

**FOR BLACK  
GIRLS  
CONSIDERING  
WOMANISM  
BECAUSE  
FEMINISM  
IS NOT  
ENUF.**

A workbook by Bilphena Yahwon  
& Nnennaya Amuchie.

**While this zine was created to be shared  
and used as an educational tool widely,  
the contents of this womanist packet is to  
be used in all black women spaces only.  
Please honor, not only our wishes, but the  
wishes of our foremothers.**

**- Bilphena & Nnennaya**

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# Defining Womanism

## Womanist as defined by Alice Walker; taken from *In Search of Our Mothers' Garden: Womanist Prose* -

1. From *womanish*. (Opp. Of “girlish,” i.e., frivolous, irresponsible, not serious.) A black feminist or feminist of color. From the black folk expression of mothers to female children, “You acting womanish,” i.e., like a woman. Usually referring to outrageous, audacious, courageous or willful behavior. Wanting to know more and in greater depth than is considered “good” for one. Interested in grown-up doings. Acting grown up. Being grown up. Interchangeable with another black folk expression: “You trying to be grown.” Responsible. In charge. *Serious*.

2. *Also*: A woman who loves other women, sexually and/or non sexually. Appreciates and prefers women’s culture, women’s emotional flexibility (values tears as natural counterbalance of laughter), and women’s strength. Sometimes loves individual men, sexually and/or non sexually. Committed to survival and wholeness of entire people, male and female. Not a separatist, except periodically, for health. Traditionally, universalist, as in: “Mama, why are we brown, pink, and yellow, and our cousins are white, beige, and black?” Ans.: “Well, you know colored race is just like a flower garden, with every color flower represented.” Traditionally capable, as in: “Mama, I’m walking to Canada and I’m taking you and a bunch of other slaves with me.” Reply: “It wouldn’t be the first time.”

3. Loves music. Loves dance. Loves the moon. *Loves* the Spirit. Loves love and food and roundness. Loves struggle. *Loves* the Folk. Loves herself. *Regardless*.

4. Womanist is to feminist as purple is to lavender.

## Womanist as defined by Layli Phillips; taken from *The Womanist Reader* -

**Womanism is a social change perspective rooted in Black women’s and other women of color’s everyday experiences and everyday method of problem solving in everyday spaces, extended to the problem of ending all forms of oppression for all people, restoring the balance between people and the environment/nature, and reconciling human life with the spiritual dimension. Unlike its name, womanism does not emphasize or privilege gender or sexism; rather, it elevates all sites and forms of oppression, whether they are based on social-address categories, like gender, race, or class, to a level of equal concern and action (Phillips, 2006, p. xx).**

Womanism’s five overarching characteristics according to Layli Phillip -

**(1) ANTIOPPRESSIONIST** - a womanist knows oppression when she sees it, and she is against it. She lives her life in such away as to fight and dismantle oppression in whatever ways she can, individually or in organized formations with others. The term “antioppressionist” conveys that womanism is identified with liberationist projects of all sorts and that womanism supports the liberation of all humankind from all forms of oppression” (Phillips, xxiv).

**(2) VERNACULAR** - identifies womanism with “the everyday” - everyday people and everyday life. The soul of womanism is grassroots, identified with the masses of humanity. Womanists view gross differentials in power and resources as highly problematic because they contribute to dehumanization and interfere with in-

dividuals and collective well-being. Womanists places trust in non elites to envision and accomplish social justice ends, inside or outside formal structures like organizations or social movements (Phillips, xxiv).

**(3) NONIDEOLOGICAL** - womanism abhors rigid lines of demarcation and tends to function in a decentralized manner (Phillips, xxv).

**(4) COMMUNITARIAN** - womanism views commonweal as the goal of social change. Commonweal is the state of collective well-being; it is the optimization of well being for all members of a community. For womanists, community is conceptualized as a series of successively overlapping tiers, beginning with Black women or women of color (the level of the self or identity), followed by the Black community and other communities of color (the level of “tribe” or “kin”), followed by all oppressed people (the universal level) (Phillips, xxv).

**(5) SPIRITUALIZED** - womanism openly acknowledges a spiritual / transcendental realm with which human life, living kind, and the material world are all intertwined. For womanists, this real is actual and palpable, and the relationship between it and humans is neither abstract nor insignificant to politics (Phillips, xxvi).

