BLACK FEMINIST THOUGHT

Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment

30th Anniversary Edition

PATRICIA HILL COLLINS

ROUTLEDGE

Praise for the new edition

"*Black Feminist Thought* continues to be an inspiration and foundation. The continued relevance of *Black Feminist Thought* thirty years later means a new generation will be inspired and fortified by the essence of Collins's words. While the country, indeed the world, has shifted since its initial publication, there is a critical need for taking seriously the intellectual and personal challenge Black feminism offers to engendering social justice. *Black Feminist Thought* answers the call by reminding us of the power of our own ideas. This volume's important additions offer a new way to read a classic text and take seriously its mandate that we continue to forge a path to a future where Black women are free."

Zakiya Luna and Whitney Pirtle,
Authors of *Black Feminist Sociology: Perspectives and Praxis*

Praise for previous editions

"With the publication of *Black Feminist Thought*, Black feminism has moved to a new level. Her work sets a standard for the discussion of Black women's lives, experiences, and thought that demands rigorous attention to the complexity of these experiences and an exploration of a multiplicity of responses."

Women's Review of Books

"A superbly crafted book that provides the first synthetic review of Black feminist thought."

Feminist Bookstore News

"The book argues convincingly that Black feminists be given, in the words immortalized by Aretha Franklin, a little more R-E-S-P-E-C-T. Those with an appetite for scholarese will find Collins's book delicious."

Black Enterprise

"The author discusses how knowledge can foster African-American women's empowerment. In line with her own deepened understanding of the issues since the first edition, she emphasizes Black feminist thought's purpose in fostering both empowerment and conditions of social justice, provides a more complex analysis of oppression, and places greater stress on the connections between

knowledge and power relations. New themes include the nation as a form of oppression, as well as a transnational, global dimension. Topics are organized under the headings of the social construction of Black feminist thought, core themes, and Black Feminism, knowledge, and power."

Book News, Inc.

Black Feminist Thought, 30th Anniversary Edition

In the first major update to this classic book in many years, Collins traces the history and contours of Black women's ideas and actions to argue that Black feminist thought is the discourse that fosters Black women's survival, persistence, and success against the odds. Through meticulous research that synthesizes the important intellectual work done by Black women, Collins's timely update demonstrates that Black women's ideas and actions are not marginal concerns but rather are central to the future of social justice within democratic societies.

The combination of the text's classic arguments and a preface and epilogue written expressly for this edition speak to people who have long been working on social justice and to a new generation of readers who are encountering the ideas and actions of Black women for the first time.

For this 30th anniversary edition, Patricia Hill Collins examines how the ideas in this classic text speak to contemporary social issues and identifies the directions needed for the future of Black feminist thought.

Patricia Hill Collins is Distinguished University Professor of Sociology Emerita at the University of Maryland, College Park and Charles Phelps Taft Professor Emerita of African American Studies at the University of Cincinnati. She is the author of ten books, including her award-winning books *Black Feminist Thought* (1990, 2000) and *Black Sexual Politics* (2004), as well as her co-authored volume *Intersectionality* (2016, 2020) and *Intersectionality as Critical Social Theory* (2019). Dr. Collins has lectured widely in the United States, Europe, Brazil, and internationally. Dr. Collins has served in many capacities in community and professional organizations,

including as the 2009 President of the American Sociological Association (ASA), the first African-American woman elected to this position in the organization's 104-year history. Dr. Collins has won numerous professional awards, among them the William E.B. DuBois Career of Distinguished Scholarship Award from the ASA (2017), the Lifetime Achievement Award from the Association of Black Sociologists (2018), the Alumni Award from Brandeis University (2021), and the Common Wealth Award of Distinguished Service for 2021 for sociology.

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Cover image: REUTERS/Jonathan Bachman, Lone activist Ieshia Evans stands her ground while offering her hands for arrest as she is charged by riot police during a protest against police brutality outside the Baton Rouge Police Department in Louisiana, U.S.A., July 9, 2016.

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Preface to the First Edition

When I was five years old, I was chosen to play Spring in my preschool pageant. Sitting on my throne, I proudly presided over a court of children portraying birds, flowers, and the other, "lesser" seasons. Being surrounded by children like myself—the daughters and sons of laborers, domestic workers, secretaries, and factory workers—affirmed who I was. When my turn came to speak, I delivered my few lines masterfully, with great enthusiasm and energy. I loved my part because I was Spring, the season of new life and hope. All of the grown-ups told me how vital my part was and congratulated me on how well I had done. Their words and hugs made me feel that I was important and that what I thought, felt, and accomplished mattered.

As my world expanded, I learned that not everyone agreed with them. Beginning in adolescence, I was increasingly the "first," or "one of the few," or the "only" African-American and/or woman and/or working-class person in my schools, communities, and work settings. I saw nothing wrong with being who I was, but apparently many others did. My world grew larger, but I felt I was growing smaller. I tried to disappear into myself in order to deflect the painful, daily assaults designed to teach me that being an African-American, working-class woman made me lesser than those who were not. And as I felt smaller, I became quieter and eventually was virtually silenced.

This book reflects one stage in my ongoing struggle to regain my voice. Over the years I have tried to replace the external definitions of my life forwarded by dominant groups with my own self-defined viewpoint. But while my personal odyssey forms the catalyst for this volume, I now know that my experiences are far from unique.

Like African-American women, many others who occupy societally denigrated categories have been similarly silenced. So the voice that I now seek is both individual and collective, personal and political, one reflecting the intersection of my unique biography with the larger meaning of my historical times.

I share this part of the context that stimulated this book because that context influenced my choices concerning the volume. First, I was committed to making this book intellectually rigorous, well researched, and accessible to more than the select few fortunate enough to receive elite educations. I could not write a book about Black women's ideas that the vast majority of African-American women could not read and understand. Theory of all types is often presented as being so abstract that it can be appreciated only by a select few. Though often highly satisfying to academics, this definition excludes those who do not speak the language of elites and thus reinforces social relations of domination. Educated elites typically claim that only they are qualified to produce theory and believe that only they can interpret not only their own but also everyone else's experiences. Moreover, educated elites often use this belief to uphold their own privilege.

I felt that it was important to examine the complexity of ideas that exist in both scholarly and everyday life and present those ideas in a way that made them not less powerful or rigorous but more accessible. Approaching theory in this way challenges both the ideas of educated elites and the role of theory in sustaining hierarchies of privilege. The resulting volume is theoretical in that it reflects diverse theoretical traditions such as Afrocentric philosophy, feminist theory, Marxist social thought, the sociology of knowledge, critical theory, and postmodernism; and yet the standard vocabulary of these traditions, citations of their major works and key proponents, and these terms rarely appear in the text. To me the ideas are important, not the labels we attach to them.

Second, I place Black women's experiences and ideas at the center of analysis. For those accustomed to having subordinate groups such as African-American women frame our ideas in ways that are convenient for the more powerful, this centrality can be unsettling. For example, White, middle-class, feminist readers will find few references to so-called White feminist thought. I have deliberately chosen not to begin with feminist tenets developed from the experiences of White, middle-class, Western women and then insert the ideas and

experiences of African-American women. While I am quite familiar with a range of historical and contemporary White feminist theorists and certainly value their contributions to our understanding of gender, this book is not about what Black women think of White feminist ideas or how Black women's ideas compare with those of prominent White feminist theorists. I take a similar stance regarding Marxist social theory and Afrocentric thought. In order to capture the interconnections of race, gender, and social class in Black women's lives and their effect on Black feminist thought, I explicitly rejected grounding my analysis in any single theoretical tradition.

