Contradictions of Modernity

The modern era has been uniquely productive of theory. Some theory claimed uniformity despite human differences or unilinear progress in the face of catastrophic changes. Other theory was informed more deeply by the complexities of history and recognition of cultural specificity. This series seeks to further the latter approach by publishing books that explore the problems of theorizing the modern in its manifold and sometimes contradictory forms and that examine the specific locations of theory within the modern.

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Fighting Words

Black Women and the Search for Justice

Patricia Hill Collins

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Developing Black feminist thought as critical social theory requires articulating a situated standpoint that emerges from rather than suppresses the complexity of African-American women's experiences as a group on this meso level. British sociologist Stuart Hall's notion of articulation works well here—the idea of "unity and difference," of "difference in complex unity, without becoming a hostage to the privileging of difference as such" (qtd. in Slack 1996, 122). Such a standpoint would identify the ways in which being situated in intersections of race, economic class, and gender, as well as those of age, sexuality, ethnicity, and region of the country, constructs relationships *among* African-American women as a group. At the same time, a situated standpoint would reflect how these intersections frame African-American women's distinctive history as a collectivity in the United States. This involves examining how intersectionality constructs relationships *between* African-American women and other groups. Thus, the challenge confronting African-American women lies in constructing notions of a Black female collectivity that remain sensitive to Black women's placement in distinctively American hierarchical power relations, while simultaneously resisting replication of these same relations within the group's own ranks.

The ability of Black feminist thought to make useful contributions to contemporary freedom struggles hinges on its ability to develop new forms of visionary pragmatism. Within the new politics of containment that confronts African-American women, visionary pragmatism in turn hinges on developing greater complexity within Black women's knowledge. In this regard, remaining situated is essential. Vision can be conjured up in the theoretical imagination, yet pragmatic actions require being responsive to the injustices of everyday life. Rather than abandoning situated standpoints, becoming situated in new understandings of social complexity is vital. Despite the importance of this project, changes in Black civil society, coupled with the growing importance of academia as a site where Black feminist thought is produced and circulated, raise real questions concerning the future of this type of functional knowledge. Whether Black feminist standpoints survive remains to be seen.

Seven

Searching for Sojourner Truth: Toward an Epistemology of Empowerment

> My name was Isabella; but when I left the house of bondage, I left everything behind. I wa'n't goin' to keep nothin' of Egypt on me, an' so I went to the Lord an' asked him to give me a new name. And the Lord gave me Sojourner, because I was to travel up an' down the land, showin' the people their sins, an' bein' a sign unto them. Afterward I told the Lord I wanted another name, 'cause everybody else had two names; and Lord gave me Truth, because I was to declare the truth to the people. (Qtd. in Sterling 1984, 151)

How did Isabella Baumfree, an illiterate, newly emancipated, poor Black woman, dare to name herself? Stepping outside the conventions of 1832, Truth created her own identity and invoked naming as a symbolic act imbued with meaning. Refusing to be silenced, Truth claimed the authority of her own experiences to challenge the racism, sexism, and class privilege of her time.

Often presented as important to Black feminism (Guy-Sheftall 1986; Joseph 1990), Sojourner Truth's ideas are important in and of themselves. Moreover, as a figure who has been appropriated by a range of groups in defense of disparate agendas (Painter 1993), Truth has taken on the status of an icon. The power of Truth as a Black feminist intellectual (an appropriation that suits my purposes) lies in her complexity, in the fact that she lends herself so well to multiple

interpretations. What I find compelling about Sojourner Truth is that her biography suggests an epistemology of empowerment that has helped me think through critical social theory in general. Recall that critical social theory encompasses bodies of knowledge and sets of institutional practices that actively grapple with the central questions facing groups of people differentially placed in specific political, social, and historic contexts characterized by injustice. Sojourner Truth's life serves as a metaphor for all parts of this definition. Not only did she produce knowledge and engage in particular social practices, she also faced injustices that remain remarkably similar to our own.

Sojourner Truth's biography speaks to the significance of her movement among multiple communities, the impact that these diverse groups had on her worldview, and the potential significance of Truth's life for an epistemology of empowerment. Truth was born into slavery but experienced the distinctive form practiced in the North. Despite being sold several times as a child, Truth knew both of her biological parents. She spoke Dutch, and when she was sold to English-speaking owners, she experienced the language barrier of not being understood. Her older sisters and brothers were sold away, yet Truth was able to see her own children grow to adulthood. Emancipated in 1827 by New York state law, Truth possessed insider knowledge of slavery but also experienced mobility out of slavery into the status of freedperson. Since she lived both in upstate New York and in New York City after emancipation, Truth was well aware of both rural and urban life. She was one of the few African-Americans in the White Christian evangelical movement, as well as one of the few Black women who spoke out about women's rights (Painter 1993; Washington 1993). Thus, Sojourner Truth's travels through multiple outsider-within locations may explain in part her remarkable ability to see things differently than others of her time did. She was visionary in her ideals concerning equity and justice yet pragmatic about the political actions needed to make justice a reality. The richness of Truth's biography signals a significance that far exceeds her individual life.

Although Sojourner Truth's and African-American women's particular experiences stimulated my ideas for this chapter, my analysis has implications beyond these specific origins. Social theories emerging from and/or on behalf of historically oppressed groups investigate ways to escape from, survive in, and/or oppose prevailing social and economic injustice. Black women in the United States are but one such group engaged in developing this type of social theory. Just as Black women's group location within hierarchical power relations creates the conditions for a distinctive standpoint, this same positionality simultaneously limits what will be visible. Since a standpoint is not something that a group possesses but rather something that involves the ongoing process of negotiating heterogeneous commonalities, Black women do not "own" an epistemology of empowerment. Rather, by using Sojourner Truth's ideas and experiences as a touchstone or metaphor, I hope to sketch out some key considerations for moving toward an epistemology that opposes injustice.

Migration, Outsider-Within Locations, and Contextualized Truth

Sojourner Truth's mobility as a "sojourner" among multiple outsider-within locations highlights the importance of social contexts in determining truth. Because Truth lived in a Black woman's body, her position in the world certainly shaped her position on her world. A traveler, a migrant who transgressed borders of race, class, gender, literacy, geography, and religion largely impenetrable for African-American women of her time, Truth remained an outsider within multiple communities. Just as Sojourner Truth was situated in the context of hierarchical power relations, searching for truth requires similar contextualization. For her, resolving the tensions raised by her migratory status did not lie in staying in any one center of power and thereby accepting its rules and assumptions. Rather, Truth explicitly breached group boundaries. By selecting the name Sojourner, Truth proclaimed that specialization and movement were both required in legitimating truth claims. No truth was possible without a variety of perspectives on any given particularity.

Individuals like Truth who accept their placement in outsider-within locations can formulate remarkable critical social theory. Biographies of many African-American intellectuals demonstrate how movement through outsider-within locations can catalyze creativity (Braxton 1989; Franklin 1995).[1] In her autobiography, Angela Davis (1974) describes how migrating from the South to the North and from the United States to Europe stimulated insights largely unavailable to African-Americans who are denied such experiences. Her pathbreaking analyses of the intersections of race, gender, and class in framing

Black women's experiences under slavery (1981) reflect the insights she gained from her movement among multiple interpretive communities. Realizing that when it comes to injustice, all social locations provide opportunities for struggle, Davis embraced both social theory and political activism in her work. "The new places, the new experiences I had expected to discover through travel turned out to be the same old places, the same old experiences with a common message of struggle" (1974, 120), she observes. Each new location provided Davis a new vantage point for constructing critical social theory.

