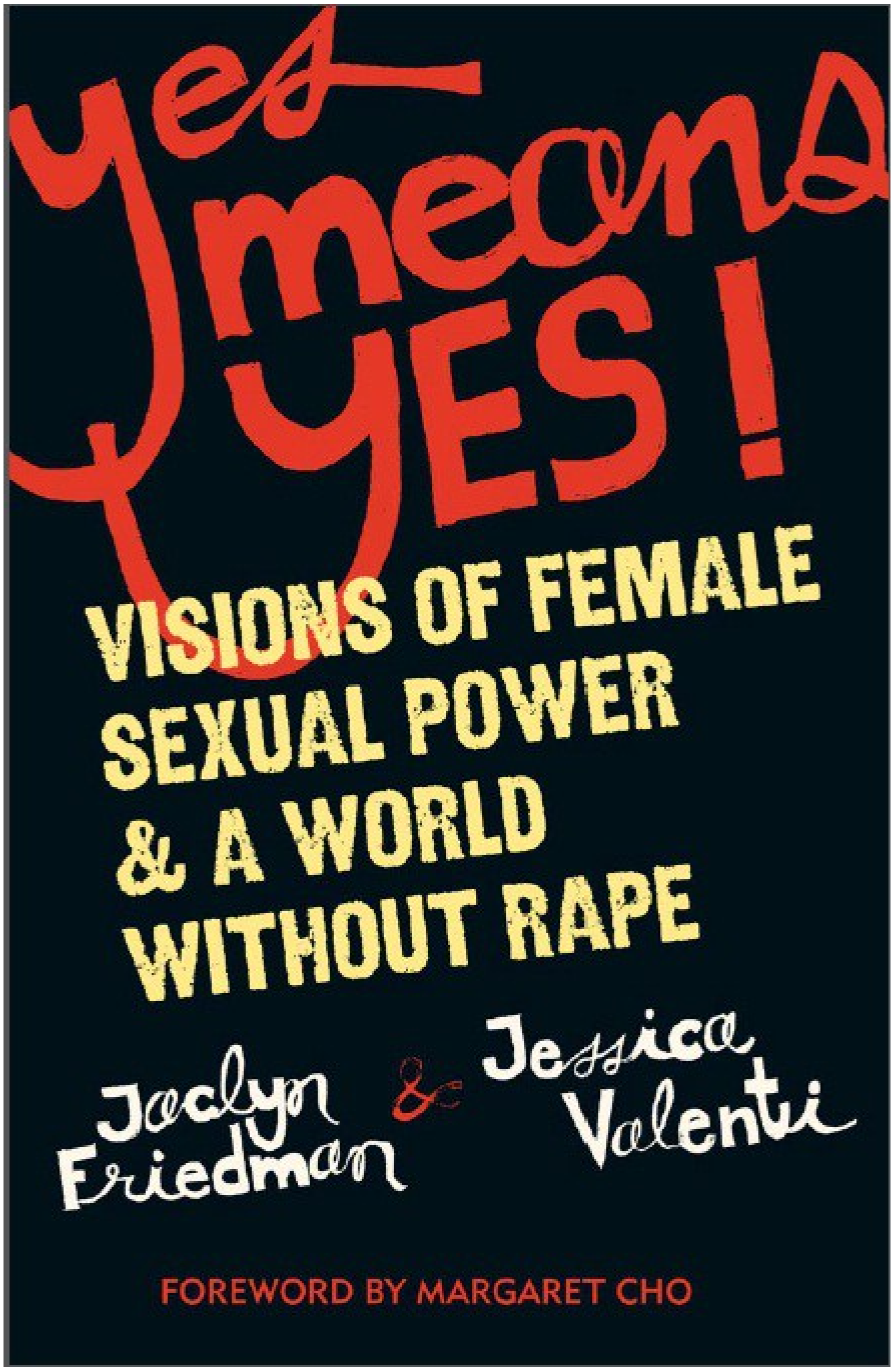

Yes Means YES!