Oppressed groups are frequently placed in the situation of being listened to only if we frame our ideas in the language that is familiar to and comfortable for a dominant group. This requirement often changes the meaning of our ideas and works to elevate the ideas of dominant groups. In this volume, by placing African-American women's ideas in the center of analysis, I not only privilege those ideas but also encourage White feminists, African-American men, and all others to investigate the similarities and differences among their own standpoints and those of African-American women.

Third, I deliberately include numerous quotations from a range of African-American women thinkers, some well known and others rarely heard from. Explicitly grounding my analysis in multiple voices highlights the diversity, richness, and power of Black women's ideas as part of a long-standing African-American women's intellectual community. Moreover, this approach counteracts the tendency of mainstream scholarship to canonize a few Black women as spokespersons for the group and then refuse to listen to any but these select few. Although it is certainly appealing to receive recognition for one's accomplishments, my experiences as the "first," "one of the few," and the "only" have shown me how effective selecting a few and using them to control the many can be in stifling subordinate groups. Assuming that only a few exceptional Black women have been able to do theory homogenizes African-American women and silences the majority. In contrast, I maintain that theory and intellectual creativity are not the province of a select few but instead emanate from a range of people.

Fourth, I used a distinctive methodology in preparing this manuscript that illustrates how thought and action can work together in generating theory. Much of my formal academic training has been designed to show me that I must alienate myself from my

communities, my family, and even my own self in order to produce credible intellectual work. Instead of viewing the everyday as a negative influence on my theorizing, I tried to see how the everyday actions and ideas of the Black women in my life reflected the theoretical issues I claimed were so important to them. Lacking grants, fellowships, release time, or other benefits that allow scholars to remove themselves from everyday life and contemplate its contours and meaning, I wrote this book while fully immersed in ordinary activities that brought me into contact with a variety of African-American women. Through caring for my daughter, mentoring Black women undergraduates, assisting a Brownie troop, and engaging in other "unscholarly" activities, I reassessed my relationships with a range of African-American women and their relationships with one another. Theory allowed me to see all of these associations with fresh eyes, while concrete experiences challenged the worldviews offered by theory. During this period of self-reflection, work on this manuscript inched along, and I produced little "theory." But without this involvement in the everyday, the theory in this volume would have been greatly impoverished.

Fifth, in order to demonstrate the existence and authenticity of Black feminist thought, I present it as being coherent and basically complete. This portrayal is in contrast to my actual view that theory is rarely this smoothly constructed. Most theories are characterized by internal instability, are contested, and are divided by competing emphases and interests. When I considered that Black feminist thought is currently embedded in a larger political and intellectual context that challenges its very right to exist, I decided not to stress the contradictions, frictions, and inconsistencies of Black feminist thought. Instead, I present Black feminist thought as overly coherent, but I do so because I suspect that this approach is more appropriate for this historical moment. I hope to see other volumes emerge that will be more willing to present Black feminist thought as a shifting mosaic of competing ideas and interests. I have focused on the pieces of the mosaic—perhaps others will emphasize the disjunctures distinguishing the pieces of the mosaic from one another.

Finally, writing this book has convinced me of the need to reconcile subjectivity and objectivity in producing scholarship. Initially, I found the movement between my training as an "objective" social scientist and my daily experiences as an African-American woman jarring. But reconciling what we have been trained to see as

opposites—a reconciliation signaled by inserting myself into the text by using "I," "we," and "our" instead of the more distancing terms "they" and "one"—was freeing for me. I discovered that the both/and conceptual stance of Black feminist thought allowed me to be both objective and subjective, to possess both an Afrocentric and a feminist consciousness, and to be both a respectable scholar and an acceptable mother.

When I began this book, I had to overcome my reluctance concerning committing my ideas to paper. "How can I as one person speak for such a large and complex group as African-American women?" I asked myself. The answer is that I cannot and should not because each of us must learn to speak for herself. In the course of writing the book, I came to see my work as being part of a larger process, as one voice in a dialogue among people who have been silenced. I know that I will never again possess the curious coexistence of naiveté and unshakable confidence that I had when I portrayed Spring, but I hope to recapture those elements of the voice of Spring that were honest, genuine, and empowering. More important, my hope is that others who were formerly and are currently silenced will find their voices. I, for one, certainly want to hear what they have to say.

Preface to the Second Edition

I initially wrote *Black Feminist Thought* in order to help empower African-American women. I knew that when an individual Black woman's consciousness concerning how she understands her everyday life undergoes change, she can become empowered. Such consciousness may stimulate her to embark on a path of personal freedom, even if it exists initially primarily in her own mind. If she is lucky enough to meet others who are undergoing similar journeys, she and they can change the world around them. If ideas, knowledge, and consciousness can have such an impact on individual Black women, what effect might they have on Black women as a group? I suspected that African-American women had created a collective knowledge that served a similar purpose in fostering Black women's empowerment. *Black Feminist Thought* aimed to document the existence of such knowledge and sketch out its contours.

My goal of examining how knowledge can foster African-American women's empowerment remains intact. What has changed, however, is my understanding of the meaning of empowerment and of the process needed for it to happen. I now recognize that empowerment for African-American women will never occur in a context characterized by oppression and social injustice. A group can gain power in such situations by dominating others, but this is not the type of empowerment that I found within Black women's thinking. Reading Black women's intellectual work, I have come to see how it is possible to be both centered in one's own experiences and engaged in coalitions with others. In this sense, Black feminist thought works on behalf of Black women, but does so in conjunction with other similar social justice projects.

My deepening understanding of empowerment stimulated more complex arguments of several ideas introduced in the first edition.

For one, throughout this revision, I emphasize Black feminist thought's purpose, namely, fostering *both* Black women's empowerment *and* conditions of social justice. Both of these themes were in the first edition, but neither was as fully developed as they are here. This enhanced emphasis on empowerment and social justice permeates the revised volume and is especially evident in Chapter 2. There I replace my efforts to "define" Black feminist thought with a discussion that identifies its distinguishing features. This shift allowed me to emphasize particular dimensions that characterize Black feminist thought but are not unique to it. It also created space for other groups engaged in similar social justice projects to recognize dimensions of their own thought and practice. I tried to reject the binary thinking that frames so many Western definitions, including my earlier ones of Black feminist thought and of Black feminist epistemology. Rather than drawing a firm line around Black feminist thought that aims to classify entities as *either* being Black feminist *or* not, I aimed for more fluidity without sacrificing logical rigor.

My analysis of oppression is also more complex in this edition, in part because neither empowerment nor social justice can be achieved without some sense of what one is trying to change. Whereas both editions rely on a paradigm of intersecting oppressions to analyze Black women's experiences, this edition provides a more comprehensive treatment. Race, class, and gender studies were being established when I wrote the first edition. Just as this area of inquiry has greatly expanded since that writing, so has my treatment of this framework. For example, in this edition, I broaden my analysis beyond race, class, and gender and include sexuality as a form of oppression. Issues of social class and culture also receive a more complex analysis in this edition. The first edition was especially concerned with issues of Black culture yet said less about social class. Culture and class were both there, but not in the balance that characterizes this edition. My arguments have not substantially changed, but I think they are more effectively developed.

In this edition, I also place greater emphasis on the *connections* between knowledge and power relations. I have always seen organic links between Black feminism as a social justice project and Black feminist thought as its intellectual center. Stated differently, the relationship between African-American women's activism and Black feminist thought as an intellectual and political philosophy integral to that endeavor for me are inextricably linked. These links continue, but as social conditions change, these ties must be rethought.

Rethinking empowerment also led me to incorporate new themes in this edition. For example, this volume says much more about nation as a form of oppression. Incorporating ideas about nation allowed me to introduce a transnational, global dimension. Whereas the discussion here of transnational politics and the global economy remains preliminary, I felt that it was important to include it. U.S. Black women must continue to struggle for our empowerment, but at the same time, we must recognize that U.S. Black feminism participates in a larger context of struggling for social justice that transcends U.S. borders. In particular, U.S. Black feminism should see commonalities that join women of African descent as well as differences that emerge from our diverse national histories. Whereas this edition remains centered on U.S. Black women, it raises questions concerning African-American women's positionality within a global Black feminism.