Truth's and Davis's travels stimulated new angles of vision. More important, their movement violates implicit assumptions concerning segregated spaces and Black women's appropriate place in them. Michel Foucault's analysis of disciplinary power points to the importance of segregated space as a guiding metaphor for thinking through African-American women's experiences in outsider-within locations. Arguing that disciplinary power operates by enclosing individuals in assigned spaces, Foucault observes, "This machinery works space in a . . . flexible and detailed way. It does this . . . on the principle of elementary location or *partitioning*. Each individual has his own place, and each place its individual" (1979, 143; emphasis in original). Since they are defined by the place they occupy in a series and by the gap that separates them from others, individuals categorized in this fashion become interchangeable. One Black woman is the same as any other, and all are different from everyone else. People are classified hierarchically and assigned metaphorical and actual places where they belong. Their location in those places (whether they are geographic neighborhoods or scientific categories of race) determines their rank (Foucault 1979, 145). The actual people remain less important than their placement in this overarching arrangement. Moreover, this logic of disciplinary power shapes the organization of bodies of knowledge. Ideas are assigned disciplinary places where they belong, and their location in their disciplines determines their value. In this sense, hierarchical power relations are mapped onto physical space that in turn reproduces symbolic space.[2]

Sojourner Truth's biography provides a metaphor for this type of journey, an ongoing search that views truth as a process negotiated in outsider-within places, as compared to a finished product that one finds in the center of either actual segregated places or symbolic disciplinary spaces. Since intellectuals are simultaneously located in and

moving through all sorts of positions within the metaphoric disciplinary space as well as within actual academic disciplines, their intellectual production and the positions they take will be similarly varied. As Black British cultural critic Kobena Mercer points out, "In matters of war, positioning is everything" (1994, 7). Some intellectuals seem to be at home in the centers of what appear to be self-contained, interpretive communities. They accept the premise that "each individual has his own place, and each place its individual" (Foucault 1979, 143), even if it disadvantages them. Theorizing from these old centers generates distinctive perspectives on the world: the former location generates elite knowledge used to support oppression; the latter, the "hidden transcripts" of oppressed groups that can be either emancipatory or not (Scott 1990). Other intellectual workers migrate through to the borderlands, boundaries, or outsider-within locations linking communities of differential power. As temporary sojourners, they pause and look around before returning to former home communities or moving on to new ones. Whether by choice or by design, still others find themselves permanently exiled in these outsider-within locations, unable to return home to old centers and never gaining entry into new ones. There, as permanent sojourners, they continue to search for meaning. In these outsider-within spaces, some sojourners approach truths.

On the one hand, journeying and migration benefit individuals in some specific ways. Individual migration reveals and breaks down segregated spaces of all sorts. Black women's migration experiences into formerly White and/or male academic disciplines illuminate how migration can stimulate individual creativity. The work of Black women writers who embrace migration and movement certainly has made important contributions to Black women's intellectual production. For example, making extensive use of migration as a metaphor for Black women's experiences, Carole Boyce Davies (1994) provides a useful overview of Black women's connections to migration literature. Decrying the fixity of the term *Black women* that she sees characterizing Black feminist discourse in the United States, Davies counsels embracing fluidity, movement, and flexibility as a frame for Black feminist theorizing. Ironically, in her criticisms of what she perceives as the fixity of American Black feminism, Davies draws on the legitimation of intellectual space created by African-American women to forward her own agenda. If there were no womanism or Black feminist thought, nothing would exist for her to criticize. Writing not from the

fixity of racial segregation in the United States but from her position as a Caribbean migrant, Davies still finds hope generated in migration. Embracing migration and movement can also spur some important coalitions among individuals of all sorts who move into and through outsider-within locations. Like African-American women as a group, other similarly situated groups develop oppositional knowledges influenced by their proximity to more powerful groups. The historical invisibility of Black feminist thought and the hidden transcripts (Scott 1990) of other subjugated knowledges make them no less real. Individuals who manage to migrate from these subordinated groups often find that they share common themes, interpretive paradigms, and epistemological orientations. Moreover, White "race traitors," feminist men, and other individuals critical of their own privilege can also move into outsider-within spaces (see, e.g., Pratt 1993). Outsider-within locations allow individuals from these diverse places to meet and compare notes.

On the other hand, neither the relationships among people in outsider-within locations nor the knowledges produced in these spaces are inherently progressive. Within American higher education, for example, the myth of equivalent oppressions creates a new kind of individualism in outsider-within spaces. Although individual intellectuals in higher education may appear to be similarly disadvantaged, actual power relations create neither uniform privileges nor uniform disadvantages. Although being marginalized in intersections of race, class, gender, sexuality, and/or citizenship places many well-meaning intellectuals in higher education in common border zones, these same systems of power reproduce hierarchies within outsider-within locations. For example, within academia, African-American and White women seemingly share outsider-within positionality. Yet although female academics theoretically occupy equivalent locations in relation to each other, they are far from equal in academia itself, and certainly not in the United States as a whole. As appealing as it may be, it is impossible to shed the meanings attached to the socially assigned groups of race, economic class, nationality, and sexuality in which one finds oneself. Constructing oneself anew in the liberatory space of a shared outsider-within identity is difficult.

Since individuals emerging from differently ranked social groups have similar yet conflicting interests, migration and journeying to outsider-within locations may not yield uniformly progressive social

theories. As Michael Awkward observes, "I have attempted to suspend disbelief, to interrogate actively the consequences of border crossings, including my own, rather than assume a predictably transgressive outcome" (1995, 15). Individual intellectuals can subsist in outsider-within locations and produce social theory that not only is *not* critical but may actually support injustice. Philosopher K. Anthony Appiah's criticism of the ways in which postcolonial intellectuals broker the idea of postcoloniality in the marketplace of academic ideas describes this situation:

> Postcoloniality is the condition—a relatively small, Western-style, Western-trained, group of writers and thinkers who mediate the trade in cultural commodities of world capitalism at the periphery. In the West they are known through the Africa they offer; their compatriots know them both through the West they present to Africa and through an Africa they have invented for the world, for each other, and for Africa. (1992, 149)

Black female intellectuals who trade a Black feminism or womanism in defense of their careers, especially if they aim to install their version as more authentic than others, are equally suspect. Thus, it is important to resist the temptation to recast outsider-within locations, their residents, and their accompanying knowledges as a homogeneous space characterized by an inherently progressive identity and politics.

Despite these caveats, gaining greater clarity about the ways in which the social location of intellectuals shapes their intellectual production offers the possibility of creating both new ways of theorizing and new types of critical social theory. This becomes possible when, for example, African-American women intellectuals who find themselves in outsider-within locations between many groups of unequal power critically use selected ideas from the knowledges generated by these groups (e.g., science, postmodernism, Afrocentrism, standpoint theory, and feminism) to construct truth(s) while journeying toward truth. To gain a fresh angle of vision, theorizing in these outsider-within locations often involves pausing in the typically uncomfortable disjuncture between conflicting knowledges. One is never "at home" anywhere, but, unlike Alfred Schutz's "stranger" (1944) or Karl Mannheim's "marginal intellectual" (1954), one is always situated somewhere in actual power relations. Pausing at the disjuncture represents the thought of one moment in time, a place in the dynamic process of theorizing. Since the locations where outsiders may pause

are multiple and changing, critical social theory honed in outsider-within spaces reflects these dynamics.

