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Review Of "Words Of Fire: An Anthology Of African-American Feminist Thought" By B. Guy-Shefthall

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Review

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on any issues, and most emphatically not on the explosive issue of woman suffrage.

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Words of Fire: An Anthology of African-American Feminist Thought. Edited by Beverly Guy-Sheftall. (New York: The Free Press, 1995. Pp. xxvi, 577. Notes, selected bibliography, index. \$20.00 paper.)

Compiled and edited by Beverly Guy-Sheftall, a professor of Women's Studies at Spelman College, this is a valuable collection of writings by and about African-American women that spans the third decade of the nineteenth century to the present day. Interdisciplinary in its focus, the volume features the voices of activists, artists, novelists, womanists, Afrocentrists, scientists, socialists, politicians, preachers and others whose contributions comprise a genealogy of black American women's thought. Drawing upon such diverse and relevant topics as politics, nationalism, sexuality, academia, art and cultural production, the essays emphasize pragmatism and activism as essential components in the development of theory, as evidenced by each writer's deliberate engagement with the questions of identity and marginalization that uniquely effect African-American women. It is the balance that these authors strike between their particular historical and social circumstances and their articulation of a politics of resistance that provides the collection with its cohesiveness and power. Together they expound a consistent ideological focus on race and gender subjectivity that Guy-Sheftall, among others, has chosen to characterize as "black feminist thought."

Readers familiar with the extensive literary and historical tradition of black American women's writing will find little that is new here. Instead, Guy-Sheftall has drawn together definitive texts, some hard-to-find pieces and numerous reprints of classic writings into a concise, chronological format, with useful biographical and topical introductions in each section. Of special note are a previously unpublished article by Lorraine Hansberry, a rare essay by a collective of black female radicals in the contemporary women's liberation movement, and a brief, provocative epilogue written by Johnetta Cole. Indeed, the value of this volume is in its illustration of diversity and continuity within African-American feminism, rather than its advancement of any new theoretical innovations or conclusions. While acknowledging the "deliberate" incompleteness of a book that would constitute a canon of black feminist writings, Guy-Sheftall has culled an impressive array of selections while underscoring the common valances of African-American female consciousness in its many modes and inclinations. Her chosen task—of distinguishing black feminist writers and their writings—will be controversial to some, since "feminism" is a

contested category, especially when applied to African-American women who do not self-identify as such. Guy-Sheftall delineates the fundamental premises and assumptions that she finds underlying black feminist thought, regardless of source or context. Foremost, she notes, is the primacy of “triple jeopardy” in African-American women’s lives, or the convergence of racial, sexual and class-based oppressions which differentiate black women’s understanding of race and gender politics from that of white women and black men. It is from this critical standpoint that black women simultaneously struggle for “racial liberation and gender equality,” challenging the feminism of white women and the nationalism of black men, a tension that has shaped African-American feminist consciousness from the earliest. Guy-Sheftall also identifies the interconnectedness of black women’s struggles against race, class and sexual discrimination as embodied in a “commitment to liberation” which is “profoundly rooted” in life experience. She notes that with these criteria fulfilled, any black woman committed to race and gender equality could be called feminist, even if she doesn’t claim the expression for herself (p. 550).

The combination of authors whose works were chosen for inclusion in this collection is even more intriguing when one considers that many were omitted. Included are Sojourner Truth, Julia A. J. Foote, Margaret Walker Alexander, Darlene Clark Hine, and Shirley Chisholm, among others; not included are writings by the likes of Fannie Barrier Williams, Adelaide Casely-Hayford, Mary Helen Washington, Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham and Patricia Williams. One wonders why there aren’t more anthologies out there that situate the work of these and other important black female thinkers. The wealth of knowledge they embody is vast and should no longer be overlooked. A promising corrective, *Words of Fire* represents a first step toward a long-overdue revision of American intellectual history.

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Civilization and Black Progress: Selected Writings of Alexander Crummell on the South. Edited by J. R. Oldfield. Southern Texts Society Series. (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1995. Pp. x, 265. Illustrations, appendix, notes, index. \$38.50.)

Born to free black parents in New York City, Alexander Crummell (1819-1898) grew up amid the relative privilege of the tiny antebellum black middle class. After obtaining considerable education and admission to the ministry in the Protestant Episcopal Church, Crummell left the United States in 1849 to study at Queen’s College, Cambridge. From 1853 to 1872, Crummell served as a missionary, proponent of colonization, and educator in Liberia. Disillusioned with the political upheavals in Liberia in the early 1870s, Crummell returned to the United States in 1872. In 1873 he became pastor of a prominent black Episcopal congregation in