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

Looking back on 2020, I can see more clearly how Black women were at the center of four ground-breaking phenomena. First, Black women were deeply affected by a deadly global health pandemic. Since 2020, more than 5.51 million people worldwide have died from COVID-19 complications, with more than 943,000 deaths in the US and 5.8 million people worldwide. By the time you read this book, those numbers will be much higher. These staggering statistics describe the magnitude of this global pandemic but not its meaning within individual lives. Countless families either lost someone to COVID-19 or knew someone who did. Each person who died mattered to someone, somewhere. Despite this shared threat, the pandemic revealed deep-seated global social inequalities. COVID-19’s impact on Black women and our families was especially poignant. Black women, many of whom faced greater exposure to COVID-19-related illnesses, found themselves grappling with this individually experienced collective trauma of the pandemic with far fewer tools to do so than their more privileged counterparts. For whose living in small houses, multi-family apartments, or who were homeless, social distancing was an unrealistic option. Because many could not afford a car, they relied on public transit to get to work and
school. Black women shopped more frequently for basic necessities since they could not afford to stockpile goods. Many lacked access to regular medical care, often because they lacked health insurance. Not only Black women, but Black, Indigenous, Latinx, refugee, migrant, poor white, and homeless people in the United States, died at far higher rates than did other groups, offering sobering evidence for the ongoing effects of systemic racism and intergenerational economic inequality.

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

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

But another highly significant event in 2020 reminded Black women of the ongoing need to raise our voices against systemic anti-Black racism in the United States. Concern about state-sanctioned violence against Black children and youth had long been central to Black women’s political activism but that year was different. In 2020, a Minneapolis police officer killed George Floyd by kneeling on his neck for more than nine minutes. A 17-year-old Black girl who witnessed Floyd’s death recorded it on her cellphone and posted the video on social media. The video went viral. For Black women activists who had launched the Black Lives Matter Movement in response similar deaths years earlier, the content of the video was achingly familiar. Yet the context that greeted this viral video was fundamentally different. Many people who viewed the video were
spurred to action, in part because they were more likely to be online while COVID-19 shuttered schools, jobs, stores, restaurants, and entertainment venues, and in part because they were moved by this particularly egregious example of social injustice. Even more startling, the ground-breaking, global social protests that ensued occurred under the banner of Black Lives Matter. Significantly, these global social protests encompassed the same racial, ethnic, sexual, and religious diversity that so galled far-right politicians in the U.S. Significantly, young people were at the forefront of these protests that mobilized entirely new populations to raise their voices in support of social justice.

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

*Black Feminist Thought* makes bold claims about the integrity of Black women’s intellectual production as a force for social change. It does so by investigating how Black women’s self-defined knowledge has been essential for countering social injustice. The ideas in this book were born under socially unjust conditions such as those of today, matured under similar circumstances, and will persist as long as Black women’s political struggles for food, love, respect, shelter, dignity, justice, and freedom remain unfulfilled. Because I wrote *BFT* in a particular place (the United States) and during a specific period of time (the late twentieth century), its content reflects African-American women’s political struggles in that place and time. Yet its main arguments speak to universal social justice issues that remain front-stage concerns for Black women in the United States, e.g., unequal health care, employment discrimination, poverty, political disenfranchisement, and state-sanctioned violence. Our tools for addressing durable social inequalities have changed, e.g.,
African-American women’s success within electoral politics and the savvy use of social media by a new generation of Black women activists. But as long as social injustice endures anywhere in the world, the need for Black women’s intellectual and political resistance will persist. As individuals, we can achieve high office, accumulate wealth, and garner societal respect, but our individual accomplishments cannot protect us. They also cannot shield either our own sons and daughters or those of other Black families from the metaphorical knee on the necks of our loved ones. In situations of social injustice, safety is an illusion. No one of us is safe until all of us are safe. Fostering dignity, security, and fairness for Black women takes sustained, collective organization within our own communities. It also requires solidarity among all communities who support broader social justice agendas.

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

For a population that was denied basic literacy well into the twentieth century, the number of African-American women who now hold advanced degrees in law, medicine, business, and the sciences is ground-breaking. Black women in the U.S. now have legal protections that enable us to put our degrees to good use by finding well-paying and often prestigious jobs. Many Black women entrepreneurs have launched successful businesses that enrich African-American
communities and broader society. In unprecedented numbers, Black women have entered corporations, government agencies, sports, higher education, and media settings in leadership positions. New communications technologies have amplified Black women’s ideas far beyond the beachheads provided by Oprah Winfrey, Michelle Obama, Ava DuVernay, Beyoncé, Serena Williams, Viola Davis, or Kamala Harris. The visibility of Black women who are writing books, poetry, and plays, directing and producing films, creating music, producing television, and acting in plays is remarkable. This explosion of Black women’s intellectual production since BFT was first published has been wonderful to behold and impossible to cite. Across these diverse accomplishments, Black women open doors so that others can follow.

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

I am proud of this book and hope that it continues to contribute to social justice initiatives. When this book was first published, I could not predict how its ideas and arguments would speak to people whose experiences differ dramatically from my own. Since writing this book, I have travelled widely both in the U.S. and internationally, lecturing and meeting with students, faculty, and staff on numerous college and university campuses. The breadth and depth of ideas that I gained through dialogues with other people’s ideas
and their willingness to share their experiences have greatly enriched my thinking. I remain humbled by how far the ideas in this book have travelled, the range of people they have reached, and how much I have learned through conversations with readers.

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

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

To contextualize Black Feminist Thought’s classic argument, I wrote this Preface and an Epilogue expressly for this 30th year edition. These two new essays do different things. This Preface outlines important social issues that, while they took special form in 2020, will continue to shape Black feminist thought in the foreseeable future. The Preface asks, what has changed since Black Feminist Thought was first published? What has remained the same despite the visible changes in Black women’s lives? In contrast, the Epilogue looks beyond the here and now to ask: What will it take for Black
feminist thought to remain oppositional in the future? How can the power of our ideas bring into being the future that we want? The Epilogue reads the signs of the present for guidance about how best to engage the future. Both essays emphasize the enduring power of ideas to bring about change. Together, these two new essays argue that ideas are far more durable than the people who advance them, and that the power of ideas lies in their flexibility and relevance within an ever-changing social world.

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

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