Situating Black feminist thought as discourse and practice in relation to other discourses and their practices highlights the importance of moving through multiple contexts. Ironically, to be situated and moving at the same time is not a contradiction. As contexts become multiple, critical social theory reflects comparable complexities. Chicana theorist and poet Gloria Anzaldúa's work provides a glimpse of this process of continually moving among discourses in contextualizing and generating truth. For Anzaldúa, contextualizing truth via movement fosters a critical social theory unavailable to those who ground their truth in the centers of any one interpretive context. Invoking the metaphor of the snake shedding its skin, Anzaldúa queries, "Why does she have to go and try to make 'sense' of it all? Every time she makes 'sense' of something, she has to 'cross over,' kicking a hole out of the old boundaries of the self and slipping under or over, dragging the old skin along, stumbling over it. It hampers her movement in the new territory, dragging the ghost of the past with her" (1987, 49). Anzaldúa describes the difficulty of always remembering one's past, the process of "dragging along" the "old skin" of science, Afrocentrism, standpoint theory, feminism, and the like. How nice it would be to move easily through these social theories, leaving them as dead and discarded skins of prior, "incorrect" periods of intellectual inquiry. Being a traveler, always attending to context ("old skin") yet always moving ("slipping under or over" the possibilities and limitations of social theories), is difficult. However, Anzaldúa also points to the utility of this approach for contextualized truth:

> It is only when she is on the other side and the shell cracks open and the lid from her eyes lifts that she sees things in a different perspective. It is only then that she makes the connections, formulates the insights. It is only then that her consciousness expands a tiny notch, another rattle appears on the rattlesnake tail and the added growth slightly alters the sounds she makes. (49)

On Naming and Proclaiming the Truth

Sojourner Truth's chosen name speaks to the power relations associated with truth, illustrating that the act of naming has special significance. Truth recognized that the power relations that framed the truth about her life were so unjust that she could not even name herself. In the context of her time, Truth was an object to be named at will by masters. Rejecting her slave name, "Isabella," Truth proclaimed, "I wa'n't goin' to keep nothin' of Egypt on me, an' so I went to the Lord an' asked him to give me a new name." By selecting Sojourner Truth as a name more in keeping with how she saw herself, Truth highlights the power of naming in creating new realities. In a similar fashion, academic masters have the power to define academic disciplines within segregated disciplinary space. Describing these connections between naming and power, Pierre Bourdieu notes, "Social agents struggle for . . . symbolic power, of which this power of constitutive *naming*, which by naming things brings them into being, is one of the most typical demonstrations" (1990, 55; emphasis in original). In this context, Truth's refusal to accept the names or interpretations routinely applied to social phenomena, including herself, constituted an act of profound defiance.

Naming oneself and defining ideas that count as truth are empowering acts. For those damaged by years of silencing, Truth's act speaks to the significance of self-definition in healing from oppression. However, Sojourner Truth's biography also points to the importance of actively proclaiming truth. Although important, private naming is not enough—truth must be publicly proclaimed. James Scott observes, "Although we have expressly avoided using the term *truth* to characterize the hidden transcript . . . the open declaration of the hidden transcript in the teeth of power is typically experienced, both by the speaker and by those who share his or her condition, as a moment in which truth is finally spoken in the place of equivocation and lies" (1990, 208). By claiming that she was to "declare the truth to the people," Sojourner Truth saw her intellectual and political task not as one of fitting into existing power relations but as one of confronting injustice—to speak the truth "in the place of equivocation and lies." Believing that speaking the truth in a context of domination constituted an act of empowerment, of all the possible names, Isabella Baumfree named herself Truth.

By proclaiming truth, Sojourner Truth's actions invoke a Black women's testimonial tradition long central to naming and proclaiming the truth. Although testimonials to God within organized church settings illustrate one important dimension of this tradition, the act of testifying is epistemologically significant as well. Within a narrow use

of the testimonial, individuals testify within a community of believers such that each testimonial spurs others on to greater faith. However, a broader use of the testimonial involves testifying the truth to cynics and nonbelievers. Within a more generalized testimonial tradition, breaking silence, speaking out, and talking back in academic settings constitute public testimonials. Moreover, linking this tradition to a search for justice politicizes it. For Black women in the United States, testifying for or publicly speaking the truth, often about the unspeakable, not only recaptures human dignity but also constitutes a profound act of resistance.

Epistemologically, the act of proclaiming truth speaks to the significance of dialogue in constructing truth, especially dialogue across substantial differences in power. Although Sojourner Truth certainly could have named herself in isolation, proclaiming the truth required a community of listeners. It mattered neither that many of the listeners in her day cared little for what she had to say nor that they were more powerful. In a sense, her boldness foreshadows the civil rights, Black Power, and other social movements of the 1960s and 1970s that effectively used the media to proclaim new truths. Despite the discomfort and conflict that typically accompany this type of dialogue, singular and/or multiple truths can be accessed only by open proclamation from a variety of locations.

In approaching the question how truth might be dialogically determined by groups with competing interests, the works of African-American women writers offer some intriguing ideas. Searching for a deeper understanding of the complexity of Black women's "voice," Mae Henderson describes Black women's voice as both a "dialogic of difference and a dialectic of identity" (1989, 21). In the former, African-American women speak from a location that highlights differences from others, whereas in the latter, they negotiate aspects of Black womanhood that are shared with others.[3] Thus, the contours of Black women's "voice" are simultaneously confrontational (in response to different interests) and collaborative (in response to shared interests). The complexity of Black women's voice reflects this difference/identity, both/and quality, one that, to Henderson, can be seen in Black women writers' ability to "speak in tongues." In describing this practice, Henderson invokes the experience of Black women in the Pentecostal Holiness Church (the Sanctified Church) of speaking in unknown tongues as a sign of being chosen or of holiness.

Henderson suggests two connotations of speaking in tongues. The first involves the ability to speak in diverse, known languages, especially to speak the multiple languages of public discourse. The second consists of the private, particular, closed, and privileged communication between the congregation and the divinity. Inaccessible to the general congregation, this second meaning of speaking in tongues is outside the realm of public discourse. Henderson claims, "It is the first as well as the second meaning which we privilege in speaking of black women writers: the first connoting polyphony, multivocality, and plurality of voices, and the second signifying intimate, private, inspired utterances" (23).

Although Henderson confines her analysis to Black women's literature, her analysis of speaking in tongues suggests provocative new epistemological directions for critical social theory. Henderson's analysis of speaking in tongues provides a metaphor for the interaction of logic, creativity, and accessibility, a metaphor for producing contextualized truth that is actively named and proclaimed in multiple voices. She states, "Also interesting is the link between the gift of tongues, the gift of prophecy, and the gift of interpretation" (1989, 24.) This link suggests intriguing connections among three ideas: the gift of tongues, or the ability to produce social theory that is accessible to diverse groups of people who speak different "tongues"; the gift of prophecy, or what we might call creativity and inspiration; and the gift of interpretation, the more familiar notion of rationality or logic. Separating truth from the world in order to construct truths about the world may not be necessary. As Sojourner Truth's biography suggests, other options exist.

Freedom Struggles and Critical Masses

When it comes to resistance, Sojourner Truth's significance lies less in her being a role model to be emulated than in the symbolic meaning of her many freedom struggles. Although Truth is best known for her speeches against slavery and for women's rights, her patterns of resistance demonstrate a knack for resisting on multiple fronts. Using her voice to name and proclaim truth did not constitute her sole means of resistance. By going to court to sue a former owner who had illegally removed one of her children to the South, Truth recognized and used law as an instrument of social change. Moreover, Truth felt compelled

to take direct action when such action seemed unavoidable. For example, she was evicted from a train for refusing to adhere to racially segregated practices. Truth's life thus seems to model a view of resistance that takes Malcolm X's words "by any means necessary" to heart.

