

INTRODUCTION

On the Practice and Politics of Intelligibility

“AGAINST OBSESSIVE FUCK COUNTING”

In 2003, one of the largest nonprofit AIDS services organizations in the United States, AIDS Project Los Angeles (APLA), placed itself in a precarious position regarding conservative funding streams by departing from HIV prevention models grounded solely in the empirical social sciences and launching a provocative, sex-positive cultural journal as an alternative method of HIV prevention. This journal, called *Corpus*, focused on writings and artwork devoted to gay sex primarily from the perspectives of men of color, and it was spearheaded by three gay Latino intellectuals: a trained clinical psychologist (George Ayala), a writer (Jaime Cortez), and an artist (Patrick “Pato” Hebert). Rather than understand gay sex from the perspective of epidemiologists and government officials as “a problem to be solved or behavior to be quantified,” *Corpus* understood gay sex (and gay male life) as a “platform from which to launch more sophisticated and nuanced explorations of desire, pleasure, culture, HIV and the challenges of living with multiplicity.”¹ Ayala, APLA’s then director of education, notes that the motivation behind this shift was to address the decreasing salience of HIV prevention campaigns at the turn of the twenty-first century for gay men. This decrease was attributable not only to an outreach agenda that was overly generic

and didactic—unable, as Ayala notes, to address “the subjective experiences of gay men in visible and affirming ways”—but also to methods of analysis that were reliant on presumably objective, but ill-conceived empirical measures.² Ayala explains, “We continuously ask gay men to report how often condoms were not used during anal sex with how many sex partners of which gender in what positions in a given window of time, as if this would teach us how to reduce the risk of HIV infection. Our obsessive fuck counting, however, yields only an impoverished understanding of what gay men think and feel when we have sex. In the end, we learn little about pleasure and desire, the place each occupies in our lives, and the meaning that we bring to each.”³

What Ayala understands as problematic, and what *Corpus*, in turn, is designed to correct, is an HIV/AIDS industry’s self-induced myopia regarding gay men, a reduction of gay men’s complex lived reality under the pretense of objective epidemiological and scientific analysis. In addition to addressing what previous models of HIV prevention did not fully understand (or care to know) about gay men—namely, that gay men’s sexual lives are not problems to be solved nor behaviors to be quantified—Ayala brings attention to the cumulative effect this knowledge gap has *on* gay men. The HIV/AIDS industry accumulates information about MSM (“men who have sex with men”) in an effort to curb and end the spread of HIV and AIDS. But this information, as it filters down to gay men (as information about the category “men who have sex with men”) reproduces the process by which gay men become, yet again, alienated from themselves, rarely serving as reference points for knowledge unless they are a population to be studied. The adage “information is power,” gets flipped here, not because gay men can do without knowing such things as how HIV is transmitted, but because the abstraction employed in collecting and disseminating “facts” about “MSM” coheres with forces that systematically rob gay men of their ability to interpret their own lives and deny them credibility as knowers.

APLA’s decision to foreground the subjective experiences of gay men (and in particular gay men of color), to do so through literature and the telling of personal and cultural stories (rather than through sociological data only), and to claim that better knowledge could be gained about gay men and the spread of HIV, raises important questions. With what notion of identity, subjectivity, and experience, and with what critical understanding of stories, of literature and culture, does APLA claim to be accessing not just new, but better knowledge

about gay men and the world in which gay men carve out an existence? What kind of claim to knowledge is APLA making with this journal? What might count as its proof? What bodies of theoretical work might substantiate its practice?