# Who Can be a Womanist?

## Who can be a womanist?

“Three central points support womanism. First, womanists understand that oppression is interlocking system, providing all people with varying degrees of penalty and privilege. Second, they believe that individual empowerment combined with collective action is key to lasting social transformation. Last, they embody a humanism, which seeks the liberation of all, not simply themselves.” - Tamara Beauboeuf-Lafontant

“Womanism is not a free-for-all. [It] requires that one’s ethnic and cultural origins be acknowledged from the outset.” - Layli Phillips

“Womanism centers Black women. Thus, if your approach to gender justice excludes race or incorporates a racist hierarchy where Black women’s needs, desires, issues of concern, politics, relationships, conceptions of beauty, health, intersectional experiences etc., should be placed last, you aren’t engaging in womanist praxis.” - Trudy (gradientliar)

# Womanism in Practice

## Discussion Questions

*Usage:* These questions can be revisited from time to time on a personal level and in group settings.

## The Personal

In womanism, the personal is political.

1. What personal experiences bring you to womanism?
2. How do you define womanhood? Who defines womanhood for you? In what ways is your womanhood erased? Affirmed?
3. When was the first time you recognized how your identity impacts how you navigate in the world?
4. How and in what settings does your identity create advantages and disadvantages?
5. How do you define self- liberation & freedom?
6. Who would you be outside of the identities that have been prescribed to you?
7. How are your personal values at odds with current systems of oppression?

## The Communal

1. How do you define community? Do you see yourself as part of your community? Are you part of many communities?
2. What is your relationship with the women/ femme folks in your life?
3. Do you believe your liberation & freedom is tied to your community? Why or why not?
  - a. If yes, what ways is your freedom bounded?
4. What lessons did you learn about womanhood at a young age? How has that impacted your relationships with other women?
5. In what type of groups do you feel most comfortable and empowered?
6. What experiences with people in your community bring you to womanism? What stories from women have been passed down?
7. What does safety look like in your community?
8. If you had unlimited resources to build up your community, what would you create?
9. What ways do you rely on your communities? Do you feel energized or exhausted when interacting with your community ?
10. How do you identify trauma in your community?

## The Universal

*Draw your vision of a Womanist World and the steps you can take to get there in the following spread.*

**Guiding Questions**

1. What are your guiding principles for the ways you live your life and the ways you envision a future for people like you?
2. How do you define power and what is your relationship to power?
3. What do you think is inherent and/or fundamental for all human beings?

“In the late 1920s my mother ran away from home to marry my father. Marriage, if not running away, was expected of seven-teen-year-old girls. By the - time she was twenty, she had two children and was pregnant with a third. Five children later, I was born. And this is how I came to know my mother: she seemed a large, soft, loving-eyed woman who was rarely impatient in our home. Her quick, violent temper was on view only a few times a year, when she battled with the white landlord who had the misfortune to suggest to her that her children did not need to go to school. She made all the clothes we wore, even my brothers’ overalls. She made all the towels and sheets we used. She spent the summers canning vegetables and fruits. She spent the winter evenings making quilts enough to cover all our beds.” (excerpt from *In Search of My Mother’s Garden*)

1. What is your relationship with your mother or any other maternal figure you had growing up?
2. Do you believe trauma has been passed down to you? If so, how?
3. How do you view this person (answer to question 1) outside of the things they have contributed to your family or community?
4. Do you know women who have been forced into marriage or motherhood? How has that informed your politics around agency & choice?
5. What are your views on marriage and motherhood? Why?
  - a. Do you feel conflicted by what you have seen and what you want? Why or why not?
  - b. Do you think your identity impacts the presence of/or lack thereof expectations in marriage or motherhood?