Providing more complex analyses of these themes required trying to retain the main arguments of the first edition while changing their time-bounded expression. Just as political and intellectual contexts change, so does the language used to describe them. Some changes in terminology reflect benign shifts in usage. Others signal more deep-seated political issues. The cases that are most interesting occur when the same language continues to be used, whereas the meaning attached to it changes. This type of shift certainly affected the term *Afrocentrism*, which I used in the first edition. As understood in the 1970s and 1980s, *Afrocentrism* referred to African influences on African-American culture, consciousness, behavior, and social organization. Despite considerable diversity among thinkers who embraced this paradigm, Afrocentric analyses typically claimed that people of African descent have created and re-created a valuable system of ideas, social practices, and cultures that have been essential to Black survival. In the 1990s, however, news media and some segments of U.S. higher education attacked the term as well as all who used it. Effectively discrediting it, as of this writing, the term *Afrocentrism* refers to the ideas of a small group of Black Studies professionals with whom I have major areas of disagreement, primarily concerning the treatment of gender and sexuality. For me, the main ideas of Afrocentrism, broadly defined, continue to have merit, but the term is too value laden to be useful. Readers familiar with the first edition may notice that I have retained the main ideas of a broadly defined Afrocentrism but have substituted other terms.

Providing more complex analyses while trying to retain the main arguments of the first edition led me to modify the overall organization of the volume. In order to strengthen my analyses, I moved blocks of text and even some chapters, all while being careful to omit very little from the first edition. For example, because of the developments in the field of sexuality, I expanded the two chapters dealing with the sexual politics of Black womanhood and moved them earlier in the volume. This new placement allowed me to strengthen ideas about sexuality in the remainder of the volume. Similarly, I moved much of the material in the final chapter of the first edition into earlier chapters. In its place, here I present a new chapter on the politics of empowerment that provides a new capstone for the entire book. Readers familiar with the first edition will find that the three chapters in Part III have been most affected by this reorganization of text. These changes, however, enabled me to present a more theoretically rich analysis of the connections between knowledge and power than that provided in the first edition. Overall, the arguments from the first edition are here as well, but they may appear in new and unexpected places.

I have learned much from revising the first edition of *Black Feminist Thought*. In particular, the subjective experience of writing the first edition in the mid-1980s and revising it now has been markedly different. I can remember how difficult it was for me to write the first edition. Then my concerns centered on coming to voice, especially carving out the intellectual and political space that would enable me to be heard. As the preface to the first edition points out, I saw my individual struggles as emblematic of Black women's collective struggles to claim a similar intellectual and political space. The events surrounding the publication of the first edition certainly involved considerable struggle. One month before *Black Feminist Thought* was to be released, the entire staff that had worked on it was summarily fired, victims of a corporate takeover. We were all in shock. During its first year with its new publisher, the book received little promotion. Despite its media invisibility, *Black Feminist Thought* quickly exhausted its initial print run. I was despondent. I had worked so hard, and it all seemed to have been taken away so quickly. Fortunately, during that awful year before the book was sold yet again to its current publisher, *Black Feminist Thought*'s readers kept it alive. People shared their copies, copied chapters, and engaged in effective word-of-mouth advertising. To this day, I remain deeply grateful to

all of the readers of the first edition because without them, this book would have disappeared.

I am in another place now. I remain less preoccupied with coming to voice because I know how quickly voice can be taken away. My concern now lies in finding effective ways to use the voice that I have claimed while I have it. Just as I confront new challenges, U.S. Black women and Black feminist thought as our self-defined knowledge also face new challenges. Because Black feminist thought is created under greatly changed conditions, I worry about its future. However, as long as Black feminist thought—or whatever terms we choose in the future to name this intellectual work—remains dedicated to fostering both Black women's empowerment and broader social justice, I plan on using my voice to support it. I recognize that the struggle for justice is larger than any one group, individual, or social movement. It certainly transcends any one book, including my own. For me, social injustice is a collective problem that requires a collective solution. When it comes to my work, the only thing that is essential is that it contribute toward this end.

Preface to the 30th Anniversary Edition

When I began preparing this 30th anniversary edition of *Black Feminist Thought (BFT),* I could not foresee how the social, economic, and political upheavals of 2020 would dramatically shape this Preface. As the year wore on, what began as brief reflections on *Black Feminist Thought*'s durability transformed into my ongoing effort to make sense of a year that seemingly offered little to celebrate. How could Black Feminist Thought speak to the immense social changes that surrounded not just Black women, but all of us?

Looking back on 2020, I can see more clearly how Black women were at the center of four ground-breaking phenomena. First, Black women were deeply affected by a deadly global health pandemic. Since 2020, more than 5.51 million people worldwide have died from COVID-19 complications, with more than 943,000 deaths in the US and 5.8 million people worldwide. By the time you read this book, those numbers will be much higher. These staggering statistics describe the magnitude of this global pandemic but not its meaning within individual lives. Countless families either lost someone to COVID-19 or knew someone who did. Each person who died mattered to someone, somewhere. Despite this shared threat, the pandemic revealed deep-seated global social inequalities. COVID-19's impact on Black women and our families was especially poignant. Black women, many of whom faced greater exposure to COVID-19-related illnesses, found themselves grappling with this individually experienced collective trauma of the pandemic with far fewer tools to do so than their more privileged counterparts. For whose living in small houses, multi-family apartments, or who were homeless, social distancing was an unrealistic option. Because many could not afford a car, they relied on public transit to get to work and

school. Black women shopped more frequently for basic necessities since they could not afford to stockpile goods. Many lacked access to regular medical care, often because they lacked health insurance. Not only Black women, but Black, Indigenous, Latinx, refugee, migrant, poor white, and homeless people in the United States, died at far higher rates than did other groups, offering sobering evidence for the ongoing effects of systemic racism and intergenerational economic inequality.

The year 2020 also brought a lengthy and uneven shutdown of the U.S. economy that highlighted Black women's economic vulnerability as well as that of a large segment of the American population. Like the pandemic, the economic effects of the COVID-19 health crisis were also not equally felt. In the U.S., the same groups who were disproportionately harmed by the COVID-19 health crisis were also overrepresented among those who faced economic hardship. Many Black women who were financially just getting by before COVID-19 faced added uncertainties of evictions, layoffs, unpaid bills, and collection agencies. When public schools and day-care centers closed, many Black women tried to homeschool their children, quit their jobs to care for sick family members, mourned the premature deaths of loved ones and friends, attended virtual funerals that offered scant comfort for their loss, and carried on, often without respite. African-American women were more likely to be exposed to infection while working, due to their overrepresentation in essential jobs in transportation, government, health care, and food supply services, and in low-wage or temporary jobs that may not allow telework or provide paid sick leave. Yet many had no choice but to continue working as bus drivers, supermarket cashiers, assembly line workers in factory fulfillment centers, and nurses' aides in elder care facilities. Work for them was essential. Because Black women were among those who assumed greater personal risk to keep the economy running, they were briefly celebrated as so-called essential workers. But since 2020, this praise has less often translated into the permanent raises, steady employment, or better health-care benefits that would shield Black women and their families from economic crisis.

Two longstanding political challenges came into focus in 2020 that continue to confront African-American women. The year laid bare a long-standing war between those who embraced equity, fairness, and social justice as values of American democracy from those who viewed the participatory democracy itself as a social problem.

