



# Killing the Black Body: Race, Reproduction, and the Meaning of Liberty

By Dorothy Roberts

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The image of the “Welfare Queen” still dominates white America’s perceptions of Black women. It is an image that also continues to shape our government’s policies concerning Black women’s reproductive decisions. Proposed legislation to alleviate poverty focuses on plans to deny benefits to children born to welfare mothers and to require insertion of birth control implants as a condition of receiving aid. Meanwhile a booming fertility industry serves primarily infertile white couples.

In *Killing the Black Body*, Northwestern University professor Dorothy Roberts exposes America’s systemic abuse of Black women’s bodies, from slave masters’ economic stake in bonded women’s fertility to government programs that coerced thousands of poor Black women into being sterilized as late as the 1970s. These abuses, Roberts argues, point not only to the degradation of Black motherhood but to the exclusion of Black women’s reproductive needs from the feminist agenda. Groundbreaking, authoritative, and timely, *Killing the Black Body* is both a powerful legal argument and a valuable aid for teachers, activists, and policy makers in creating a vision of reproductive freedom that respects each and every American.

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## **Killing the Black Body: Race, Reproduction, and the Meaning of Liberty** By Dorothy Roberts **Bibliography**

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### Editorial Review

#### Amazon.com Review

Dorothy Roberts' passionate and well-documented book looks at a less-talked about side of the battle for reproductive rights: the history of the social and governmental control of African American women's bodies.

Roberts, a law professor at Rutgers University, asserts that African American women have been engaged from the start in an ongoing fight to gain control of their reproductive choice. First, in the early days of American slavery, from control by white "masters" who forced slaves to produce children to work for them, and now, from government "solutions" to African American child-bearing like the distribution of the long-term contraceptive Norplant in African American communities.

Roberts also takes the mainstream feminist movement to task for working mostly for the "negative right" of liberty, that is, the right of women to not have the government involved in their reproductive decision-making. To Roberts this debate, focused mainly on government non-interference, ignores issues especially important to African American women such as access to contraception or reproduction technologies. "Reproductive freedom is a matter of social justice," she says, stating further that it is social inequality, more than any legal interference, that severely limits African American women's ability to choose how and whether to have children. "We need a way of rethinking the meaning of liberty so that it protects all citizens equally," Roberts writes. "I propose that focusing on the connection between reproductive rights and racial equality is the place to start." --*Maria Dolan*

#### From Library Journal

Rutgers law professor Roberts examines "the history of social policies used by the dominant power structure to control black women's reproductive freedom."

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#### From Kirkus Reviews

Roberts's exploration of the history of African-American women and reproductive rights is brilliant, controversial, and profoundly valuable. The author, a professor of law (Rutgers Univ.), brings forth a view of black women wholly ignored by mainstream America. Beginning with slavery and moving to the present day, she argues that white America has perpetuated a legacy of pathological social violence against black women and their reproductive capabilities. Female slaves, Roberts asserts, were often bought with the express purpose of using them as breeders; white males profited by raping black women and selling their children. Later, in the first half of the 20th century, the eugenics movement turned contraception from a tool of women's liberation into a tool of control to cut birth rates among southern blacks, and as late as the 1970s black women were routinely sterilized by hysterectomies that were not medically necessary. More recently, poor black women living in urban areas have been forced by courts, doctors, and health care organizations to be implanted with the Norplant birth-control device; doctors frequently refuse to remove it on request. Roberts's arguments are especially convincing because they are so well researched and thoroughly dissected. Drawn from documented cases, African-American theorists, and media reports, Roberts's knowledge of her subject is total. Instead of painting black women as passive victims of this reproductive racism, she represents them through the image offered by a former slave, Anna Julia Cooper, who characterizes the black woman fighting to protect the bodies of her daughters as "an entrapped tigress." Roberts outlines an agenda for change in the final chapter, positioning the book as an important stepping-stone toward transforming the way black women and their children are treated in America. "The denial of Black reproductive autonomy

serves the interests of white supremacy," Roberts states, and she demands her reader rethink the relationship between race and reproduction. -- *Copyright ©1997, Kirkus Associates, LP. All rights reserved.*

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