Using her voice, pursuing legal remedies, and taking direct action all contribute to Truth's lushly textured notion of freedom. Freedom was not an intellectual project for Truth. Born a slave, freedom was real for her. Historian Darlene Clark Hine describes the centrality of freedom for Sojourner Truth and her contemporary Harriet Tubman:

> For both Truth and Tubman, freedom, and the unrelenting quest for freedom, was the mainstay of their identities. Their passionate embrace of freedom was born not of some abstract commitment to the Constitution or the noble sentiments embodied in the Declaration of Independence, but out of the reality of their enslavement and oppression. They knew firsthand what it meant to be owned by another, to be considered little more than a cow or a mule. Truth and Tubman also mastered the survival skills slavery and multiple oppression required. Slavery, and resistance to it, were the defining moment of the birth of black women's oppositional consciousness. (1993, 343)

Truth's fusion of visionary ideas about freedom (a vision informed by race, class, and gender intersectionality), as well as pragmatic actions taken in search of freedom (legal action, individual protest, speeches, etc.), shaped her resistance.[4]

In crafting freedom struggles that resist the new politics of containment, Black feminist thought might build on this tradition of visionary pragmatism. For African-American women, questions such as "In what ways does Black feminist thought equip Black women to resist oppression?" and "In what ways is Black feminist thought functional as a tool for social change?" are more than academic concerns. Answers to these questions have palpable implications not only for Black women in the United States but also for members of other similarly situated groups. Black feminist thought and other critical social theories either explicitly or implicitly include ideas about resistance. Any critical social theory that energizes African-American women to struggle in the context of everyday life will be more valuable than social theories that, no matter how logical, correct, contextually true, or eloquently proclaimed, foster hopelessness. Moving African-American women to political action requires providing a comprehensive array of pragmatic actions that can work in everyday life. Grounded in the

belief that everybody can contribute something to a freedom struggle, such a theory recognizes that not everyone can make the same contribution, nor should they.[5]

Sojourner Truth's path of initially struggling for her own freedom and then expanding her actions and ideas to encompass broader freedom struggles is not unusual. Just as Truth grounded her struggles in concrete experience but refused to limit them to her particular experience, contemporary Black feminist thought might emulate a similar relationship between the particular and the general. Since Black feminist thought has now succeeded in its initial efforts to gain some visibility, Black women can move beyond their particular experiences without losing sight of the specificity of those experiences. In *Fighting Words,* for example, I stress the specificity of African-American women's involvement in a new politics of containment. I neither claim that all groups experience this emerging politics in the same way nor present African-American women's experiences as a new universal reality. Rather, just as being situated yet moving does not constitute a contradiction for knowledge developed in outsider-within locations, being simultaneously particular and universal is also possible. Black feminist thought must remain situated in African-American women's particular experiences yet must also generate theoretical connections to other knowledges with similar goals. It must preserve its particular but must learn to see its particular in universal terms. Stated differently, Black feminist thought can be conceptualized as a particular intellectual freedom struggle that must engage (both confrontationally and collaboratively) with other intellectual freedom struggles without losing sight of the specificity of its own situation.[6]

For the moment at least, Black women's intellectual production has visibility that provides new opportunities for thinking through Black women's pragmatic, everyday freedom struggles. Since much of African-American women's political activism in particular situations remains unrecognized as political activism, even by many Black women themselves, it remains unconnected to more universal freedom struggles (e.g., those for human rights). Moreover, most discussions of politics focus on male behavior in the public sphere and assume self-interest as a motivation for participation. In contrast, actions that derive from a concern for collective good—one major dimension of women's political activism—are rarely incorporated into contemporary political analyses. Nancy Naples's study of the political practice of

women community workers in low-income neighborhoods reveals a reluctance on the part of Black and Puerto Rican women to identify their community activism as "political." As Naples points out, "Most of the workers did not define themselves a political people, feminists, radicals, or socialists. They simply believed that they were acting to protect their communities" (1991, 491). A similar study of a group of elderly Black women who successfully managed co-op buildings in Harlem found that the activities of women in co-ops linked domestic life and cooperative organization. Both leaders and tenants in successful co-ops likened their buildings to a family. Elderly Black women became leaders not only because of their special abilities but also because of their membership in long-standing social networks, as well as their histories of reliance on such networks for survival (Saegert 1989). Yet because women's behavior in both of these cases could not be coded within dominant norms of political self-interest, their actions were not defined as political activism.

In recasting the political to encompass Black women's everyday freedom struggles, the term *critical mass* seems especially useful. I like this term because it is already in everyday use and has a variety of interrelated meanings.[7] One meaning views a critical mass as a necessary catalyst for some other, larger action to occur. In the history of protest movements, the term refers to small subgroups of especially motivated individuals who form a critical mass that sets collective action in motion. For example, the four students who sat in at the Woolworth's lunch counter in Greensboro, North Carolina, in 1960 formed an organized critical mass that galvanized Black and White students across the American South to take similar action. Borrowing from business, the term is applied to a threshold of vendors needed to launch a successful product line. The turning point or threshold at which hype turns into reality constitutes the onset of critical mass. The term *critical mass* also refers to a group of people who take action in response to their criticisms of some policy or dimension of social organization. Although they may express a critical consciousness, they become a critical mass when they take action.

All of these meanings of *critical mass*—a catalyst for change, a threshold or necessary turning point at which action can occur, and an action taken by an organized minority—permeate African-American women's pragmatic, everyday freedom struggles. In this sense, Black feminist thought might aim to build critical masses of all sorts, certainly among African-American women, but also between Black women and other similarly situated groups. The term *critical mass* seems especially malleable in this regard. On the one hand, there exists a need to build a critical *mass* or threshold group of people who act as catalysts for change. *Mass* does not necessarily mean large numbers of people, as in "mass" culture and "mass" media. Instead, *mass* can mean some sort of political threshold associated with action. On the other hand, a need for a *critical* mass—a group, however defined, that is equipped to analyze its situation—also exists. Developing more complex understandings of critical mass might provide new directions for contemporary freedom struggles.

Moral Authority, Black Women's Spirituality, and Justice

Reading about Sojourner Truth's accomplishments, I remain awed at how she managed to persist under such extremely difficult circumstances. In my own work, I have access to telephones, computers, fax machines, steady employment, health benefits, decent housing, and multiple forms of literacy. All enable me to do this kind of work. Despite this level of Western privilege, however, some days I become discouraged. Sojourner Truth possessed none of these advantages. How did she manage to keep going?

Sojourner Truth's sustained commitment to social justice raises one important question for any critical social theory: does this social theory move people to struggle? I use the word *move* intentionally to refer to the power of deep feelings. This type of passionate rationality flies in the face of Western epistemology that sees emotions and rationality as different and competing concerns (Jaggar 1989). Described by Audre Lorde (1984) as the power of the erotic, deep feelings that arouse people to action constitute a critical source of power. Sadly, within capitalist marketplace relations, this erotic power is so often sexualized that not only is it routinely misunderstood but the strength of deeply felt love is even feared. Spirituality fully realized, for example, is a passionate, deeply felt affair. People are moved to do all kinds of things when they genuinely care. Ideas that engage this deep love, caring, and commitment can energize people and move them to struggle. Moreover, given the vulnerability of deep feelings to be annexed by systems of power, moral authority must lie at the heart of meaningful social theory, providing, as Cornel West suggests, "a chance for people

to believe that there is hope for the future and a meaning to struggle" (1993, 18).

