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INTRODUCTION

Post-Oppositional Resistance?

Threshold Theories Defined and Enacted

Wars. So many wars. Wars outside and wars inside. Cultural wars, science wars, and wars against terrorism. Wars against poverty and wars against the poor. Wars against ignorance and wars out of ignorance. My question is simple: Should we be at war, too, we, the scholars, the intellectuals? Is it really our duty to add fresh ruins to fields of ruins? Is it really the task of the humanities to add deconstruction to destruction? More iconoclasm to iconoclasm? What has become of the critical spirit? Has it run out of steam?
Bruno Latour, "Why Has Critique Run Out of Steam?"

Some forty-odd years after the Civil Rights movement, we are still seeking solutions to racism. The question is how shall we dismantle or redeem the systems that have been put in place to perpetuate racism? To date there have been few answers to this question. There are even fewer options for defining self and society as constructs that do not emerge out of conflict, but out of a full awareness of the realities of the universe and our connections in it.

Barbara A. Holmes, *Race and the Cosmos*

A typical response when I witness, experience, or in other ways am confronted with racism, sexism, homophobia, imperialism, colonialism, or other forms of social injustice—whether this injustice is reported in the news, experienced

by my family/friends/self, or expressed in my classrooms, at conferences, or in the books, articles, and websites I read—is to react oppositionally. My blood pressure rises, my muscles tense. I condemn and reject the ignorant views, the stereotypes, the oppressive treatment. I fight back. Indeed, such reactions have become so automatic that they seem like human nature (*you push me and/or my people, and I'll push back*)¹ or like common sense (*I mean—what's the alternative to fighting back? Should I become a doormat, a pushover? Should I silence myself and just allow the violence—the unfair situation—to continue? Should I ignore the injustice, avert my gaze, remain oblivious?*). My commitment to challenging social injustice has defined me and shaped my career so extensively that at times I've described myself by what I oppose: my work is anti-racist, anti-sexist, anti-homophobic, anti-white-supremacist, and so on. (*Look at me: The crusading scholar!*)

My undergraduate and graduate work trained me to think oppositionally, to structure my articles and book chapters as a series of binary discussions that proceed through nuanced contrasts: first, describe other scholars' theories and perspectives; second, demonstrate the limitations in their views; third, explain why my views are superior to those of other scholars; fourth, persuade readers to reject the other scholars' views and embrace mine. I've developed an oppositional toolkit—an arsenal, as it were—filled with all sorts of strategies, methods, and approaches that enable me to poke holes in other people's arguments, demonstrate the flaws in their thinking, and persuade readers that my theories are better—more all-encompassing, more insightful, more effective, more worthy of respect. In short, I've been trained to demonstrate that my perspectives are right and those of others are wrong. I've honed my debate skills and sharpened my oppositional consciousness so thoroughly that they've become second nature. As I define the term, *oppositional consciousness* represents a binary either/or epistemology and praxis that structures our perceptions, politics, and actions through a resistant energy—a reaction against that which we seek to transform. Oppositional consciousness can take a variety of modes and occurs both inside and outside academic settings (classrooms, journals, etc.).²

I've lost count of the number of times that I've waded into an argument, jumped into the fray. And I confess, at this point in my career, these intellectual oppositional battles have become kind of fun. I enjoy the scholarly skirmishes, the critical banter, the opportunities to think on my feet, to use my words, my research, and my ideas in a righteous crusade for a better future. I

relish the battle, and I love winning; I want to be right! (*Just ask my family.*) I'm not alone in my oppositional approach; I've learned from the best, modeling myself on the leading scholars in my academic fields, adopting their "murderous maneuvers of dialectical reasoning that negate another's position as wrong in order to affirm our own position as right—as *the* one (and only) position" (Kirby, 228, original emphasis).

But like Bruno Latour, I wonder: Given the many forms of violence we experience today—environmental violence, military violence, ethnocentric violence, gender-based violence, and the list goes on and on and on—"Should we be at war, too, we, the scholars, the intellectuals? Is it really our duty to add fresh ruins to fields of ruins?" While Latour refers specifically to the "science wars" between career scientists and sociologists of science, his questions can be applied more generally both to contemporary academic life and to those of us involved in progressive social-justice work.³ (I define "us" broadly, to include people inside, outside, or straddling the academy; people who are students, professors, student-professors, lifelong learners, voracious readers, mindful activists, and more.) To be sure, oppositional politics and other forms of oppositional consciousness have been vital, enabling us to survive under hostile conditions and make important social change. However, I question the long-term effectiveness of our oppositional politics and thinking. As I explain in the following pages, these oppositional approaches—wherever they occur . . . in the academy, on the street, in daily life, or in the words we speak, read, and think—are too limited to bring about the long-term transformation we need. Oppositional politics and oppositional thinking have not enabled us to radically transform society. As Barbara Holmes suggests in the second epigraph to this introduction, our struggles against racism—and, I would add, against classism, sexism, homophobia, and other forms of discrimination and oppression—have not enabled us to "dismantle or redeem the systems" that created and reinforce these unjust structures. We remain immersed in conflict—conflicts that often subtly reinforce the very systems against which we struggle.⁴ This oppositionality saturates us and limits our imaginations; we define "self and society" in antagonistic, conflict-driven terms that prevent us from obtaining a more ample "awareness of the realities of the universe and our connections in it." Without this larger vision, we remain locked in an embattled, us-against-them status quo.

Transformation Now! grew from my belief that these oppositional energies, politics, epistemologies, and battles are inadequate. We must use them less

frequently and, perhaps, move beyond them. We must take new risks and create additional tools and strategies. Like M. Jacqui Alexander, I believe that “[o]ur oppositional politic has been necessary, but it will never sustain us; while it may give us some temporary gains. . . . it can never ultimately feed that deep place within us: that space of the erotic, that space of the soul, that space of the Divine” (99). Hence this book’s title, with its demand for immediate change—the immediacy underscored, the demand heightened by the exclamation point. The transformations I call for and attempt to enact are theoretical, thematic, and methodological. I am interested in transforming several recurring strands that occur across a broad range of disciplines. These strands hinge on dichotomous epistemological and ontological frameworks and include the following: (1) an overemphasis on narrow definitions of difference and identity, defined in exclusionary, either/or terms; (2) a subsequent underemphasis on commonalities, defined *not* as sameness but as points of complex connections; (3) the limited knowledge and use of women-of-colors theorizing in a variety of academic fields, ranging from literary studies of the Americas to women’s studies;⁵ and (4) the oppositional consciousness and energies generally found in social-justice work and in academic critique. But here’s the really tricky thing: I can’t simply reject these four strands because to do so would inadvertently yet automatically enact the dichotomous thinking I want to transform! And so, rather than entirely dismiss these four strands, I engage them, gently pushing, prodding, and pulling them in new directions.

Each chapter has at least one additional, more specific transformational focus: the dominance of intersectionality and intersectional theory as a framework to understand difference in feminist scholarship, women’s and gender studies (WGS), and queer theory (chapter 1); canonical definitions of “American” selfhood and mainstream understandings of individualism (chapter 2); conventional identity politics (chapter 3); critiques of universalism and feminist revisionist mythmaking (chapter 4); self-help literature and the New Age movement (chapter 5); and critical pedagogy (chapter 6). I use these chapter-specific topics to illustrate a key aspect of my call for transformation: the centering of woman-of-colors texts. Each chapter proceeds by foregrounding theories by women of colors, putting these theories in dialogue with additional theoretical and disciplinary perspectives.

I focus on twentieth- and twenty-first-century women-of-colors theorizing because these theories are the most potentially transformational theories that I’ve ever encountered (*and I have studied many theories*). They give me

the intellectual grounding and tools to understand, challenge, and alter the existing frameworks and paradigms. They are riskier, more innovative and imaginative . . . rich with the potential to transform. The theories I explore in the following chapters have called out to me, inviting me to use them in new ways. They embolden and encourage me. (“*Ándale! Ándale!*” *They urge. “Take your ideas further—go ahead, . . . challenge that shibboleth, poke a few holes in the status quo.”*) To be sure, women-of-colors theorists and authors have not received the attention they deserve; this work is underrepresented in academic thought. But my motivation here is not, primarily, representational. In other words, I do not underscore the value of women-of-colors theories *because* I want women of colors to be more fully represented in the scholarship (*although I do very much desire this increased representation*). Nor does my emphasis on women-of-colors work grow from my own women-of-colors status. I showcase these theories and theorists because of their intellectual power to provoke and transform.

Throughout *Transformation Now!* I enact the post-operational theorizing that I call for. I interrogate some of the diverse forms that binary-operational thought can take while resisting the (*very strong*) temptation to react oppositionally. I aspire to offer viable additions and alternatives to the oppositional forms of consciousness and politics that currently drive social-justice theorizing, activism, and academic disciplines. I develop nonoperational theories and relational methods that insist on a realistic politics of hope and the possibility of planetary citizenship. Through unlikely dialogues and startling juxtapositions, *Transformation Now!* builds on women-of-colors theories, texts, and perspectives—offering alternatives to difference-based scholarship. The book enacts a variety of multidirectional, multidisciplinary, multivoiced conversations, provocative dialogues in which all parties are transformed.

But what’s so bad about oppositional consciousness?