“PEOPLE CANNOT BE HANDLED THAT WAY”

In 1962, about forty years before *Corpus* was inaugurated, the gay African American writer James Baldwin published a provocative novel—reviewed by his contemporaries with limited acclaim, referenced as a paradigmatic example of Baldwin’s racial self-hatred, and banned domestically and abroad for its sexually “obscene” nature. Panic aside, the novel arguably explores a set of emotional states previously undocumented in the racial and sexual discourse of the American mid-twentieth century—states of profound confusion and unacknowledged incoherence that accompany a group of “well-meaning” friends and lovers as they negotiate cross-racial tensions and queer desires. Implicit in this novel is Baldwin’s own theory of the role literature can play in politics and social analysis. For Baldwin, the novel has the opportunity to exceed the didactic limits of political pamphleteering as well as the presumed (detached) objectivity of the social sciences, and to tell a different story altogether. The novel, for Baldwin, has the opportunity not simply to chronicle crimes against humanity, shocking and shaming people into social action, but to explore another narrative with a different question: What motivates people to commit those crimes in the first place? Likewise, the novel—when dedicated to providing an account of *what it feels like* to negotiate knowledge in oppressive contexts, rather than to simply tell people what to think—presents a confrontation and rebuttal with the logic of the mid-twentieth century social sciences as unbiased mediators of “truth” (about minority populations) through “facts.” Baldwin captures this critique of the establishmentarian social sciences by reminding us of the difference between the knowledge we need (in order to live and survive the contradictions of a racist and homophobic America) and the knowledge that we often get (which is so frequently alienating): “We think that once one has discovered that thirty thousand, let us say, Negroes, Chinese, or Puerto Ricans have syphilis or don’t, or are unemployed or not, that we’ve discovered something about the Negroes, Chinese, or Puerto Ricans. But in fact, this is not so. In fact, we’ve discovered nothing very useful because people cannot be handled in that way.”⁴

Baldwin is unconvinced by the truth effect produced about minority “populations” through empirical methods; more so, he is passionate and unequivocal about the role literature can play in providing alternative stories, accounts that contain liberatory insight otherwise minimized, misread, or never accessed.

A DECOLONIZING POLITICS, A REALIST PRACTICE

The critical turn toward literature and cultural stories promoted by Baldwin in the early part of his career and redeployed by APLA at the turn of the twenty-first century represents more than critique of the empirical social sciences. Indeed, it echoes an ambitious vision promoted by an overlapping cohort of intellectuals, cultural producers, and activists (among them several social scientists) about the necessity of decolonizing our knowledge-generating practices.⁵ Cherríe Moraga’s call to theorize from the “flesh and blood experiences of women of color” and Gloria Anzaldúa’s theory of “la facultad” to explain the ability of marginalized groups to “see in surface phenomena the meaning of deeper realities” are luminary Chicana lesbian feminist instantiations of epistemic decolonization.⁶ They share with theorists of decolonization like Paolo Freire and Rodolfo Kusch, or Walter D. Mignolo and María Lugones, a radical commitment to *think from* the position of suppressed knowledges and marginalized subjectivities, rather than about them. This commitment amounts to purposeful epistemic insubordination within Western paradigms of knowledge production because it engages ways of thinking and ways of being that have been considered, as Laura Pérez notes with regard to Chicana art and spirituality, illegitimate starting points for knowing, and also because it calls critical attention to the proclivity in Eurocentric disciplines to hide, or remain unconcerned by, the geo-historical and class locations of their own theorizing.⁷ Roderick Ferguson, in his articulation of “queer of color critique,” has argued similarly for a type of decolonizing reading practice, anchored in African American literature as a complex archive of social analysis that challenges canonical sociology’s account of African American lived reality. The decolonizing challenge in Ferguson’s approach is not grounded in the illusion that African American literature is free from contradictions and ideological mystifications. The challenge, instead, is that queer of color critique deliberates about the world from the “underside” of modernity/coloniality, by attending to ways of knowing and acting that have emerged from subjugation

or distortion, and that have the potential to raise new insights about the social world. Critical race theorists might similarly be thought of as decolonizing the field of legal studies, if only by challenging the “implied objectivity, neutrality, and impersonal voice of mainstream scholarship” through an explicit and rigorous engagement with the “material, aesthetic, emotional and spiritual experiences of people of color.”⁸