Like Sojourner Truth, Black women often approach this search for meaning by expressing a deep-seated concern with the issue of justice, not just because they either think justice is logical or see pragmatic reasons for pursuing it, but because they *believe* that achieving it is the right thing to do.[8] Moreover, as was true for Sojourner Truth, people often feel compelled to take action against injustice when they care deeply about something. The ability of a social theory to engage deep feelings in searching for justice suggests a complex redefinition of the personal. As opposed to interpretations of "the personal is political" that aim to micromanage individual actions in defense of misguided political "correctness," personal actions grounded in ethical frameworks (such as the search for justice) become infused with political meaning. When feelings are involved—when individuals *feel* as opposed to *think* they are committed—and when those feelings are infused with self-reflexive truths as well as some sort of moral authority, actions become fully politicized.

As they are for other groups with histories of oppression, ideas of freedom and justice are especially important for Black women in the United States. Even though Black women's concern for justice is shared with many others, African-American women have a particular group history in relation to justice. Spirituality, especially that organized though and sanctioned by Black Christian churches, provides one important way that many African-American women are moved to struggle for justice. Defined as a collective expression of deep feeling that occurs within an overarching moral framework, spirituality remains deeply intertwined with justice in Black women's intellectual history.[9] Spirituality moves many Black women and thus influences Black women's critical social theory in particular ways. My concern in this section lies less with the *content* of Black women's vision of what makes social theory meaningful to them (i.e., with particular expressions of spirituality) and more with the way Black feminist thought represents a culturally specific, distinctive expression of a more general *process* of being moved to struggle.

Sojourner Truth's biography suggests a process in which thinking and feeling do not work at cross-purposes but, rather, seem to energize one another. Her spirituality served as a vehicle that clearly moved her struggle for justice. It is almost as if Truth developed a deep love

for justice and expressed her passionate commitment to it through her freedom struggles. As is the case for many African-American women, Truth's spirituality found expression through a Christian religious ethos whereby she talked directly to "the Lord" and where "the Lord" gave her the name Truth. When Sojourner Truth was asked by a preacher if the source of her preaching was from the Bible, she responded, "No honey, can't read a letter. When I preaches, I has jest one text to preach from, an' I always preaches from this one. My text is, 'when I found Jesus!'" (qtd. in Grant 1992, 41). Truth's understanding of Jesus appears consistent with an African-American women's moral tradition of seeing the world as infused with an importance that supersedes any one human being or group of human beings. In a carefully constructed and comprehensive assessment of African-American spirituality, Dona Richards offers a deeply textured analysis of its significance within African-American culture. Noting the difficulty of discussing spirituality using the language of Western intellectual discourse, Richards observes, "Spirit is, of course, not a rationalistic concept. It cannot be quantified, measured, explained by or reduced to neat, rational, conceptual categories as Western thought demands. . . . We experience our spirituality often, but the translation of that experience into an intellectual language can never be accurate. The attempt results in reductionism" (1990, 208). Thus, spirituality is not merely a system of religious beliefs similar to logical systems of ideas. Rather, spirituality comprises articles of faith that provide a conceptual framework for living everyday life. Sojourner Truth's biography reveals the profound influence that the evangelical movement had on her ethical standards, her notion of struggle, and her journey to proclaim the truth. Truth describes the importance of spirituality, expressed as a belief in God, in her everyday life: "No, God does not stop to rest, for he is a spirit, and cannot tire. . . . And if 'God is all in all,' and 'worketh all in all,' . . . then it is impossible he should rest at all; for if he did, every other thing would stop and rest too; the waters would not flow, and the fishes could not swim; and all motion must cease" (qtd. in Washington 1993, 86–87). For Truth, God was to be worshiped at all times, in all places, throughout time, and without rest.

For many Black women in the United States, Christianity provides symbols invoked in crafting and expressing this ethical tradition infused with spirituality.[10] Jesus constitutes one such symbol. According to Black feminist theologian Jacqueline Grant, Black women see Jesus

as a nonconformist, a model of wholeness, and a person who affirms women as persons created equally with men. By interpreting Jesus as a cosufferer, an equalizer, and a liberator, Black women appropriate the symbols of Christianity and infuse them with a moral authority that guides everyday life:

> As the Resurrection signified that there is more to life than the cross for Jesus Christ, for Black women it signifies that their tri-dimensional oppressive existence is not the end, but it merely represents the context in which a particular people struggle to experience hope and liberation. Jesus Christ thus represents a three-fold significance: first he identifies with the "little people," Black women, where they are: secondly, he affirms the basic humanity of these, "the least"; and thirdly, he inspires active hope in the struggle for resurrected, liberated existence. (1989, 217)

In brief, Jesus is committed to social justice.

In her volume *Black Womanist Ethics*, Katie Cannon develops a model of Black women's ethics that is deeply tied to this ethos of spirituality. According to Cannon, Western ethical ideals are predicated on the existence of freedom, defined as having a wide range of choices. Dominant ethics make a virtue of qualities that lead to economic success—self-reliance, frugality, and industry. Dominant ethics also assume that a moral agent is basically free, possesses individual rights, and is self-directing. Each person retains self-determining power in a raceless, genderless, classless rational-man theory on which notions such as liberal individualism, moral worth, and distributive justice rest. For people experiencing oppression, these assumptions are inaccurate. In a context of racial segregation, the everyday texture of African-American life requires an alternative moral agency that challenges and replaces these beliefs. In investigating this moral agency, Cannon looks not to biblical sources but to the tradition of Black women's literature. Cannon claims that this literary tradition forms the best available written repository for understanding Black women's ethical values. For Cannon, this tradition "documents the 'living space' carved out of the intricate web of racism, sexism, and poverty" (1988, 7). It parallels African-American history and conveys the assumed values in the Black oral tradition.

Using this understanding of the connections between deep caring, moral authority, and freedom struggles for justice creates a dramatically different political and intellectual ethos for African-American women. Spirituality broadly defined continues to move countless African-American women like Sojourner Truth to struggle in everyday life. "In addition to the necessity for us to be political, we must be spiritual," contends poet Sonia Sanchez. "Our spirituality will keep us from becoming cynical, from becoming bitter, from becoming harsh. Our politics combined with our spirituality will keep us from becoming like the people that we are now trying to replace" (qtd. in Chandler 1990, 362). As Black feminist literary critic Barbara Omolade observes, "The reliance on the spiritual center for answers, explanations, and focus is the strongest opposition to Western social and natural science. All questions can't be answered through objectivity, and certainly Black woman's power and knowing can't be understood without a knowing of her spirit and spiritual life" (1994, 112). Historically, Black women invoked spirituality through family, church, and other institutions of Black civil society. This spirituality encompassed a distinctive ethical core, one that not only gave moral authority to African-American women's ideas and actions but also fostered survival. To Dona Richards, African-Americans survived the horrors of the Middle Passage, the slave experience, and subsequent institutionalized racism because of the "depth and strength of African spirituality and humanism" (1990, 207).

African-American women's active participation in the civil rights movement cannot be explained fully by either their commitment to truth or their skill in crafting critical masses. It took passion to confront fire hoses, dogs, and guns, a deep caring linked with a vision of how their individual efforts constituted part of some larger ethical struggle. Moreover, the freedom songs, many of which were secular versions of music sung in Black churches, were central to helping marchers and protesters sustain the struggle. For example, Fannie Lou Hamer's rendition of "This Little Light of Mine" spoke to the uniqueness of each individual in that collective struggle. Similarly, the Freedom Singers, in which Bernice Johnson Reagon was a young singer, produced music that gave heart to the struggle. The civil rights movement typifies a freedom struggle with close links among spirituality, moral authority, and social justice. Black women participated in the civil rights movement not because it was logically defensible to do so but because it was the *right* thing to do. In this context, "rightness" encompassed more than mere logic or rationality—"rightness" emerged from faith and had moral authority.

