Chanequa Walker-Barnes’ *Too Heavy A Yoke* serves both as an accessible introduction to the racism and sexism that affects the daily lives of black American women and as a helpful guide for those who provide pastoral care for black women. Walker-Barnes’ book focuses on the idea of the strong black woman, which she compresses into the term, StrongBlackWoman to emphasize the connections between these terms. Using a largely womanist methodology that “situate[s] the lives of individual Black women within a structural analysis of race-gender-class oppression” (9), Walker-Barnes interrogates the modern conception of the StrongBlackWoman, connects it to the pervasive physical and mental health problems among black women, outlines both its historical development and modern incarnations in popular culture, and suggests pathways towards healing. Through all of this, she traces the ways in which the church in America has reinforced the notion of the StrongBlackWoman, very often to the detriment of those who embrace this image. Walker-Barnes’ goal is larger than simply identifying a problem, however. This book is directed towards those who care for black women, particularly in a pastoral context, and each chapter ends with suggestions for pastoral practice. In all, this is a valuable book for anyone who interacts with black women, but especially those pastors, ministers, and counselors who care for black women.

In the first chapter, Walker-Barnes defines the notion of the StrongBlackWoman. She opens with a powerful anecdote about a woman named Ms. Martha, who continues to actively participate in the life of her church, always with a smile on her face, even through the death of her husband and son in the same year. Ms. Martha is praised by her pastor for her strength and faith, but this strength is manifested by a profoundly disturbing denial of her own emotional needs in a period of devastating personal loss. Using this and many other examples, Walker-Barnes defines the StrongBlackWoman as having “three core features – emotional strength/regulation, caregiving, and independence” (18). While women of any race can be strong (and strength is not necessarily a negative trait), Walker-Barnes argues that this concept of the StrongBlackWoman developed in response to a variety of negative images of black womanhood. The StrongBlackWoman must be independent and self-reliant in order to be an emotionally strong caregiver, someone who embodies positive aspects of blackness and femininity and who can hold black communities together. Walker-Barnes demonstrates that these traits, while commendable in moderation, combine together under the pressures of racism and sexism to create what she calls an ill-fitting suit of armor, armor that “shields Black woman from the threat of devaluation but also keeps them from the type of authentic self-expression and intimacy that are necessary for optimal social and emotional health” (35). This chapter argues persuasively for the problems inherent in the notion of the StrongBlackWoman, an argument that is further developed in the next chapter.

The second chapter presents the effects of the notion of the StrongBlackWoman on the physical and mental health of black women. While this chapter is, as Walker-Barnes acknowledges, weak in terms of empirical evidence, it compellingly suggests that the physical and mental health problems among black women may be tied to the expectations of the StrongBlackWoman, particularly the expectation of
continual caregiving to others at the expense of care for oneself. This chapter effectively reminds us that the oppression of racism and sexism is not simply an ideological problem, but a problem with many and profound impacts on the health of those impacted. After reading this chapter, it is difficult to dismiss the effects of StrongBlackWomanhood as minor or inconsequential; at the very least, Walker-Barnes provides a compelling reason to better understand the links between social pressures and the overall health of black women.

Chapters three and four outline the development of the ideas of the StrongBlackWoman and its appearance in contemporary popular culture. Chapter three begins with negative images of black women rooted in slavery, particularly the Jezebel (sexually promiscuous) and the Mammy (asexual caregiver for white families); it also discusses the negative image of the matriarch (or Sapphire), the angry, sharp-tongued and emasculating head of a household. Walker-Barnes argues that Black Women’s Clubs, with the support of black churches, advanced the idea of the StrongBlackWoman to counter these negative, racist images without fully embracing ideals of white womanhood (for example, ideal black womanhood includes participation in the workforce, in contrast to the ideal of the dependent woman). While Walker-Barnes acknowledges the powerful motivations and good intentions behind the creation of the StrongBlackWoman, she also critiques the notion as one that forces black women to deny themselves and their experiences in unhealthy ways. Chapter four continues to trace the idea of the StrongBlackWoman in American culture today, with an excellent consideration of the character Miranda Bailey (Grey’s Anatomy) and her idealized embodiment of the StrongBlackWoman. But the greatest strength of chapter four is Walker-Barnes’ discussion of the ways in which StrongBlackWomen have been blamed for many of the problems in black communities, and in particular for preventing the rise of male leadership in black communities. Walker-Barnes ably demonstrates how black women are expected to thread the impossible needle of being strong but not too strong, independent but supportive of men. Here, Walker-Barnes’ womanist approach deftly reveals the double oppression of racism and sexism.

