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

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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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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 Of special note are a previously unpublished article by Lorraine Hansberry, a rare essay by a collective of black female radicals in the contemporary women’s liberation movement, and a brief, provocative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

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