The moral authority that emerges from this type of spirituality becomes increasingly significant in a secular world grounded in the commodity relations associated with profound injustices. After all, how does a group of people persist when each day brings new ways of relegating them to the bottom of a social hierarchy? How do African-American women struggle in a place where the black jelly beans remain stuck to the bottom of the bag from one generation to the next? Critical social theory infused by a deeply felt, politicized spirituality operates in a special place—it steps *outside* the assumptions of social theories expressing either purely theoretical quests or narrow pragmatic concerns. Moreover, in the absence of being moved toward justice, the quest for contextualized truth, the naming and proclaiming of truth, and the building of critical masses constitute secular, pragmatic concerns. Even the most intellectually gifted and politically savvy students, faculty members, parents, managers, and book editors become discouraged. Although secular, pragmatic concerns clearly matter, in the absence of deep caring infused with ethical or moral authority, freedom struggles become increasingly difficult to sustain.

Rather than being seen as yet another content area within Black feminist discourse, a concern with justice fused with a deep spirituality appears to be highly significant to how African-American women conceptualize critical social theory. Justice constitutes an article of faith expressed through deep feelings that move people to action. For many Black feminist thinkers, justice transcends Western notions of equality grounded in sameness and uniformity. Elsa Barkley Brown's discussion of African-American women's quilting (1989) points us in the direction of conceptualizing an alternative notion of justice. In making their quilts, Black women weave together scraps of fabric from all sorts of places. Nothing is wasted, and every piece of fabric has a function and a place in a given quilt. Black women quilters often place in juxtaposition odd-sized scraps of fabric that appear to clash with one another. Uniform size is not a criterion for membership in the quilt, nor is blending in with all the other scraps. Brown reports that viewers of such quilts who evaluate aesthetic beauty in terms of sameness, repetitive patterns, and overall homogeneity are often disoriented. These quilts may appear chaotic, yet patterns that are initially difficult to see become apparent over time.

In a similar fashion, those who conceptualize community via notions of uniformity and sameness have difficulty imagining a social

quilt that is simultaneously heterogeneous, driven toward excellence, and just. In this regard, neither the false universal perspectives on truth discussed in chapter 2 nor the postmodern treatment of difference explored in chapter 4 has been able to generate compelling alternatives for unjust practices. False universal perspectives claim that seemingly universal standards (whether of truth or beauty) should be held up for all members of the social fabric to replicate. Within this logic, just communities are accomplished by making individuals fit into some overall pattern. When each piece has an equal right to achieve its place in some preestablished setting, then justice has been adequately distributed. Postmodern notions of difference criticize these notions yet have difficulty generating compelling alternatives. The extreme constructionist views of difference offer little hope for achieving community. Within their logic, no social quilt is possible. All that remains is a pile of unrelated scraps of fabric. Reconstructive postmodern views that retain tolerance for difference may also inadvertently rely on notions of uniformity and sameness in constructing just communities. As long as patterns in the overall social quilt remain uniform, tolerating an occasional scrap of difference is allowed. One need not like a scrap that sticks out within the overall pattern of homogeneity—one need only tolerate its presence. Indeed, in an era of commodified difference, symbolic inclusion of scraps of difference that divert attention from overall social injustices can appear to promote social justice while upholding unjust power relations.

Brown's analysis of quilts points to a much more radical notion of justice. Although Brown's analysis makes little overt mention of justice, viewing quilts as a metaphor for community highlights different ways of conceptualizing justice within communities. Her notion of difference held in balance in one quilt suggests a notion of justice that balances the whole and its different parts. Brown presents a vision of a just community constructed in response to aesthetic and pragmatic concerns, one in which all people are represented and none left out, no matter how small or seemingly insignificant the individual scrap of fabric. A textbook containing this vision of community would forget neither those second graders I taught so long ago nor the children of today. Moreover, Brown's vision is not merely an academic concern. Black women activisits such as Fannie Lou Hamer and Ella Baker brought similar sensibilities to their freedom struggles. In particular,

Baker's notion of participatory democracy suggests a pragmatic approach to achieving Brown's vision of community.

Black feminist poet and essayist June Jordan has long offered an uncompromising stance on the issue of justice. Jordan counsels us to move beyond, as she puts it, "the paralysis of identity politics," because, as she observes, "there is available to me a moral attachment to a concept beyond gender and race. I am referring to the concept of justice" (1992, 168). Angered by the increasing depoliticization of the language of struggle, Jordan points to the connections among moral authority, freedom struggles, and justice. In her essay entitled "Where Is the Rage?" she links deep feelings of rage with a passion for justice:

> The neglected legacy of the Sixties is just this: unabashed moral certitude, and the purity—the incredible outgoing energy—of righteous rage. I do not believe that we can restore and expand the freedoms that our lives require unless and until we embrace the justice of our rage. . . . If we do not change the language of current political discourse, if we do not reintroduce a Right and Wrong, a Good or Evil measurement of doers and deeds, then how shall we, finally, argue our cause? (178)

As for those who lack the commitment to struggle for justice, Jordan offers the following challenge: "No matter how desolate our condition, there is someone else depending on our humanity for his or her rescue" (114).

When I embarked upon the journey from my Philadelphia neighborhood to the unfamiliar terrain of my high school, then to my class of Boston second graders, and on to the often troubled campuses of higher education in the 1990s, I had no idea that my journey would take me so far. Much has changed since I started. Former concerns about my identity or difference seem less important these days, for too much is at stake. Because situations characterized by injustice are ubiquitous, I neither bemoan my discomfort nor worry whether I "belong" when I find myself in situations of privilege. When tempted to complain about some dimension of my life, I try to remember that my condition is far from desolate, and that holding fast to my humanity might matter to others. On a daily basis, I try to remember that even though I "buy in" to much of what is around me, I cannot forget to ask whether I've "sold out." In my current terrain of struggle—the often seductive yet vital world of higher education—these remain important lessons.

As Italian philosopher Antonio Gramsci observes, "For a mass of people to be led to think coherently and in the same coherent fashion about the real present world, is a 'philosophical' event far more important and 'original' than the discovery by some philosophical 'genius' of a truth which remains the property of a small group of intellectuals" (Forgacs 1988, 327). Although political struggle requires good ideas, it also needs much more. Without some sense of where we're going and why we want to go there, and some "righteous rage" to spur us on, we won't even know if we're headed in the right direction. As Barbara Ransby and Tracye Matthews remind us, "It is a complex journey from consciousness to the concrete politics of empowerment, and one which is, by definition, full of contradictions and detours. It is perhaps most important, individually and collectively, simply to stay on the right road" (1993, 68). In these endeavors, critical social theory matters, because it helps point the way. If critical social theory manages to move people toward justice, then it has made a very important difference.