VISIONS OF FEMALE SEXUAL POWER & A WORLD WITHOUT RAPE

Jaclyn Friedman & Jessica Valenti

FOREWORD BY MARGARET CHO

6 Queering Black Female Heterosexuality

BY KIMBERLY SPRINGER

HOW CAN BLACK WOMEN say yes to sex when our religious institutions, public policy, home lives, media, musical forms, schools, and parents discuss black women's sexuality only as a set of negative consequences? When mentioned at all, the words I recall most associated with black female sexuality were edicts against being "too fast." "Oooh, that girl know she fas'!" my aunty would tut as the neighborhood "bad girl" switched on by. Just looking too long at a boy could provoke the reprimand "Girl, stop being so fas'." Notably, it was only us girls who were in danger of being labeled "fast." Women in church, passing through the hairdressers, and riding by in cars with known playas were simply dismissed. They were already gone; "respectable" women uttered "jezebel" in their wake. The culture that's embedded in these subtle and not-so-subtle passing judgments tries to take away my right to say yes to sex by making me feel like if I do, I'm giving in to centuries of stereotypes of the sexually lascivious black woman.

Public assumptions about black female sexuality mirror the contradiction we deal with daily: hypersexual or asexual. We use silence as a strategy to combat negative talk. Perhaps if we do not speak about black women and sex, the whole issue will go away?

After all, for centuries black women tried to escape sexual scrutiny by passing unnoticed through white America as nurturing mammies. It's the nasty jezebels who give black people a bad name, and it's Mammy's duty to keep those fast women in check. The mammy and jezebel caricatures were forged in the complex and perverse race relations of the post–Civil War South. One foundational text for the mammy and jezebel icons is the white supremacist film *Birth of a Nation* (1915). Based on segregationist Thomas Dixon's novel *The Clansman,* the film portrays the loyal mammy as defender of the white family and home she claims as her own.

At the other end of the sexual spectrum in *Birth of a Nation,* Lydia Brown, a conniving mulatto character, uses her sexuality to bring about the fall of a white man. European explorers and English colonists accused black women of sexual promiscuity and labeled them jezebels. In the Bible's Old Testament, Jezebel was the wife of Ahab. Her reputation was that of a manipulator, but her name became synonymous with sexual deviousness and promiscuity. During slavery, white slave owners indiscriminately raped black women. White men, their wives, churches, and communities considered black women morally loose. What better way to excuse the abuse of white male power than by claiming sexual weakness when tempted by black devil women?

After slavery, though black women were no longer needed to supply offspring for sale, persistent racial and economic segregation required the jezebel image. Perpetuating the myth of black women as hypersexual served to set white women on a pedestal and excuse white men's rape of black women. If black women were always ready and willing sexual partners, it was impossible to have sex with them against their will. Rutgers University historian Deborah Gray White, in her history of enslaved black women, "*Ar'n't I a Woman": Female Slaves in the Plantation South,* observes that from the Civil War to the mid-1960s the Southern legal system failed to convict white men of rape or attempted rape of black women, though instances were widespread.

Black female sexuality in pop culture has not moved very far from these stereotypes. What better place to see this continued history of the asexual mammy than in the films of Queen Latifah? Whether she's *Bringin' Down the House* or having a *Last Holiday,* she's the queen of teaching white people how to be more human at the expense of her own sexuality, save the improbably chaste and deferred romance with a hottie like LL Cool J.

Though Halle Berry received an Academy Award in 2002 for her role as poor, working-class mother Leticia in *Monster's Ball,* her role in this film merely updates the jezebel. Leticia provides a vivid example of black female sexuality that is needy and bankrupt, as she pulls at her clothing and mewls to her white lover, Hank, "Can you make me feel good?" Leticia cannot satisfy herself economically, emotionally, or sexually, but neither will Hank. The jezebel is insatiable. For mammy and jezebel, black female sexuality is defined in relation to white maleness, and as such serves as a cautionary tale about black women's sexuality unbound. What we face is a huge, but not insurmountable, obstacle in getting to "yes."

As sociologist Patricia Hill Collins points out in her book *Black Sexual Politics,* the more things change, the more they remain the same. Collins describes the continuous link between the mammy and a contemporary image of the "black lady." Stereotypes about black women's sexuality have met with resistance, particularly among middle-class blacks in the nineteenth century who advocated racial uplift and self-determination. Proving that blacks could be good citizens required silence about sexuality and sexual pleasure. Between respectability and silence, black women found little space to determine who they were as sexual beings. Black women might never be "true ladies" capable of withdrawing from the workplace and into the home and motherhood. The realities of racism and sexism in terms of wages and employment meant that black families needed two incomes long before white Americans needed or wanted double paychecks. Still, though most black women had to work, they could endeavor to be respectable and asexual. Respectable black women were professionals, good mothers, dutiful daughters, and loyal wives. Each role depended on their being traditionally married and in a nuclear family. Most certainly, one was not a loose woman.