In case any pastoral caregivers feel inclined to root the above problems in secular culture, chapter five examines the ways in which American churches benefit from the labor of StrongBlackWomen, often without allowing them full participation in the life of the church and even sometimes blaming their expected service to the church for a lack of male leadership. In addition to this critique, Walker-Barnes also draws on womanist theology to demonstrate that the American church has “romanticized Black women’s suffering” (142), encouraging suffering while denying the need for self-care. In response, Walker-Barnes offers a reading of two well-known passages in Luke: the story of the Good Samaritan and Jesus’ interaction with Mary and Martha. As she reads these passages, Walker-Barnes offers them as correctives to the glorification of selfless suffering. She acknowledges that Christianity does require the unselfish care of others, as when the Samaritan halts his journey to care for the battered man on the side of the road. Yet the Samaritan does not end his journey; instead, he continues on his way, with a promise to return and pay the innkeeper – who is also not expected to sacrifice with no reward. In her reading, unselfish care for others does not require self-abnegation or an unhealthy denial of self. Turning to the story of Mary and Martha, Walker-Barnes sees Christ’s affirmation of Mary’s choice to listen to his teaching as an affirmation of self-care: Mary is devoting time to her own spiritual development, something that Martha rejects in her perceived need to care for others. Through these readings, Walker-Barnes argues that self-love is, in fact, necessary for the Christian; an ethic of self-love and mutual self-
giving “can free African-American women from the limitations of an identity circumscribed by emotional stoicism, self-sacrificial caregiving, and radical independence” (158).

My one concern with *Too Heavy A Yoke* comes in the final chapter, in which Walker-Barnes outlines a recovery program for StrongBlackWomen; I will preface this concern with my own lack of any experience or training as a counselor. She models her program on the well-known twelve-step program, with steps that ask participants to own their problematic StrongBlackWomanhood, ask for divine help in overcoming the problem, and make amends to those they have hurt. Walker-Barnes envisions this program happening in an environment committed to acknowledging the large social forces of racism and sexism inherent in the idea of the StrongBlackWoman; she spends most of the final chapter outlining what she sees as the necessary support for healing black women, including caregivers who have themselves experienced the struggle of being a StrongBlackWoman and a fundamental respect for the lived experience of black women. In this context, a twelve-step program would most likely be helpful and liberating. Divorced from this context, however, this type of program has the potential to become yet another means of blaming black women for their own oppression. One of the great strengths of *Too Heavy A Yoke* is the presence of practical steps that caregivers can take to help StrongBlackWomen; the challenge for caregivers lies in finding the best balance between encouraging individual women to move towards healing while also recognizing the powerful and pervasive social factors that make healing difficult.

*Too Heavy A Yoke* is an important and accessible resource for understanding the ways in which racism and sexism – both historical and contemporary – impacts the lives of black women. I finished the book with a much better understanding of the historical and contemporary social pressures on constructions of black womanhood. While the book is accessible to a variety of audiences, the meticulous footnotes offer interested readers a variety of further reading on all of the topics Walker-Barnes explores. In addition, Walker-Barnes’ suggestions for healing are both important and useful; this book should be required reading for anyone with an interest in caring for black women.