(1996, 117; emphasis in original). Although articulation is obviously a very powerful concept that closely parallels what I am calling intersectionality, there may be a difference between them. Slack describes the relationship between ideas and social structure that she sees emerging in cultural studies and that is captured by articulation: "The context is not something *out there, within which practices occur or which influence the development of practices.* Rather, *identities, practices, and effects generally, constitute the very context in which they are practices, identities or effects*" (125; emphasis in original). Although I value the effort to infuse a more dynamic dimension into analyses of social phenomena, this definition seems too much of a closed loop for me. I prefer, at least analytically, to retain the distinction between context and ideas that Slack collapses into one. Thus, the notion of intersectionality seems more closely wedded to notions of articulation that assume an independent existence for social structure. For additional insight into Hall's use of the term *articulation,* see Grossberg (1996).

6. Many thinkers have worked within a sociology-of-knowledge framework. At first glance, the links between a sociology of knowledge associated with Robert Merton and a standpoint theory associated with Karl Marx may seem surprising. Merton is typically associated with a structural-functionalism that omits questions of power. Although Merton is known for his contributions to the sociology of science, he treats science as one knowledge among many. Merton has been central in bringing ideas of the sociology of knowledge, historically associated more with theoretical and historicist traditions of Europe than with empiricist traditions in American sociology, to American sociology. As Merton suggests in his important essay "Paradigm for the Sociology of Knowledge," originally published in 1945, "The perennial problem of the implications of existential influences upon knowledge for the epistemological status of knowledge has been hotly debated from the very outset" (Merton 1973, 13).

In contrast, Marx's entire focus seems to be hierarchy. The fundamental questions that link diverse thinkers in this field are flexible enough to accommodate a considerable variability on the connections between knowledge and social structure. Merton places far less emphasis than Marx on the hierarchical or power dimensions of social structure. In contrast, Marx focuses on the power dimensions of social structure; his ideas that are now known as standpoint theory are designed to explore the connections between hierarchical power relations and ensuing knowledges or standpoints. Moreover, thinking through the connections between knowledge and power is an especially sociological concern, because sociology examines social structures. French philosopher Michel Foucault (1977) points out that it is not a question of emancipating truth from systems of power. Rather, the issue lies in detaching the power of truth from its hegemonic institutional contexts. Foucault suggests that rather than being outside power or deprived of power, truth remains grounded in real-world politics. Each society has its own "regime of truth" or "general politics" of truth. These regimes consist of the types of discourses harbored by a particular society that it causes to function as true; epistemological criteria that distinguish truth from falsehoods; and legitimating mechanisms that determine the status of those charged with constructing truth (Foucault 1977). Using a more general definition of class as group leads one in a different direction. Like Robert Merton (1973), I see Karl Mannheim's work (1954) as extending the idea of class as a group with a connection to knowledge, to broader types of social groups. Thus, although the language of standpoint remains affiliated with Marxist social theory, the idea of knowledge emerging from groups differentially placed in social conditions transcends its origins in Marxism.

7. The literature on economic class is vast, and I make no attempt to review it here. Both Grimes (1991) and Vanneman and Cannon (1987) provide useful resources for summarizing and critiquing American scholarship on economic class. In brief, within American social science, economic class is routinely associated with either Karl Marx (social class) or Max Weber (status). The status-attainment perspective has garnered the most attention in American social science. Sacks (1989) takes the position that economic class should be conceptualized as group relationships and that efforts to assign a class category to individuals in order to examine economic class consciousness overlook the more significant features of economic class analysis. Thus, the approach that I use in developing a context for standpoint theory is already a minority position. For a discussion of the origins of feminist standpoint epistemology in a Marxist standpoint theory of labor, see Smith (1987), especially pp. 78–81.

8. Bourdieu makes a similar point about the differences between the ideas in Marxist social theory and the use to which those ideas are put: "Marxism, in the reality of its social use, ends up by being a mode of thought completely immune to historical criticism, which is a paradox, given the potentialities and indeed, the demands inherent in Marx's thought" (1990, 17).

9. Current debates that juxtapose class and culture as if these were two oppositional and distinct processes may create artificial boundaries where none exist. Economic class is typically theorized on the level of macrosociological structures—labor markets, industrial sectors, and the like. In contrast, historically, studies of group culture have emphasized ethnic and tribal cultures emerging from small-group interactions. This seeming division of the themes of economics, political science, and sociology as being best suited for one type of issue, namely, economic class, and the humanities of history, literary studies, English, and literature as dealing with another, reflects the problems inherent in relying too heavily on disciplinary approaches to each concept. Sociology claimed the concept of social class and, from its inception, has studied economic class as a structural phenomenon largely divorced from culture. In contrast, until the advent of British cultural studies and its subsequent impetus on communications studies generally to take on the theme of mass culture, culture remained largely the province of anthropologists who carried out studies of culture in other societies.

7. Searching for Sojourner Truth

1. For example, by denouncing the war in Vietnam, Martin Luther King Jr. saw the connections between racism and imperialism. Moving outside the confines of Black civil society allowed him to gain additional insights concerning the connections among systems of oppression. King's stance was unpopular with African-Americans, who counseled him to stick to the issue of race. Yet King was also unpopular with White Americans, because of his position on race. The biographies and work of many prominent Third World intellectuals also reflect these themes. Many cannot return to their nations, because the social distance is too great or their ideas are too dangerous. See, for example, Minh-ha (1989), Said (1990), and Spivak (1993).

2. In his study of the philosophical foundations of racism, David Goldberg offers a comparable analysis of the connections between contained space and relations of ruling: "Racial categories have been variously spatialized . . . since their inception into continental divides, national localities, and geographic regions. Racisms become institutionally normalized in and through spatial configuration, just as social space is made to seem natural, a given, by being conceived and defined in racial terms . . . *apartheid* space . . . the logical implication of racialized space" (1993, 185).

3. Although I rely on Henderson's insightful analysis, my use of the testimonial tradition differs from hers. Henderson describes a both/and positionality expressed by

Black women writers, one wherein African-American women are simultaneously opposed to and in solidarity with other groups: "These writers enter simultaneously into familial, or *testimonial* and public, or *competitive* discourses—discourses that both affirm and challenge the values and expectations of the reader. As such, black women writers enter into testimonial discourse with black men as blacks, with White women as women, and with black women as black women. At the same time, they enter into competitive discourse with black men as women, with White women as blacks, and with White men as black women" (1989, 20; emphasis in original). Within this meaning, one testifies to those with whom one has shared commonalities, and engages in competitive discourse with those who have competing interests. The fixity of categories of assumed common interests created by race and gender may not be as clear-cut. I prefer to see Black women engaging in simultaneous testimonial and competitive discourse with all other groups and with each other.

4. A definition of freedom varies depending on who controls the definition. Certainly for slaves, formal emancipation constituted freedom. For other generations of African-Americans, freedom was associated with gaining political rights and protections in the public sphere that were associated with formal citizenship. The civil rights movement demonstrated, however, that freedom would be accomplished only when substantive rights of citizenship became available to African-Americans. Richard King's study of the civil rights movement and the meaning of freedom (1992) explores how freedom operates as a deep root in African-American social and political thought. Currently, freedom may mean protection from surveillance and disciplinary control, a move out of the public sphere. These understandings of freedom all require self-determination or group empowerment. According to philosopher Iris Marion Young, notions of freedom, justice, and self-determination are connected: "If justice is defined negatively as the elimination of structures of domination, then justice implies democratic decision-making. Democracy is a condition of freedom in the sense of self-determination" (1990, 91).