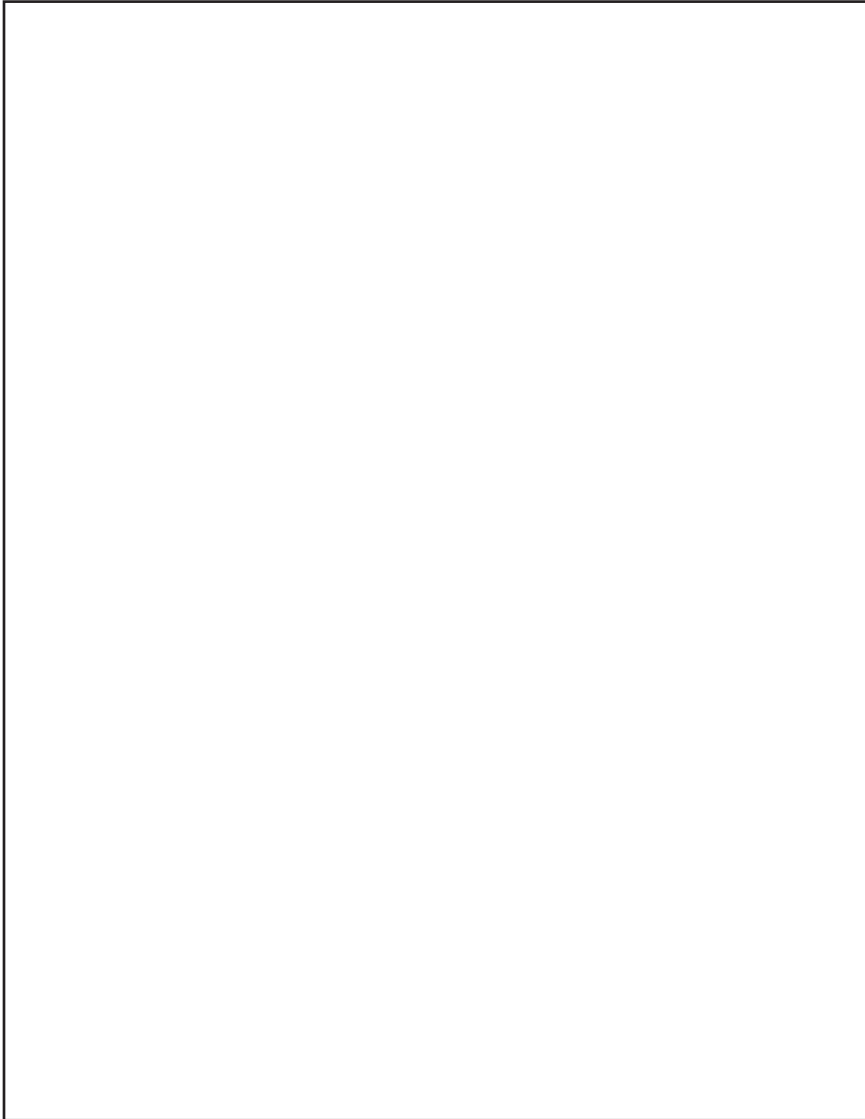
“I notice that it is only when my mother is working in her flowers that she is radiant, almost to the point of being invisible-except as Creator: hand and eye. She is involved in work her soul must have. Ordering the universe in the image of her personal conception of Beauty. Her face, as she prepares the Art that is her gift, is a legacy of respect she leaves to me, for all that illuminates and cherishes life. She has handed down respect for the possibilities-and the will to grasp them. For her, so hindered and intruded upon in so many ways, being an artist has still been a daily part of her life. This ability to hold on, even in very simple ways, is work black women have done for a very long time.” (excerpt from *In Search of my Mother’s Garden*)

1. In what ways do you center joy in your life?
2. How do you define art and in what ways (if any) has art politicized you?
3. How do you feed your creative spirit? In what ways are you discovering your creative spirit?
4. What are some of the stories & lessons you have picked up from your mother or another maternal figure in your life?
5. What type of outlets have you created to manage/cope with stress, frustration, or emotional exhaustion?
6. Do you agree with the last sentence of the paragraph? Why or why not?
7. How is the ability or need to create art linked to survival? Why does Walker emphasize the relationship between art and survival?

