access to adequate reproductive health services a basic right for all women. How could the existence of Planned Parenthood clinics in black neighborhoods possibly be considered at all harmful, much less genocide?

The answer to this question is complex, and should be considered in light of the history of the treatment of black women in the United States: forced sterilization of black women, often without their knowledge; the rape of black women not being considered a crime; children of black women born into slavery, taken away, and sold.³⁸ Understanding these events and the different social locations created by them is crucial to understanding the way different people will engage with and understand the Bomberger's mission. Black women, historically and to this day, struggle to have healthy pregnancies, to give birth, to be allowed to parent their children, and to manage interlopers well-meaning and otherwise.³⁹ Though we reject the Bomberger's

messages as purposeful nonsense, it is not because their claims are outrageously false. Instead, we think because of the already oppressive context in which these messages are delivered, they, ultimately, harm black women.

The Radiance Foundation's anti-abortion campaign employs purposeful nonsense both in its general rhetorical strategy (e.g., the invocation of "black genocide") and its specific execution (the billboards). The selective use of facts, and the context (or lack of context) in which they are placed, lend this campaign the air of truthiness or bullshit. For example, while the history of Planned Parenthood may have included blatant racism on the part of its founders, it stands today as a valuable source of healthcare, serving many low-income women and families. Whatever the sources of the current racial disparity in the quality of healthcare for women and children, the services of Planned Parenthood clinics are not among them. Implying otherwise has the *function* of misleading or deceiving. Another main reason we argue this campaign is a prime example of purposeful nonsense is that it serves to tangibly *harm* black women.

In the following sections we will take a closer look at the recent series of anti-abortion billboards sponsored by the Radiance Foundation. We contend that the messages of these billboards rely on racist and sexist narratives already present in the social imaginary, mislead through 'truthiness', and contribute to the oppression of black women, thereby helping to maintain an unjust society. In other words, these billboards are a prime example of purposeful nonsense at work.

Black Children As "Endangered Species"

The first billboard of the series features a photo of a young black child with the caption "Endangered Species". One apparent connotation of this message is that black children are akin to nonhuman animals. The primary context in which we hear the phrase "endangered species" is in reference to animals in danger of going extinct. Given the ongoing association of

blacks with animals – apes or other primates in particular – this serves to remind black women of their historical status as less than human. In this sense, the use of “endangered species” is inflammatory; it conjures up negative racial stereotypes that are almost impossible to miss. This message relies on racist narratives and stereotypes that are already present in our society.

Perhaps the representation of black children as an endangered species is only meant to convey the issue's importance or tug on the heartstrings. However, this charitable reading only makes sense against a background of shared knowledge that is inherently racist. Without the underlying racist association between blacks and nonhuman animals, the billboards wouldn't make nearly as much sense. A billboard reading simply “Endangered Species” above the picture of a white infant would far less comprehensible: what does it mean to say, that humans are going extinct? That babies in general are in danger?⁴⁰ This is a good example of the sort of misrepresentation Frankfurt refers to: racially charged inflaming of the “abortion wars” disguised as concern for black children.⁴¹ As we will see, all three of the billboard messages fit with our conception of purposeful nonsense and cause harm to a specific group. In these cases, the harm consists in a reinforcement of blacks women's subordinate status.

“The Most Dangerous Place For An African American is in the Womb”

The second billboard in the series seems less directed at eliciting concern or pity and more directed at producing surprise or shock. Once again, this slogan draws on certain “facts” or “knowledge” already available in the social imaginary: that blacks are violent, especially amongst themselves (e.g. “black on black violence”); that they don't share “our” values; that they are often poor, on welfare, under-educated; that neighborhoods where they live are especially dangerous. In this context, it is quite provocative to say that black children may be in *more* danger before they are even born into such circumstances.⁴² Again, this message invokes racist stereotypes, thus, serving to fuel anti-choice rhetoric while at the same time shaming a specific social group.

