Stolen women: Reclaiming our sexuality, taking back our lives
Review by Juanita Rubio, Heather Terrell, and Nancy Felipe Russo

In Stolen Women, Gail Elizabeth Wyatt, Ph.D. draws upon her professional experience as a psychologist, sex researcher, and clinician, as well as her own personal experiences as a black woman, to examine the topic of African American women and sexuality. She begins by explaining that a woman of any color bears the burden of sexual stereotyping at some point in her lifetime, but that black women are especially devalued. Although white women are often depersonalized by being labeled as less intelligent or incompetent, depersonalization of black women focuses first on their sexuality. Stereotypes about black women that are rooted in slavery perpetuate myths about lack of sexual control and sexual irresponsibility, making it difficult for black women to express their sexuality without being defined by it.

The book is divided into three sections, and although it is based on clinical research, its conclusions are consistent with her empirical research as well. She takes a narrative approach, using various accounts to help the reader understand that sexuality has a varied meaning and that there is no single notion of womanhood. In Part I, Wyatt focuses on history, tracing sexual images of African American women through nearly five centuries to show the reader that modern stereotypes of black women have roots that can be traced back several generations. In Part II, stories of women she has interviewed are drawn upon to develop a portrait of the formative sexual experiences of black women. She discusses how these experiences influence sexuality later in life, and points out the cultural patterns that are expressed in personal accounts and behavior. She goes on to provide the reader with principles and knowledge that can help women take responsibility for their sexuality, regardless of past experiences or societal demands. In Part III, she encourages self-awareness by including a Sexual Responsibility test that can help one identify ‘personal problems, challenges, and unexplored potential’ while on the path of sexual healing and self-discovery.

Wyatt attempts to cover ground that has been previously untouched by other researchers. Middle-class and affluent women are included in her studies with poor women, emphasizing both differences and similarities. Cultural differences between black women are also taken into consideration, and Wyatt pays special attention to diversity of individual backgrounds and life experiences, as demonstrated by her emphasis on personal narratives. The book provides an in-depth analysis of the experiences of black women that allows an examination of cultural patterns that shape later decisions, and also traces the early patterns of sexuality across the entire life span.

Abortion issues are but a small part of Wyatt’s examination of the range of black women’s sexual and reproductive experiences. The points she makes, however, challenge conventional wisdom and emphasize the need for vigilance in avoiding the stereotypes that construct their sexuality. She presents a brief but powerful description of the impact of illegal abortion on black women, including a chilling example of a male nurse who poured turpentine down a woman’s vagina into her uterus in an attempt to perform an abortion. Later, she considers the meaning of sexual responsibility, considering factors that influence risky sexual behaviors, sexual satisfaction, deciding to have a family, use of contraceptives and deciding to have an abortion. Wyatt provides statistics on how many women have had abortions and their reasons for doing so, and points out that, contrary to other literature, she finds black women and white women seek abortion at similar rates. She issues a ringing challenge to the assumption that black women oppose abortion, stating ‘For African American women, the overall pattern appears to be pro-children, pro-families, and pro-choice. We have always valued the right to choose to bear children, whether legally or illegally’ (p. 178). She emphasizes that abortion is a ‘last decision’ in a series of events that might be prevented if Black women had more information about their bodies and were more empowered to consider their own goals and futures rather than deferring to their partners’ needs and wishes.

Although Wyatt acknowledges and explores the various painful socially constructed problems of African American women’s sexuality, her stance is optimistic, emphasizing the need for women to take on the responsibility to create change. Stolen Women is an important book. Reading it is an empowering experience for black women and a path to understanding the diversity of black women’s experiences for all readers. But women of other ethnicities will find echoes of their experiences in the book as well. Thus, on the one hand the book documents how sexuality and reproductive experiences are shaped by cultural forces and must be understood in their social and cultural context. But at the same time, the work also provides a bridge to unite women across those social and cultural contexts by showing how women share so many of the issues they face because they bear and raise children.