The 2020 presidential election became a proxy referendum on the meaning of democracy. This hard-fought, high-stakes national election revealed not just the depth of social inequality in the U.S., but also the widespread support among a sizable segment of the American population for sustaining it. Black women were especially well-positioned to see what was at stake during this historic election. The vast majority of Black women had no interest in supporting a political party that embraced far-right ideologies of white supremacy, misogyny, homophobia, and xenophobia, especially one led by a President who openly trumpeted these views. Because we had for so long been denied that vote and understood the costs of disenfranchisement, Black women understood the importance of the vote for ourselves, our families, African-American civil society, and democracy itself—and we acted accordingly. Through strategies such as grassroots community organizing within Black churches and neighborhoods, building political coalitions with many of the same groups that suffered COVID-19's negative health and economic outcomes, and serving as foot soldiers and leaders within local, state, and national electoral politics, African-American women came to power as a visible political force. Black women were central to the defense of participatory democracy in the 2020 U.S. election, but again, we were far from alone. African-American men, feminist women, Asian-Americans, Latinx people, LGBTQ people, Indigenous groups, new immigrant populations, non-Christian religious minorities, and many working-class white people also used the ballot box to reject the rhetoric and policies of far-right politicians and their financial backers.

But another highly significant event in 2020 reminded Black women of the ongoing need to raise our voices against systemic anti-Black racism in the United States. Concern about state-sanctioned violence against Black children and youth had long been central to Black women's political activism but that year was different. In 2020, a Minneapolis police officer killed George Floyd by kneeling on his neck for more than nine minutes. A 17-year-old Black girl who witnessed Floyd's death recorded it on her cellphone and posted the video on social media. The video went viral. For Black women activists who had launched the Black Lives Matter Movement in response similar deaths years earlier, the content of the video was achingly familiar. Yet the context that greeted this viral video was fundamentally different. Many people who viewed the video were

spurred to action, in part because they were more likely to be online while COVID-19 shuttered schools, jobs, stores, restaurants, and entertainment venues, and in part because they were moved by this particularly egregious example of social injustice. Even more startling, the ground-breaking, global social protests that ensued occurred under the banner of Black Lives Matter. Significantly, these global social protests encompassed the same racial, ethnic, sexual, and religious diversity that so galled far-right politicians in the U.S. Significantly, young people were at the forefront of these protests that mobilized entirely new populations to raise their voices in support of social justice.

For me, living through 2020 solidified my commitment to Black feminist thought and all that it represents. For Black women, fighting for our right to live dignified, secure, and joyful lives seems as crucial today as when I wrote *Black Feminist Thought (BFT)* over 30 years ago. Yet the Black feminism I witness today seems fundamentally different than that of the past—it reflects not just a maturation, but an evolution of the ideas in this book. The iconic photo on the cover of this 30th anniversary edition of *BFT* says it all. When a Black woman wearing a sundress and armed only with the courage of her conviction that Black Lives Matter calmly faces police in full body armor, something has changed. For me this photo symbolizes the tenacity of Black feminist thought to speak the truth to power, even when the odds appear to be so unequal.

Black Feminist Thought makes bold claims about the integrity of Black women's intellectual production as a force for social change. It does so by investigating how Black women's self-defined knowledge has been essential for countering social injustice. The ideas in this book were born under socially unjust conditions such as those of today, matured under similar circumstances, and will persist as long as Black women's political struggles for food, love, respect, shelter, dignity, justice, and freedom remain unfulfilled. Because I wrote *BFT* in a particular place (the United States) and during a specific period of time (the late twentieth century), its content reflects African-American women's political struggles in that place and time. Yet its main arguments speak to universal social justice issues that remain front-stage concerns for Black women in the United States, e.g., unequal health care, employment discrimination, poverty, political disenfranchisement, and state-sanctioned violence. Our tools for addressing durable social inequalities have changed, e.g.,

African-American women's success within electoral politics and the savvy use of social media by a new generation of Black women activists. But as long as social injustice endures anywhere in the world, the need for Black women's intellectual and political resistance will persist. As individuals, we can achieve high office, accumulate wealth, and garner societal respect, but our individual accomplishments cannot protect us. They also cannot shield either our own sons and daughters or those of other Black families from the metaphoric knee on the necks of our loved ones. In situations of social injustice, safety is an illusion. No one of us is safe until all of us are safe. Fostering dignity, security, and fairness for Black women takes sustained, collective organization within our own communities. It also requires solidarity among all communities who support broader social justice agendas.

Black Feminist Thought's 30th anniversary gives each of us an opportunity to consider the prospects for social justice in our own lives. When I think about what Black women of the past have given to all of us today, I can see how changes in the U.S. context would bring deep satisfaction to my great-grandmother, grandmother, and mother. Each lived through trying times like those of 2020. In the 1920s, during the devastating global health pandemic of the "Spanish" flu my grandmother gave birth to my mother, helped only in caring for her and her six siblings by my great-grandmother. In the 1930s, during the Great Depression, they raised seven children, while holding jobs that made them the "essential workers" of their time. By the 1950s and 1960s, where job prospects were better in Northern cities, my mother and father found good working-class jobs that kept me housed, fed, clean, and enrolled in decent public schools. My family story is that of thousands of African-American families. The intergenerational benefits of Black women's labor have accrued not just to me as an individual but also to the approximately 21 million Black women who now reside in the United States. Doors are currently open to us that were closed to previous generations.

For a population that was denied basic literacy well into the twentieth century, the number of African-American women who now hold advanced degrees in law, medicine, business, and the sciences is ground-breaking. Black women in the U.S. now have legal protections that enable us to put our degrees to good use by finding well-paying and often prestigious jobs. Many Black women entrepreneurs have launched successful businesses that enrich African-American

communities and broader society. In unprecedented numbers, Black women have entered corporations, government agencies, sports, higher education, and media settings in leadership positions. New communications technologies have amplified Black women's ideas far beyond the beachheads provided by Oprah Winfrey, Michelle Obama, Ava DuVernay, Beyoncé, Serena Williams, Viola Davis, or Kamala Harris. The visibility of Black women who are writing books, poetry, and plays, directing and producing films, creating music, producing television, and acting in plays is remarkable. This explosion of Black women's intellectual production since *BFT* was first published has been wonderful to behold and impossible to cite. Across these diverse accomplishments, Black women open doors so that others can follow.

Each era brings its own variations of struggle, and today is no different. Black women's accomplishments can and should be celebrated. Black women have faced adversity before and will continue to do so in the near future. Past adversity is no excuse for contemporary pessimism, but rather contemporary challenges lay the foundation for imagining a more expansive Black feminist future. In this spirit, I am happy to celebrate *Black Feminist Thought*'s survival, especially through such trying times. The very survival of this book let alone its wide acceptance belies efforts to marginalize Black women's experiences as not applicable to others. Instead, many readers have responded to *BFT*'s invitation to see the particularities of Black women's lives as a reflection of universal questions of equity, fairness, and humanity. In a world where categories of race, class, gender, sexuality, age, ethnicity, ability, religion, and citizenship are wielded as weapons to divide and conquer, learning to recognize the humanity of others across such categories requires radical thought and action. Pausing to celebrate may be a balm to the soul, but it cannot substitute for continuing the intellectual and political work required to foster equity and social justice.

I am proud of this book and hope that it continues to contribute to social justice initiatives. When this book was first published, I could not predict how its ideas and arguments would speak to people whose experiences differ dramatically from my own. Since writing this book, I have travelled widely both in the U.S. and internationally, lecturing and meeting with students, faculty, and staff on numerous college and university campuses. The breadth and depth of ideas that I gained through dialogues with other people's ideas

and their willingness to share their experiences have greatly enriched my thinking. I remain humbled by how far the ideas in this book have travelled, the range of people they have reached, and how much I have learned through conversations with readers.

