Loretta Ross’ “African American Women and Abortion” essay closely examines the active role Black women have played in the reproductive rights movement from the early 1800s to now. African-American women’s roles, efforts and contributions in the movement are often times plagued by racist and sexist ideologies, and overlooked and overshadowed by their white counterparts. This brief summary of her longer essay is intended to provide an overview of Black women’s determination to control their reproductive destinies over time and despite many obstacles. This historical evidence counters the more recent claims by anti-abortionists that African American women are incapable of making responsible decisions for themselves about their bodies and their families. We can learn from our foremothers that:

1. African American women have always fought for dignity, respect, and self-determination over their bodies.
2. Opposition to family planning for women has a long-standing history and a set of well-financed opponents.
3. Ideas of race-based eugenics still contaminate thinking about whether people of color have the human right to have children or not have children, and to parent the children we have.
4. Black women can overall all obstacles, insults, and are fierce members of the Reproductive Justice movement.
The Black feminist movement’s historical advocacy for and commitment to Reproductive Justice has remained obscured for three reasons. The traditional perspective is that the movement for abortion rights is primarily a white women’s movement. As a result, feminist literature developed the assumption that African-American women lacked the capability and awareness to establish a grounded perspective about gender inequality and abortion rights. Second, many people assume that a “striking kinship” between reproductive rights and Civil Rights (in the words of Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr.) is nonexistent. Yet, the two movements were connected until the 1960s through the common goals of birth control proponents and many leaders of the African American community. Ross states, “In the early twentieth century Black organizations were often visible supporters of fertility control for Black women, linking reproductive rights to racial advancement”. African American women were not passive in their efforts to attain reproductive dignity but in fact assertive in their decisions to choose to use birth control and have abortions.

The third reason the true contributions of African American women in the movement was hidden is because of racist and sexist perceptions held by population experts, feminists and/or African Americans who believe that Black women are not capable of making their own decisions regarding their political standpoint and their reproductive health. Some anti-abortion activists even claim that Black women are dupes of the family planning movement, leading to false charges of self-genocide perpetrated by Black women. However, a historical examination of African American birthrates, history and activism contradicts these erroneous assumptions.

Approximately 20% of the American population was African American before the Civil War. Before the Civil War, Black women had to hide their knowledge about contraceptives and abortifacients they had secretly brought from Africa or learned in America because plantation owners punished women who did not breed more slaves. In active resistance, Black women employed contraceptive methods and abortion. They even resorted to infanticide to oppose slavery and exert some limited control over their destinies, even though sexual assault and sexual abuse against enslaved women was rampant. This knowledge was spread even wider after slavery through midwives and secretive literature although the Comstock Law of 1873 was a federal law that made it a crime to sell or distribute information or materials that could be used for contraception or abortion. For example, in 1894

*The Women’s Era,*

an African-American women’s journal edited by Josephine St. Pierre Ruffin, declared that “not all women are intended for mothers. Some of us have not the temperament for family life,” she wrote arguing for fertility control.

In the latter half of the 19th century, Black women were making great strides to control their
fertility and employed such techniques as delaying marriage or having fewer children so that by the early 20th century, the African American population was cut in half. Forced breeding of Black women had come to an end due to the agency of Black women. Moreover, controlling one’s family size was linked to a strategy of racial uplift, deliberate strategies by the African American community to improve their social and economic conditions and resist white supremacy.

Early twentieth century African-American women were vigorously involved in the birth control movement. The Women’s Political Association of Harlem, working with the New York Urban League, was the first Black organization to implement educational sessions on birth control in 1918. Soon after launching the educational campaign, the organization received massive attention from numerous clubwomen seeking information about birth control. They strongly supported the development of family planning clinics in Black communities, with the first one opening in 1924 in conjunction with the New York Urban League in the largely black Columbus Hill neighborhood in New York City. The New Amsterdam News, the leading Black newspaper of the city, trumpeted the opening of the Harlem Clinic on October 16, 1929. The three biggest Black Harlem churches – Abyssinian Baptist Church, St. James Presbyterian, and St. Philip’s Protestant Episcopal – hosted public lectures on birth control.

The success of the birth control campaign spurred strong and sustained reactions from various opponents. The main opponents to fertility control were the Catholic Church, white conservatives who were concerned with white women’s easy accessibility to birth control, and Black Nationalist leaders who believed in population growth as a form of resistance to racial oppression. Black Nationalist fears of a decreasing African American population size stemmed from the high rates of racism, lynchings, and poverty during the early twentieth century.