This billboard's message relies not only on stereotypes based on race but on gender as well; any analysis of this case should be intersectional. It takes aim specifically at *black women* specifically but in that peculiarly roundabout way characteristic of purposeful nonsense. Note that there is no direct mention of black women and motherhood; there is simply a reference to the womb, as if it were just a place where children lie in incubation, unconnected to the black mother's body. A message is conveyed to these women: you are only the *site* of a battle, of a possible campaign of genocide against your offspring.⁴³ This billboard also conjures up the intersectional stereotypes of the "welfare queen" (lazy, dependent on the government, careless of her own and others' well-being) and the "jezebel" (sexually wanton, perhaps susceptible to the "easy way out" offered by abortion). Black women are not *being seen* as responsible, autonomous agents, literally and figuratively. It is this lack of recognition, this diminishment, which contributes to the subordination of black women. These billboards offer a concrete illustration of the harm of purposeful nonsense; a glimpse of oppression at work.

"Black & Unwanted"

The message of the final billboard in the series also works on at least two levels. At one level, it is meant to elicit indignation: why should some children be unwanted simply because they are black? At the same time, on another level, it serves to remind blacks that there is a real sense in which they *are* unwanted or ignored in U.S. society. For example, blacks earn 40% less, have one-tenth the net worth, pay more for homes valued at 35% less, and are overrepresented among the arrested, prosecuted, incarcerated and executed.⁴⁴ Here again, we see racial stereotypes called upon to exploit real concerns and anxieties; the billboards use inflammatory rhetoric masquerading as concern for black children.

Messages of this sort have a common thread; they serve to reinforce and maintain social oppression by invoking harmful stereotypes already available in the social imaginary. In the billboard examples, we see purposeful nonsense playing on both gender and racial stereotypes.

In her book *Sister Citizen*, Melissa Harris-Perry explores the complicated relationship between these sorts of stereotypes and African American women's experience of themselves as political actors:

I conducted focus groups with forty-three African American women in Chicago, New York, and Oakland. As a warm-up task, I asked participants to think about black women as a group and list the stereotypes or myths about them that other people may hold. I then asked them to write down the 'facts' about black women as they saw them... Although these women lived in different cities, were of several generations, and had different economic and family circumstances, their discussions formed a coherent picture. They independently arrived at the same three stereotypes that many researchers of African American women's experience also identify: Mammy, Jezebel, and Sapphire.⁴⁵

While further analysis of these intersectional stereotypes is not possible here, we do want to highlight the ready availability of these harmful stereotypes. You don't have to dig deep to access them; they are always there, lurking in the background of people's experience. What purposeful nonsense does is trigger these harmful stereotypes; it brings them to the foreground. Purposeful nonsense thereby *actively* participates in creating, re-creating, and maintaining oppression, contributing to an unjust society.

Again, the Radiance Foundation may or may not be deliberately intending to mislead, deceive, or harm. That is not relevant to the argument we make here. The point is the harm results from the way that purposeful nonsense *functions*; the harm stems from its role in the reproduction of oppression. Furthermore, its harm is not merely that it personally offends members of subordinate groups. It may do that, but that is not the main point, and responding to purposeful nonsense as such would not alleviate its most serious harm. The main point is the tangible effects it has on (in this case) black women's lives: for example, it may contribute to less funding for crucial, affordable health care.

4. CONCLUSION

Purposeful nonsense is a name for a routine way in which oppression is accomplished in everyday life. Feminist, black feminist, and intersectional analyses have been integral to

understanding this phenomenon. Feminist analyses of oppression are an important source of the initial intuition that the rhetoric in purposeful nonsense requires attention, despite how ridiculous and beyond relevance it may seem at first; this same literature provides continuing analysis of the direct harms of oppressive ideology.⁴⁶ Feminist and black feminist theorists are among the first to collect and document damaging racist and sexist stereotypes, thus, providing a database against which this rhetoric can be compared.⁴⁷ Feminist and black feminist theorists have routinely theorized the significance of background social structure and context as fundamental to the function of social oppression, positing something like a “social imaginary” as part of that context.⁴⁸ They have led the way in cataloguing the complexity and variety of the ways that racism and sexism – in particular, the intersection of the two – undermine the material well-being, the psychological well-being, and the agency of its victims.⁴⁹ Feminists and black feminist theorists have also made important contributions to ethical theory in this vein, identifying and criticizing the subtler forms of moral failure stemming from racism and sexism.⁵⁰ Absent these vital contributions, purposeful nonsense and its role in social oppression would remain veiled. Feminist and black feminist thought is key to identifying avenues for further research of this phenomenon; in particular, it may serve as an excellent resource for further exploration of the concept of *stereotype threat*.

