My mother used to say that through her life, through her living testimony, she tried to tell women that they too had to participate, so that when the repression comes and with it a lot of suffering, it's not only the men who suffer. Women must join the struggle in their own way. My mother's words told them that any evolution, any change, in which women had not participated, would not be a change, and there would be no victory. She was as clear about this as if she were a woman of all sorts of theories and a lot of practice.

—I, Rigoberta Menchú

If it is true that a revolution can fail, even though it be nurtured on perfectly conceived theories, nobody has yet successfully practiced Revolution without a revolutionary theory.

—Amilcar Cabral, Unity and Struggle

Each time I begin work on a new piece of writing, a theoretical essay, a critical book, fiction, autobiography, I confront within myself extreme dread that the subjectivity that I have fought so hard to claim will not assert itself. Paralyzed by the fear that I will not be able to name or speak words that fully articulate my experience or the collective reality of struggling black people, I am tempted to be silent. The persistence of this dread has intensified my awareness that wounds inflicted by oppressive structures of racism, class exploitation, and sexist domination mark me/us; that political self-recovery, the development of revolutionary consciousness heals but does not erase. This dread surfaces as a forgotten scar, permanently inscribed on the body, a sign of past terror and torture, aggressively demanding recognition.
The production of terror, unmediated dread, in the minds and hearts of the exploited and oppressed, binds us to a politics of domination, keeps us in place, unable to resist, afraid to resist. On all levels, confronting this dread, breaking its hold on our lives, is a joyous gesture of resistance. That remnants of the dread remain in individuals, like myself, who believe our political self-recovery to be complete, unsettles, but it need not disenable. This dread returns me to memory, to places and situations I often want to forget. It forces me to remember, to hold close the knowledge that for people globally who fight for liberation, resistance is also “a struggle of memory against forgetting.” Remembering makes us subjects in history. It is dangerous to forget.

I do not forget the poverty of our childhood, the weight of patriarchy’s heavy hand in our household, the apartheid social structure which slapped us in the face each time we walked out the door. Everywhere so little has changed—in that place of childhood, and that familiar world of home. In that hostile space outside, nothing has changed: racism, class exploitation, and sexist domination prevail. Deprivation intensifies, despair abounds, and suffering lingers. Being an intellectual does not separate or estrange me from this reality. I became an intellectual in resistance, responding consciously, critically, to conditions of suffering in my life and the lives of family and community. I wanted knowledge only to the degree that it would enable that suffering to end. I wanted education to offer the critical guidance that would provoke, stimulate awareness and the will to change. I learned about the importance of critical reflection, cultivating strategies that would ensure survival in the face of abuse and open up the possibility of a transformed future for us, the black poor, the underclass, the dis-inherited.

Coming to consciousness in the context of a concrete experiential struggle for self-actualization and collective black self-determination, I began to see clearly the mutual, reciprocal relationship between theory and practice. In the process of transformation, of moving from object to subject, I learned how to use knowledge in the service of liberation. Poetry and novels brought me close to myself, helped me to overcome the estrangement that domination breeds between psyche and self. Reading, I could vicariously experience, dare to know and feel, without threat of repression, retaliation, silencing. My mind became a place of refuge, a sanctuary, a room I could enter with no fear of invasion. My mind became a site of resistance.

I chose to be a writer in my girlhood because books rescued me. They were the places where I could bring the broken bits and pieces of myself and put them to-
together again, the places where I could dream about alternative realities, possible futures. They let me know firsthand that if the mind was to be the site of resistance, only the imagination could make it so. To imagine, then, was a way to begin the process of transforming reality. All that we cannot imagine will never come into being.

Critical fictions emerge when the imagination is free to wander, explore, question, transgress. Years ago, I heard Ivan Van Sertima speak about *They Came Before Columbus*, his work documenting the presence of Africans in the “New World.” Commenting on black liberation struggles globally, he asserted that it is not just our minds that have been colonized, but our imaginations. Thinking about the imagination in a subversive way, not seeing it as a pure, uncorrupted terrain, we can ask ourselves under what conditions and in what ways can the imagination be decolonized. Globally, literature that enriches resistance struggles speaks about the way the individuals in repressive, dehumanizing situations use imagination to sustain life and maintain critical awareness. In oppressive settings the ability to construct images imaginatively of a reality not present to the senses or perceived may be the only means to hope. How many of us in our daily life think about the connection between our capacity to imagine and resistance struggle? Often in radical circles, the imaginative mind is perceived as threatening, as though it will obstruct and disrupt progressive action. Certainly it is useful in a culture of domination to project the sense that the imagination is primarily useful as a means to produce fantasy. In this country, the work of Gabriel García Márquez is often read and talked about as though his fictions are fantasy, narratives of escape, works that invite readers to forget, to lose themselves in the exotic world of the Other. In *The Fragrance of Guava*, García Márquez critiques this emphasis on fantasy and speaks instead about the primacy of the imagination: “I believe the imagination is just an instrument for producing reality and that the source of creation is always, in the last instance, reality. Fantasy, in the sense of pure and simple Walt Disney–style invention without any basis in reality, is the most loathsome thing of all.”