5. Pierre Bourdieu's notion of habitus (1990) speaks to the use of multiple strategies developed here. Bourdieu defines strategy as the "product of the practical sense as the feel for the game, for a particular, historically determined game—a feel which is acquired in childhood, by taking part in social activities" (1990, 62–63). According to this definition, individuals who have experienced similar situations develop a common arsenal of responses or strategies in response to the "game" or social situation that constitutes their specific history. Bourdieu continues: "The good player, who is so to speak the game incarnate, does at every moment what the game requires. That presupposes a permanent capacity for invention, indispensable if one is to be able to adapt to indefinitely varied and never completely identical situations. This is not ensured by mechanical obedience to the explicit, codified rule (when it exists)" (63). From this perspective, a good Black woman game player would fit into her role as Black woman and would survive in subordination. What Black women need to know is how to resist the *rules* of the game. The goal is not to excel at coping with injustice, but to eliminate it altogether.

6. Similar themes have been expressed in certain interpretations of postmodernism. According to one source, "Postmodernists tend to favor forms of social inquiry which incorporate an explicitly practical and moral intent, that are contextual and restricted in their focus (local stories are preferred over general ones), and that are narratively structured, rather than articulating a general theory" (Seidman and Wagner 1992, 7). Although the focus on local stories and local strategies for resistance is refreshing, this focus in no way guarantees that the local will have an explicitly practical and moral intent. Social theorist Steven Seidman suggests that theorists shift their roles from "building general theory or providing epistemic warrants for sociology to serving as moral and political analysts, narrators of stories of social development, producers of genealogies and social critics" (1992, 48). In describing interpretive social science, another source claims that it "seeks to replace the standing distinction between the social sciences as descriptive disciplines and the humanities as normative studies with the realization that all human inquiry is necessarily engaged in understanding the human world from within a specific situation. This situation is always and at once historical, moral, and political" (Rabinow and Sullivan 1987, 20–21).

7. The term *critical mass* has multiple meanings across quite diverse fields of study. For example, as used in nuclear physics, the term refers to a catalytic function, the amount of fuel needed for a fission chain reaction to occur. Another meaning of *critical mass* emerges from its use in business. Although the term is widely used and does not have a uniform meaning, it often refers to a threshold of some sort. Examples of the meaning of *critical mass* as approximating a pressure or protest group come from many sources. The power of pressure groups acting as a critical mass has long been recognized by formal governments that often aim to diffuse the power of such groups. For example, tactics of gerrymandering congressional districts, forbidden by the 1965 Voting Rights Act, were designed to dilute the voting strength of African-Americans and other racial and ethnic minority groups to prevent the action of voting as a pressure group. In other cases, a well-organized critical mass acting as a pressure or protest group is difficult to stop. For example, a critical mass in traffic is a group of riders large enough to hold up opposing traffic at an intersection. When cyclists use the term, it usually refers to a group large enough to take all lanes of a street. For a New York City group that organizes what it calls Critical Mass rides, a critical mass is the minimum number of cyclists needed to bike safely on crowded urban streets. Group members say that the rides operate as a "xerocracy"—rule by the copy machine and without leaders. New York's Critical Mass is part of a larger movement-without-borders, with rides taking place in cities around the United States, as well as overseas. Cities such as Montreal, Seattle, Boston, Washington, D.C, Rio de Janeiro, and many others have regular Critical Mass rides. One of the unique aspects to a Critical Mass ride is its "organized coincidence." When skaters find out about it, they just show up and travel with the cyclists. In this example, although the notion of a catalyst for a larger movement is maintained, the vision of the larger movement consists of explicitly shutting down business-as-usual. The field of electronic communications provides a final meaning of the term *critical mass*. The critical mass of a software product describes a condition whereby fixing one bug introduces additional bugs. When software achieves critical mass, it can never be fixed—it can only be discarded and rewritten. This meaning of *critical mass* references a condition in which reform no longer seems feasible. Continuing to try to fix social systems may yield a critical mass that needs to be discarded.

8. I have deliberately avoided defining justice, because I think that it is difficult to do so within assumptions of individualism. Iris Marion Young, however, sees social justice as the degree to which a society maintains social institutions necessary to oppose oppression and domination (1990, 37). What I like about Young's analysis is that she aims to build a theory of justice from the group-based traditions of the new social movements. The issue of justice, especially the significance of having an ethical foundation to scholarship, emerges in the work of other scholars of color, especially those in legal studies. Critical race theorists Richard Delgado, Kimberle Crenshaw, Charles Lawrence, and Mari Matsuda oppose hate speech by invoking ethical as well as rational criteria (Matsuda et al. 1993). Matsuda, for example, claims that hate speech is wrong because it violates human rights protections. In a carefully argued case that distinguishes

between protected and unprotected speech, Matsuda contends that a challenge to certain types of hate speech can be made on moral, ethical grounds.

9. The growing literature by womanist theorists and theologians examines spirituality broadly defined. For an anthology of works in this tradition, see Townes (1993). Groups with different histories may rely on divergent themes and ways of moving their membership. For example, the issues of equality, justice, liberation, and freedom emerge from groups with histories of oppression. African-Americans routinely stress these issues, and they are part of the moral and ethical systems of African-American culture (Mitchell and Lewter 1986; Cannon 1988). In contrast, beliefs in traditional cultures that have had minimal contact with the West and/or with systems of domination imported from the West reflect a concern with other issues that give life meaning. For example, traditional African cosmologies stress issues of humanity and community (Mbiti 1969; Serequeberhan 1991).

Black women writers explore and build on a spiritual tradition articulated in the tradition of Black women's literature. Finding meaning through a spiritually infused Black women's tradition permeates Black women's cultural production and political activism. Many African-American women writers invoke variations of Black women's spirituality in constructing their fiction. For example, Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987), Alice Walker's *The Temple of My Familiar* (1989), and Gloria Naylor's *Mama Day* (1988) all rely on images and metaphors of a spiritual world that transcends the natural or physical world. Accessing this spiritual dimension can be central to Black women's healing and survival in harsh environments structured by intersecting oppressions. For example, the women in Toni Cade Bambara's *The Salt Eaters* (1980) and in Paule Marshall's novel *Praisesong for the Widow* (1983) move toward wholeness and healing when they embrace their spirituality. Recall these controversial lines from Ntosake Shange's choreopoem *for colored girls who have considered suicide / when the rainbow is enuf*: "i found god in myself / & i loved her / i loved her fiercely" (1975, 67).

10. It is important to distinguish between Black women's embeddedness in sacred and secular traditions of spirituality and the regulation of this spirituality by organized religions and other social institutions. Some scholars see Black Christian traditions as problematic and as fostering the social control of Black women through their general practices and patriarchal structures (Grant 1982; Marable 1983). In contrast, others view these same traditions as highly sustaining for African-American women, claiming that churches provide African-American women with a community that not only offers interpretations other than those put forth by dominant society, but also provides safe spaces in which to develop leadership skills (Grant 1989, 1992; Sanders 1995; Sobel 1979; Gilkes 1985).

Glossary

binary thinking: An either/or way of thinking about concepts or realities that divides them into two mutually exclusive categories, for example, white/black, man/woman, reason/emotion, and heterosexual/homosexual.

Black civil society: A set of institutions, communication networks, and practices that help African-Americans respond to economic and political challenges confronting them. Also known as the *Black public sphere* or the *Black community*.

Black nationalism: A political philosophy based on the belief that Black people constitute a people or nation with a common history and destiny.

canon: A body of knowledge and/or scholarly works meant to represent the traditions of a particular academic discipline or area of inquiry.

capitalism: An economic system based on the private ownership of the means of production. Typically characterized by extreme distributions of wealth and large differences between the rich and the poor.

center/margin metaphor: A literary metaphor that describes core/periphery power relations. The center/margin metaphor was an important precursor to the emergence of decentering as one rubric of postmodernism.