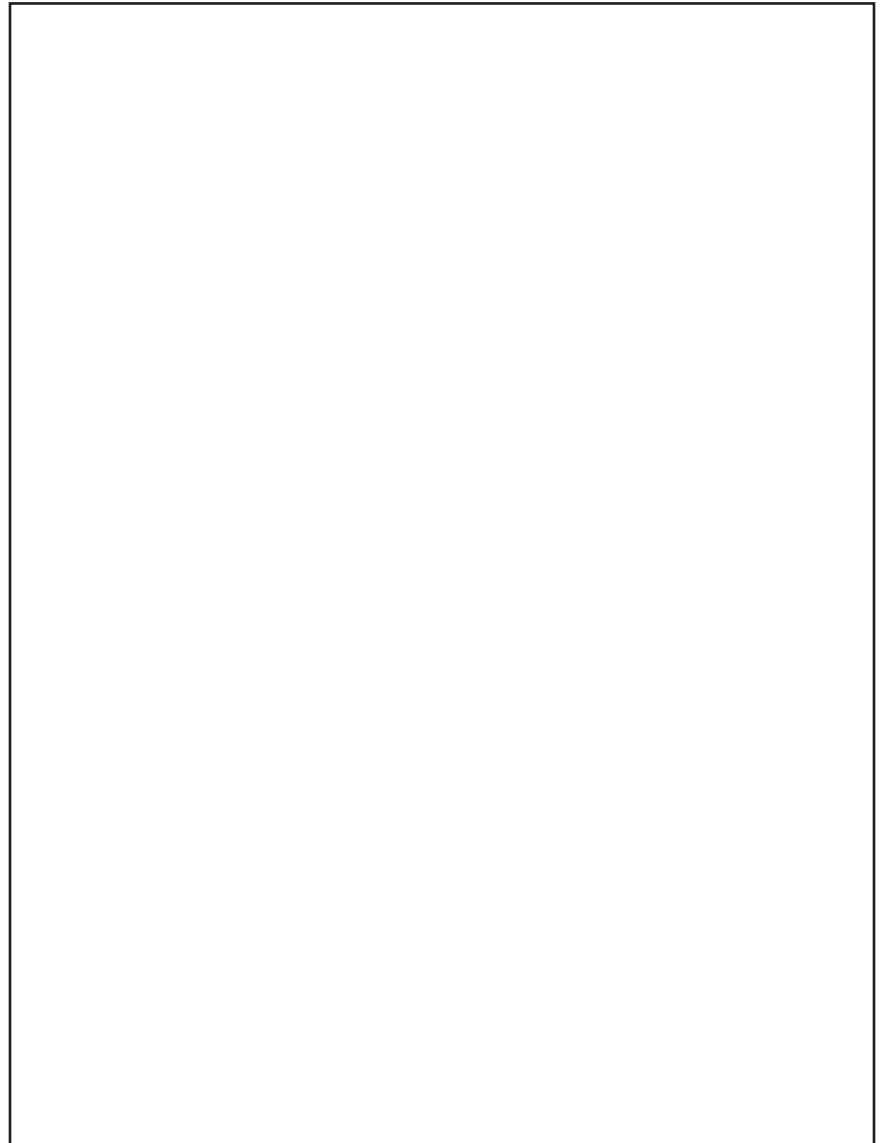


Womanism is not only an ideology, but it is an everyday practice. Use this sheet to write down three ways will practice your womanism on a 1) personal level 2) communal/ interpersonal and 3) universal level.