All too often the colonized mind thinks of the imagination as the realm of the psyche that, if fully explored, will lead one into madness, away from reality. Consequently, it is feared. For the colonized mind to think of the imagination as the instrument that does not estrange us from reality, but returns us to the real more fully, in ways that help us to confront and cope, is a liberatory gesture. In El Salvadoran writer Manlio Argueta’s novel, *One Day of Life*, Lupe’s emergent critical
consciousness is consistently linked to the gradual expansion of her imaginative abilities. Free to imagine, she can invent rituals of remembrance that sustain her revolutionary spirit when Chepe, her husband and compañero, has been assassinated. Recalling his presence, she imaginatively constructs a redemptive heterosexual paradigm to stand as testimony of their union, love, and struggle:

*The odor of Chepe lingers, the same odor that he brings everyday from work, the clean and agreeable odor of the sweat of a real man. It is like the perfume of our life. One becomes accustomed to it and the pleasure is in conserving the moistness of the body. The body itself absorbs it. Maybe deep within it nourishes us with that same sweat.*

Characters in *One Day of Life* walk a tightrope of the imagination, wherein the possibility of courageous critical awakening coexists with the dangerous forgetfulness that breeds complicity and betrayal. Everyone must choose, imagine, and act accordingly. As the novel concludes, Adolfoina, with prophetic insight, assures Grandma Lupe that justice will prevail, telling her that this knowledge of the future appeared “in my imagination, it came upon me like a revelation.”

Many new critical fictions disrupt conventional ways of thinking about the imagination and imaginative work, offering fictions that demand careful scrutiny, that resist passive readership. Consciously opposing the notion of literature as escapist entertainment, these fictions confront and challenge. Often language is the central field of contestation. The way writers use language often determines whether or not oppositional critical approaches in fiction or theory subvert, decenter, or challenge existing hegemonic discourses. Styles of language pointedly identify specific audiences both as subjects of the text and as that audience one addresses more intimately. If I choose to write using black vernacular speech, this creative decision will make a work appear more familiar to readers who use that patois. Yet to address more intimately is not to exclude; rather, it alters the terms of inclusion. To fully experience Michelle Cliff’s novel, *No Telephone to Heaven*, readers must shift locations and grapple with language. Readers unfamiliar with Jamaican patois must be ever vigilant to keep the sense of the text, to experience its pleasure. I chose to read *No Telephone to Heaven* without turning to the glossary at the end of the novel, seeking instead the contextualized meaning of words I did not understand. After the first reading, I read the glossary and began again. The writer of critical fictions is necessarily concerned with using languages in ways that open up a text to multiple audiences. Many new works by writers of color in the United States contain passages or chapters that can be read orally to audiences
with varying degrees of literacy. In this way, the boundaries separating oral storytelling and written work can be traversed.

Writers in exile speak about the struggle to come to voice in alien tongues. Those writers who hold to the language that most connects them with home, work to maintain ties. Turkish writer Nedim Gürsel writes:

*Although I continue to write in Turkish, my syntax is being distorted. To resist the impact of the present which this daily practice of French unleashes in me, I must bind myself to the words of my childhood. In describing this painful yet enriching experience, I want to show how reality can sometimes sustain the literary language without being reflected by it.*

Readers of critical fiction cannot approach work assuming that they already possess a language of access, or that the text will mirror realities they already know and understand. Much critical fiction dynamically seeks to deconstruct conventional ways of knowing. It effectively critically intervenes and challenges dominant/hegemonic narratives by compelling audiences to actually transform the way they read and think. Toni Morrison’s revolutionary novel, *The Bluest Eye*, begins with the disruption of that way of learning to read and think that teaches white bourgeois notions of reality as though they represent a social norm. Indeed, by beginning her novel with a passage taken from a reading primer, she reminds readers that art is socially constructed, that there is no realm of the imagination that is not acted upon by reality. Changes in typography force the reader to be conscious of the evolution of printing and the development of a publishing industry. Morrison places the writer within a social and historical framework. The way *The Bluest Eye* is constructed forces the reader to confront the reality that the critical apparatus necessary to understand this fiction cannot be reached by conventional ways of knowing. Readers must learn to “see” the world differently if they want to understand this work. This is the fundamental challenge of critical fictions. They require that the reader shift her paradigms and practice empathy as a conscious gesture of solidarity with the work.