Although oppositional consciousness, politics, and thinking have been necessary to our survival, enabling us to resist and sometimes partially reform oppressive social practices and structures, oppositionality is not as useful today as it was in the past century. I attribute these limitations to the underlying binary systems on which our oppositional epistemologies and practices are generally based. This dichotomous framework defines reality—and, by extension, knowledge, ethics, and truth—in limited, mutually exclusive terms. In this

either/or system, we have only two options: Either *I'm* right and I win, or *you're* right and you win. This binary structure flattens out commonalities, reducing them to sameness: Our views are either entirely the same or they're entirely different. And, if our views are *not* the same—if they're different—then one of us (*me, I hope!*) is right and the other one (*you, I will argue!*) is wrong. There's no room for contradiction (*we're both right, even though our views seem strikingly different*); for overlapping perspectives and friendly disagreements (*we're both partially right and partially wrong*); for the building of new truths (*let's take your perspective, my perspective, and at least one more perspective and develop several synergistic alternatives—new perspectives!*); or for whatever other complex commonalities our imaginations might cook up. We remain locked into our already-existing opinions, which we cling to with desperation and fierce determination. As Flora Bridges notes, in oppositional discourse

what becomes normative, “right,” and regulatory within the culture is determined by beating down or stamping out various other alternatives. Norms and values are established by way of domination. In this mental framework the possibility for both/and is destroyed. Both/and thinking is basically determined as irrational, primitive, or illogical. What results is a ravaging, hate-filled dogmatic form of establishing cultural values. (71)

Embattled and besieged, we harden ourselves to protect our current beliefs, values, theories, and worldviews. Because any slippage—any willingness to consider alternative perspectives—seems to weaken our position and expose us to attack, we refuse to seriously consider the limitations in our current perspectives. (*It's us against them. Me against you.*) Differences are drained of complexity and defined in narrow, either/or terms that limit our options and strangle our imaginations. Mark Lawrence McPhail makes a similar point, noting that “argumentative language perpetuates division and fragmentation because it assumes *that competing positions are in fact mutually exclusive*” (*Zen* 99, original emphasis).

These violent oppositional perspectives—in which only one of us can be right and the other must be wrong—have their source at least partially in an inflexible ontological framework that posits a distinct separation between human beings and reality, divides this reality into discrete parts, and defines truth in narrow, rigid terms. Mutual exclusivity and either/or thinking is built into this framework. As McPhail explains, critical discourse relies on an antagonistic, dichotomous worldview and an essentialist epistemological

structure, or what he calls negative difference. According to McPhail, “the problem of language in Western culture in its most extreme form . . . reifies the existence of an essential reality, a reality ‘out there,’ separate and distinct from the human agents that interact within it. This belief in separateness has, indeed, made us strangers, and has created a language of negative difference that manifests itself in the social and symbolic realities of race, gender, and rhetoric” (“Complicity” 1–2).

This principle of negative difference, with its dichotomous epistemology and ontology, shapes academic scholarship. Most (if not all) of us educated in western school systems have been trained to think in disconnectionist terms, to look for the differences (defined narrowly) between our views and those of others, and to heighten these differences while ignoring possible points of connection.⁶ By challenging other people’s theories, we affirm, support, and develop our own. While difference-inflected dialogue can offer valuable opportunities for intellectual development and creative explorations, we greatly diminish our possibilities for growth by assuming that these differences between our views and others’ are permanent and cannot be bridged, transformed, or in other ways resolved. As McPhail notes, critical academic discourse is based on and grounded in disagreement: “all polemic is presupposed by an agreement to disagree, to take positions that are assumed to be mutually exclusive and *essentially* at odds with one another” (*Zen* 59, original emphasis). This antagonistic foundation, with its mutually exclusive options, transforms conversations into battles, making it almost impossible to develop creative compromise or generate innovative hybrid perspectives that draw from strikingly different views.

Our overreliance on these binary forms of oppositional consciousness limits activist-scholars in at least three interrelated ways: as I’ve just discussed, we’re locked into the existing system (which shapes and reinforces the social problems we aspire to change); we can’t imagine alternatives to this status quo, with its essentializing dichotomous definition of reality; and we internalize our oppositional approach so thoroughly that we use it against each other. In short, these oppositional energies limit our vision for change, restrict our options, and inhibit our ability to create transformational alliances. Oppositional consciousness usually prevents scholars from seeing alternatives because the arguments are grounded in the systems, framework, and worldview that we’re trying to transcend. We’ve become trapped. Our overreliance on this binary framework imprisons us within the very system

that we're trying to transform. Rather than think for ourselves and reflect thoughtfully on the most effective ways to address the specific situations at hand, we automatically fight back, trying to dish out even more than we or our allies have received. Locking us into a reactionary stance, these oppositional energies harm us as students, teachers, scholars, and colleagues.

In addition to inhibiting our ability to develop and implement innovative strategies for progressive social change, oppositional thinking erodes our alliances and communities. As the histories of numerous social movements have demonstrated, all too often oppositional politics fragment from within, damaging the individual and the group.⁷ These hostile, oppositional energies become poisonous when we direct them at one another, as we too often do. Because oppositional thinking is premised on a series of winners and losers, we struggle fiercely to come out on top—as one of the winners (or, better yet, as The Ultimate Winner). We engage in all sorts of battles. All too often, and despite our best intentions, we enact what Timothy Powell describes as “corrosive exchanges” (“All Colors” 168) and embark on “[a] downward spiral of ever more hostile counter-accusations that tend to irrupt when a multiplicity of contentious and contrasting cultural points of view come into contact” (175). This fractured approach leads to divisive politics anchored in what Jacqui Alexander describes in “Remembering *This Bridge*, Remembering Ourselves” as “mono-thinking: the mistaken notion that only one kind of justice work leads to freedom” (98). As Alexander notes, reflecting on her own experiences in social-justice movements, oppositional politics’ limited approach relies on reductive thinking that prevents social-justice actors from creating broad-based movements for social change:

We named this process of fragmentation colonization, usually understood as a set of exploitative practices in political, ideological, and aesthetic terms, but also linked in minute ways to dualistic-hierarchical thinking: divisions among mind, body, spirit; between sacred and secular; male and female; heterosexual and homosexual; in class divisions; in divisions between the Erotic and the Divine. We saw its operation creating mono-thinking: *the mistaken notion that only one kind of justice work leads to freedom*. Presumably, organizing for a decent, just, living wage is not connected to anti-racist work, to anti-homophobia work, to organizing against the U.S state in Vieques. Such thinking is always premised in negation, often translated into singular explanations for oppression. (98–99, emphasis added)

Like McPhail's principle of negative difference, the "mono-thinking" that Alexander describes relies on (and reinforces) an essentializing, binary framework that defines reality too narrowly, in inflexible unchanging terms. When our politics are driven by mono-thinking, we assume that there is an absolute "best practice" and "best theory" to effect change. This assumption compels us to focus too narrowly on this single approach (*say, for instance, anti-racism*). Rather than work with those who use other approaches and draw on different theories, we judge them as somehow inferior—as lacking. (*Too often, of course, this judgment seems logical because our potential colleagues have defined their own approach as "the best."*)

Our internal fragmentations—our intra-divisions, as it were—have their source at least partially in the oppositional energies (and the dichotomous thinking behind them) that the groups used to combat social oppression. We can't turn off the negative energies once we remove ourselves from the battlefield. We take these energies with us, into our work, our homes, our minds, our bodies, our souls. They eat away at us, devouring us as we direct this oppositional thinking at one another and at ourselves. We fragment. We crumble. We deteriorate from within. And then we regroup. We begin again. And on to the next corrosive battle.

Too often, we've so closely associated our theories and scholarly/activist/political perspectives with our personal identities and our self-esteem that we become even more adamant about our views, even more reluctant to change. Even a slight shift in opinion can be viewed as defeat—a wound to one's selfhood. In such instances, we're no longer arguing in order to communicate our perspective, protect our values, and/or defend our theories. We're struggling for our psychic lives—fighting to defend our Selves—our self-definitions and self-worth. In such instances, if you attack my theory, you're attacking me. The friendly banter dissolves into acrimonious debate.

How could we even assume that these oppositional politics could effect the permanent, progressive change we so desperately need? After all, the oppositional thinking we employ relies on (and therefore unintentionally reinforces) the existing (unjust, oppressive) frameworks that we're trying to transform! Even if oppositionality's dichotomous approach to reality seems "hardwired" into our brains, as some scientists suggest, I'm tired of the knee-jerk reactions and the recycled theories and practices.⁸ I'm exhausted with this divisive mono-thinking and the negative difference on which it relies. It's time

to break out of our oppositional frameworks—at least occasionally. We need additional tools and tactics, nonbinary forms of oppositional consciousness that enable us to explore, discover, and create commonalities. Fortunately, we don't need to start from scratch: Women-of-colors scholarship and other threshold theories have opened the way.

Threshold theorizing . . . defined and enacted

Transformation Now! has its source in my belief that radical progressive change—on individual, collective, and planetary levels—is urgently needed and in fact possible, although not necessarily easy to achieve.⁹ In this book, I call for, explore, and attempt to enact alternatives to conventional oppositional thinking and scholarship. I describe these alternatives as “threshold theories” to underscore their nonbinary, liminal, potentially transformative status. As I use the term, *thresholds* represent complex interconnections among a variety of sometimes contradictory worlds—points crossed by multiple intersecting possibilities, opportunities, and challenges. Like thresholds—that mark transitional, in-between spaces where new beginnings, and unexpected combinations can occur—threshold theories facilitate and enact movements “betwixt and between” divergent worlds, enabling us to establish fresh connections among distinct (and sometimes contradictory) perspectives, realities, peoples, theories, texts, and/or worldviews. I borrow the phrase “betwixt and between” from Victor Turner. Building on the work of anthropologist Arnold van Gennep, Victor Turner uses this phrase to describe the middle, liminal stage he finds in human rituals—a fluid, nonhierarchical, paradoxical stage in which participants “are neither living nor dead from one aspect, and both living and dead from another. Their condition is one of ambiguity and paradox, a confusion of all the customary categories” (96–97). As I demonstrate throughout *Transformation Now!*, this category confusion is a crucial component in threshold theories. When we enact threshold theorizing, we shift “betwixt and between” established categories, enacting what I've elsewhere described as both/and/neither/nor thinking—negotiations between (and within) affirmation and negation—that facilitate the invention of additional possibilities.¹⁰

Threshold theories inspire us to be bold, to dream big, to affirm the possibility of transformation, to envision radical change. Thresholds mark crisis

points, spaces where conflicting values, ideas, and beliefs converge, unsettling fixed categories of meaning. These theoretical thresholds open up dangerous, uncomfortable locations—for both readers and writers. Threshold theories are frictional, containing partial assertions and not-quite-this-but-not-quite-that perspectives. This oscillating ambivalence makes threshold theories complex, contradictory, and multiplicitous. Threshold theories draw from numerous perspectives and offer no final destination, no permanent fixed truths.

