

## Black Feminist Thought as Oppositional Knowledge

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

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

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

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

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

#### **BLACK FEMINIST THOUGHT AS OPPOSITIONAL KNOWLEDGE**

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

#### **BLACK FEMINIST THOUGHT AND BLACK WOMEN'S INTELLECTUAL COMMUNITIES**

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

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

#### **WHO BENEFITS FROM BLACK FEMINIST THOUGHT?**

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

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

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

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

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

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

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#### NOTES

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