Just as nineteenth-century black leaders advocated respectability, modern-day public policies that belittle black women as "welfare queens," "hoochie mamas," and "black bitches" work to control and define the parameters of black women's sexuality. If black women's sexuality—particularly poor and working-class black women's sexuality—is routinely described as the root of social ills, then once again black women are left with little room to maneuver if they want respect in America's classrooms, boardrooms, and religious sanctuaries. Collins claims that the ideal of the "black lady" is what black women have to achieve if they want to avoid undesirable labels like "bitchy," "promiscuous," and "overly fertile."

The nonsexual black lady has become a staple in television and film. She wears judicial robes (Judges Mablean Ephriam and Lynn Toler of *Divorce Court*), litigates with stern looks (district attorney Renee Radick in *Ally McBeal*), is a supermom who seems to rarely go to the office (Claire Huxtable on *The Cosby Show*), delegates homicides (Lieutenant Anita Van Buren in *Law and Order*), and ministers to a predominantly white, middle-class female audience (Oprah Winfrey). It seems contrary to protest an image that is *not* slutty. Surely, television producers responded to demands from civil rights organizations that black women be portrayed in a different light. The black lady would appear to reflect well on black women as proper, middle-class, professional, and even-tempered. She appears as progress in the American workplace, politics, and the entertainment industry. However, the black lady image is retrograde.

If a black woman is a lady and not dismissed as a ho, there will inevitably be speculation that she is a closet lesbian. This accusation is particularly the case with very successful black women. The wild gossip about powerful black women always casts suspicion on the nature of their relationships with their close childhood confidantes. Oprah Winfrey, Queen Latifah, Whitney Houston, Condoleezza Rice, Alicia Keys—each of them has had to refute accusations from straights and gays that they are lesbians. Their strategies have ranged from good-naturedly "outing" themselves as unapologetic best friends to making homophobic denials. Both tactics miss the opportunity to assert anything positive about black female sexuality beyond the childish rejoinder "I am strictly dickly."

Today in black communities, women's communities, the hip-hop community, and popular culture, the main way of viewing black female sexuality is as victimized or deviant. No one could have anticipated the proliferation of the black woman–as-whore image in a new mass-media age that is increasingly the product of black decision makers. Fans and detractors these days uncritically call women who perform in music videos "hoes," "ho's," or "hoez." No matter how it's spelled, the intent is still the same: to malign black women who use their bodies in sexual ways. An equal-opportunity sexist might claim, "Video hoes aren't only black—there are Asian hoes, white hoes, Latin hoes, all kinds of hoes!" How very exciting and magnanimous—an age of racial equality when little girls of any race can be called hoes.

They wear very little clothing (it might be generous to call a thong "clothing"). The camera shots are either from above, (for the best view of silicone breasts) or zoomed in (for a close-up on butts). And the butts! They jiggle! They quake! They make the beat go *boom*, papi! As Karrine Steffans tells us in *Confessions of a Video Vixen,* these black women are pliable and willing to serve as props in music videos. So respected was Steffans for her willingness to do anything to be in a rap video or a rapper's limo, she earned and trademarked the nickname Superhead. Jezebel has become a video ho, video honey, or video vixen—depending on your consumer relationship to the women who participate in making music videos.

There are also female rappers willing to play the jezebel role to get ahead in the game. As Collins and others observe, they have added another stereotype to the mix: the Sapphire. Sapphire is loud and bitchy. She is abusive to black men and authority figures, especially her employer. Embodied in raunchy rappers like Lil' Kim, Trina, and Foxy Brown, this combination Jezebel/Sapphire is hot and always ready for sex . . . but she just might rip your dick off in the process. Is this empowerment?

Listening to people debate black women's sexualized participation in rap music videos, but seeing asexual black women only on film and television, what's a girl to do? Young black girls and teenagers are aspiring to be well-paid pole dancers. Black women, such as Melanie in the CW's sitcom *The Game,* think that the only way to attract and keep their man is to adopt a position of "stripper chic," which means clinging comically to a newly installed pole in the living room. Black female heterosexuality seems to move deeper and deeper into unhealthy territory that is less about personal satisfaction and more about *men's satisfaction*.

This acquiescence is akin to a nationwide black don't ask/don't tell policy. In her documentary film *Silence: In Search of Black Female Sexuality in America* (2004), director Mya B asks young black women how they learned about sex. They all give a similar, familiar answer: *not* in my parents' house. Their parents' silence, of course, does not stop them from thinking about, having, and enjoying sex, but one wonders what they will (or won't) say to their younger sisters or children about sex. Particularly noticeable about Mya B's film is that we are never told the names of the women speaking about their sexuality. The only people whose interviews are captioned are medical, religious, and spiritual experts. The young and older women speaking to their own diverse sexual experiences remain unnamed—in the closet, as it were.

