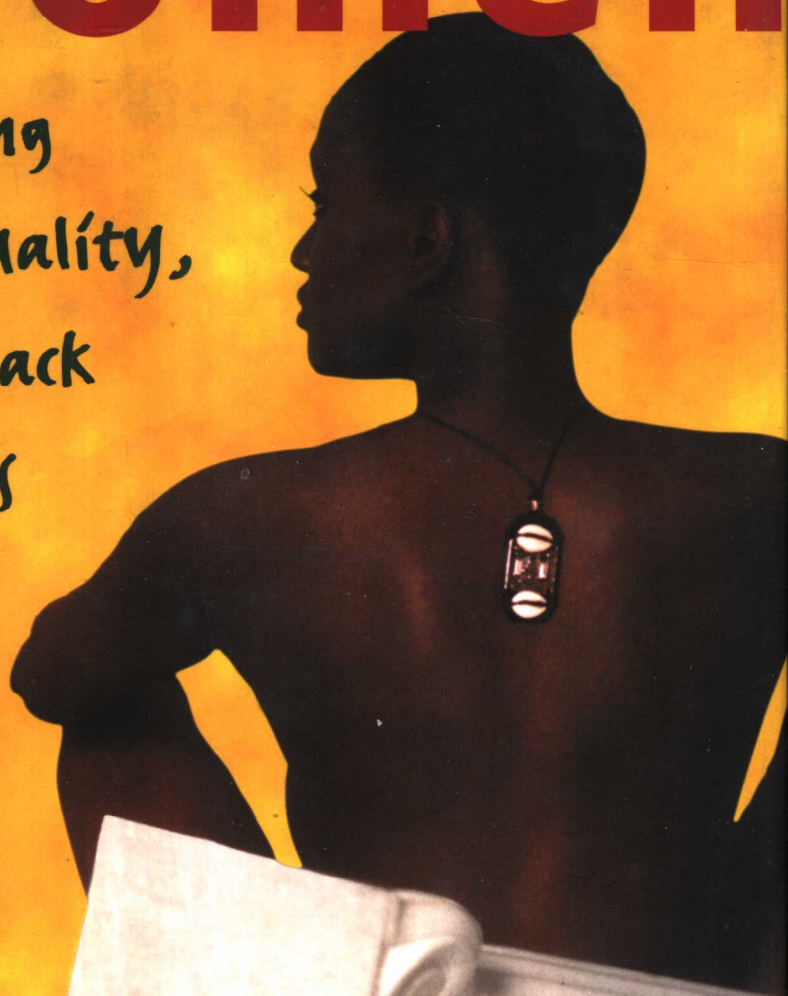


"Probing, fact-based . . . dissects the myths, discards the stereotypes, and unshackles our minds." —BEBE MOORE CAMPBELL

# stolen women

Reclaiming  
Our Sexuality,  
Taking Back  
Our Lives



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*My life is a journey*  
*My ancestors and others show me the way*  
*Like my mother, I chose my own path*  
*For Lauren and Darren, I finish my sister's dream*  
*With Lance, Lacey, and Gavin, I leave behind more than I received*  
*God protects me, and*  
*Lewis lights my way home with his love*

# Introduction

## Why I Wrote This Book

I bring over twenty-two years of professional experience as a sex researcher and therapist—and a lifetime of experiences as a black woman—to the book you are about to read. *Stolen Women* is a portrait of African-American female sexuality, documenting not only what it is, but telling the story of how it came to be, and how it shapes our lives.

There are no other books like this one about our sexuality. The few that come closest are based on interviews with a small number of people whom the author either knows or met in private practice. It would have been fairly easy for me to select just a few interesting individuals and write about them, but too much of that kind of work has already been done. What we need is an objective framework of information that can help us gain perspective on our lives. This book attempts to fill that gap by representing our experiences across seven generations, based on my clinical research and in-depth interviews with hundreds of women from 18 to 80 years old.

In Part I, “Redefining Our Image,” I trace sexual images of black women through nearly five centuries and show how stereotypes that are centuries old still threaten our modern sexuality.

In Part II, “Understanding Our Sexuality,” I explore our

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formative sexual experiences, report their actual outcomes across our lifespans, point out the cultural patterns expressed in our behaviors, and uncover the principles and knowledge that enable us to take responsibility for ourselves and our sexuality no matter what society expects or what has happened to us in the past.