Critical fictions effectively intervene and challenge dominant reading practices when they compel the uncritical reader to put aside set notions of what literature should be or do and enthusiastically grasp new and different approaches. Anyone can be an audience for a particular work if they engage willingly and empathetically. This may indeed require them to relinquish privilege and their acceptance of dominant ways of knowing as preparation for hearing different voices. The ability to be empathetic is rooted in our capacity to imagine. Imagination can enable us to
understand fictive realities that in no way resemble where we are coming from. By calling on the reader to enter realms of the unknown with no will to colonize or possess, critical fictions offer alternatives to an imperialist paradigm which constructs the text as territory to be conquered, taken over, irrevocably altered. Concurrently, writers of critical fiction do not mask their self-conscious engagement with the work. Expecting to be held accountable for their fictions, they acknowledge that imaginative work does not emerge in a realm outside history. It is precisely the writer’s longing to participate in the transformation of history that fosters the artistic vigilance necessary for the production of a critical fiction.

Significantly, the writer of critical fiction makes the conscious decision to locate her work in the realm of oppositional cultural production. That choice is most often informed by a desire to intervene critically in the status quo, to participate in cultural revolution. In the United States it is often assumed that any work by indigenous folks of color or individuals from the Third World is necessarily “a critical fiction,” one that will radically subvert and challenge dominant discourses. Informed by narrow essentialist notions of “otherness,” such thinking has to be critically interrogated. Often a writer may do one work that is critically subversive, and other fictions by the same author may simply reinscribe the status quo. Even though the individual writer may perceive a work to be oppositional, in the end reader response will determine the power of the text to challenge and transform.

Unfortunately, audience response may also influence whether an oppositional work will be accorded that status. Certainly many feminist readers were and are unable to fully appreciate the oppositional nature of Angela Carter’s *The Sadeian Woman*, as critical meditation on ideology, as insightful commentary on the social construction of female sexuality, and as a transgressive reading of Marquis de Sade’s writing. To feminist thinkers who want to maintain a discursive space within feminist politics for discussions of sexuality, of varied and diverse sexual practices, Carter’s work continues to provide insight and critical direction. Reflecting on the unwillingness of writers and readers of pornographic fiction to take it seriously, Carter poses a critique that can easily apply to the production of critical fictions. Often such work is seen—particularly in academic and/or intellectual circles—as simply propaganda, especially if it enriches and promotes resistance struggle, as though canonized works of art do not serve the interests of specific political concerns. Carter comments, “Fine art, that exists for itself alone, is art in the final state of impotence. If nobody, including the artist, acknowledges art as a
means of knowing the world, then art is relegated to a kind of rumpus room of the mind and the irresponsibility of the artist and the irrelevance of art to actual living become part and parcel of the practice of art.”

Critical fictions work to connect art with lived practices of struggle. Constituting a genealogy of subjugated knowledges, they provide a cultural location for the construction of alternative readings of history told from the standpoint of the oppressed, the dispossessed, or those who are open to seeing the world from this perspective. Concurrently they enable the articulation of cultural practices that are part of the reality of marginalized groups, not forged in the context of struggle. The assertion of a decolonized subjectivity allows us to emphasize resistance, as well as other aspects of our experience. A work like *I, Rigoberta Menchú* seeks to call attention to the oppression of the Guatemalan peasant, while contextualizing that reality so that it is evident that the people are more than their pain. Literature emerging from marginalized groups that is only a chronicle of pain can easily act to keep in place the existing structures of domination. The writer producing work in a revolutionary context may specifically call attention to particular forms of oppression, graphically depicting suffering to document and inform. Writers working in a nonrevolutionary context must be careful not to appropriate narratives of struggle in ways that reduce them to colorful spectacle.

