



**WESTERN  
MICHIGAN**  
UNIVERSITY

The Journal of Sociology & Social Welfare

---

Volume 37

Issue 4 December - Special Issue on  
*Homelessness in Canada*

Article 19

---

2010

**Review of *'Til Death or Distance Do Us Part: Love and Marriage in African America*. Frances Smith Foster. Reviewed by Shannon Butler-Mokoro.**

Shannon Butler-Mokoro  
*Salem State College*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/jssw>



Part of the Social Work Commons

---

**Recommended Citation**

Butler-Mokoro, Shannon (2010) "Review of *'Til Death or Distance Do Us Part: Love and Marriage in African America*. Frances Smith Foster. Reviewed by Shannon Butler-Mokoro.," *The Journal of Sociology & Social Welfare*: Vol. 37: Iss. 4, Article 19.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.15453/0191-5096.3575>

Available at: <https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/jssw/vol37/iss4/19>

This Book Review is brought to you by the Western Michigan University School of Social Work. For more information, please contact [wmu-scholarworks@wmich.edu](mailto:wmu-scholarworks@wmich.edu).



**WESTERN  
MICHIGAN**  
UNIVERSITY

identifying targets and tactics, motivating people/groups for social change, and how “old fashioned organizing [was able to] trump resources and sophistication ... of a well funded public relations effort.”

Fisher claims that many community organizing efforts are hampered by four dominant trends within the field: (1) a turn from organizing for economic justice to culture; (2) a turn from oppositional strategies to community building; (3) a turn from building power to local organizing; and (4) a turn from social movement building to community organizing—and that these trends dampen social justice efforts. ACORN has bucked these trends, and Fisher uses its successful 38 years to remind organizers that there are alternatives to accepting dominant trends.

Fiduciary issues raised against ACORN—a source of possibly trumped up scandal—are not addressed until page 251. Chapter author Gary Delgado links the questions of ACORN’s future existence to the possibilities associated with “developing the internal and external strategies to grow beyond” its existing success. ACORN has seen more difficulties since Delgado wrote these words, and yet ACORN still has many lessons to teach. These include: how many of ACORN’s problems are a result of attacks from the right, and therefore an outgrowth of its success; and how many result from poor management decisions that left the organization vulnerable to such attacks?

No matter what the future of ACORN entails, the future of community practice theory is always strengthened by Fisher’s probing eye, and this book is no exception.

*Elizabeth Beck, Georgia State University*

Frances Smith Foster, *'Til Death or Distance Do Us Part: Love and Marriage in African America*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2010. \$21.95 hardcover.

Documenting the history of Africans in America from slavery through the century has typically proved to be a difficult task. Many slaves and, later, free Blacks were not literate, making it difficult to document the events in their lives. Researchers interested in writing about the lives of Africans in

early America (1619 through the 1800s) lack enough first person accounts to tell an accurate story or end up misinterpreting their sources. Foster dedicates a chapter to the importance of distinguishing fact from fiction in writing about Africans in America. Throughout, she emphasizes the importance of using first-person accounts in context and understanding myths and memory. "Distanced as we are by time and circumstance, we need to listen and read with our eyes and ears tuned to what we can know about the speaker and the speaker's circumstance." She explains that myths can be fictional or factual and that personal voices and context help to make the distinction.

Historical research can be caught in the dichotomy between fact and myth. Foster refers to the work of Martin Luther King, Jr. and historians Ira Berlin and Leslie Rowland in describing plantation slave relationships. "Both accounts are factual. Both are narratives that have gone on to acquire the power of myth. They are stories that contain at least one truth ... stories we believe." Foster herself has used primary sources, including African American newspapers and love letters, as well as the work of historians and novelists to weave her stories of marriage in this socio-historical account. *'Til Death or Distance Do Us Part: Love and Marriage in African America* adds an important dimension to previous slave stories by concentrating specifically on the rituals leading up to marriage, marriage itself, and the challenges of being married in the face of the legal and socio-cultural mandates of slavery and antebellum America.

Traditional wedding vows include the phrase, "'til death do us part." The reality of slavery in America was that death or distance due to being sold to separate plantations could separate a married slave couple. Foster uses the example of fugitive slave Henry Bibb to illustrate the point. Bibb's marital situation "shows that distance created involuntary separation and intolerable circumstances could not dissolve a marriage but that giving up the struggle could.... When he heard his wife had been sold to a man to be his concubine, Bibb states, 'my wife was living in a state of adultery with her master ... This was a death blow to all my hope and pleasant plans ... I could no longer regard her as my wife.'"

While reminding us of this harsh reality for African slaves and the restrictions that the antebellum period sometimes

placed on Blacks, Foster nonetheless dispels myths that slaves were unable to marry. Interweaving historical accounts with personal stories that remind us of how African Americans create culture, Foster challenges the reader to imagine that Africans could be passionate, engage in love rituals, write love letters and poems, and create happy, healthy households. We are taken on a journey that describes courtship, the rules and laws of society that dictated and restricted marriage among people of African descent, and through the marriage rituals themselves.

By comparing the story of a modern-day African couple who will be separated because their individual asylum statuses dictate they live on separate continents to that of the slave couples, Foster concludes the book by bringing us full circle to the dilemma of death or distance—a bittersweet reality of marriage among modern-day Africans living in the western world—eerily similar to African slaves in early America.

There are some confusing transitions as Foster interweaves first-person narratives with the work of other authors and modern-day stories, but overall the book is well-written with enough first-person stories to support the truths about African marriage in America. This is a useful book for any scholar of African American history and, in particular, for those looking to understand families of African descent. No stranger to writing about African slaves and Blacks in the antebellum period, Foster has done an excellent job discussing a significant ritualized institution that very often gets lost in the history of Africans in America—marriage.

*Shannon Butler-Mokoro, Salem State College*

Megan Comfort, *Doing Time Together: Love and Family in the Shadow of the Prison*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009. \$55.00 hardcover, \$22.00 paperback.

The United States prison population increased sevenfold in the last four decades, with over 1.5 million people currently in state or federal facilities and an additional 700,000 individuals serving time in local jails. Stakeholders are divided on mass incarceration—most either brand themselves as staunch