Threshold theories demand that we stretch! They challenge us to re-examine and perhaps change our thinking, our worldviews, our actions. Neither entirely inside nor fully outside any single theoretical perspective, threshold theories invite us to consider and perhaps occupy ambivalent insider/outsider positions in relation to a variety of more established theoretical views. In many ways, threshold theories' ambivalent insider-outsider oscillations resemble what Walter Mignolo describes as "border thinking." But I describe these theories as "thresholds" rather than "borders" to underscore both their ability to contain and transform multiple opposing perspectives and their promise of transformation.

Grounded in a framework of interconnectivity—a metaphysics of interconnectedness, as it were—threshold theories are relational. Whereas border thinking generally begins from a point of breakage—from the "subaltern perspective[,] emerging from the cracks between civilization and culture" (Mignolo 44), threshold theories start elsewhere—with the presupposition that we are intimately, inextricably linked with all human and nonhuman existence. Each individual being is interrelated with all that exists—on multiple levels and in multiple ways, ranging from economics and ecology to language, social systems, and energy.¹¹ By thus positing our radical interconnectivity, threshold theories contain but exceed the exclusionary ontological frameworks, the principle of negative difference, and the either/or thinking found in oppositional consciousness and other Enlightenment-based worldviews. As I indicate in more detail later in this introduction, my use of the word *radical* (with its Latin origin in *roots*) is quite intentional: Threshold theories are premised on a shared commonality (not sameness)—a complex commonality so spacious that it embraces difference—even apparently mutually exclusive differences. By positing complex, contradictory commonalities, threshold theories—and the relational thinking that they produce and on which they rely—enable us to redefine and reconceive conflicts and fragmentation. When

we view conflicts from these relational perspectives, we simultaneously acknowledge and look beneath surface judgments, rigid labels, and other divisive ways of thinking. We don't reject these divisions, but we don't become trapped in them, either. We seek commonalities and move toward healing. As I intend to demonstrate in *Transformation Now!*, this radically relational approach can facilitate the development of post-oppositional resistance and nonbinary forms of oppositional consciousness.¹²

But enough abstract talk! Let's look at Gloria Anzaldúa's theories and practice of *nepantleras* and *nepantla* to consider some of the forms that these nonoppositional threshold theories can take. Drawing on her own experiences with a variety of social-justice movements and academic organizations, as well as her innovative understanding of the Náhuatl term *nepantla*, Anzaldúa coined the term *nepantlera* in her post-*Borderlands* work as she developed an expansive alternative to Chicana lesbian identity politics. For Anzaldúa, the *nepantlera* represents a type of threshold person or world traveler: someone who enters into and interacts with multiple, often conflicting, political/cultural/ideological/ethnic/etc. worlds and yet refuses to entirely adopt, belong to, or identify with any single belief, group, or location.¹³

Anzaldúa invents the word *nepantlera* by taking the common Náhuatl word for "in-between space," *nepantla*, and expanding its meaning to include ontological, epistemological, and ethical dimensions. In Anzaldúa's philosophy, *nepantla* represents temporal, spatial, psychic, intellectual forms of liminality and potential transformation. As she explains in her preface to *this bridge we call home*, "I use the word *nepantla* to theorize liminality . . . and to talk about those who facilitate passages between worlds, whom I've named *nepantleras*. I associate *nepantla* with states of mind that question old ideas and beliefs, acquire new perspectives, change worldviews, and shift from one world to another" ("Preface" 1). In Anzaldúa's work, *nepantla* signals crisis points, potential shifts in meaning, and a resistance to facile either/or frameworks. As Sarah Ohmer suggests, Anzaldúa's *nepantla* is charged with multiple oppositional energies, for it includes "a clash of opposites, un *enfrentamiento* with oppositional movements of identities and ideologies in which the self sways, but is not fixed, and remains ambivalent" (153). This mobile, ambivalent multiplicity triggers a shift from binary-oppositional consciousness and mono-thinking. Perhaps *nepantla* can best be described as particularly chaotic thresholds. When you're in *nepantla*, you're in chaos—tugged between starkly different peoples and worldviews. Your previous theories, your beliefs about life, no longer make sense. You're in free fall—painful, terrifying free fall.

Held in chaotic tension, these oppositional energies can activate transformation. (Here we see opposition, but not a dichotomous form. Nepantla's multiplicity complicates oppositionality, breaks it out of the binary.) During an Anzaldúan nepantla, individual and collective self-definitions, belief systems, and worldviews are destabilized as we begin questioning our previously accepted assumptions. Apparently fixed categories—whether based on gender, ethnicity/'race,' sexuality, religion, or some combination of these categories and often others as well—are slowly stripped away.¹⁴ Perhaps not surprisingly, Anzaldúa uses metaphors of awakening and rebirth to describe nepantla: it's "this birthing stage where you feel like you're reconfiguring your identity and don't know where you are. You used to be this person, but now maybe you're different in some way. You're changing worlds and cultures and maybe classes [or] sexual preferences" (*Interviews/Entrevistas* 225–26). In short, nepantla is the site of multiple, clashing perspectives and beliefs that don't seem to make sense, although they coexist with one another. In these nepantla states, boundaries become more permeable, and begin breaking down (perhaps transitioning from boundaries to thresholds). This loosening of previously restrictive categories, perspectives, and beliefs—while incredibly painful—can create shifts in consciousness and new opportunities for change; we acquire additional, potentially transformative perspectives, different ways to understand ourselves, our circumstances, and our worlds. It's as if nepantla shoves us outside of our existing frameworks, forcing us to change our views.

Some people experiencing these difficult nepantla states choose to become nepantleras. I underscore the volitional nature of this shift because it's not easy to be a nepantlera. It's risky, lonely, exhausting work as we live with overlapping, contradictory worldviews, perspectives, and peoples. Never entirely inside, always somewhat outside, every group or worldview, nepantleras do not belong entirely to any single location. Yet this willingness to remain with/in the thresholds enables nepantleras to at least partially break away from the cultural trance and the binary thinking that has locked us into the status quo. As Anzaldúa explains in "Speaking across the Divide,"

Las nepantleras, like the ancient chamanas, move between the worlds. They can work from multiple locations, can circumvent polarizing binaries. They try not to get locked into one perspective or perception of things. They can see through our cultural conditioning and through our respective cultures' toxic ways of life. They try to overturn the destructive perceptions of the world that we've been taught by our various cultures. They change the stories about who we are and about our behavior. They point to the stick we beat ourselves with

so we realize what we're doing and may choose to throw away the stick. They possess the gift of vision. (293)

Living within and among multiple worlds, *nepantleras* use their frictional existence and discomfort to create alternative perspectives—ideas, theories, actions, and/or beliefs that contain yet exceed either/or thinking. This multiplicity compels them to redefine and thus slip through binary-oppositional frameworks and the dichotomous thinking on which it relies. They invent relational theories and tactics with which they can reconceive and in other ways transform the various worlds in which they exist. Significantly, Anzaldúa's *nepantleras* do not focus on narrow socially inscribed identity categories but instead forge a much more inclusive planetary vision: "Nepantleras think in terms of the planet, not just their own racial group, the U.S., or Norte América. They serve as agents of awakening, inspire and challenge others to deeper awareness, greater *conocimiento*, serve as reminders of each other's search for wholeness of being" (293). This planetary vision is post-humanist; as Anzaldúa writes in "now let us shift . . . the path of *conocimiento* . . . inner work, public acts," it includes but goes beyond all human life, embracing "everyone/everything" (558).

Years before she invented the word *nepantlera*, Anzaldúa was forging the theory in her daily actions, through the unpopular political and personal choices she made. We see an especially good example of the *nepantlera's* creative nonoppositional resistance in "La Prieta," her 1981 autohistoria, where Anzaldúa draws on her experiences from the previous twenty years and calls for a transformational social-justice movement.¹⁵ During the 1960s and 1970s, she pursued her work as an artist and spiritual seeker while also participating in a number of political-activist organizations, including (but not limited to) the farm workers' movement, the Brown Berets, the women's movement, and the lesbian-gay movement. At a time when separatism was a familiar political strategy among oppositional groups, Anzaldúa maintains her commitments to all of these various movements and peoples. Look, for instance, at the following assertion, where she defiantly reaffirms her connections across differences:

I am a wind-swayed bridge, a crossroads inhabited by whirlwinds. Gloria, the facilitator. Gloria, the mediator, straddling the walls between abysses. "Your allegiance is to La Raza, the Chicano movement," say the members of my race. "Your allegiance is to the Third World," say my Black and Asian friends. "Your

allegiance is to your gender, to women,” say the feminists. Then there’s my allegiance to the Gay movement, to the socialist revolution, to the New Age, to magic and the occult. And there’s my affinity to literature, to the world of the artist. What am I? *A third world lesbian feminist with Marxist and mystic leanings*. They would chop me up into little fragments and tag each piece with a label. (45, original emphasis)

Although each particular group adopted an oppositional (and often separatist) approach that made membership contingent on an exclusionary set of demands (a type of sameness, as it were), Anzaldúa maintains her allegiance to all of the groups while rejecting their mono-thinking perspectives, politics, and rules.

Anzaldúa’s nuanced response illustrates the relational oppositionality and threshold theorizing I advocate and attempt to develop in *Transformation Now!* By refusing the rules while accepting the people and the groups who impose these rules, Anzaldúa enacts a nonbinary form of opposition. She reaches beyond occidental traditions and defies either/or logic as she embraces apparent contradictions. Addressing the various oppositional activists who have demanded her exclusive allegiance, she exclaims:

You say my name is ambivalence? Think of me as Shiva, a many-armed and -legged body with one foot on brown soil, one on white, one in straight society, one in the gay world, the man’s world, the women’s, one limb in the literary world, another in the working class, the socialist, and the occult worlds. A sort of spider woman hanging by one thin strand of web.