The early 20th century quickly gave birth to eugenics as an ideology and a social and political movement due to fears about emancipated African Americans and immigrants. The movement promoted selective breeding as an effective way to improve the overall quality of society. The movement reflected white Americans’ fears of people of color and immigrant whites who were not of Nordic-Teutonic descent rapidly out-reproducing the “normal” white American population. Ross notes that “to promote the reproduction of self-defined “racially superior” people, eugenics proponents argued for both “positive” methods, such as tax incentives and education for the desirable types, and “negative” methods, such as sterilization, involuntary confinement, and immigration restrictions for the undesirables” (as cited in Petchesky, 1990, p.86). Sterilization abuse of vulnerable women became official government policy during this period and lasted until the 1970s when lawsuits by women of color halted the official funding of this practice. The eugenics movement fed legitimate concerns about deliberate attempts to reduce the Black population but African American women were not confused between external attempts to control their reproduction and their personal decisions about their lives. They
opposed eugenics and supported individual family planning at the same time.

Skyrocketing infant and maternal mortality rates prompted activists such as Margaret Sanger to argue for reproductive freedom for all women. Sanger had an immediate effect on the American population that began to debate whether women should have legal access to birth control, with feminists and conservatives pitted against each other. However, the early feminism of the birth control movement views and efforts were distorted with the involvement of eugenicists in the campaign who brought their own racist nativism into the debate. The use of birth control became a right or option for white women, while it became viewed as a necessary obligation for poor women, particularly women of color.

During the 1950s, new ideologies justifying population control began to surface after eugenics as a philosophy had been discredited by the Nazis during World War II. New theories were constructed to explain Third World population growth effects on America’s ability to dominate world affairs. The U.S began to heavily support population control policies abroad, arguing that population control was vital in the fight against communism. Domestically, the success of the Civil Rights movement in challenging segregation caused many politicians to become increasingly fearful of African American political power. Instead of offering a political argument, they coded their concerns by claiming that Black ghettos would continue to grow, and that a growing welfare class predominately concentrated in inner cities would cause crime rates to skyrocket.

As a result, conservative support for federally-supported family planning grew. Former president Richard Nixon said in 1970, “It is my view that no American woman should be denied access to family planning assistance because of her economic condition.” He established the Office of Economic Opportunity to fund family planning programs, particularly in Latino and African American communities, arguing that such programs would reduce health and welfare costs.

The establishment of family planning programs in mainly Black and Latino urban areas in the South caused a division between white conservatives. On one hand, some whites wanted programs that implemented eugenic ideas about reducing the populations of people of color. On the other hand, a strong portion of the conservative white American population was threatened by the idea of all women controlling their fertility. They were especially concerned that white women would have access to family planning intended for women of color. In clinics throughout the South, white women were actively discouraged from using these services, such as in Louisiana and Arkansas. This split among conservatives over family planning was not healed until after Nixon, when Ronald Reagan helped launched the “Moral Majority” to put conservatives back in power in 1980.
In the 1970s there was a lack of visible Black male support that had been visible from the 1920s until the rise of the Black Power Movement. Many Black Nationalist organizations such as the Black Muslims of the Nation of Islam, the NAACP sector in Pittsburgh, and the Black Power Conference strongly opposed abortions by linking it to genocide. The Black Panther Party was the only nationalist group that partially supported the accessibility of birth control and free abortions even as it split largely along gender lines.

The birth control clinics established by Sanger did not provide all the necessary resources or services demanded, so that Black women did not have a variety of options before the legalization of birth control in the 1960s. Even though programs and projects were launched aiming to reach African American women such as the 1939 Negro Project, they never developed the capacity to meet the overwhelming needs of the population, especially in rural areas. Black women were limited to refraining from intercourse or adopting methods such as the usage of condoms, spermicidal douching or practicing the withdrawal method. Black women who sought an abortion did it illegally through the assistance from doctors, midwives and quacks. The lack of access to appropriate contraceptives and abortion caused many African American women to resort to sterilization as a means to avoid unwanted pregnancies.

The failure to achieve reproductive justice led many desperate women to take matters into their own hands and establish an “underground railroad” movement to secure abortions. Before abortion was legalized in 1973, many women went to illegal practitioners. In the 1960s, underground abortion was made possible by churches, community based referral services and supportive doctors. In Chicago, an underground network called Jane started in 1969 to address the problem of the lack of safe and affordable abortions. The women of Jane, including several African American pioneers, learned how to perform abortions at a lower cost than the rates other illegal practitioners were charging.

After the 1973 *Roe v. Wade* Supreme Court decision that legalized abortion, Black feminist leadership flourished. For example, in the early 1970s Byllye Avery, founder of the National Black Women’s Health Project in 1984, traveled to New York a great deal helping women obtain abortions because she was a member of a referral network. But she soon realized that trips to New York to obtain illegal abortions were not reasonable options for all women. She instead decided to co-found the Gainesville Women’s Health Center in 1974 with several white women and learned to perform abortions. The National Council of Negro Women issued a statement in support of *Roe* in 1973, while the National Political Congress of Black Women, the Coalition of 100 Black Women, and other important organizations affirmed the right of African American women to self-determination and bodily integrity.
Countless other African American women have fought for reproductive justice and histories are just now being written about them. From the “granny” midwives during slavery to leaders like Angela Davis and Dorothy Roberts, African American women continue the fight for their human rights to control their bodies and their destinies.