I am happy that *Black Feminist Thought* has travelled so far, but in no way do I mistake its success as a reason to stop thinking and writing about the difficult questions of equity and social justice. This was my first book, and hopefully it will not be my last. Despite this book's acceptance, I know that I will never have all the answers to the challenges that Black women face, or perhaps, have even posed the best questions. No one individual, no matter how talented, committed, or well-resourced, has an infallible God's-eye view of the world.

Trying to make sense of massive social change while living through it taxes even the most diligent sociological imagination. It was impossible for me to think through the meaning of the groundbreaking phenomena of 2020 while I was living through them. The convergence of a global pandemic, navigating the uncertainties of a sustained economic crisis, working to defeat far-right candidates in an historic U.S. national election, and supporting ongoing global protests against state-sanctioned violence of anti-Black racism was unprecedented. But taking the time to step back in order to assess how well *BFT* speaks to these broader social issues was well worth it. Because the original text provides a historical, intellectual, and political context for contemporary social issues, I decided to leave it intact. The classic text also provides a theoretical language for analyzing current realities: namely, the distinguishing features of Black feminist thought, a survey of its core themes, and its significance for knowledge production and power relations. Leaving the original text intact for this 30th anniversary edition introduces these arguments to you, a new generation of readers.

To contextualize *Black Feminist Thought*'s classic argument, I wrote this Preface and an Epilogue expressly for this 30th year edition. These two new essays do different things. This Preface outlines important social issues that, while they took special form in 2020, will continue to shape Black feminist thought in the foreseeable future. The Preface asks, what has changed since *Black Feminist Thought* was first published? What has remained the same despite the visible changes in Black women's lives? In contrast, the Epilogue looks beyond the here and now to ask: What will it take for Black

feminist thought to remain oppositional in the future? How can the power of our ideas bring into being the future that we want? The Epilogue reads the signs of the present for guidance about how best to engage the future. Both essays emphasize the enduring power of ideas to bring about change. Together, these two new essays argue that ideas are far more durable than the people who advance them, and that the power of ideas lies in their flexibility and relevance within an ever-changing social world.

When it comes to a future-forward view of social change, much is riding on each of you. The power of ideas in this book lies not just in my intentions as an author, but also in how you as a reader interpret and use the ideas presented here. This joint process of meaning-making requires a new way of reading *from* you where you hold yourself accountable for your interpretation of my arguments. The meaning that you make of *Black Feminist Thought* will emerge through the conversations you have *with* this text as well as the conversations that you have with others *about* it. I am not trying to preach to you, influence you, or scare you into political action. Rather, my goal is to provide conceptual tools so that you can think for yourself.

When you step out into the unknown, you rarely know how it will turn out. None of us knows what the future holds but taking intellectual and political risks is essential to laying claim to the future that we want to see. When I wrote *Black Feminist Thought* over 30 years ago, I had no assurances that anyone would ever read it. In writing *BFT*, I drew inspiration from risks large and small taken by ordinary Black women. They decided that coming to voice was key to their ability to survive, grow, and often thrive within socially unjust societies. I was laying claim to the power of their ideas as foundational to social justice. Writing *Black Feminist Thought* may have felt risky, but it was also a labor of love. I had to trust that, even if no one read this book, I would write it anyhow. Taking the ideas in this book forward into your future will involve risk, commitment, courage, and love. Like the Black women who I discuss within these pages and the woman in the iconic photograph that graces this book's cover, many people who are devalued in their respective societies find ways to survive, grow, thrive, and make their voices heard. If I did not write my book, who would? If we do not write our own stories about the world as we see it, someone else will write them for us. If you do not raise your voice, someone else will speak for you.

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Countless Black women helped build a foundation that nurtured me. My aunts Mildred, Marjorie, and Bertha, and my great-grandmother Mama Jones showed me different ways of being strong and sensitive Black women. They reminded me that turning my back on the struggles of Black women and our loved ones was too high a price to pay for any opportunities that might come my way. I was fortunate to grow up in an extended family with wonderful Black men and a slew of cousins. My father, Albert Hill, went to work every day and was a rock through good times and bad. Through their unswerving commitment to my cousins and me, my uncles Lucius, Luther and Randy Black men who supported Black women. I hope that this foundation infuses the future of my daughter Valerie, my daughter-in-law Lauren, and my grandsons Harrison and Grant.

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I dedicate this project to the memory of my mother, Eunice Hill, who never got to read this book. Often when I became discouraged, I thought of her and told myself that if she could persist despite the obstacles that she faced, then so could I. One great regret of my life is that my mother and my daughter will never meet. I hope these pages will bring their lives closer together.

Part I

The Social Construction of Black Feminist Thought

Chapter 1

The Politics of Black Feminist Thought

In 1831 Maria W. Stewart asked, "How long shall the fair daughters of Africa be compelled to bury their minds and talents beneath a load of iron pots and kettles?" Orphaned at age five, bound out to a clergyman's family as a domestic servant, Stewart struggled to gather isolated fragments of an education when and where she could. As the first American woman to lecture in public on political issues and to leave copies of her texts, this early U.S. Black woman intellectual foreshadowed a variety of themes taken up by her Black feminist successors (Richardson 1987).

Maria Stewart challenged African-American women to reject the negative images of Black womanhood so prominent in her times, pointing out that race, gender, and class oppression were the fundamental causes of Black women's poverty. In an 1833 speech she proclaimed, "Like King Solomon, who put neither nail nor hammer to the temple, yet received the praise; so also have the white Americans gained themselves a name . . . while in reality we have been their principal foundation and support." Stewart objected to the injustice of this situation: "We have pursued the shadow, they have obtained the substance; we have performed the labor, they have received the profits; we have planted the vines, they have eaten the fruits of them" (Richardson 1987, 59).

Maria Stewart was not content to point out the source of Black women's oppression. She urged Black women to forge self-definitions of self-reliance and independence. "It is useless for us any longer to sit with our hands folded, reproaching the whites; for that will never elevate us," she exhorted. "Possess the spirit of independence. . . . Possess the spirit of men, bold and enterprising, fearless and undaunted" (p. 53). To Stewart, the power of self-definition

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was essential, for Black women's survival was at stake. "Sue for your rights and privileges. Know the reason you cannot attain them. Weary them with your importunities. You can but die if you make the attempt; and we shall certainly die if you do not" (p. 38).

Stewart also challenged Black women to use their special roles as mothers to forge powerful mechanisms of political action. "O, ye mothers, what a responsibility rests on you!" Stewart preached. "You have souls committed to your charge. . . . It is you that must create in the minds of your little girls and boys a thirst for knowledge, the love of virtue . . . and the cultivation of a pure heart." Stewart recognized the magnitude of the task at hand: "Do not say you cannot make any thing of your children; but say . . . we will try" (p. 35).

Maria Stewart was one of the first U.S. Black feminists to champion the utility of Black women's relationships with one another in providing a community for Black women's activism and self-determination. "Shall it any longer be said of the daughters of Africa, they have no ambition, they have no force?" she questioned.

> By no means. Let every female heart become united, and let us raise a fund ourselves; and at the end of one year and a half, we might be able to lay the corner stone for the building of a High School, that the higher branches of knowledge might be enjoyed by us.
>
> (p. 37)

Stewart saw the potential for Black women's activism as educators. She advised, "Turn your attention to knowledge and improvement; for knowledge is power" (p. 41).

