

The Womanist Reader: The First Quarter Century of Womanist Thought

Reviewed by Deidre Hill Butler, Ph.D.

Deidre Hill Butler (butlerd@union.edu) is an Assistant Professor of Sociology, Africana Studies and Women's and Gender Studies at Union College in Schenectady, NY. She is the guest editor of this edition of *The Journal of Pan African Studies*, and is presently at work on a book titled African American Stepmothers.

The Womanist Reader: The First Quarter Century of Womanist Thought by Layli Phillips
Routledge, 2006. Paperback \$39.95; ISBN: 9780415954112

This text puts Womanism in its rightful place by incorporating both theory and practice into global feminist discourse. Womanist theory and practice is already accepted in black religious circles as an expression of black women's spirituality and an anchor for activism. The collection's editor, Dr. Layli Phillips, refutes the "add and stir" method of inclusion, and instead explores Womanism's in-depth history and contemporary applications by highlighting authors and academic disciplines that utilize this theoretical approach, including literature, history, theater and film studies, psychology, and urban studies. Womanist critiques and praxis are also explored, most notably in an article by Iris Carlton-LaNey, a professor of social work. Carlton-LaNey's piece connects a classic example of how Womanism is enacted in the daily lives of black women with its manifestation in personal career choices and public consciousness. She highlights the marriage between personal and political activism, not only for the sake of self, but for the sake of culture and community.

The term "Womanism" was adapted from Pulitzer Prize-winning author Alice Walker. In her book *In Search of Our Mother's Garden: Womanist Prose*, Walker used this term to describe the perspective and experiences of "women of color." Phillips excerpts three of Walker's writings: "Coming Apart," "Gifts of Power: The Writing of Rebecca Jackson," and "Womanist." The inclusion of all three essays provides a grounded definition of the concept, specifically that Womanism breaks the class barriers of feminism, creating a discourse that involves women of various classes. A need for the term arose from the early feminist movement, which was led by middle-class white women advocating social changes, such as woman's suffrage. The movement focused primarily on gender-based oppression, but ignored oppression based on racism and classism. To counter this trend, Womanists pointed out those black women experienced a different kind of oppression.

In the *Reader's* introduction, Phillips stresses that although most Womanist scholarship centers on the African American woman's experience, other non-white women also identify with its concepts. Her collection includes non-white voices and articles by men employing Womanist expression, namely Michael Awkward's previously published "A Black Man's Place in Black Feminist Criticism" and Gary Lemons's "To Be Black, Male, and 'Feminist': Making Womanist Space for Black Men." These articles offer a sense of Womanism's role within black gender discourse. Sadly, more recent work by Mark Anthony Neal or other Womanist and black feminist male writers is not included. I do hope the exclusion of additional expressions of black male solidarity was due to the publisher's need to maintain a certain page range, rather than a reflection of the actual scholarship available.

The *Reader* supports the definition of Womanism utilized as a benchmark by Phillips in the introduction to Carol Marsh-Lockett's *The Oxford Companion to African American Literature*. Marsh-Lockett explores how Womanist theory and praxis extends and connects to a "global vision" tied to "attention to the African presence in the Americas" and the "universality of the Black race" (785). Phillips and her collaborators further explore this universality in the *Reader* by demonstrating how Womanism is expressed within various social movements, and reinterpreted by emerging practitioners in and outside the academy. The text also provides substantial background on the concept and practice of Womanism.

The Womanist Reader provides thorough insight, but this reviewer is most impressed by how well its structure complements the aims of black feminist theory or black women's sociology courses. I used this collection in my upper-level undergraduate black women's sociology course, comprised mostly of upper class white female students, and though they are not included in the text, they are not excluded from it, either. Because, like the *Reader*, my course brings the experiences of black women to the forefront, this text aided all of my students in comprehending how black women negotiate race, class, and gender boundaries, locally and globally. Katisha Andrew, a political science major who wrote her senior thesis on black feminism, thought highly of the book; she commented on the *Reader's* "global focus and the ways in which its analysis and content extended to include Afrocentric thinking, critique/commentary on Afrocentrism, and Afro-feminist thinking." I highly recommend *The Womanist Reader: The First Quarter Century of Womanist Thought* by Layli Phillips Routledge as a supportive text for introductory women's, gender studies, Africana, or African American courses and as required reading for upper-level black women's studies and race, class, and gender courses.