The decolonizing imperative in this body of work should not be confused with an embrace of antirealism or relativism. Rather, embedded within the efforts of APLA, Baldwin, Anzaldúa, and Moraga, among others, are a set of recurring and underappreciated “realist” arguments regarding the epistemic status of social identities and minority experiences.⁹ Part of my effort in this book is to unearth and clarify these arguments, showing that through a greater attention to the subjective levels of reality—particularly through the careful study of stories and narratives that arise from the experiences of queers of color and other marginalized people—we can gain better knowledge about our shared social world.¹⁰ Realist arguments manifest themselves frequently in the assertions queers of color make about how they acquire better and more accurate knowledge, and about how they make sense of their experiences. The full impact of these arguments, however, remains potentially unrecognized by contemporary critics because of the excessive skepticism that has dominated academic discourse regarding the relationship between identities, experiences, and objectivity. This skepticism often derives from an antirealist or subjectivist belief that there is no truth of the matter—that all we can talk about is how “truth” and “identity” are constructed, and how they are ultimately no more than fictions.¹¹ Although how “truth” and “identity” are constructed is of great concern to me, I want to argue against the skepticism that presents this as the only interesting question to be asked of “truth” and “identity.” I aim to show how the rich and meaningful experiences of racial and sexual minorities can be best gleaned if we assume that there is indeed an objective reality, and that reference to that reality is possible. This inclination can lead us to other questions, like whether a given truth claim is valid or whether a given identity is useful—and for what end.

Few scholars in literary and cultural studies today are inclined to speak of “objective reality” and “objectivity” without some degree of cynicism. While many good reasons for this cynicism exist, one undergirding justification is poorly conceived. Critics too often spar with the static and easily dismissible

notion of objectivity as certainty, as knowledge that is presumably context transcendent and free from bias. This is not the notion of objectivity to which I refer in this book. I understand objectivity as a process of approximation necessarily tied to social and historical conditions, a process that requires the analysis of different kinds of subjective and theoretical bias, as well as an understanding that knowledge claims are fallible, open to revision and critique.¹² This less totalizing and more useful understanding of objectivity is frequently at play in the way that queers of color deploy literature and cultural stories. Related to this understanding of objectivity is an equally substantive understanding of the epistemic status of identities and experiences.

Returning to *Corpus*, for example, we notice that the editors' decision to *think from* the position of gay men of color implies an understanding of identity and experience as useful resources for the acquisition of better, more accurate knowledge. This perspective diverges from understandings of identities as imposed impediments, as limiting constructions that are politically unreliable and which we would do best to critically distrust rather than believe in.¹³ Similarly, the knowledge that Ayala understands he can generate about the lives of gay men through cultural production and personal experience is not simply *different* from that produced by empirical studies; it is also in some crucial ways *better*. Explaining the richness of this evaluative claim entails, at least in part, an account of the utility of social identities that goes beyond rote understandings of them as only "strategically" important. Instead of understanding identities as *arbitrary* social constructs, as *fictions* which impose meaning rather than provide access to an existing reality, *Corpus* understands identities less negatively and rigidly. *Corpus* shares with US minority realist critics the belief that identities, precisely because they are mediated (constructed) and causally related to the social world, are crucial avenues for deep social literacy. While *Corpus* does not naively rely on identity-based knowledge as a given, it remains optimistic about identity at a historical moment where optimism pushes up against the limits of established frameworks of credibility. This optimism, far from signaling a lack of judgment and sophistication, employs Linda Alcoff and Satya Mohanty's more nuanced assessment of identities as social constructs, an assessment that shows how identity claims can be not only "specious, narrow, and incorrectly described," but also "plausibly formulated and accurate."¹⁴ Alcoff and Mohanty clarify, "We contend that identities can be no less real for being socially and

historically situated, and for being relational, dynamic, and at times, ideological entrapments. Moreover, we believe that identity-based knowledge can achieve objectivity, not by the (unachievable) ideal of the disinterested, passive observer, but through a more workable approach to inquiry that aims to accurately describe the features of our complex, shared social world.”¹⁵