Though she said little in her speeches about the sexual politics of her time, her advice to African-American women suggests that she was painfully aware of the sexual abuse visited upon Black women. She continued to "plead the cause of virtue and the pure principles of morality" (p. 31) for Black women. And to those Whites who thought that Black women were inherently inferior, Stewart offered a biting response:

> Our souls are fired with the same love of liberty and independence with which your souls are fired. . . . [T]oo much of your blood flows in our veins, too much of your color in our skins, for us not to possess your spirits.
>
> (p. 40)

Despite Maria Stewart's intellectual prowess, the ideas of this extraordinary woman come to us only in scattered fragments that not only suggest her brilliance but speak tellingly of the fate of countless Black women intellectuals. Many Maria Stewarts exist, African-American women whose minds and talents have been suppressed by the pots and kettles symbolic of Black women's subordination (Guy-Sheftall 1986).[1] Far too many African-American women intellectuals have labored in isolation and obscurity and, like Zora Neale Hurston, lie buried in unmarked graves.

Some have been more fortunate, for they have become known to us, largely through the efforts of contemporary Black women scholars (Hine et al. 1993; Guy-Sheftall 1995b). Like Alice Walker, these scholars sense that "a people do not throw their geniuses away" and that "if they are thrown away, it is our duty as artists, scholars, and witnesses for the future to collect them again for the sake of our children . . . if necessary, bone by bone" (Walker 1983, 92).

This painstaking process of collecting the ideas and actions of "thrown-away" Black women like Maria Stewart has revealed one important discovery. Black women intellectuals have laid a vital analytical foundation for a distinctive standpoint on self, community, and society and, in doing so, created a multifaceted, African-American women's intellectual tradition. While clear discontinuities in this tradition exist—times when Black women's voices were strong, and others when assuming a more muted tone was essential—one striking dimension of the ideas of Maria W. Stewart and her successors is the thematic consistency of their work.

If such a rich intellectual tradition exists, why has it remained virtually invisible until now? In 1905 Fannie Barrier Williams lamented, "The colored girl . . . is not known and hence not believed in; she belongs to a race that is best designated by the term 'problem,' and she lives beneath the shadow of that problem which envelops and obscures her" (Williams 1987, 150). Why are African-American women and our ideas not known and not believed in?

The shadow obscuring this complex Black women's intellectual tradition is neither accidental nor benign. Suppressing the knowledge produced by any oppressed group makes it easier for dominant groups to rule because the seeming absence of dissent suggests that subordinate groups willingly collaborate in their own victimization (Scott 1985). Maintaining the invisibility of Black women and our ideas—not only in the United States, but in Africa, the Caribbean, South America, Europe, and other places where Black women now

live—has been critical in maintaining social inequalities. Black women who are engaged in reclaiming and constructing Black women's knowledges often point to the politics of suppression that affect their projects. For example, several authors in Heidi Mirza's (1997) edited volume on Black British feminism identify their invisibility and silencing in the contemporary United Kingdom. Similarly, South African businesswoman Danisa Baloyi describes her astonishment at the invisibility of African women in U.S. scholarship: "As a student doing research in the United States, I was amazed by the [small] amount of information on Black South African women, and shocked that only a minuscule amount was actually written by Black women themselves" (Baloyi 1995, 41).

Despite this suppression, U.S. Black women have managed to do intellectual work, and to have our ideas matter. Sojourner Truth, Anna Julia Cooper, Ida B. Wells-Barnett, Mary McLeod Bethune, Toni Morrison, Barbara Smith, and countless others have consistently struggled to make themselves heard. African women writers such as Ama Ata Aidoo, Buchi Emecheta, and Ellen Kuzwayo have used their voices to raise important issues that affect Black African women (James 1990). Like the work of Maria W. Stewart and that of Black women transnationally, African-American women's intellectual work has aimed to foster Black women's activism.

This dialectic of oppression and activism, the tension between the suppression of African-American women's ideas and our intellectual activism in the face of that suppression, constitutes the politics of U.S. Black feminist thought. More important, understanding this dialectical relationship is critical in assessing how U.S. Black feminist thought—its core themes, epistemological significance, and connections to domestic and transnational Black feminist practice—is fundamentally embedded in a political context that has challenged its very right to exist.

The Suppression of Black Feminist Thought

The vast majority of African-American women were brought to the United States to work as slaves in a situation of oppression. Oppression describes any unjust situation where, systematically and over a long period of time, one group denies another group access to the resources of society. Race, class, gender, sexuality, nation, age, and ethnicity among others constitute major forms of oppression in the

United States. However, the convergence of race, class, and gender oppression characteristic of U.S. slavery shaped all subsequent relationships that women of African descent had within Black American families and communities, with employers, and among one another. It also created the political context for Black women's intellectual work.

African-American women's oppression has encompassed three interdependent dimensions. First, the exploitation of Black women's labor essential to U.S. capitalism—the "iron pots and kettles" symbolizing Black women's long-standing ghettoization in service occupations—represents the economic dimension of oppression (Davis 1981; Marable 1983; Jones 1985; Amott and Matthaei 1991). Survival for most African-American women has been such an all-consuming activity that most have had few opportunities to do intellectual work as it has been traditionally defined. The drudgery of enslaved African-American women's work and the grinding poverty of "free" wage labor in the rural South tellingly illustrate the high costs Black women have paid for survival. The millions of impoverished African-American women ghettoized in Philadelphia, Birmingham, Oakland, Detroit, and other U.S. inner cities demonstrate the continuation of these earlier forms of Black women's economic exploitation (Brewer 1993; Omolade 1994).

Second, the political dimension of oppression has denied African-American women the rights and privileges routinely extended to White male citizens (Burnham 1987; Scales-Trent 1989; Berry 1994). Forbidding Black women to vote, excluding African-Americans and women from public office, and withholding equitable treatment in the criminal justice system all substantiate the political subordination of Black women. Educational institutions have also fostered this pattern of disenfranchisement. Past practices such as denying literacy to slaves and relegating Black women to underfunded, segregated Southern schools worked to ensure that a quality education for Black women remained the exception rather than the rule (Mullings 1997). The large numbers of young Black women in inner cities and impoverished rural areas who continue to leave school before attaining full literacy represent the continued efficacy of the political dimension of Black women's oppression.

Finally, controlling images applied to Black women that originated during the slave era attest to the ideological dimension of U.S. Black women's oppression (King 1973; D. White 1985; Carby

1987; Morton 1991). Ideology refers to the body of ideas reflecting the interests of a group of people. Within U.S. culture, racist and sexist ideologies permeate the social structure to such a degree that they become hegemonic, namely, seen as natural, normal, and inevitable. In this context, certain assumed qualities that are attached to Black women are used to justify oppression. From the mammies, jezebels, and breeder women of slavery to the smiling Aunt Jemimas on pancake mix boxes, ubiquitous Black prostitutes, and ever-present welfare mothers of contemporary popular culture, negative stereotypes applied to African-American women have been fundamental to Black women's oppression.

Taken together, the supposedly seamless web of economy, polity, and ideology function as a highly effective system of social control designed to keep African-American women in an assigned, subordinate place. This larger system of oppression works to suppress the ideas of Black women intellectuals and to protect elite White male interests and worldviews. Denying African-American women the credentials to become literate certainly excluded most African-American women from positions as scholars, teachers, authors, poets, and critics. Moreover, while Black women historians, writers, and social scientists have long existed, until recently these women have not held leadership positions in universities, professional associations, publishing concerns, broadcast media, and other social institutions of knowledge validation. Black women's exclusion from positions of power within mainstream institutions has led to the elevation of elite White male ideas and interests and the corresponding suppression of Black women's ideas and interests in traditional scholarship (Higginbotham 1989; Morton 1991; Collins 1998a, 95–123). Moreover, this historical exclusion means that stereotypical images of Black women permeate popular culture and public policy (Wallace 1990; Lubiano 1992; Jewell 1993).