Who, me, confused? Ambivalent? Not so. Only your labels split me. (“Prieta” 45–46)

After redefining herself in beyond-binary terms, Anzaldúa shifts her focus from the groups’ demands to the underlying framework—the hidden status-quo story and the conventional separatist thinking that undergird these demands and would deny her ability to move among the various groups and worldviews.¹⁶ By thus changing her focus, she acquires additional insights that she uses to examine the divisive roles social-identity labels (and categories) play. Carefully synthesizing acceptance with rejection, Anzaldúa exposes and opposes the labels’ limitations and the flaws in the various forms of group-think on which such labels rely. However, she does not reject the people themselves. Nor does she separate herself from the groups. She embraces them all but also exceeds them. By so doing, she attains new insights

about the framework that has shaped the many groups to which she partially belongs. She enacts a post-oppositional stance.

Threshold theorizing includes flexible epistemologies and ontologies capable of incorporating contradiction and paradox whenever necessary (*and useful*). Thus, for example, Anzaldúa adopts Marxist, socialist, mystical, and occult beliefs, despite the fact that many Marxists, socialists, and others might insist on these theories' mutually exclusive status. She refuses to choose between them but holds the contrasting beliefs in tension. She sits with the messy complexity. It's this willingness to live with the contradictions that makes nonbinary oppositional work possible. But new insights are not instantaneous, and threshold theories require patience, respectful attention to multiple voices, and the willingness to live with contradictory oppositions. In short, threshold theories require intellectual humility. As explained in more detail in chapter 1, I define intellectual humility as an open-minded, flexible way of thinking that entails the acknowledgment of our inevitable epistemological limitations, the acceptance of uncertainty and the possibility of error, and intense self-reflection. Intellectual humility resembles the "epistemic humility" Lee Hester finds in Choctaw elders' epistemologies. As Hester explains, "When you do not claim to have a correct map of the world, then you do not claim to have the 'Truth.' You are willing to accept that other people have maps that are as good (or as bad) as your own" (331). To borrow Hester's metaphor, threshold theories do not present the "True Map" of the world (or even "True Maps" of smaller regions, ideas, etc.); rather, they remain open to multiple mappings, enabling us to chart additional pathways and possibilities that we can use as we work to build a more inclusionary, socially just world.¹⁷

Threshold theories invite us to move from binary-oppositional to (*and, possibly, beyond*) relational-oppositional thinking. Anzaldúa illustrates this movement in one of her final essays, "now let us shift," where she draws on her own experiences at the 1990 National Women's Studies Association (NWSA) Conference.¹⁸ During this conference, many women of colors, fed up with the organization's ongoing racism—with its limited attention to their needs, its narrow ('white'-raced, middle-class) definition of "women's issues" and "women's studies," its tokenization, its silencing, and its erasure of their words—walked out. By so doing, they enacted the typical oppositional politics of the time. Deeply wounded by years of dismissive treatment, angered by the ongoing racism they had experienced in U.S. culture and in the NWSA orga-

nization, they responded in an oppositional either/or fashion. They entirely rejected the organization. My point here is not to condemn these feminists of colors' actions or to judge them as too narrow to be useful. (*Indeed, had I been at this conference, I might have walked out, too.*) Their reaction was justified and necessary; however, it was not sufficient, in itself, to bring about the radical changes they desired. Along with such binary oppositional acts, radical transformation requires additional perspectives and actions, such as those Anzaldúa provides.

Significantly, Anzaldúa did not deny or discount her colleagues' oppositional perspective. As she explains in an unpublished interview, she fully understood why they felt compelled to leave, and she agreed with their assessment of the organization's deeply embedded racism. However, she also viewed the issue as more complex, with more than two sides. While maintaining full awareness of (*and personally wounded by*) NWSA's ongoing racism and painful actions, she did not entirely reject the organization. Holding these mutually exclusive perspectives in tension, she chose to remain at the conference and work to create opportunities for dialogue that could witness to all sides of the conflict.

This willingness to witness broadly, to all parties, is a dangerous, often unpleasant task. (Indeed, I can't help but wonder if Anzaldúa's work as a nepantlera negatively impacted her health and contributed to her premature death.)¹⁹ However, in order to effect broad-based, lasting progressive transformation, we must move beyond oppositional thinking and take such risks. As Anzaldúa explains in "now let us shift," where she draws on her memories of this conflict-ridden NWSA walk-out as she presents her theory of *las nepanteras*: "When perpetual conflict erodes a sense of connectedness and wholeness *la nepantlera* calls on the 'connectionist' faculty to show the deep common ground and interwoven kinship among all things and people. This faculty, one of less-structured thoughts, less-rigid categorizations, and thinner boundaries, allows us to picture—via reverie, dreaming, and artistic creativity—similarities instead of solid divisions" (567–68). As this description indicates, Anzaldúa proposes nepantleras' connectionist thinking as an alternative to the oppositional thought we generally employ. A connectionist approach can be vital during times of fragmentation. When we view conflicts from connectionist perspectives, we try to look beneath surface judgments, rigid labels, and other divisive ways of thinking. We seek commonalities and move toward healing: "Where before we saw only separateness, differences,

and polarities, our connectionist sense of spirit recognizes nurturance and reciprocity and encourages alliances among groups working to transform communities” (568). Anzaldúa demonstrates that by thus moving beyond binary thinking, shifts in perspectives, beliefs, and social structures become possible (though not necessarily guaranteed).²⁰

Becoming nepantleras:
forging complex commonalities,
making new connections

I am a nepantlera, torn between theories, divided among worldviews, in love with authors and philosophers who rarely (if ever) speak to one another or even acknowledge one another’s work: Ralph Waldo Emerson and Gloria Evangelina Anzaldúa. Engaged Buddhism and Black Feminism. Object-Oriented Ontology and Indigenous Thought. Quantum physics’ theory of nonlocality and Womanist theory’s LUXOCRACY. The strange couplings continue: Jane Roberts, Seth, and Women-of-Colors Theories. The Paranormal and Social-Justice Work. Spirituality and Activism. Pedagogy and Energy Medicine. Despite their many differences, these divergent academic fields, theories, and worldviews offer potential points of connection. I want to make these connections, draw these disparate worldviews into dialogue, create these synergistic conversations among areas of thought and perspectives that too often are kept far apart. Hence *Transformation Now!* As I make bold and unlikely combinations among fields, theories, and authors generally kept distinct, I simultaneously model and invite others to take similar risks.

Throughout *Transformation Now!* I adopt a relational, dialogic approach and bring strikingly different people, texts, theories, and ideas into convers(at)ion. I bracket the letters “at” in this word to underscore both my hope that these conversations will be transformative and my attempt to embed the transformation deeply within the conversations themselves. Positing interconnections among disparate perspectives, I call for and attempt to enact transformational dialogues—conversations with the potential for conversion. Like Mark McPhail, I believe that “[d]ialogue allows for the recognition of the interrelatedness of positions and propositions that transcends the dualistic essentialism of persuasive discourse, and provides for an understanding of rhetoric as coherence” (*Zen* 80). And so in the following chapters, I stage a series of liminal conversations—boundary collisions and internal disrupt-

tions—where unlikely juxtapositions and transformational possibilities occur. Topics range from Ralph Waldo Emerson’s individualism, Mary Daly’s radical revisionist theology, and mainstream self-help literature to Gloria Anzaldúa’s post-Chicana philosophy, Paula Gunn Allen’s provocative use of Native American “medicine women” and storytelling traditions, and *This Bridge Called My Back*’s interventions into mainstream feminist theory.

While the specific topics I explore might seem wildly diverse, *Transformation Now!* includes several recurring themes and practices: the importance of enacting *nonoppositional theories and tactics*; the significant, potentially transformative contributions *women-of-colors theorizing* can make to mainstream scholarship and cultural issues; the development of context-specific *relational methodologies* that enable us to forge complex differential commonalities; and the creation of *transformational identity politics* that deeply acknowledge, yet simultaneously move through, existing social identity categories, thus offering a vital alternative to conventional identity politics and postpositivist realism.

These themes are closely related to my larger objectives: First, to encourage scholars and students (of all racial/ethnic/gender/etc. backgrounds) to educate themselves about women-of-colors theories, texts, and perspectives, and to use this work in new ways. Second, to offer viable alternatives to the oppositional forms of consciousness and politics that currently drive social-justice theorizing, activism, and academic disciplines. And third, to generate new commonalities among texts and theories that are generally kept entirely apart. *Commonalities*, as I use the term, is not synonymous with sameness. When I focus on commonalities, I neither deny nor overlook the many differences among us (*defining “us” however you will*). It is, in many ways, almost the reverse: By focusing on potential commonalities among differently situated people, authors, texts, ideas, and/or worldviews, I can develop (*or discover?*) complex points of connection. Commonalities offer pathways into relational investigations of difference—difference defined not as deviation *from* an unmarked norm but as alterations interrelated *with* this norm. In *Transformation Now!* I demonstrate that this nonbinary approach to difference, coupled with (sometimes painful) self-reflection, makes transformation possible, on multiple intertwined levels. As with the threshold theories I describe above, commonalities represent an oscillation between what some might define as mutually exclusive categories. Commonalities are relational and nonbinary. The exploration of commonalities leads to unpredictable discoveries and potentially new modes of interactions with others. I locate these discover-

ies at least partially in language itself. Language acts.²¹ Like Mark McPhail, I believe that language offers untapped possibilities for transformation, possibilities that we can access (*and/or perhaps create*) through self-reflection and open-minded investigation: “As we begin to scrutinize, reconceptualize, and reconstruct our classification systems, we will find forces within the language that will formulate a discourse devoid of domination; one that, in its affirmative approach to language, thought, and action, will be both radical and revolutionary. Such an approach to language will enable critics to engage in a rhetoric that actively recognizes and seeks to transcend the illusory black and white divisions of race, gender, and the language of negative difference” (“Complicity” 12).

Throughout *Transformation Now!* I enact the threshold theorizing I call for. I develop nonoppositional perspectives and relational methods that insist on a politics of hope yet thoroughly acknowledge the existing social disparities and systemic injustices.