There is, of course, an intergenerational aspect to silence around discussions of sexuality that cuts across race and ethnicity. Puritanical views on sexuality are not confined by race. In the case of the black community, however, our silence is further enforced by traumatic intersections of race, sexuality, and often violence. In other words, there are nuances to silence that will take more than merely urging openness in dialogue between mothers and daughters to address. Ending this silence around sexuality needs to be more than telling girls how not to get pregnant or catch STDs. Speaking about black women's sexuality today should be as much about pleasure as it is about resistance to denigration.

This "damned if you do, damned if you don't" approach to black women's sexuality is a *crisis situation*. It might not have Beyoncé ringin' the alarm, but until black women find a way to talk openly and honestly about our private sexual practices, the terms of black female sexuality will always be determined by everyone but black women. The women in the videos are merely the emissaries delivering a skewed message.

Also of urgent concern is black women's acceptance of negative representations of our sexuality. Is the disavowal that we are not like the video hoes on our screens any better than silence? Is even accepting the term "video ho" resignation that the insult is here to stay? Postmodern sexuality theorist Michel Foucault wrote about how people will serve as their own surveillance by policing their own thoughts and actions. Our silence about our sexuality becomes the border that we must not cross if we too want to assume the role of the black lady. Racism, sexism, classism, and heterosexism are the sentinels on that border, but there is very little for these guardians to do when we keep ourselves within the designated zone with our own silence or condemnation of other women. There are women, increasingly young women, who believe that if they do not behave in sexually promiscuous ways, they will be exempt from public scorn. Unfortunately, that is not the case. Just as we can all take a bit of pride in Oprah's achievements, we also are all implicated in the mockery and contempt heaped upon Janet Jackson. Clearly, the strategies we've used since the end of slavery have not worked. What have we been doing? Being silent in an effort to resist the normalization of deviant representations of black female sexuality is a failed tactic.

Where, frankly, is the outrage? Are we so overwhelmed by centuries of being told that we are overly sexed that we refuse to acknowledge insults anymore? Clearly, if we simply ignore the problem, it will not go away. In an age when marketing language has become standard, our sexuality will continually be rebranded depending on the needs of the marketplace. In women's magazines, on e-bulletin boards, in conversations, and in fiction, we hear that black women are tired of being mistreated, but what is the prescription or call to action?

In 1982 at Barnard College, a controversial conference, "Towards a Politics of Sexuality," exposed the tensions and anxieties inherent in wrestling with sexuality. Coming out of the conference was a key book, *Pleasure and Danger: Exploring Female Sexuality,* edited by Carol Vance. Vance asks questions in her introduction that remain, for me, unanswered: "Can women be sexual actors? Can we act on our own behalf? Or are we purely victims?" When applied to women of color, these questions become even more pressing, given that our sexuality is what is used as the dark specter to keep white women in line. Can black women be sexual actors in a drama of our own construction? Will black women act on our own behalf . . . even if doing so includes fantasies that incorporate racist or sexist scenarios? Or are black women destined to always be victims of a racial and sexual history that overwhelms hope for transformation and liberation?

As it stands now, many of feminism's concerns (mainstream, white, black, and so on) restrict our discussions of black female sexuality to the consequences of having sex. Teen pregnancy, unwanted pregnancy, sexually transmitted diseases, HIV, sexual assault, incest, and exploitation are the topics that come up when we talk about sex education. *We need new visions and new ways of talking about black female sexuality.*

Historically, white women parlayed their experiences working with blacks for the abolition of slavery into the drive for women's voting rights. In the early 1970s, many social-change groups adopted the language of the Black Power movement. Why? Because the notion of power was potent and, dare I say, *virile* language. The notion of pride and refusing to be ashamed had a confrontational edge to it that Chicanos, women's libbers, Asians, American Indians, and gays recognized as a new direction: Rather than ask for integration into a corrupt system, why not demand the resources to build a new world according to one's own agenda?

