

Phillis Isabella Sheppard. *Self, Culture, and Others in Womanist Practical Theology*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011. 223 pages. \$89.

Among the intended audience for this work are scholars of womanist thought, practical theology, psychoanalysis, and those with an interest to contribute to knowledge in these fields. In *Self, Culture, and Others*, Sheppard weaves together insights drawn from these disciplines in order “to articulate a robust womanist psychoanalytic perspective” (76). She is primarily concerned about the lack of proper attention given to the imprinting of external oppressions on the inner lives of black women, creating insidious internal narratives that are then unconsciously embodied. These “inner scripts” (as she sometimes refers to them) are as pernicious as the external power structures that shape them, and black women’s experiences can be fully understood only by examining their psychic content and its relation to their social cultural contexts. Sheppard’s thesis could be summarized this way: social contexts are deeply embedded in the psyche and the experiences of the body (3), and no womanist practical theology can accurately theorize black women’s experiences without the intermingling of psychoanalysis, self, and culture.

The book is divided into three parts. The first outlines the contours of current womanist perspectives and describes what a womanist practical theology looks like on the basis of these perspectives. While she identifies an embedded psychological reality at work, there is not (in her view) a clearly defined psychoanalytic framework. Sheppard recognizes that the lack of clarity here is due in part to the complicated history of blacks as it relates to the field of psychoanalysis. She explores this history in some detail in the second part of the book. She concludes this section with an attempt to recover resources that make it possible to appropriate psychoanalysis for practical theology, namely African American psychoanalysts and black feminist psychoanalytic literary criticism (82). In part three, Sheppard concretizes her revision of a womanist practical theology through accounts of and reflection on black women’s psycho-social readings of the “Song of Songs.”

Throughout the book Sheppard uses “the voices of black women reporting their experiences of religion and spirituality [as] the primary source for [her] reflections on living blackness” (19). In these reports readers gain as much access as the text can provide into the psychic reality that Sheppard wants to bring to the foreground. In this way, the external oppressive forces that circumscribe black women’s experiences (that is, the converging realities of color, gender, sexuality, and racial categorization) are linked to their psychological manifestations—sorrow, rage, grief, and so on.

Without taking seriously the convergence of the cultural and psychological, other theories proceed with the implicit assumption that, by focusing on transforming the cultural realities, they simultaneously address the effects of these realities on black women’s “inner selves.” In shifting the focus inward, Sheppard, through the voices of black women, challenges us to acknowledge the pervasiveness of these cultural oppressive forces and their nature to misshape one’s sense of self, leading to the malformation of black women’s identities.

Sheppard admits that “[a] book with such an ambitious task is, in the end, a beginning and an invitation” (194). While some readers may get lost in the ambitiousness of the project, most will simply appreciate the invite.

Audrey Thompson, Pittsburgh Theological Seminary, Pittsburgh, PA