Tying up a few loose ends: chapter overviews and text selection

Offering a rigorous analysis of the overlooked theoretical contributions of *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color*, chapter 1, “Beyond Intersectionality: Theorizing Interconnectivity with/in *This Bridge Called My Back*,” underscores the importance of women-of-colors theorizing while inviting readers to go beyond intersectional frameworks. A groundbreaking, multigenre collection of writings, *This Bridge Called My Back* has become an iconic text in feminist scholarship and WGS curriculum. However, its impact on contemporary theory and feminist scholarship has been minimal. Although scholars regularly use this book to *illustrate* the diversity and differences among women, they almost never employ the theories within *Bridge as theory*—as part of their own theorizing process. Nor do they integrate contributors’ most radical lessons into their own lives and intellectual traditions. In this chapter, I offer another approach to *This Bridge Called My Back*. Drawing on my experiences co-editing *this bridge we call home: radical visions for transformation* with Gloria Anzaldúa (who was also a co-editor for the original *Bridge*), I argue that *This Bridge Called My Back* offers social-justice actors and scholars of all colors innovative tools and theoretical contributions that we still need to learn from, expand on, and implement in our scholarship, teaching, and

other forms of activism. With this claim of *This Bridge Called My Back's* value for *all* people, I also offer an alternative perspective from those who claim that *This Bridge* represents a “safe space” exclusively for women of colors.

Chapter 2 moves sideways through time, connecting my previous work in canonical U.S. literature with my more recent work in U.S. women-of-colors theory.²² Through a dialogue between nineteenth-century American transcendentalist writers and contemporary women-of-colors authors, “American’ Individualism, Variations on a Theme” investigates and revises conventional models of individualism and personal selfhood. Given the central roles Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau have played in constructing an “American” self and an “American” literary tradition, canonical transcendentalist texts like Emerson’s “Self-Reliance” and Thoreau’s *Walden* offer a useful point of departure for this investigation. Although I’ve been tempted to reject these famous representations of individualism entirely, use their examples as a springboard into a completely different version of individualism, or replace them with an exclusive focus on community and collective identity, I resist these temptations. Working from the inside out, this chapter redefines individualism—including *canonical* versions of individualism—in more relational terms. When we (re)read mainstream versions of “American” individualism and self-reliance through the work of contemporary U.S. women of colors, all parties are transformed: Self-reliance becomes a highly democratic, relational endeavor that simultaneously extends canonical interpretations of personal freedom outward to include previously ignored groups and redefines “American individualism” by reconfiguring the relationship between personal and communal identities.

Building on the previous chapter’s explorations of selfhood, identity, and radical self-reliance, chapter 3, “I am your other I’: Transformational Identity Politics,” offers an alternative to more conventional versions of identity politics, which I call transformational identity politics. Transformational identity politics represent nonbinary models of identity; differential subjectivities; an expanded, deeply multiplicitous concept of the universal; and relational epistemologies that facilitate the creation of new forms of commonalities. Although identity politics originated in a space of intersectionality that embraced multiple, complex identities, I argue that contemporary uses of identity politics have become too oppositional to effect radical change. However, rather than entirely rejecting identity-based politics and the personalized experiences on which they’re based, I redefine identity by anchoring it in

a metaphysics of interconnectedness. Through an analysis of Paula Gunn Allen's, Gloria Anzaldúa's, and Audre Lorde's threshold positionings (*their creative use of identity politics, as it were*), I illustrate some of the forms transformational identity politics can take.

Chapter 4 offers a detailed example of how scholars and other readers can use differences to forge commonalities. Focusing on revisionist mythmaking and divergent feminist spiritual traditions, "'There is no arcane place for return': Revisionist Mythmaking with a Difference" puts Mary Daly in dialogue with Gloria Anzaldúa and Audre Lorde; I use this dialogue both to examine the limitations in typical western concepts of the universal and to propose an alternative. While the similarities between Daly, Anzaldúa, and Lorde are at times quite striking, scholars almost never discuss these theorists in conjunction; instead, each is relegated to discrete categories based on genre, culture, and 'race.' Reading Daly in conversation with Anzaldúa and Lorde, this chapter takes a different approach: I demonstrate the possibility of negotiating between the universal and the particular without denying the importance of either. I argue that these negotiations are transformational in (at least) two ways: They enable us to redefine the universal in radically open-ended and inclusionary ways. And, these negotiations between universal and particular alter readers' self-perceptions and collective definitions. This chapter also addresses post-structuralist critiques of origin stories and revisionist mythmaking. While scholars generally ignore Anzaldúa's and Lorde's revisionist mythmaking or dismiss it as a nostalgic desire to return to some prehistorical, utopian gynocentric, Mesoamerican, or Yoruban/Fon community of women, I propose that their revisionist myths are forward-looking and, indeed, visionary.²³ By going "back" to previously erased conventions, they go forward—far beyond "God the Father"—rewriting the past from their present perspectives and inventing new definitions as they go. Their "returns" are performative, not descriptive, and enable them to enact their transformational identity politics.

Reading mainstream "New Age" self-help literature in dialogue with women-of-colors narratives, chapter 5, "From Self-Help to Womanist Self-Recovery," proposes a new genre that I call womanist self-recovery. Womanist self-recovery represents a contemporary transcultural project with several characteristics: the transgression of conventional literary genres; the visionary belief in language's performative power; and the use of non-western cultural traditions (epistemologies, symbols, myths, metaphors, and/or beliefs)

to develop inclusionary multicultural communities. The phrase *womanist self-recovery* is intentionally contradictory, juxtaposing womanism's radical liberatory potential with mainstream self-help literature's conservative tendencies. I develop this genre by retracing my troubled engagement with Paula Gunn Allen's *Grandmothers of the Light: A Medicine Woman's Sourcebook*—a provocative book that scholars generally ignore, if they don't condemn outright. After acknowledging my deep concerns about Allen's book, I dive into it and, through my explorations, redefine it as womanist self-recovery. I argue that womanist self-recovery creates communally based, multicultural transformation narratives—stories of self-empowerment that begin with the personal but move outward to encourage and facilitate collective change, stories that synthesize self-love and self-reflection with the quest for social justice.

Drawing on indigenous teachings, recent work in speculative metaphysics, and classroom experiences, the final chapter calls for and attempts to enact alternatives to critical pedagogy. More specifically, in "Pedagogies of Invitation: From Status-Quo Stories to Cosmic Connections," I explore the implications of positing interconnectivity as a framework for invitational pedagogies and relational models of identity. Language, belief, perception, and action are intimately interwoven. The stories we tell ourselves, the stories we learn from our cultures (our families, schooling, religion, friends, the media, etc.) influence our beliefs about ourselves, other people, and the world. Our beliefs affect our perceptions, and these perceptions affect how we act; our actions shape the stories we tell, the stories others tell about us, the ways they perceive us, the ways we perceive ourselves. All too often, however, we (educators and students) assume that our perceptions and beliefs accurately reflect the entire truth about reality and ourselves; such assumptions narrow, limit, restrict our worldviews and inhibit our actions. Take, for example, that well-known story of rugged individualism with its pull-yourself-up-by-the-bootstraps theory of success (explored in chapter 3). My teaching experiences have convinced me that this hyper-individualism is one of the most damaging narratives in U.S. cultures. Seduced by stories of the "self-made man," the majority of my students cannot recognize the co-existence of another story, one of interconnectivity and interrelatedness: What affects others—*all* others, no matter how separate we seem to be—ultimately affects them as well. After examining the crucial role self-enclosed individualism plays in sustaining racism and other forms of social injustice, I use indigenous science and womanist thought to develop transformative pedagogical models, or what I

call pedagogies of invitation; invitational pedagogies are nonoppositional and require intellectual humility, flexibility, and an open-minded attitude.

As these brief chapter summaries might suggest, *Transformation Now!* is grounded in women-of-colors theorizing and leans heavily on the work of Paula Gunn Allen and Gloria Anzaldúa. This emphasis is intentional. As I explain above, I believe that women-of-colors theorizing is more intellectually stimulating and useful than any other theories I've encountered. I have been especially influenced by Allen's and Anzaldúa's work. Their writings—more than those of any other theorists, authors, or artists—have inspired and shaped me, encouraging me to take new risks. Gloria Anzaldúa and Paula Gunn Allen are my Gilles Deleuze, my Jacques Derrida, my Judith Butler, my intellectual and spiritual guides. More importantly, Anzaldúa and Allen are two of the most innovative, visionary U.S. theorists of the late twentieth- and early twenty-first centuries. And yet, their most innovative and provocative contributions are generally overlooked. I fear that if we do not attend to these contributions, they might be entirely forgotten, and Anzaldúa and Allen will become far less useful. This loss would be tragic, forcing us (at some point later in the twenty-first century) to reinvent—rather than build on—innovative theories and perspectives.

Although scholars sometimes include Allen's and Anzaldúa's work in ethnic-specific areas of literary studies, women's studies, or lesbian studies, they typically focus on the more predictable elements of their careers—on Anzaldúa's borderlands/new mestiza theory, her Chicana lesbian identity politics, and her oppositional approach in portions of *Borderlands/La Frontera* or *Making Face, Making Soul/Haciendo Caras* and on Allen's discussions of Native feminism and her tendency, at times, to essentialize aspects of Native American and feminine cultures. To be sure, these specific areas are important and should not be ignored; however, they are not the most provocative, potentially transformative dimensions of their work. Indeed, I would suggest that scholars sometimes tend to use (or not use) Anzaldúa and Allen in conservative ways—ways that unintentionally preserve the status quo. Thus, they repeatedly focus on the mid-career Gloria Anzaldúa, the Anzaldúa who can function as a spokesperson for Chicana, Lesbian, and Chicana Lesbian identities, and they rarely examine Anzaldúa's more inclusionary early and late work—her radical challenges to social identities and her visionary calls for planetary citizenship. The avoidance of Allen's work is even broader and more extreme. A founding figure in Native American Studies and one of the

first Native-identified women to intentionally and visibly describe herself and her work as feminist (*and lesbian*), Allen produced groundbreaking creative and academic writings that significantly impacted U.S. literary studies and contemporary feminist thought. Why, then, has she been so ignored, and what are the implications of this semi-erasure? Although I return to this question in chapter 5, I would suggest that scholars ignore Allen because she irreverently destabilizes many of our assumptions.