In developing that vision, gays, lesbians, bisexuals, and transgender (LGBT) activists not only declared a form of gay pride, but also later would even co-opt the language of civil rights. We see it today in demands for same-sex marriage as a right. And while LGBT uses of civil rights language might rub some African Americans the wrong way, I would say it is time for blacks—specifically, black women—to take something back. Isn't it time for heterosexual black women to adopt the language of queerness to free us from Mammy's apron strings? Wouldn't the idea of coming out of the closet as enjoying sex on our own terms make Jezebel stop in her tracks to think about getting *herself* off, rather than being focused on getting her man off? It is time to queer black female *heterosexuality*. As it stands, black women acquiesce to certain representations as if taking crumbs from the table of sexual oppression. Our butts are in vogue, we're nastier than white women in the bedroom, we're wilder than Asian women—all stereotypes derived in a male fantasy land of "jungle" porn and no-strings-attached personal ads. A queer black female heterosexuality isn't about being a freak in the bedroom; it's about being a sexual person whose wants and needs are self-defined. Easier said than done in a culture that makes us believe that someone else's wants are our needs.

Black female sexuality is not pathology. Until 1973, homosexuality was listed in the American Psychiatric Association's diagnostic manual as a disease. Both political agitation and studies within the field resulted in its removal. Black female sexuality is not listed, of course, in psychiatric manuals as a disease, but the way it is represented in American popular culture is sick and twisted. It is easy enough to say what we do not like, but rarely does anyone hear what we *do* like.

Queerness, then, is not an identity, but a position or stance. We can use "queer" as a verb instead of a noun. Queer is not someone or something to be treated. Queer is something that we can *do*. The black woman is the original Other, the figure against which white women's sexuality is defined. Aren't we already queer? To queer black female sexuality means to do what would be contrary, eccentric, strange, or unexpected. To be silent is, yes, unexpected in a world whose stereotype is of black women as loud and hypersexual. However, silence merely stifles *us*. Silence does not change the status quo.

Queering black female sexuality would mean straight black women need to:

1. Come out as black women who enjoy sex and find it pleasurable.

2. Protest the stereotypes of black female sexuality that do not reflect our experience.
3. Allow all black women—across class, sexual orientation, and physical ability—to express what we enjoy.
4. Know the difference between making love and fucking—and be willing to express our desires for both despite what the news, music videos, social mores, or any other source says we should want.
5. Know what it is to play with sexuality. What turns us on? Is it something taboo? Does our playfulness come from within?
6. Know that our bodies are our own—our bodies do not belong to the church, the state, our parents, our lovers, our husbands, and certainly not Black Entertainment Television (BET).

Queering black female heterosexuality goes beyond language. Black communities go 'round and 'round about the use of "nigger" with one another. Is it a revolutionary act of reclaiming an oppressive word? Or does it make us merely minstrels performing in the white man's show? Older and younger feminists debate the merits of embracing the labels of "bitch" and "dyke" as a bid for taking the malice out of the words. There are some black women who say, "Yes, I am a black bitch" or, "Yes, I am a ho." These claims do little to shift attitudes. If nothing else, we merely give our enemies artillery to continue to shoot us down or plaster our asses across cars in rap videos. How does the saying go? You act like a trick, you get played like a trick. Claiming queerness is linguistic, but ultimately about action that does not reinforce the stereotypes.

I am not suggesting a form of political lesbianism, which was a popular stance for some feminists who struggled against male domination in the 1970s. In addition to adopting a political position, queering black female sexuality means listening to transformative things that have already been said about black sexuality. Black lesbians and gay men have something to tell straight black women about sexuality if we care to listen. Poets such as Audre Lorde, writer/activists such as Keith Boykin, and cultural theorists such as Cathy Cohen and Dwight McBride offer insights about African American sexuality that move beyond boundaries of sexual orientation and that we would do well to heed. Cohen, for example, challenges queer politics for lacking an intersectional analysis. That is, queer theory largely ignores questions of race and class when those categories in particular are the straw men against which marginalization is defined, constructed, and maintained.

Queer theory isn't just for queers anymore, but calling on the wisdom of my black, gay sisters and brothers runs the risk of reducing them solely to their sexuality. Thus, the challenge for me in bringing an intersectional perspective to queering black female heterosexuality is to remain mindful of my own heterosexual privilege and the pitfalls of appropriating queerness as identity and not as a political position.

What I must also claim and declare are all the freaky tendencies that I consider sexy and sexual. Sexual encounters mined from Craigslist's Casual Encounters, where I both defy and play with stereotypes about black women's sexuality. Speaking frankly about sex with friends—gay, straight, bisexual, trans, male, and female. Enjoying the music and words of black women, such as Jill Scott, who are unabashed about their sexual desire and the complexity of defining nontraditional relationships—monogamous and otherwise. All of these sexual interventions/adventures in daily existence play against my own conditioning to be a respectable, middle-class young lady destined to become an asexual black lady. That biology is *not* my destiny.