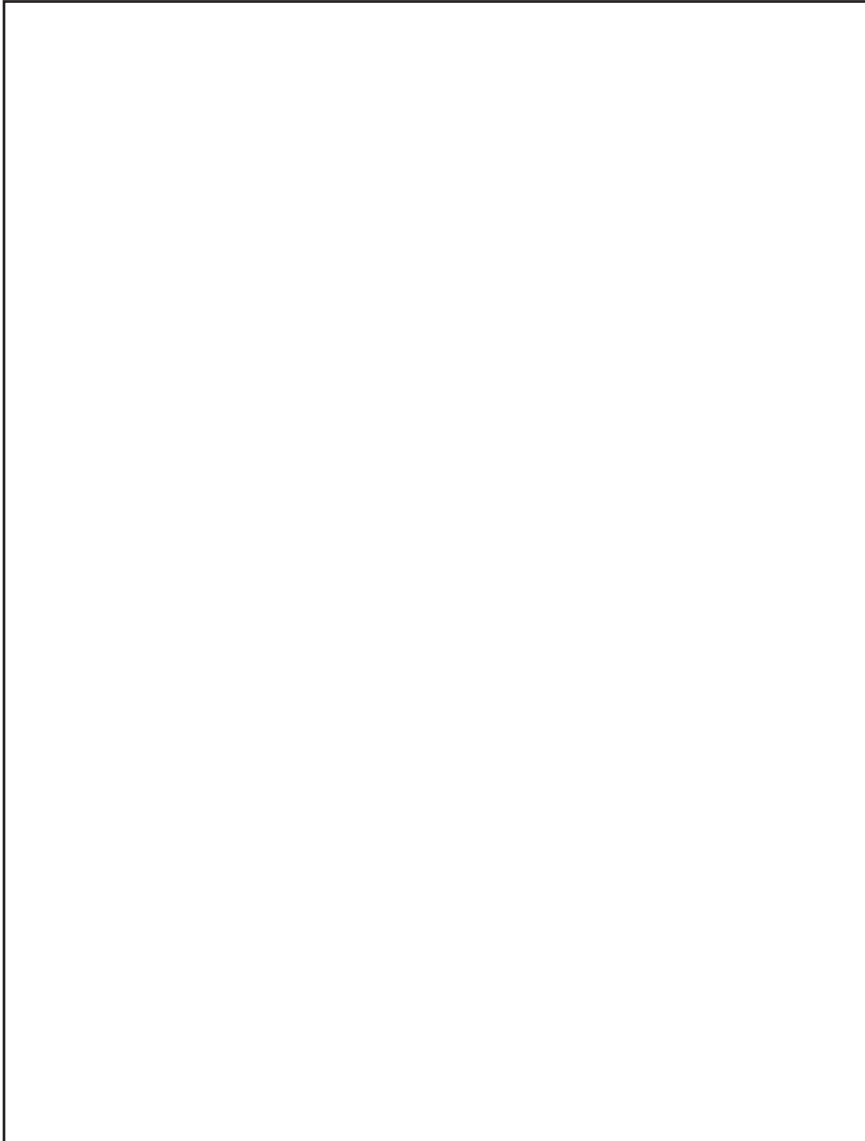
**Personal**



**Communal / Interpersonal**



Universal



Womanist Crossword Puzzle

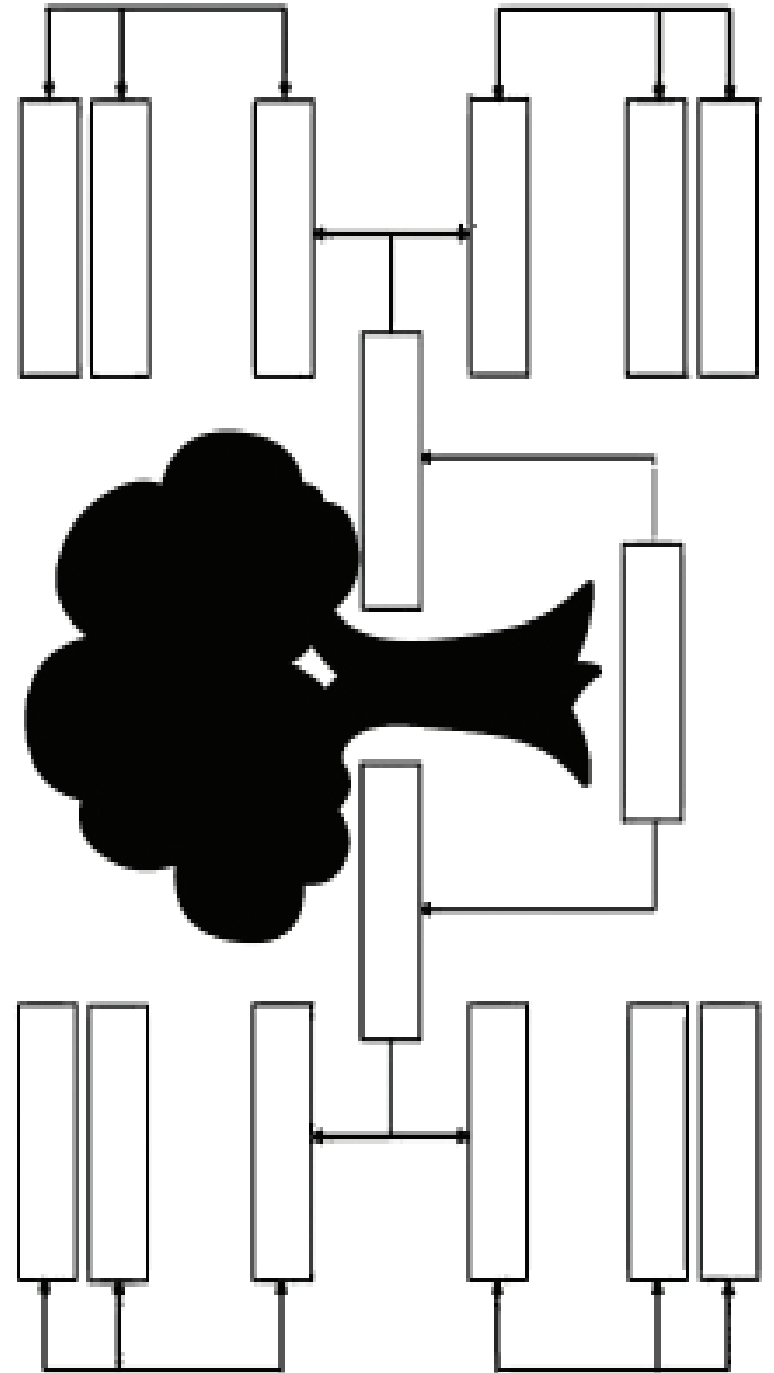
G P R E D N E G W K S E A E Q  
F G I G C E J Z Q L S X A Q M  
T F U Q P T V U N E M V W W R  
Z S O J O U R N E R T R U T H  
M P T T M F H S E B M G C L U  
A K K T J W H C R H X A O I L  
O J N O I S S E R P P O U C H  
P S F C W O M A N I S M M B Z  
U F Q M R E K L A W E C I L A  
S K O O H L L E B K L T I T P  
F J H S H L J Z G E Q Z W H R  
F B R E D N E V A L L T T C E  
W G E B J W P U V J H N C R W  
J F J J B I B V Z N H W K V O  
R M S I N I M E F K C A L B P