By drawing so extensively on Allen and Anzaldúa—by exploring, applying, and extending the most provocative aspects of their work—I challenge this theoretical erasure and build on their risky theoretical and stylistic innovations. I hope that my example will invite others to explore and apply their work, as well as the work of other women-of-colors theorists. This invitation is an important part of my activism as a scholar.

Postscript and invitation: A few words about my writing style, methods, and aspirations

Although I absolutely love Gloria Anzaldúa's early essay, "Speaking In Tongues: A Letter To 3rd World Women Writers," and can still recall the joy and inspiration I felt when I first read it, I cannot follow her advice to "[t]hrow away abstraction and the academic learning, the rules, the map and compass. Feel your way without blinders. To touch more people, the personal realities and the social must be evoked—not through rhetoric but through blood and pus and sweat" (34). Sure, I'd love to abandon all of my academic training and all those rules and instructions that I learned during my many years in school (*kindergarten through high school, college, graduate school for both a master's and a doctoral degree*). However, despite my optimism and visionary thinking, I can't believe it's really possible to entirely reject, forget, and in other ways "throw away" all of those (*awful, restrictive, spirit-sucking*) rules. They have shaped me, seeped into me (*possibly even at a cellular level*) too thoroughly. And honestly, some of the rules are ok. Punctuation rules, for instance, can be very useful when employed selectively, enabling writers to craft nuanced discussions. Indeed, I don't think that Anzaldúa could follow her own advice; she spent even more years in formal academic training than me (*kindergarten through high school, college, graduate school for a master's degree and extensive doctoral training at two universities*) and she, too, loved playing with language.²⁴ Nor do I share

Anzaldúa's wholesale rejection of rhetoric. I define *rhetoric* more broadly, to encompass a huge variety of forms, including at least a few that can bleed and ooze from our wounded lives just like the passionate writing she calls for. (*In this instance, perhaps rhetoric embodies that passion.*)

As you'll see when you read the following chapters, although I haven't thrown away all of my academic training, I've twisted it into surprising shapes and sent it spinning off into new directions. Whenever possible, I've replaced standard scholarly conventions (the persuasive arguments, the detached voice, the overly confident assertions, the lengthy refutations, the snarky comments) with questions, contradictions, "declarations of feeling," and other less conventional modes.²⁵ Rather than persuade, I invite. (*Or, perhaps, I persuade through invitation?*) I've tried to craft flexible invitations; I offer perspectives, theories, and ideas open to being altered and built on—hopefully, by you. Through these gestures, I aspire to enact the intellectual humility necessary for threshold theorizing. Through these words, I offer invitations into additional perspectives, actions, ways of being—possibilities that go beyond what I can currently envision.

I embrace contradiction and poly-vocal meanings. Hence the parenthetical comments, the italics, the italicized parenthetical comments, the questions, the exclamatory statements. Sentences written in the English language are so linear! They march along, word by word, tricking us into logical, organized assumptions, where the meaning builds point by point by point. Parentheses enable me to disrupt this onward movement; they allow me to make two or more (sometimes contradictory) points simultaneously. Take, for instance, this sentence you've just read. By bracketing the words "sometimes contradictory," I can tell you two things at once: (a) The parenthesis enable me to make several points simultaneously; and (b) these simultaneous points might contradict each other. With parenthesis, I can weave opposing ideas together, make them jut up against each other, touch and change each other and themselves. Italics, exclamation points, question marks, and other such feeling-inflected mechanisms give my sentences additional texture, change their tone—marking words differently, calling fresh attention to them. Meaning doubles up, folds back on itself. (*When I really want to double—or even triple—the meaning, offer additional perspectives, or underscore the tentative nature of my claims, I put my words in italicized parenthetical comments.*) Just as these sentences hold the contradiction—the two (or more) meanings, the

multiple perspectives—in productive tension, so I invite you to sit with the contradictions, allowing them to jostle each other. These jostlings can be productive, leading to new insights.

In my desire to foster commonalities across disciplinary boundaries and intellectual fields, I rely on epigraphs, subsections, and copious endnotes—formats that enable me to include additional voices and perspectives and, through this multiplicity, foster numerous, overlapping conversations among a wide variety of authors/scholars/texts. (*Or, should I say, conver(sa)tions . . . transformational dialogues?*) By putting these voices and perspectives into dialogue with one another and with myself (*and hopefully with you*), the words, perspectives, theories, and views function synergistically, enabling us (*me, you, and the many writers whose words I borrow and include*) to build on the conversation, to contribute (y)our views . . . and on we go, creating ideas and perspectives that I (*at best*) only partially envision or control.

If you read my endnotes (*I hope that you will!*), you'll find extra commentary, additional references, and, occasionally, personal opinion. Endnotes hold the overflow. Here, too, I strive for multiplicity and expansive, potentially transformational dialogues. Sharing information, ideas, and texts that have stretched my thinking, I hope that they might stretch yours, as well. Both in the endnotes and throughout the book, I promote the work of authors whose writings have spurred and supported my intellectual-spiritual growth. If you read these brilliant, underread people, their work will have a greater impact, a longer life.

I am now at a place in my life where I can take some additional risks and make suggestions that might strike (at least some) readers as rather crazy—as pretty far out there, out on a limb.²⁶ I do so both to honor the women-of-colors theorists whose work inspired and emboldened my own and, perhaps, to make things easier for others. I hope that readers can build on my risks, use (some of) my words as shields or platforms or other devices energizing you to take your own risks. I hope that my attempts to rattle the box, to move further, to shift into different spaces, might embolden you to do so, as well. Certainly, this is how women-of-colors theories functioned for me, when I was starting out—fresh from graduate school, sick and tired of the academic rules and constraints. And so, I invite you to take whatever might be useful in the following pages, retool it as helpful for your contexts, and build on it as together we work to enact progressive change—transformation now!

Black Feminist Thought as Oppositional Knowledge

ABSTRACT How might Black feminist thought remain oppositional, reflexive, resistant, and visionary in the context of contemporary intellectual and political challenges? This essay examines this challenge by engaging two questions. First, is Black feminist thought still oppositional and, if so, in what ways is it oppositional in this era? Second, what will it take for Black feminist thought to remain oppositional under current social and political conditions that appear inclusionary? **KEYWORDS** Black feminist thought; Oppositional knowledge; African American women; Intersectionality; Politics of inclusion

Writing the first edition of *Black Feminist Thought* was a labor of love.¹ I had neither release time from teaching nor grants to defray my research expenses. Turning my back on much-needed income, I never taught during the summer because that was the only time that I had to write. Few of my colleagues understood my work or, for that matter, cared much about it or me. Instead, I wrote my book thoroughly immersed in the demands of my everyday life. After my family and professional responsibilities, researching and writing *Black Feminist Thought* was my third job. In describing my early-career intellectual production, I do not use the term “labor” lightly. If there was no guaranteed career or financial payoff for the labor I devoted to this project, why did I persist? That is where the love comes in. I saw my intellectual project as speaking to, with, and for Black women whose subordination was and continues to be intertwined with our depictions within scholarship, the media, and other forms of mainstream knowledge. More importantly, I conceptualized *Black Feminist Thought* as oppositional knowledge that might contribute to the broader project of Black feminism.

Special issues of journals, such as this one, remind me of the continued need for Black feminist thought to remain oppositional, reflexive, resistant, and visionary. Carrying forward this important work requires asking some hard questions. First, is Black feminist thought still oppositional, and if so, in what ways is it oppositional in this era? When I wrote *Black Feminist*

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Thought, I could trace the clear connections between how multiple forms of race and class segregation shaped Black women's intersecting oppressions. Black feminist thought opposed these power relations and the strategic exclusion from jobs, education, housing, and healthcare that upheld them. But what does it mean to do oppositional scholarship within a politics of inclusion wherein Black women and Black feminist thought are now more visibly included within social institutions that historically have excluded us? In this context, although Black feminist thought in the academy now accommodates a broad array of scholarly projects that claim Black feminist thought in name, does this work advance Black feminist thought *as oppositional knowledge*?

Second, what will it take for Black feminist thought to remain oppositional under current social and political conditions that appear inclusionary? *Black Feminist Thought* and similar texts are assigned across many disciplines, and Black women scholars have achieved unprecedented visibility. Yet in the current period of reconfigured race relations and racial meanings, it is important not to mistake the visibility of either Black women or Black feminist thought for power. Just as the challenges are different, Black feminist scholars and our allies need to ask new epistemological questions and engage in new theoretical and methodological practices to answer them. Black women are certainly visible, suggesting that the ideas associated with Black feminism are making similar strides. Yet, underscoring Rachel Alicia Griffin's assertion in the Introduction to this special issue, visibility should not be mistaken for access, equality, or empowerment. Rather, all scholars who oppose social injustices must be attentive to the political economy of the production and consumption of knowledge itself.

BLACK FEMINIST THOUGHT AS OPPOSITIONAL KNOWLEDGE

Historically, Black feminist thought came into being to challenge the status quo, and thus must be evaluated in light of this important goal. As an oppositional knowledge project, Black feminist thought's sole purpose cannot be only simple survival within prevailing academic norms, providing jobs and opportunities for African American and African-descended women academics or media figures. Its purpose goes beyond offering up kneejerk responses to the latest perceived insult. Instead, being oppositional means doing serious, diligent, and thoughtful intellectual work that aims to dismantle unjust intellectual and political structures. For individual scholars from all backgrounds, this means looking beyond the difficulties and victories of one's own labor and success to ask: How does my work contribute to Black feminist thought's overall oppositional stance toward

systemic, societal oppressions? Just as we differ based on our social locations within intersecting power relations of race, gender, class, sexuality, age, ability, ethnicity, religion, and nationality, our contributions will and should vary. Black feminist thought is not the property of Black women, but Black women must be centered in its practice. Researching Black women in all our heterogeneity—for example, women of African descent who identify as African American women, Afro-Caribbean women, Nigerian American women, Black British Women, Afro-Brazilian women, and women who claim blackness in combination with other racial identifications—constitutes an important intellectual goal. While research that recognizes class, sexuality, age, immigrant status, and other forms of heterogeneity among Black women provides long-overdue descriptions of the complexities that operate within the term “Black women,” such research does not necessarily or automatically embrace a vision of Black feminist thought as oppositional knowledge. Additionally, claiming Black feminist thought in name does not make one’s research oppositional.