Feminist theorists have taken great pains to try to connect the experience of oppression to the material consequences of oppression, but there is still more work to be done in this area. An already robust and still growing body of studies on stereotype threat have shown that when reminded of a social group identity stereotyped as performing poorly in some arena – from mathematics, to athletics, to social sensitivity – members of that social group *do* in fact perform less well in that arena.⁵¹ The risk this creates – that one will confirm a negative stereotype about one’s social group – is called stereotype threat. The variety and extent of the confirmation of stereotype threat offers a deeper understanding of stereotypes and their impact. Characterizing the performance failures provoked by a combination of long-term awareness of

and immediate exposure to oppressive stereotypes is an important first step, but there may be more direct effects that can be quantified by similar research.

Research on stereotype threat focuses on measurable results of the effects of these negative stereotypes, under extremely controlled conditions. The effects of purposeful nonsense, however, are significantly more subtle and wide-ranging and, therefore, potentially more detrimental to performance across a broader spectrum of life situations. We suggest that purposeful nonsense, disguised as merely “bad” or logically confused discourse, is a key factor in creating and maintaining an oppressive and unjust society and does so, in part, by provoking stereotype threat type reactions in the vulnerable populations that are subjected to it. Although purposeful nonsense calls upon similar stereotypes across far less controlled circumstances, we suggest that there may be a fruitful line of inquiry that blends some of the crucial insights of stereotype threat research with analysis of the workings of purposeful nonsense. For example, one could take a closer look at the way in which particular stereotypes perpetuate the oppression of some social groups. Here we have in mind Harris-Perry’s work on the enduring harm of the intersectional stereotypes of the Jezebel, the Sapphire, and the Mammy. These are the sorts of stereotypes regularly invoked by purposeful nonsense; it would be interesting to investigate connections between such invocations and the precise way in which stereotype threat is triggered.

Given the revelation about the important role that the social imaginary plays in both the effectiveness of purposeful nonsense as communication and its effectiveness as oppression, mapping the social imaginary – in particular racist, sexist and other discriminatory ideologies – is a necessary next step in undermining purposeful nonsense directly and social oppression more generally. Purposeful nonsense analysis could be used to track gaps between people’s awareness of discriminatory ideology and their *acknowledged* awareness, because it often requires hearers to avail themselves of stereotypes and other denigrating narratives – that they would ordinarily disavow – in order to make the discourse intelligible. Tracking the ability to

interpret this discourse could be useful to tracing the reach of the relevant stereotype.

Determining the relevance of age, intelligence, or geography, for example, to the function of this discourse could assist in developing anti-racist and anti-sexist educational strategies.

Discussing the ability to interpret messages that rely on racist and sexist stereotypes could also be a useful inroad to getting people to engage with their own unconscious or covert biases.

Stereotype threat demonstrates that the harm of stereotyping endures. More specifically, robust stereotypes create a vulnerability that people have to manage, that threatens them even when no agent is intentionally applying these stereotypes. The poignant irony revealed by the study of stereotype threat is that stereotypes inflict ongoing, serious harm without need of a malicious agent, and then, ultimately, erase their tracks. Much in the same way, purposeful nonsense employs harmful stereotypes without ever having to make them explicit. Our central interest is in exposing purposeful nonsense and its role in maintaining an unjust society. Our analysis identifies important avenues for further research into the epistemology of social oppression, and the complicated ways in which such oppression works. Crucial to our investigation are a host of indispensable tools developed and sustained by feminists and black feminist theorists. With these same tools, progress can be made in the ongoing struggle against social oppression.

¹ L. Moore, "Rep. Todd Akin: 'Legitimate Rape' Statement and Reaction." *The New York Times*, 20 August 2012, sec. U.S. / Politics at <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/08/21/us/politics/rep-todd-akin-legitimate-rape-statement-and-reaction.html> [accessed 29 July, 2013].

² Cf. M. M. Holmes et al., "Rape-related Pregnancy: Estimates and Descriptive Characteristics from a National Sample of Women," *American Journal of Obstetrics and Gynecology* 175, no. 2 (August 1996): 320–324; discussion 324–325.