You will encounter several exemplary lives in this section, but if you are looking for a single ideal notion of womanhood, you won't find one here. I believe we are too diverse and far too complicated to fit neatly into one image to which we all could or even would want to aspire. It's much more important to get at the reasons why so many of us, like the women I have come to know and care about, need healing and insight. You will meet many of them here, including:

- Confident and independent Peggy, coping with her friends, her new teenage body, and two loving parents trying to teach her to be a lady.
- Heather, contemplating suicide at age 25 because her memories of childhood sexual abuse will not subside.
- June, settling for romantic flings that sometimes last for years—until the guys fall out of love and go on to marry someone else.
- Mickey, a sensitive college student, hiding behind baggy jeans, workshirts, and combat boots to blend in better with her “homeboys.”
- Sandra, small, shy, and pregnant at age 15, pausing when I ask her what it means to “have a baby for a guy” and replying, “It means that you care.”
- Marte, sleeping with men to have something to talk about, but still in a genuine romantic relationship with her girlfriend, Jean.
- Maya, finally unlocking the secret of lasting love with her husband after almost losing what they had together.

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Perhaps these lives sound familiar. I try to portray them factually, not leaving anything out. Women's experiences are diverse as well as sexual, and it's time we recognize it and acknowledge how that diversity and sexuality may be relevant to our own experiences. Some stories may disgust or surprise you; some will amuse and enlighten you. I try to make the lessons of our individual struggles available to you. When possible, I link them to cultural patterns in the distant past in order to show how similar our cultural beliefs and practices have remained or how different they have become as we've struggled as an African people to survive sexual slavery and its aftermath.

In Part III, "Taking Back Our Lives," I encourage your self-awareness. Take my Sexual Responsibility Test and identify your personal problems, challenges, and unexplored potential as you continue on your private path through life as a unique sexual being, affirming the best of us across generations.

## About My Research

Even though many of my findings have been published in professional journals, cited hundreds of times by other sex researchers and writers, presented at international conferences, and reported in the *New York Times*, *Ebony*, *Essence*, *Emerge*, *Vanity Fair*, *USA Today*, the *Los Angeles Times*, and other national media, this is the first time I have attempted to share them with other African-American women, our girls, our families, the men and women who love us, and the many people who have important reasons to care about us.

I have been fascinated by the mystery of black sexuality all of my life. As the granddaughter of a Methodist minister, I grew up in a very conservative Southern family that

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sheltered my sister and me from the world, but encouraged us to create our own. As little girls, we spent hours in our backyard playing with dolls. Eventually, of course, I got to know the outside world; and when I did, I was especially curious about people who looked more or less like us.

What I found was extremely contradictory. On television, I saw the comedians like Rochester, the spineless valet on "The Jack Benny Show," in contrast to Sapphire, the domineering wife on "Amos 'n' Andy." Looking at movies such as *Gone with the Wind* and *Pinky*, I discovered sexless, saintly, confused, or victimized black women. Then as a teenager, I saw mostly the opposite: violent, sex-obsessed characters in the black exploitation films. In all those years, no matter what images I saw, I wondered, Who were these people? Where did they live? I didn't know anyone who acted the way they did, so I wondered, Was my world the world, or was I missing something? Today, I find myself asking similar questions when I see sex-saturated music videos such as "Baby Got Back."

Eventually I figured out that truth always defies oversimplification. At historically black Fisk University, I learned not to accept the media's version of black people, but to observe and document black life instead. By the time I had completed my doctoral work in psychology at the University of California at Los Angeles, I was on a mission. I knew just what I had to do. I would become an expert on the social and cultural issues that affect our mental health, including what I now understood were all those sexual stereotypes I had noticed as a child. I broadened my clinical training to include sex therapy and sex education. Yet once again, I was struck by the gap between the reality I knew and the way we were portrayed.

When I looked for useful information about healthy black female sexuality, I found only descriptions of the



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sexual practices of poor women that compared them to middle-class suburban whites. The comparisons made us seem almost tragic, unlike the many individuals I knew who enjoyed healthy, expressive sex lives. Clearly, the full range of our experiences had not been studied. Having learned that the roots of human sexuality lie in the survival needs of the past, I tried to gain some insight into the traumatic impact of slavery on our sexuality in America. I found virtually no information on that subject either.