Black feminist thought participates in multiple oppositional knowledge projects that are situated within intersecting power relations of race, gender, class, sexuality, age, ability, ethnicity, religion, and nationality. These power dynamics of intersectionality produce heterogeneous knowledge projects advanced by women who have varying intellectual and political identifications with Black women. While understanding the historical trajectories of oppression is key, politics of exclusion primarily predicated on binaries cannot capture the complexities of intersecting power relations that produce multiple identities and distinctive perspectives on social phenomena. In an era characterized by a politics of inclusion, supporters and critics of Black feminist thought as oppositional knowledge can occupy multiple positions as simultaneously privileged and disadvantaged within power relations of racial, gender, class, sexual, and ethnic desegregation.

Black feminist thought pivots on two interconnected dimensions, both of which have implications for its ability to remain oppositional. First, a fair amount of Black feminist thought has engaged in the ongoing diagnostic project of analyzing socially unjust practices that confront Black women, as well as the limitations of existing scholarship in understanding these processes. This diagnostic function problematizes existing knowledge, with the goal of providing substantive critique about the existing world. Deconstructionist methods are especially useful for this. Second, Black feminist thought as an oppositional knowledge project aims to build new knowledge about the social world in order to stimulate new practices. This scholarship aims to move beyond criticism in order to construct new interpretations and trajectories for action that address

concerns that are especially important to and for Black women. It also aims to construct new ways of doing scholarship itself. AnaLouise Keating's linking spiritual activism, visionary pragmatism, and threshold theorizing is firmly situated in this space of highlighting productive alliances and alternatives, as opposed to simply lamenting what is. Keating's essay also shows the richness of intellectual cross-fertilization with knowledge projects, such as Chicana feminism, that aim to challenge *and* change the status quo.

Historically, few projects fell exclusively within false binaries of either deconstruction or reconstruction. Black women typically had to do both, and works that draw upon both identifying problems and solving problems are especially timely. For example, Ashley Patterson, Valerie Kinloch, Tanja Burkhard, Ryann Randall, and Arianna Howard perform a diagnostic function of identifying methodological issues in studying black women. Yet rather than only identifying and lamenting the problems in such work, they aim to reconstruct methodology via an innovative, collective approach.

We are in a different historic moment than when I was writing *Black Feminist Thought* in the 1980s, and I am ambivalent about what working within the contemporary academy means for Black feminist thought's ability to remain oppositional. On the one hand, there are some new challenges that cannot be ignored by oppositional knowledge projects. For example, although we may see much more "diversity" in the academy, it can be placed as much in service to sustaining social hierarchies as in challenging them. Oppositional knowledge projects produced within these social relations can fall victim to what Kristie Dotson calls "testimonial quieting," namely, an unnamed, persistent epistemological pressure that disciplines seemingly oppositional projects to conform to prevailing norms.²

In this context, small decisions concerning oppositional practice may matter just as much as visible actions of broad-based social movements. Take, for example, my decision to capitalize the term *Black* when referring to Black women and Black feminist thought, and to use a lower-case "b" when referring to blackness as an ideological set of ideas that is a site of interpretive struggle. Journal and book publishers routinely have conventions of refusing to capitalize the term *Black* when it refers to people, defending the decision to use a lowercase "b" as a benign part of the editorial process. Yet struggles over naming and interpretations of blackness have always been central to racial rule. Throughout my publishing career, I have opposed the normative structure of mainstream publications that still refuse to capitalize the term *Black*, both in reference to African Americans and people of African descent. If I consistently used the term "negro

american feminist thought” or “african american feminist thought,” a good copy-editor would correct me. Because I had to defend my choice of words so often I shared my reasoning in *Black Sexual Politics*. In brief, I capitalize the term *Black* when it serves to name a racial population group with an identifiable history in the United States. For African Americans, the term *Black* is simultaneously a racial identity assigned to people of African descent by the state, a political identity for petitioning that same state, and a self-defined ethnic identity.³

Capitalizing the term *Black* opposes practices that routinely disrespected Black people through the power to name. Large numbers of people self-define as Black, seeing themselves as part of a population group that receives distinctive treatment. In 2015, approximately 42.8 million people self-defined as Black or African American only, with those numbers swelling to 46.3 million when those who identify as Black in combination with another race are added.⁴ In 2015, the Black American population was larger than the total population of many countries, including Iraq (37 million), Canada (36 million), Ghana (28 million), Australia (23.9 million), Greece (11 million) Israel (8 million), and Jamaica (2.8 million).⁵ The Black Lives Matter movement that arose in 2012 in response to the policing of African American communities and racially discriminatory handling by the criminal justice system placed the treatment of actual Black people in the center of its opposition. Recognizing and regardless of heterogeneity among Black people—including within the movement itself—the Black Lives Matter movement exists because anti-Black racism is not targeted toward people who happen to be “black” but toward actual Black people.

My goal here is not to argue in favor of capitalization, but rather to use this seemingly small issue to illustrate the alertness needed for oppositional knowledge projects. The traditional exclusion of Black feminist thought from mainstream publications rendered the question of capitalization moot. Yet contemporary politics of inclusion require continual vigilance concerning the terms of Black feminist thought’s participation across an array of projects. In my scholarship, I sometimes adhere to the conventions of journals regarding the capitalization issue because I would rather my work be published than rejected. In other cases, I push the envelope, choosing to write about oppositional knowledge in ways that might contest the conventions of a given journal. This process of navigating conventions is more than a struggle over simple word choice; it can signal struggles over interpretation itself. Practices such as these can valorize Black feminist thought through appropriation yet simultaneously strip its oppositional impetus. Conventions signal the small ways larger systems of meaning and interpretation become routinized. Challenging such conventions,

both minor and major—from seemingly small acts such as claiming the authority to name oneself (the elusive capital “B”), and larger claims of insisting on curriculum transformation to include the experiences of African American women—point to the protracted and intertwined nature of intellectual and political struggles.

For many scholars, it is difficult to recognize the complexities of remaining oppositional, or to aspire to be oppositional at all in the face of new obstacles. Sophisticated forms of institutional gatekeeping within academia deploy new technologies measuring everything: from student evaluations to faculty evaluations to research productivity to journal rankings. These practices bundle this data together into normative institutional ideals that have eroded intellectual production. Students and faculty are constantly watched and assessed, which has a damaging effect on creativity and critical, oppositional thinking. Inclusion provides the illusion of opposition. It is not enough to conduct scholarship about dissident Black women, nor to employ seemingly radical Black feminist thought within the business-as-usual parameters of traditional scholarship. Unless one believes that academia has become as inclusive as those in positions of power often say it has, operating within business-as-usual parameters and having one’s Black feminist works easily published and praised, in and of itself, signals a dampening of Black feminism’s foundational oppositional stance.

On the other hand, contemporary scholars have a much broader array of resources for producing oppositional knowledge. Black feminist thought can build upon existing intellectual and political coalitions with groups who have similar histories of struggle, and develop new alliances with those facing similar challenges. Nadine Naber’s archeological piece on alliances among women of color, in this case US Black feminists and Arab American and Arab feminists, demonstrates the work yet to be done to deepen transnational dimensions of Black feminist thought. Because Black feminist thought has largely moved beyond earlier contentious politics of engagement with mainstream feminism, new coalitions with scholars working within transnational social justice traditions of feminism become especially important. Kristin Waters’s analysis of her journey from willful ignorance toward Black feminist thought shows the oppositional ethos of Black feminist thought in dismantling the status quo. Black feminist thought is neither the intellectual property of Black women nor should it be. Rather, seeking out points of convergence with similar projects potentially enriches all parties involved, and certainly exposes how systems of domination work similarly across intersecting power relations.

Moving beyond traditional academia, popular culture and social media provide new outlets for innovative, progressive, and oppositional Black feminist

thought. The Crunk Feminist Collective, The Feminist Wire, Black Girl Dangerous, and similar blogs and media outlets create new tools to criticize and advance Black feminist thought in important ways. These sites do not engage in a politics of nostalgia, celebrating what was or bemoaning what has not been. Instead, they point toward progressive possibilities by taking Black feminist thought and contemporary social issues seriously enough to acknowledge Black women's past, examine contemporary challenges, and imagine a more socially just and inclusive future. These sites of intellectual production exemplify the foundational commitment of Black feminism to unite thought and action. As illustrated by the origins of the #BlackLivesMatter movement in the social media activism of three queer African American women, sites like Black Twitter also offer venues for exposing non-academic audiences to Black feminist thought. Via media, Black women have gained unprecedented visibility, providing broad audiences access to Black feminist thought: Shonda Rhimes and Mara Brock Akil have launched influential television shows; director Ava DuVernay has entered and succeeded in the world of "mainstream" filmmaking; and Beyoncé Knowles's song "Formation" and album *Lemonade* indicate a provocative use of popular culture for political education. These examples constitute visible victories not only for African American women, but also for producing Black feminist material that speaks to contemporary issues. Yet there are dangers in interpreting simple inclusion as resistance. Kaetlyn Hale Wood's article on Wanda Sykes's comedy quite rightly recognizes the power of mediated visibility for Black women, the progress yet to be made, and the kind of popular culture analysis that advances Black feminist thought toward being more inclusionary. Mirroring Wood's focus, what are the contributions of other cultural icons to Black feminist thought? Only time will tell.