³ This notion has been resurfacing in conservative talking points for forty years. Cf. P. Levy, "'God's Little Shield': A Short History Of The False No-Pregnancy-From-Rape Theory," *TPM*, 20 August 2012 at <http://2012.talkingpointsmemo.com/2012/08/akin-not-the-first-a-short-history-of-the-false-no-pregnancy-from-rape-theory.php> [accessed January 15, 2013].

⁴ Cf. E. Bazelon, "Charmaine Yoest's Cheerful War on Abortion," *The New York Times*, 2 November 2012, sec. Magazine at <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/11/04/magazine/charmaine-yoests-cheerful-war-on-abortion.html> [accessed 29 July, 2013]; —, "Republicans' Claim That Rape Doesn't Cause Pregnancy

Comes From Nazi Experiments,” Blog, *Slate: The XX Factor - What Women Really Think*, 12 June 2013 at http://www.slate.com/blogs/xx_factor/2013/06/12/trent_franks_abortion_myth_and_the_nazis_no_exception_for_pregnancy_from.html [accessed 29 July 2013].; and her, “Myth That Rape Rarely Causes Pregnancy Based on a Nazi Experiment That Never Happened,” Blog, *Slate: The XX Factor - What Women Really Think*, 26 July 2013 at http://www.slate.com/blogs/xx_factor/2013/07/26/myth_that_rape_rarely_causes_pregnancy_based_on_a_nazi_experiment_that_never.html [accessed 29 July 2013].

⁵ Cf. S. Cho, Crenshaw and L. McCall, “Toward a Field of Intersectionality Studies: Theory, Applications, and Praxis”, *Signs*, 38 (2013), 785–810 (pp. 785, 792); L. McCall, ‘The Complexity of Intersectionality’, *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 30 (2005), 1771–1800 (pp. 1772, 1780–82). This essay is best understood as akin to the “centrifugal applied” projects described by Cho et al. employing the “intracategorical” approach described by McCall.

⁶ Cf. P. H. Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*, 2nd edn (New York: Routledge, 2000); “It’s All in the Family: Intersections of Gender, Race and Nation.”, *Hypatia*, 13 (1998), 62; A. Y. Davis, *Women, Race & Class* (New York: Vintage Books, 1983) in particular.

⁷ Cf. S. L. Bartky, *Femininity and Domination: Studies in the Phenomenology of Oppression* (Routledge, 1990); Marilyn Frye, *Politics of Reality: Essays in Feminist Theory* (Crossing Press, 1983); Iris Marion Young, *Justice and the Politics of Difference* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1990).

⁸ The methodologies of black feminism – the focus on particular experience as the root of theory and by extension resistance, the commitment to modeling and defending this way of engagement – are crucial to our project. Cf. P. H. Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*, 2nd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2000): 21-44.

⁹ Cf. Davis, *Women, Race & Class*, pp. 202 - 221; Recent black feminists have also contributed to this discourse, cf. K. M. Bridges, *Reproducing Race: An Ethnography of Pregnancy As A Site of Racialization* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011) and H. A. Washington, *Medical Apartheid: The Dark History of Medical Experimentation on Black Americans from Colonial Times to the Present* (New York: Harlem Moon, Broadway Books, 2006).

¹⁰ K. Crenshaw, “Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics”, *University of Chicago Legal Forum* 1989 (1989), 139–155, p. 140.

¹¹ E. Peralta, “Sen. Jon Kyl Corrects Erroneous Statement On Planned Parenthood: NPR”, *The Two-Way: NPR’s News Blog*, 2011 at <http://www.npr.org/blogs/thetwo-way/2011/04/22/135641326/sen-jon-kyl-corrects-erroneous-statement-on-planned-parenthood> [accessed 26 September 2012].

¹² Ibid.

¹³ A. Solomon, “The Missionary Movement to ‘Save’ Black Babies - COLORLINES,” News, *COLORLINES*, 2 May 2013 at http://colorlines.com/archives/2013/05/crisis_pregnancy_centers_and_race_baiting.html [accessed 29 July 2013].