U.S. and European women's studies have challenged the seemingly hegemonic ideas of elite White men. Ironically, Western feminisms have also suppressed Black women's ideas (duCille 1996, 81–119). Even though Black women intellectuals have long expressed a distinctive African-influenced and feminist sensibility about how race and class intersect in structuring gender, historically we have not been full participants in White feminist organizations (Giddings 1984; Zinn et al. 1986; Caraway 1991). As a result, African-American, Latino, Native American, and Asian-American women

have criticized Western feminisms for being racist and overly concerned with White, middle-class women's issues (Moraga and Anzaldua 1981; Smith 1982a; Dill 1983; Davis 1989).

Traditionally, many U.S. White feminist scholars have resisted having Black women as full colleagues. Moreover, this historical suppression of Black women's ideas has had a pronounced influence on feminist theory. One pattern of suppression is that of omission. Theories advanced as being universally applicable to women as a group upon closer examination appear greatly limited by the White, middle-class, and Western origins of their proponents. For example, Nancy Chodorow's (1978) work on sex role socialization and Carol Gilligan's (1982) study of the moral development of women both rely heavily on White, middle-class samples. While these two classics made key contributions to feminist theory, they simultaneously promoted the notion of a generic woman who is White and middle class. The absence of Black feminist ideas from these and other studies placed them in a much more tenuous position to challenge the hegemony of mainstream scholarship on behalf of all women.

Another pattern of suppression lies in paying lip service to the need for diversity, but changing little about one's own practice. Currently, some U.S. White women who possess great competence in researching a range of issues acknowledge the need for diversity, yet omit women of color from their work. These women claim that they are unqualified to understand or even speak of "Black women's experiences" because they themselves are not Black. Others include a few safe, "hand-picked" Black women's voices to avoid criticisms that they are racist. Both examples reflect a basic unwillingness by many U.S. White feminists to alter the paradigms that guide their work.

A more recent pattern of suppression involves incorporating, changing, and thereby depoliticizing Black feminist ideas. The growing popularity of postmodernism in U.S. higher education in the 1990s, especially within literary criticism and cultural studies, fosters a climate where symbolic inclusion often substitutes for bona fide substantive changes. Because interest in Black women's work has reached occult status, suggests Ann duCille (1996), it "increasingly marginalizes both the black women critics and scholars who excavated the fields in question and their black feminist 'daughters' who would further develop those fields" (p. 87). Black feminist critic Barbara Christian (1994), a pioneer in creating Black women's studies in the U.S. academy, queries whether Black feminism can survive

the pernicious politics of resegregation. In discussing the politics of a new multiculturalism, Black feminist critic Hazel Carby (1992) expresses dismay at the growing situation of symbolic inclusion, in which the texts of Black women writers are welcome in the multicultural classroom while actual Black women are not.

Not all White Western feminists participate in these diverse patterns of suppression. Some do try to build coalitions across racial and other markers of difference, often with noteworthy results. Works by Elizabeth Spelman (1988), Sandra Harding (1986, 1998), Margaret Andersen (1991), Peggy McIntosh (1988), Mab Segrest (1994), Anne Fausto-Sterling (1995), and other individual U.S. White feminist thinkers reflect sincere efforts to develop a multiracial, diverse feminism. However, despite their efforts, these concerns linger on.

Like feminist scholarship, the diverse strands of African-American social and political thought have also challenged mainstream scholarship. However, Black social and political thought has been limited by both the reformist postures toward change assumed by many U.S. Black intellectuals (Cruse 1967; West 1977–78) and the secondary status afforded the ideas and experiences of African-American women. Adhering to a male-defined ethos that far too often equates racial progress with the acquisition of an ill-defined manhood has left much U.S. Black thought with a prominent masculinist bias.

In this case the patterns of suppressing Black women's ideas have been similar yet different. Though Black women have played little or no part in dominant academic discourse and White feminist arenas, we have long been included in the organizational structures of Black civil society or the Black public sphere (Gregory 1994). U.S. Black women's acceptance of subordinate roles in Black organizations does not mean that we wield little authority or that we experience patriarchy in the same way as do White women in White organizations (Evans 1979; Gilkes 1985). But with the exception of Black women's organizations, male-run organizations have historically either not stressed Black women's issues (Beale 1970; Marable 1983) or have done so under duress. For example, Black feminist activist Pauli Murray (1970) found that from its founding in 1916 to 1970, the *Journal of Negro History* published only five articles devoted exclusively to Black women. Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham's (1993) historical monograph on Black women in Black Baptist churches records African-American women's struggles to raise issues that concerned women. Even progressive Black organizations have

not been immune from gender discrimination. Civil rights activist Ella Baker's experiences in the Southern Christian Leadership Conference illustrate one form that suppressing Black women's ideas and talents can take. Ms. Baker virtually ran the entire organization, yet had to defer to the decision-making authority of the exclusively male leadership group (Cantarow 1980). Civil rights activist Septima Clark describes similar experiences: "I found all over the South that whatever the man said had to be right. They had the whole say. The woman couldn't say a thing" (C. Brown 1986, 79). Radical African-American women also can find themselves deferring to male authority. In her autobiography, Elaine Brown (1992), a participant and subsequent leader of the 1960s radical organization the Black Panther Party for Self-Defense, discusses the sexism expressed by Panther men. Overall, even though Black women intellectuals have asserted their right to speak both as African-Americans and as women, historically these women have not held top leadership positions in Black organizations and have frequently struggled within them to express Black feminist ideas (Giddings 1984).

Much contemporary U.S. Black feminist thought reflects Black women's increasing willingness to oppose gender inequality within Black civil society. Septima Clark describes this transformation:

> I used to feel that women couldn't speak up, because when district meetings were being held at my home . . . I didn't feel as if I could tell them what I had in mind. . . . But later on, I found out that women had a lot to say, and what they had to say was really worthwhile. . . . So we started talking, and have been talking quite a bit since that time.
>
> (C. Brown 1986, 82)

African-American women intellectuals have been "talking quite a bit" since 1970 and have insisted that the masculinist bias in Black social and political thought, the racist bias in feminist theory, and the heterosexist bias in both be corrected (see, e.g., Bambara 1970b; Dill 1979; Jordan 1981; Combahee River Collective 1982; Lorde 1984).

Within Black civil society, the increasing visibility of Black women's ideas did not go unopposed. The virulent reaction to earlier Black women's writings by some Black men, such as Robert Staples's (1979) analysis of Ntozake Shange's (1975) choreopoem, *For*

Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide, and Michele Wallace's (1978) controversial volume, *Black Macho and the Myth of the Superwoman*, illustrates the difficulty of challenging the masculinist bias in Black social and political thought. Alice Walker encountered similarly hostile reactions to her publication of *The Color Purple*. In describing the response of African-American men to the outpouring of publications by Black women writers in the 1970s and 1980s, Calvin Hernton offers an incisive criticism of the seeming tenacity of a masculinist bias:

> The telling thing about the hostile attitude of black men toward black women writers is that they interpret the new thrust of the women as being "counter-productive" to the historical goal of the Black struggle. Revealingly, while black men have achieved outstanding recognition throughout the history of black writing, black women have not accused the men of collaborating with the enemy and setting back the progress of the race.
>
> (1985, 5)

Not all Black male reaction during this period was hostile. For example, Manning Marable (1983) devotes an entire chapter in *How Capitalism Underdeveloped Black America* to how sexism has been a primary deterrent to Black community development. Following Marable's lead, work by Haki Madhubuti (1990), Cornel West (1993), Michael Awkward (1996), Michael Dyson (1996), and others suggests that some U.S. Black male thinkers have taken Black feminist thought seriously. Despite the diverse ideological perspectives expressed by these writers, each seemingly recognizes the importance of Black women's ideas.