Certainly it is difficult for the writer in the United States to find publishers for critical fictions. Again it must be reiterated that a growing interest on the part of publishers and consumers in works by writers of color does not mean that the works that are published and most talked about are necessarily critical fictions. Although work by black women writers seems to be receiving unprecedented attention at this historical moment in this society, much of that work is in no way subversive. Perhaps it is a bitter commentary to think that writers may strategically include passages or chapters in work so that it appears to be a critical intervention even as the overall work in no way breaks with prevailing oppressive and repressive norms. Such moments may merely reflect contradictions. Interest in works by black women writers should not blind us to the reality that this society does not support or affirm the production of critical fictions by black women.

Militancy, akin to that one finds in Ama Ata Aidoo’s *Our Sister Killjoy* or Nawal El Saadawi’s *Woman at Point Zero*, is not a characteristic trademark of black women writers here or globally. *Our Sister Killjoy* was first published in 1977. Written before an established body of feminist writing by black women had been produced, it was a fictive foretelling of the way the words of militant black women—opposing
gender, race, class, and imperialist oppression—would be received: Sister Killjoy's militant speech is greeted with silence. She remains unrelenting in her critique of colonization, internalized racism, and complicity throughout the novel, making her critical observations with humor and wit. Identifying the way knowledge is produced to mask imperialism, she also identifies the enemy: "The academic-pseudo-intellectual... who in the face of reality that is more tangible than the massive walls of the slave forts standing along our beaches, still talks of universal truth, universal art, universal literature and the Gross National Product."

El Saadawi published *Woman at Point Zero* in 1975. Identifying her location in the introduction, naming her solidarity with the dispossessed, the prisoner, the exile, she wrote of this narrative that it is "the story of a woman driven by despair to the darkest of ends. This woman, despite her misery and despair, evoked in all those, like me, who witnessed the final moments of life, a need to challenge and to overcome those forces that deprive human beings of their right to live, to love and to real freedom." These words pose a radical challenge to writers of critical fiction. If we ally ourselves in the struggle with the oppressed (and especially if we are working and living in the context of privilege), how will our fictions, our theory, name this solidarity? Fundamentally, this gesture of commitment to radical change will inform our fictions, so that they become both sign and expression that society is undergoing a transformation, that a new history is emerging. Peruvian liberation theologian Gustavo Gutiérrez, in his critical interpretation of the Book of Job, urges recognition that it is radical communion with the suffering of human beings which brings us to the deepest level of history. Without reducing artistic practice to mere propagandistic function, in a manner that censors and represses the imagination, revolutionary critical fictions prophetically construct and name the transformed future.

A shared history in struggle allows politically committed revolutionary individuals to form communities of resistance, locations that sustain those who fear they will be defeated by despair and alienation. Palestinian writer Anton Shammas evokes a politics of exile that sees in that location a potential space of empowerment. Responding to Somali writer Nuruddin Farah's assertion that we are "driven from Paradise," Shammas offers the playful yet serious oppositional response: "Nuruddin, the Garden of Eden is a masterpiece of boredom, who wants to go there? Exile is far more interesting. I would support expulsion from the Garden of Eden, because it makes life and literature more interesting." Brazilian educator Paulo Freire, in conversation with the Chilean critical thinker Antonio
Faundez, also problematizes the question of exile:

*Wherever exiles finally settle, they tend to experience from the moment they arrive the ambiguous feeling of freedom on the one hand, freedom at having escaped from something threatening them, and on the other of having suffered a tragic break in their history. Learning to live with that ambiguity is difficult but it has to be done... If they do succeed in doing so, then their time of waiting in exile, actively waiting, will become for them a time of hope.*

It is this hope that African Americans as an exilic people have sustained throughout our history in the United States. It is hope rooted in struggle, a hope that forms the basis of resistance. Vietnamese Buddhist Thich Nhat Hanh reminds us in *The Raft Is Not the Shore* that: “The purpose of resistance, here, is to seek the healing of yourself in order to be able to see clearly... I think that communities of resistance should be places where people can return to themselves more easily, where the conditions are such that they can heal themselves and recover their wholeness.” Such clarity must inform revolutionary critical fictions, theory, and practice.

Within communities of resistance, narratives of struggle are testimony. Writing about the place of testimony in black religious experience in *My Soul Looks Back*, James Cone states that “the purpose of testimony is not only to strengthen an individual’s faith but also to build the faith of the community.” As writers and readers of critical fictions, we rejoice in the power of community, because it renews our hope, intensifies awareness, and invites us to imagine together.