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Cf. J. Sunday, “Racist Anti-Abortion Campaign Comes to Austin”, *How to Have Sex in Texas*, 2010 at <http://howtohavesexintexas.blogspot.com/2010/12/racist-anti-abortion-campaign-comes-to.html> [accessed 19 April 2012]; M.Z. Pérez, “Past and Present Collide as the Black Anti-Abortion Movement Grows” - *COLORLINES*, 2011 at http://colorlines.com/archives/2011/03/past_and_present_collide_as_the_black_anti-abortion_movement_grows.html [accessed 18 April 2012]; and ‘The Radiance Foundation’, *The Radiance Foundation* at <http://www.theradiancefoundation.org/topics/> [accessed 25 September 2012].

¹⁵ Cf. N. Ambady and others, “Stereotype Susceptibility in Children: Effects of Identity Activation on Quantitative Performance”, *Psychological Science (Wiley-Blackwell)*, 12 (2001), 385; S. J. Spencer, C. M. Steele and D. M. Quinn, “Stereotype Threat and Women’s Math Performance”, *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, 35 (1999), 4–28; M. Walsh, C. Hickey and J. Duffy, “Influence of Item Content and Stereotype Situation on Gender Differences in Mathematical Problem Solving”, *Sex Roles*, 41 (1999),

219–240; and C. Steele, *Whistling Vivaldi: How Stereotypes Affect Us and What We Can Do*, Kindle edn (New York: Norton, 2010), Kindle Locations 216–218.

¹⁶ J. Hoskinson, “Colbert Report: The Word – Truthiness”, *The Colbert Report* (New York: Comedy Central, 2005) at <http://www.colbertnation.com/the-colbert-report-videos/24039/october-17-2005/the-word-truthiness> [accessed 23 April 2012].

¹⁷ H. Frankfurt, *On Bullshit*, 1st ed. (Princeton University Press, 2005).

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 12.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 21 - 22.

²⁰ J. Hoskinson, “Colbert Report: The Word – Truthiness”.

²¹ L. Moore, “Rep. Todd Akin: ‘Legitimate Rape’ Statement and Reaction,” *The New York Times*, 20 August 2012, sec. U.S. / Politics at <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/08/21/us/politics/rep-todd-akin-legitimate-rape-statement-and-reaction.html> [accessed 29 July 2013].

²² *Ibid.*

²³ Forerunner of the rape can’t cause pregnancy theory, Stephen Freind, claimed that raped causes women to secrete a spermicide, cf. J. M. Baer, “Freind’s Rape-pregnancy Theory Refuted,” *Daily News Magazine*, *Philly.com*, 23 March 1988 at http://articles.philly.com/1988-03-23/news/26277205_1_freind-woman-secretes-luigi-mastroianni [accessed 29 July 2013]; More recently, conservatives have relied on Fred Mecklenburg who posits that stress prevents ovulation, cf. Bazelon, “Myth That Rape Rarely Causes Pregnancy Based on a Nazi Experiment That Never Happened”.

²⁴ Baer, “Freind’s Rape-pregnancy Theory Refuted”.

²⁵ H. Herzog, “Why Are Rape Victims More -- Not Less -- Likely To Get Pregnant?” *Huffington Post* at http://www.huffingtonpost.com/hal-herzog/why-are-rape-victims-more_b_1823152.html [accessed 29 July, 2013].

²⁶ Bazelon, “Myth That Rape Rarely Causes Pregnancy Based on a Nazi Experiment That Never Happened”.

²⁷ “Reporting Rates | RAINN | Rape, Abuse and Incest National Network,” *Reporting Rates* at <http://www.rainn.org/get-information/statistics/reporting-rates> [accessed 29 July 2013], .

²⁸ There is reason to believe that it isn’t just a figurative slap, either. Rape the leading cause of post traumatic stress disorder in women (per L. M. Cortina and S. P. Kubiak, “Gender and Posttraumatic Stress: Sexual Violence as an Explanation for Women’s Increased Risk.,” *Journal of Abnormal Psychology* 115, no. 4 (November 2006): 754). Having a prominent figure put air quotes around your rape is a potential trigger for serious stress responses.

²⁹ C. Taylor, *Modern Social Imaginaries* (Duke University Press Books, 2003), p. 21.

³⁰ “COLORLINES - About Us.” *Daily News Magazine*. *COLORLINES*. Accessed August 13, 2013. <http://colorlines.com/about>.

³¹ Solomon, “The Missionary Movement to ‘Save’ Black Babies - COLORLINES”.