Black Feminist Thought as Critical Social Theory

Even if they appear to be otherwise, situations such as the suppression of Black women's ideas within traditional scholarship and the struggles within the critiques of that established knowledge are inherently unstable. Conditions in the wider political economy simultaneously shape Black women's subordination and foster activism. On some level, people who are oppressed usually know it. For African-American women, the knowledge gained at intersecting oppressions of race, class, and gender provides the stimulus for

crafting and passing on the subjugated knowledge[2] of Black women's critical social theory (Collins 1998a, 3–10).

As an historically oppressed group, U.S. Black women have produced social thought designed to oppose oppression. Not only does the form assumed by this thought diverge from standard academic theory—it can take the form of poetry, music, essays, and the like—but the *purpose* of Black women's collective thought is distinctly different. Social theories emerging from and/or on behalf of U.S. Black women and other historically oppressed groups aim to find ways to escape from, survive in, and/or oppose prevailing social and economic injustice. In the United States, for example, African-American social and political thought analyzes institutionalized racism, not to help it work more efficiently, but to resist it. Feminism advocates women's emancipation and empowerment, Marxist social thought aims for a more equitable society, while queer theory opposes heterosexism. Beyond U.S. borders, many women from oppressed groups also struggle to understand new forms of injustice. In a transnational, postcolonial context, women within new and often Black-run nation-states in the Caribbean, Africa, and Asia struggle with new meanings attached to ethnicity, citizenship status, and religion. In increasingly multicultural European nation-states, women migrants from former colonies encounter new forms of subjugation (Yuval-Davis 1997). Social theories expressed by women emerging from these diverse groups typically do not arise from the rarefied atmosphere of their imaginations. Instead, social theories reflect women's efforts to come to terms with lived experiences within intersecting oppressions of race, class, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, nation, and religion (see, e.g., Alexander and Mohanty 1997; Mirza 1997).

Black feminist thought, U.S. Black women's critical social theory, reflects similar power relationships. For African-American women, critical social theory encompasses bodies of knowledge and sets of institutional practices that actively grapple with the central questions facing U.S. Black women as a collectivity. The need for such thought arises because African-American women as a *group* remain oppressed within a U.S. context characterized by injustice. This neither means that all African-American women within that group are oppressed in the same way, nor that some U.S. Black women do not suppress others. Black feminist thought's identity as a "critical" social theory lies in its commitment to justice, both for U.S. Black women as a collectivity and for that of other similarly oppressed groups.

Historically, two factors stimulated U.S. Black women's critical social theory. For one, prior to World War II, racial segregation in urban housing became so entrenched that the majority of African-American women lived in self-contained Black neighborhoods where their children attended overwhelmingly Black schools, and where they belonged to all-Black churches and similar community organizations. Although ghettoization was designed to foster the political control and economic exploitation of Black Americans (Squires 1994), these all-Black neighborhoods simultaneously provided a separate space where African-American women and men could use African-derived ideas to craft distinctive oppositional knowledges designed to resist racial oppression.

Every social group has a constantly evolving worldview that it uses to order and evaluate its own experiences (Sobel 1979). For African-Americans this worldview originated in the cosmologies of diverse West African ethnic groups (Diop 1974). By retaining and reworking significant elements of these West African cultures, communities of enslaved Africans offered their members explanations for slavery alternative to those advanced by slave owners (Gutman 1976; Webber 1978; Sobel 1979). These African-derived ideas also laid the foundation for the rules of a distinctive Black American civil society. Later on, confining African-Americans to all-Black areas in the rural South and Northern urban ghettos fostered the solidification of a distinctive ethos in Black civil society regarding language (Smitherman 1977), religion (Sobel 1979; Paris 1995), family structure (Sudarkasa 1981b), and community politics (Brown 1994). While essential to the survival of U.S. Blacks as a group and expressed differently by individual African-Americans, these knowledges remained simultaneously hidden from and suppressed by Whites. Black oppositional knowledges existed to resist injustice, but they also remained subjugated.

As mothers, othermothers, teachers, and churchwomen in essentially all-Black rural communities and urban neighborhoods, U.S. Black women participated in constructing and reconstructing these oppositional knowledges. Through the lived experiences gained within their extended families and communities, individual African-American women fashioned their own ideas about the meaning of Black womanhood. When these ideas found collective expression, Black women's self-definitions enabled them to refashion African-influenced conceptions of self and community. These self-definitions of Black womanhood were designed to resist the negative controlling

images of Black womanhood advanced by Whites as well as the discriminatory social practices that these controlling images supported. In all, Black women's participation in crafting a constantly changing African-American culture fostered distinctively Black and women-centered worldviews.

Another factor that stimulated U.S. Black women's critical social theory lay in the common experiences they gained from their jobs. Prior to World War II, U.S. Black women worked primarily in two occupations—agriculture and domestic work. Their ghettoization in domestic work sparked an important contradiction. Domestic work fostered U.S. Black women's economic exploitation, yet it simultaneously created the conditions for distinctively Black and female forms of resistance. Domestic work allowed African-American women to see White elites, both actual and aspiring, from perspectives largely obscured from Black men and from these groups themselves. In their White "families," Black women not only performed domestic duties but frequently formed strong ties with the children they nurtured and with the employers. On one level, this insider relationship was satisfying to all concerned. Accounts of Black domestic workers stress the sense of self-affirmation the women experienced at seeing racist ideology demystified. But on another level, these Black women knew that they could never belong to their White "families." They were economically exploited workers and thus would remain outsiders. The result was being placed in a curious *outsider-within* social location (Collins 1986), a peculiar marginality that stimulated a distinctive Black women's perspective on a variety of themes (see, e.g., Childress 1986).

Taken together, Black women's participation in constructing African-American culture in all-Black settings and the distinctive perspectives gained from their outsider-within placement in domestic work provide the material backdrop for a unique Black women's standpoint. When armed with cultural beliefs honed in Black civil society, many Black women who found themselves doing domestic work often developed distinct views of the contradictions between the dominant group's actions and ideologies. Moreover, they often shared their ideas with other African-American women. Nancy White, a Black inner-city resident, explores the connection between experience and beliefs:

> Now, I understand all these things from living. But you can't lay up on these flowery beds of ease and think that you are running

> your life, too. Some women, white women, can run their husband's lives for a while, but most of them have to . . . see what he tells them there is to see. If he tells them that they ain't seeing what they know they *are* seeing, then they have to just go on like it wasn't there!
>
> (in Gwaltney 1980, 148)

Not only does this passage speak to the power of the dominant group to suppress the knowledge produced by subordinate groups, but it illustrates how being in outsider-within locations can foster new angles of vision on oppression. Ms. White's Blackness makes her a perpetual outsider. She could never be a White middle-class woman lying on a "flowery bed of ease." But her work of caring for White women allowed her an insider's view of some of the contradictions between White women thinking that they are running their lives and the patriarchal power and authority in their households.

Practices such as these, whether experienced oneself or learned by listening to African-American women who have had them, have encouraged many U.S. Black women to question the contradictions between dominant ideologies of American womanhood and U.S. Black women's devalued status. If women are allegedly passive and fragile, then why are Black women treated as "mules" and assigned heavy cleaning chores? If good mothers are supposed to stay at home with their children, then why are U.S. Black women on public assistance forced to find jobs and leave their children in day care? If women's highest calling is to become mothers, then why are Black teen mothers pressured to use Norplant and Depo-Provera? In the absence of a viable Black feminism that investigates how intersecting oppressions of race, gender, and class foster these contradictions, the angle of vision created by being deemed devalued workers and failed mothers could easily be turned inward, leading to internalized oppression. But the legacy of struggle among U.S. Black women suggests that a collectively shared, Black women's oppositional knowledge has long existed. This collective wisdom in turn has spurred U.S. Black women to generate a more specialized knowledge, namely, Black feminist thought as critical social theory. Just as fighting injustice lay at the heart of U.S. Black women's experiences, so did analyzing and creating imaginative responses to injustice characterize the core of Black feminist thought.