So I decided to find out for myself and began to do the research, determined to replace the sketchy, distorted images of black sexuality with accurate information at last. Few researchers before or since have attempted to do what I did in conducting the research on which this book is based. I set out to:

- include middle-class and affluent women in my studies with poor women and not just compare them,
- take cultural differences between us into account, factoring in our diverse personal backgrounds and specific life experiences, and
- trace the early patterns of our sexuality across our lifespans.

Beginning in 1980, I studied my first representative sample of 126 African-American and, for perspective, 122 white women ages 18 to 36 in Los Angeles County using the Wyatt Sexual History Questionnaire (WSHQ). I asked literally hundreds of questions about what they had learned about sex throughout their lives and why they engaged in the sexual behaviors that they reported. We chose to be very thorough in our interviews rather than to ask fewer questions of more women. It was not my intent simply to describe sexual practices but to understand the circumstances in which they occurred. In that study, I began

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to see certain cultural patterns in my respondents' sexual behavior.

In 1994, a decade later, my colleagues and I asked many of the same questions to a second representative sample of 305 African-American, 300 white, and 300 Latina women ages 18 to 50 in Los Angeles County. Similar patterns appeared again and again, regardless of when the women were born.

Even more recently, along with another research team, I used the same approach with a third sample of 71 African-American and 77 white survivors of breast cancer ages 39 to 80 in Los Angeles and Washington, D.C. Even their traumatic bouts with cancer and surgery did not alter the cultural patterns that I first noted in much younger women in my first study. You might think that these patterns would be influenced by regional differences, but in fact we did not find any differences between patterns reported in Los Angeles and those reported in Washington.

I realize that the numbers of women I have studied may seem small to you at first glance. Nonetheless, my findings give us an accurate picture of the connection between our culture and our sexuality. Further, they provide unlimited insight into the strength of the resulting patterns of behavior. For example, as a group, our basic sexual patterns did not change radically between the 1980s and the mid 1990s despite our awareness of the life-threatening consequences of AIDS. The fact that these patterns are so ingrained adds to the urgency of understanding them.

In Appendix I you will find more detailed background information on exactly how, when, where, and with whom I conducted these studies. In Appendix II and the reference section, you'll find the statistics supporting each observation. In a few chapters, I have included numerical data along with my general observations because the numbers speak louder than words.

## What Else to Expect

No book, regardless of how thorough, can answer every question about a topic as broad and important as sexuality—and this one is no exception. So there are a few points I would like to make clear before we begin.

*1. This is not a book about sex-related racial differences.* I have learned to focus on ethnic and cultural factors, not on racial differences in sexual experiences. When I refer to African-Americans, I mean the history and cultural values we share, not our race. People all over the world have engaged in various degrees of mixing, particularly in the United States over hundreds of years. There is no way to look at every person and determine their exact racial background. Even if you identify yourself as an African-American, it does not necessarily mean that you have no ancestors from other places. You carry the genes from all the nationalities on your family tree. Placing all blacks in one category is like mixing different vegetables in a soup and refusing to acknowledge the varied ingredients. Well, you may not care what's in it, but each ingredient adds to the flavor—some more, some less.

*2. This is an in-depth analysis.* You might expect research of this scope to ask women if they engaged in a variety of behaviors, and simply report them. By contrast, I chose to ask women why they did or did not engage in the behaviors they reported. While it's important to report their behaviors—and I do—it's even more important to understand the reasons behind them. An in-depth analysis also allows us to better identify cultural patterns that shape subsequent decisions. I feel that the only way to debunk stereotypes and truly understand our sexuality is to learn more about what influences our decisions to express it.

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*3. This is a book about the lifelong effects of our early sexual experiences, not a book about every sexual experience in our lives.* Our adult sexuality is essentially defined by certain critical decisions we make during childhood, adolescence, and young adulthood, including:

- when to become sexually active
- how to express our sexuality
- whether and how we should control our reproductive abilities
- the people with whom we express our sexuality
- how we use sex in our relationships

These early decisions tend to set the template for our entire sexual lives. I look closely at our decision making. I also look at what's done to, said to, or forced upon us during these early years because our sexuality is ultimately influenced as much by what we are made to do as by what we choose to do.