³² “The Radiance Foundation”, *The Radiance Foundation*.

³³ R. K. Jones, Lawrence B. Finer and S Singh, *Characteristics of U.S. Abortion Patients, 2008* (New York: Guttmacher Institute, May 2010), (p. 7) at <http://www.guttmacher.org/pubs/US-Abortion-Patients.pdf> [accessed 21 January 2013].

³⁴ The infant mortality rate in the U.S. for black babies is almost 2.5 times higher than for white babies; the maternal mortality rate for black women is more than three times that of white women per K. M. Bridges, *Reproducing Race*, locations 2185 & 2200; and M. Z. Pérez, “Past and Present Collide as the Black Anti-Abortion Movement Grows”.

³⁵ H. A. Washington, *Medical Apartheid*, pp. 195 – 198.

³⁶ K. Dries, “‘Black Babies Cost Less’: The Racial Realities of Adoption in America”, *Jezebel* at <http://jezebel.com/black-babies-cost-less-the-racial-realities-of-adopt-597148155> [accessed 29 June 2013].

³⁷ The UN definition of genocide is broader than this, and includes such acts as causing serious physical or mental harm to members of a group, and forcefully transferring the children of one group to another. Cf. “Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide” (United Nations, December 9, 1948) at [http://www.un.org/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=A/RES/260\(III\)](http://www.un.org/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=A/RES/260(III)) [accessed 29 July 2013].

³⁸ Cf. Washington esp. Chapter 8 “The Black Stork: The Eugenic Control of African American Reproduction”, pp. 189-215.

³⁹ Cf. Bridges, *Reproducing Race* and Davis, *Women, Race and Class*.

⁴⁰ Cf. P. McIntosh, “White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack,” *Peace & Freedom Magazine*, July/August 1989: 1.

⁴¹ Frankfurt, *On Bullshit*, pp. 3–4.

⁴² This message also has the ring of truthiness about it. Is the claim that the most dangerous place for black babies is in the womb meant to be a fact, an opinion, or neither of these in particular? Is it merely a statement of feeling, meant to be immune to standards of truth and falsity? There is no attempt to provide evidence for the claim. Again, it seems to work because it trades on already-available elements of the social imaginary.

⁴³ Cf. A. Strasser, “GOP Congressman Calls Planned Parenthood A ‘Racist Organization’, Compares Abortion To Slavery”, *ThinkProgress*, 2012 at <http://thinkprogress.org/health/2012/09/14/852491/gop-congressman-calls-planned-parenthood-a-racist-organization-compares-abortion-to-slavery/> [accessed 29 September 2012].

⁴⁴ E. Bonilla-Silva, *Racism Without Racists: Color-Blind Racism and the Persistence of Racial Inequality in America*, Third Edition (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2009), p. 2.

⁴⁵ M. V. Harris-Perry, *Sister Citizen: Shame, Stereotypes, and Black Women in America*, 1st edn (Yale University Press, 2011), p. 32.

⁴⁶ Cf. Bartky, *Feminist and Domination*, pp. 22-32, for example.

⁴⁷ M. Frye, *Politics of Reality: Essays in Feminist Theory* (Crossing Press, 1983); C. W. Mills, “‘But What Are You Really?’ The Metaphysics of Race”, in *Blackness Visible: Essays on Philosophy and Race* (Cornell University Press, 1998), pp. 41–66; C. W. Mills, *The Racial Contract* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1999).

⁴⁸ Young, *Justice and the Politics of Difference*, especial chapter 2, “The Five Faces of Oppression”, pp. 39 - 65.

⁴⁹ K. Crenshaw, ‘Mapping the Margins, 1241–1299.

⁵⁰ Marilyn Friedman, *What Are Friends For?: Feminist Perspectives on Personal Relationships and Moral Theory* (Cornell University Press, 1993); J.L.A. Garcia, “The Heart of Racism”, *Journal of Social Philosophy*, 27 (1996), 5–46.

⁵¹ Again, Steele’s *Whistling Vivaldi* provides the most substantial overview of the phenomenon, while “ReducingStereotypeThreat.org” at <http://reducingstereotypethreat.org/bibliography.html> [accessed 29 July 2013] offers a significant bibliography of stereotype threat research to date.

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