BLACK FEMINIST THOUGHT AND BLACK WOMEN'S INTELLECTUAL COMMUNITIES

Despite its visibility and seeming acceptance, oppositional knowledge like Black feminist thought is far more precarious than its dominant counterparts. Hegemonic knowledge projects have the luxury of knowing they will survive without having to create the conditions that sustain them. Endless reams of theoretical and empirical work belabor how durable social inequality is, which suggests that the empowerment of all Black women at varying intersections of marginalization and privilege remains an arduous uphill climb. Dominant scholarship aims to preserve the status quo, ensure social order, and redefine social change as a process of polite gradualism that really does not feel like or

result in much change at all. Oppositional knowledge projects that rock the boat cannot expect to be loved, and being loved and celebrated too much can raise questions about how oppositional such projects actually are.

In this context, the question of what it will take for Black feminist thought to remain oppositional assumes added importance. Here attending to the political economy of the production and consumption of knowledge becomes paramount. Mass media, popular culture, and scholarship as forms of cultural production do not fall from the sky. Each intellectual product has an author, an audience, and underlying set of power dynamics—no matter how hidden or innocuous they may appear to be. There is a producer—someone we should hold accountable for intellectual creation—and a consumer—someone who interprets, for instance, a text, film, or journal article. Likewise, both the creation and interpretation of any given cultural product is informed by underlying power dynamics. The meaning of Black feminist thought does not lie in the product—in this case, the contours of the theory and/or method—but rather in the interconnectedness of production, consumption, and power. Being and remaining oppositional lies in the recursive and synergistic relationship among these three entities.

What will it take to remain oppositional? The essays in this special issue illustrate how Black feminist thought has grown dramatically by, for example, using new media and incorporating scholars and practitioners from diverse backgrounds who make important contributions to its growth and success. Given the brevity of this essay, I want to focus on the centrality of Black women to both the production and consumption of Black feminist thought, as well as the outcomes of Black intellectual endeavors. Having allies and being involved in coalitions with non-Black social actors remains vital to the future of Black feminist thought. However, because no one has more at stake in advocating for Black feminist thought as oppositional knowledge than Black women, this knowledge project cannot flourish without insisting that Black women as agents of knowledge be central to its production and consumption.

Cultivating Black women's intellectual communities is vital to the future of Black feminist thought as oppositional knowledge. Such communities do not come into being by some inevitable process of evolution. Instead, their existence requires sustained labor on the part of Black women and our allies who see and experience Black women's intellectual work as vital to the individual and collective survival of Black women and girls. We must ask: Is it possible to have the intellectual richness of Black feminism itself without diverse communities of Black women producers and consumers at the heart of it? As evidenced by

this special issue—particularly in Patterson, Kinloch, Burkhard, Randall, and Howard and in Joëlle M. Cruz, Oghenetoja Okoh, Amoaba Gooden, Kamesha Spates, Chinassa Elue, and Nicole Rousseau—I am happy to see the resurgence in interest in Black feminist intellectual communities. But we would be naive to think that intellectual interest in Black feminist thought—even communal interest—is, by itself, likely to catalyze commitment to changing the intersecting power relations of race, gender, class, and sexuality that marginalize so many Black women and girls in the United States and transnationally. For every Black feminist product produced, whether a special issue, scholarly essay, song, film, or blog, we must ask: How do Black women and girls, however they identify with blackness, benefit from Black feminist intellectual production? Are they still an important audience for Black feminist thought, or is it increasingly being produced with someone else in mind? Furthermore, mindful of transnationalism and globalization, how do African American women in the United States benefit from Black feminism? How do women of African descent globally benefit from Black feminist intellectualism, and are US Black feminists mindful of the systemic privilege afforded to Western knowledge projects?

Cruz, Okoh, Gooden, Spates, Elue, and Rousseau's essay on the Ekwe Collective explores important aspects of the need for and challenges in building Black women's intellectual communities. Their attentiveness to intergenerational linkages provides a template for thinking through Black women's intellectual communities in temporal spaces impacted by dynamic transnational identities and geopolitics. Yet we cannot be lulled into thinking that the development of community will be forthcoming and the same for all women of African descent. There is a tendency to romanticize Black women's communities as places of safety and comfort. Patterson, Kinloch, Burkhard, Randall, and Howard's essay on building a community of women who differentially identify with blackness as foundational to their particular research project provides added insight into the difficulties of doing collective work.

By arguing that transfeminism and Black feminist thought could be placed in alliance profitably with the idea of strengthening the oppositional, epistemological stance of each, Marquis Bey simultaneously unsettles and upholds the concept of Black women's community even further. Bey provides an important critique of and corrective to Black feminist thought, suggesting that it recognize both the embedded historical forms of heterogeneity and the new forms of heterogeneity that are now more visible. Just as Black feminist thought became visible in academia when it was named, Bey's naming of blacktransfeminist thought serves a similar purpose. While I take issue with Bey's suggestion that

blacktransfeminist thought is so distinctive from Black feminist thought that a new name is needed, the broader call to democratize the meaning of Black women's community as a political construct by explicitly including transgender and gender-queer Black women is essential.

Knowing what we now know, building a vibrant Black feminist thought framework that is grounded in more expansive understandings of Black women's intellectual and political communities will not be easy. The space of Black women's community is situated between the fragmented individual lives of elite Black feminist scholars and multicultural, multiethnic intellectual communities whose commitments to social justice mandate connecting special issues in academia to broader circumstances and agendas in society. Although Black feminism needs the support of all kinds of people, misrecognizing Black feminism as synonymous with either end of this spectrum catastrophically dismantles Black women's intellectual communities spanning multiple centuries that nurtured Black feminism itself. Despite these dangers, if the essays in this special issue are any indication, current efforts to navigate a path for Black feminist thought within complex, contemporary politics remains extremely promising.

WHO BENEFITS FROM BLACK FEMINIST THOUGHT?

Regardless of the identities we claim and the paths we follow to enter into Black feminist thought, one way of analyzing the terms of our participation in this oppositional knowledge project is to ask ourselves: Who is our work for? Remaining oppositional lies not only in how ideas are developed both within Black women's intellectual communities and a broader context of social justice knowledge projects, but also in how such ideas travel, are taken up, and are used. This question of audience is fundamental to oppositional knowledge projects. Scholars and intellectuals who aim to make contributions to Black feminist thought must ask: Exactly who are the audiences for my work? How much can I say? How far can I go? Which audiences are most receptive to the oppositional mission of Black feminist thought and which find that mission inappropriate, if not outright dangerous? Who is the intended audience and how will they receive the ideas?

There are no easy answers to these questions, and all we can do is continue to ask them as we produce our work. When I wrote *Black Feminist Thought*, my primary audiences consisted of the undergraduate students who were enrolled in my courses, graduate students and junior faculty members who also saw the limitations of how traditional scholarship had depicted Black women, and the ever-present watchful eyes of institutional gatekeepers. I had no idea that *Black*

Feminist Thought would flourish; yet I hoped that the ideas presented would provide navigational tools for intellectual work. With hindsight, I can see that I was writing for an audience that was and remains and under construction, and that the authors included in this special issue were in it.

I opened this essay with brief reflections on my own understanding of Black feminist thought as a labor of love. It is crucial to remember that without sustained effort, there may be no audiences for our work, save those who already agree with us. That is the real danger of individual scholarship that remains uninformed about or disconnected from the kind of big-picture social, political, and intellectual labor that advancing Black feminist thought requires. The authors featured here are in a position to do big- and bigger-picture work—they have interdisciplinary colleagues and alliances, a visibility within mass and social media that could not be imagined a generation ago, and a greatly changed political climate wherein diversity, although still elusive, is no longer a derogatory epithet. Lots of people are writing, but are we reading and citing and learning from one another? Or, are we waiting for book reviews, critics, and other evaluative scholarly and popular metrics to tell us what we should be reading, who we should be citing, and from whom we should be learning? Will Black feminist thought's tradition of centering on Black women's knowledge production morph into a loosely coupled constellation of talented individuals, working alone and mourning their isolation in their respective institutions? Or will this group figure out ways to protect individual creativity within the context of building community capacity to enhance the individual *and* the collective? Will this group reach out within and beyond the academy to enact praxis?

I close by asking: Who has your back and whose back do you have? Who will protect Black feminist thought from the inevitable assault that confronts all oppositional knowledge projects? Special issues of journals like *Departures in Critical Qualitative Research* can constitute important interventions in upending the status quo. However, they fall short of serving as oppositional unless the authors and audiences engage in the labor of love to make them so. I hope the authors included in this special issue see their individual pieces not as endpoints, but rather as potential contributions to the collective project of Black feminist thought as oppositional knowledge. As many of us lovingly share our political, social, and intellectual labor with future generations of Black feminist intellectual activists, I can only hope that our gifts are received as tools for the greater good, and not consumed on the spot as just another individual success or intellectual fad. The intergenerational legacy of Black feminist thought should be marked with moments of celebration, self-reflection, and as Karla D. Scott's

essay meaningfully emphasizes, self-care. However, our work also requires responsibility and accountability. Others had to create the conditions that made it possible for me to survive and occasionally flourish, and others made it possible for the authors in this special issue to make these contributions to Black feminism. Black feminist thought as oppositional knowledge will rise or fall, ebb and flow in response to these essays and our individual actions. What will you choose to do with the knowledge imparted here? I ask again, who has your back and whose back do you have? ■

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NOTES

1. Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politic of Empowerment* (New York: Routledge, 1990).
2. Kristie Dotson, “Tracking Epistemic Violence, Tracking Practices of Silencing,” *Hypatia* 26, no. 2 (2011): 236–57.
3. Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Sexual Politics: African Americans, Gender, and the New Racism* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 17, n 16.
4. US Census Bureau, “QuickFacts,” *United States Census Bureau*, <http://www.census.gov/quickfacts/table/PST045215/00>, accessed 13 September 2016.
5. United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, “List of Countries by Population,” *Statistics Times*, <http://statisticstimes.com/population/countries-by-population.php>, accessed 13 September 2016.