I also contrast women who grew up in rural versus urban areas, women who grew up poor versus those who were affluent, and those with more versus less education. These descriptions will highlight the importance of the environment on women's sexual experiences. And I describe the sexual patterns of women who were born before World War II or since the '60s, comparing my findings with the best-known sex research conducted in the early twentieth century—the Kinsey study—in an attempt to explain how patterns have or have not changed.

No doubt, there are essential lessons and sexual patterns later in life, including becoming menopausal, physically disabled, or ill with chronic or terminal diseases, that I did not include. These life experiences involve both biological and physical changes that deserve to be discussed in a book of their own.

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4. *This is not a book about African-American men.* I acknowledge that there is equally little known about their sexuality and even fewer studies that include them. But I chose to focus on women for two reasons. First, to obtain funds from the federal government to study sexuality you must present a convincing argument telling why you are the person to conduct that research. I elected to limit my first study to the group with which I had had the most experience in research, and that was women. Second, I feel that studies of African-American men should be conducted as carefully as I believe mine have been conducted. That study should include African-American men making important decisions about the questions that should be asked and what the findings mean. No one knows more about men than men themselves do. Men deserve a book of their own, because their experience, while similar to women's in some respects, is also very different. Their exclusion from this book is not meant to suggest that they should not be studied or that they are not as important as women. They are.

Finally, this book is as much about me as it is about you.

No women are more devalued in our society than women of color. It's been said that every woman bears the burden of sexual stereotyping at some point during her lifetime. That may be true; white women are often depersonalized, labeled as less than intelligent or incompetent. But the depersonalization of black women focuses on our sexuality first. In our homes, in our neighborhoods, and around the world, powerful stereotypes rooted in slavery perpetuate myths about who we are. Society's message is that to be black and female is to be without sexual control, to be irresponsible about our sexuality. Regardless of the circumstances, our age or our appearance, someone may assume that we are sexually available or for sale at some price.

One day I learned this the hard way. Even though sev-

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eral years have passed since the incident, I still remember my shock and pain. I know I am not alone in this. The problem is that too many people, perhaps some very close to you, have the illusion that our culture condones these things:

- having sexual knowledge at a young age
- having an unusual interest in sex
- having first intercourse outside of marriage
- having a high number of sexual partners
- engaging frequently in unconventional sexual practices.

There are few books written about sex by an African-American expert, and I have written this one because I want my findings to make a difference, not because I want to harm or exploit anyone. Most important, I want to show that not everyone is a victim. You will meet women in this book who have many problems, and others who are doing just fine. This book is designed to expose myths and destroy negative stereotypes about who we are. But it does not pretend that we are perfect. Who is?

I want you to sit in my circle and let me tell you our story. Like the griots of old, I tell a story that began many centuries ago, and you must become familiar with the story in order to understand how we've survived. In telling it, I, too, am surviving. This is more than a book—it is a part of our lives, so get comfortable and experience it with me.

I'd like to think that Granddaddy Morgan is looking down from his heavenly pulpit and saying "Amen to that!"

## Acknowledgments

I am standing on the shoulders of so many individuals who have helped and encouraged me to conduct my studies of African-American women's sexuality and to write this book. Early in my education, I had some powerful role models in Drs. Shirley Roberts, Henry Tones, Reginald Jones, and Edwin Nichols, who were my first psychology professors at Fisk University. My experiences at Fisk set the template as I learned what had to be accomplished in conducting my research.

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## Acknowledgments

ate directors, have made it possible for me to focus on difficult research questions and to conduct work for the first time with African-American women in a scientifically rigorous manner. They have also included me in conferences where the research findings could be heard by audiences all over the world. It was this kind of support that made it possible for me to begin to both challenge traditional notions and influence research and policies relating to African-American women's sexuality and health. Dr. Delores Perron, associate director for Special Populations at NIMH, has been a tremendous advocate, working in conjunction with my funding sources to provide me with the information and support needed to continue my work. I am also indebted to Edna Hardy Hill for her advice and guidance in conducting research and negotiating through the federal funding process.

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Finally, I want to express my sincere appreciation to the women who allowed me to tell their stories. I hope that I have represented them well. While many of the experiences