There is no guarantee that straight black women adopting queerness will change how the dominant culture perceives black female sexuality. I do not think black women embracing our sexuality and being vocal about that will change how politicians attempt to use our sexuality as a scapegoat for society's ills, as they did with the "welfare queen" in the 1980s and 1990s. However, I do believe that queering black female sexuality, if enough of us participate in the project, will move us collectively toward a more enlightened way of being sexual beings unconstrained by racialized sexism. Instead of trying to enact a developmental approach (we were asexual mammies or hot-to-trot jezebels, but now we are ladies), claiming queerness will give us the latitude we need to explore who we want to be on a continuum. It is a choice that both black women as a group and black women as individuals must make.

Some black women have taken risks in expressing themselves about black women's sexuality. When, in 1999, performance poet Sarah Jones faced Federal Communications Commission (FCC) censorship for her work *Your Revolution (Will Not Happen Between These Thighs)*, she battled three years for her right to determine her sexual fate through her art. Incorporating lyrics from male rappers' top 40 radio-play hits into a paraphrasing of Gil Scot Heron's *The Revolution Will Not Be Televised,* Jones moved us a step closer to black women saying yes to sex by denying male demands for compliant freaks and hoochies. That the FCC refused to recognize the feminist content of her song and sought to penalize a community-based, volunteer-run radio station in the process speaks to mainstream refusal to accept that black women are something other than sexually deviant. More so than Janet Jackson's misguided attempt to express black female sexuality in 2004 via her infamous "wardrobe malfunction"—and before she was unceremoniously left out to dry by her coperformer, Justin Timberlake—Jones's willingness to challenge censorship demonstrated that black women are interested in sex, but on our own terms.

Similarly, in February 2001, African American photographer Renee Cox stood up to censorship of black female sexuality. Only this time, the censorship came from the local level: Then-mayor Rudolph Giuliani attempted to close down the Brooklyn Museum of Art and establish a citywide "decency commission" over the display of Cox's self-portrait/homage *Yo Mama's Last Supper*. Jones stands in the center of the tableau as a nude and unashamed Jesus Christ before his disciples. The disciples are all cast as men of color, except for Judas, who is white. Giuliani and New York City's Catholic patriarchs denounced Cox's display of her nude body as "anti-Catholic" and "disgusting." Cox, rather than retiring, stepped up to the plate to defend her artistic vision, her black female body as beautiful, and her critique of Catholicism for its racism and sexism.

These black women's sexual expressions in American popular culture are dangerous because they are not what we're used to. It may not seem like much, but overcoming centuries of historical silence will create different perceptions about black women and sex that will reshape our culture, society, and public policies. In calling for heterosexual black women to queer their sexuality, I am expressing the fierce belief that, if we follow the example of women such as Sarah Jones and Renee Cox, we can dramatically change how black female sexuality is viewed in America. More important, though, I believe we can change how black girls and women *live* and *experience* their sexuality: on their own terms and free from a past of exploitation. Historians often refer to the "long shadow" that slavery has cast over African Americans. While it is important to acknowledge the reverberations of this human atrocity in black family structure, economic disadvantage, and especially black sexuality, it is just as critical that we push along a dialogue that reinvents black sex in ways that do not merely reinstate the sexual exploitation that was inflicted and that some of us now freely adopt.

Can black women achieve a truly liberated black female sexuality? Yes. If we continue to say no to negative imagery—but that alone has not been effective. In addition, we must create and maintain black female sexuality queerly. Only then can we say, and only then will society hear, both yes and no freely and on our own terms.

If you want to read more about HERE AND QUEER, try:

- Shame Is the First Betrayer BY **TÓNI AMATO**
- Why Nice Guys Finish Last BY **JULIA SERANO**

If you want to read more about MUCH TABOO ABOUT NOTHING, try:

- A Love Letter from an Anti-Rape Activist to Her Feminist Sex-Toy Store BY **LEE JACOBS RIGGS**
- Who're You Calling a Whore?: A Conversation with Three Sex Workers on Sexuality, Empowerment, and the Industry BY **SUSAN LOPEZ, MARIKO PASSIÓN, SAUNDRA**

If you want to read more about RACE RELATING, try:

- Invasion of Space by a Female BY **COCO FUSCO**
- When Sexual Autonomy Isn't Enough: Sexual Violence Against Immigrant Women in the United States BY **MIRIAM ZOILA PÉREZ**