Words:

/ WOMANISM / BLACKFEMINISM /  
/ OPPRESSION / POWER / GENDER /  
/ LAVENDER / BELLHOOKS / ALICEWALKER /  
/ SOJOURNERTRUTH /

## Family Tree Activity

We are individuals but part of a larger ecosystem outside of us. Relationships with ourselves, our community, and the world are fundamental to our growth as womanist and praxis as womanist. Fill this tree out with individuals who have had a great impact on your life. These can be individuals who are living or dead. Individuals who you know personally or individuals who you have been inspired by.



## Womanist Syllabus

Amadiume, Ifi  
Male Daughters, Female Husbands: Gender and Sex in an African Society (1987)

bell, hooks  
Theory as Liberatory Practice

Cannon, Katie G.  
Black Womanist Ethics (1988)

Christian, Barbara  
“But Who Do You Really Belong To--Black Studies or Women’s Studies?” (1989)

Crenshaw, Kimberlé  
Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex (1989)

Collins, Patricia Hill  
Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness and the Politics of Empowerment (1990)

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What’s in a Name? Womanism, Black Feminism, and Beyond (1996)

Falola, Toyin  
The Women’s War of 1929: A History of Anti-Colonial Resistance in Eastern Nigeria (2011)

Gbowee, Leymah  
Might Be Our Powers: How Sisterhood, Prayer, and Sex Changed a Nation (2011)

Hull, Gloria T; Scott, Patricia Bell and Smith, Barbara  
*All the Women are White, All the Blacks are Men, But some of Us are*

*Brave* (1982)

Hudson-Weems, Clenora  
Africana Womanist Literary Theory (1997)

Klebine, Anna  
“Hell Hath No Fury like a Drag Queen Scorned”: Sylvia Rivera’s Activism, Resistance, and Resilience

Lorde, Audre  
“There Is No Hierarchy of Oppression” (1999)

Lorde, Audre  
“Age, Race, Class, and Sex: Women Redefining Difference” (1984)

Mock, Janet  
Redefining Realness (2014)

Mohanty, Chandra Talpade  
Feminism Without Borders: Decolonizing Theory, Practicing Solidarity (2003)

Mohammed, Patricia  
Towards Indigenous Feminist Theorizing in the Caribbean

Moraga, C., & Anzaldua  
This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by radical women of color (1981)

Ogunyemi, Chikwenye Okonjo  
“Womanism: The Dynamics of the Contemporary Black Female Novel in English (1985)

Oyèwùmí, Oyèrónkẹ  
“The Invention of Women: Making an African Sense of Western Gender” (1997)

Ritchie, Beth

“Arrested Justice: Black Women, Violence, and America’s Prison Nation” (2012)

Ritchie, Andrea

“Invisible No More: Police Violence Against Black Women and Women of Color” (2017)

Rivera, Sylvia

“Queens in Exile, the Forgotten Ones” (2002)

Smith, Barbara

“The Truth That Never Hurts: Black Lesbians in Fiction in the 1980s” (1990)

Walker, Alice

In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens: Womanist Prose (1983)

Walker, Alice

“Coming Apart” (1979)

Williams, Sherley Ann

“Some Implications of Womanist Theory” (1990)

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