This realist perspective on the relationship between identity and knowledge is implied in James Baldwin’s work as well. Throughout his career Baldwin was emphatic about the constructedness of black and white identities, showing us how profoundly and inelegantly these identities produce opacity in the lives of everyday Americans. But he was equally attuned to the tangible reality of living in a world organized so predictably and systematically on the subjugation and distortion of what black people feel and know. Additionally, Baldwin provocatively reminds us that although the *reality* of antiblack racism certainly has negative consequences for “black” communities (that is, for how they can live, where they can go, and who they can imagine themselves to be), it most peculiarly and negatively leaves “white” communities epistemically compromised and damaged. He tells us in his 1963 speech “A Talk to Teachers” that curricular change in America’s K-12 education system is necessary not only in order to teach blacks “their history,” but also to teach white US Americans theirs. Baldwin writes:

If [...] one managed to change the curriculum in all the schools so that Negroes learned more about themselves and their real contributions to this culture, you would be liberating not only Negroes, you’d be liberating white people who know nothing about their own history. And the reason is that if you are compelled to lie about one aspect of anybody’s history, you must lie about it all. If you have to lie about my real role here, if you have to pretend that I hoed all that cotton just because I loved you, then you have done something to yourself.¹⁶

For Baldwin *better* knowledge about oppression can be achieved through a comparative analysis of identities and their cognitive, material, and relational consequences. These methods are *realist* because they recognize the ideal of objective knowledge as the constant evaluative touchstone guiding social justice movements. Objective knowledge about black and white relationships is possible, Baldwin would add, but not as definite certainty. It is available in degrees, through attention to error, and through the patient effort it takes to reconsider,

revise, and own up to mistakes. What matters is not whether identities are constructed but “what difference different kinds of construction make.”¹⁷ Against the tendency to associate the constructedness of identities and experiences with epistemic unreliability, realists have sought a more complex and supple account of how identities make possible better and worse knowledge about the world.

TOWARD A DECOLONIZING REALISM

On Making Sense, in the broadest terms, speaks to the prospects of acquiring reliable knowledge about the social world through literary and cultural production and from an embodied perspective. The arguments in this book build upon close readings of literary and cultural texts in order to examine how genres other than critical theory and political practices other than direct activism contribute uniquely to social theorizing and to the thriving of minority communities, particularly by paying attention to ways of knowing and acting in the social world that have emerged from subjugation and distortion and that too often have escaped the purview of systematic theorizing. On the whole, this study is motivated by questions regarding the usefulness of literature and cultural production for engaging historically subjugated knowledge and marginalized subjectivities. Additionally, however, it seeks to understand the role minority identities and experiences—mediated as they may be through language, historical context, and ideology—can play in achieving better, more objective knowledge about key features of our social world.

Literature, culture production, social identity, and subjective experience are all mediated social phenomena. What we understand each to mean depends on a variety of shifting social, historical, geopolitical, and linguistic determinants. In this sense, they are unruly, some might even say questionable, places for developing truth claims about the social world. And yet queers of color, like many other marginalized groups attempting to give meaning to their lives in oppressive contexts, have found rich epistemic and political recourse in them.¹⁸ Some of the best literary and cultural studies criticism on race and sexuality grapples with this complexity, but perhaps too often by underemphasizing the dual challenge queer writers and artists of color pose, both to Eurocentered epistemologies in the US academy and to the antirealism that has influenced theoretical discourse in the humanities for the last twenty years.

Eurocentric epistemologies tend to conceal or remain indifferent to the geo-historical locations of their theorizing. The world and its phenomena are up for interpretation and explanation, sometimes in progressive ways and toward liberatory ends, but always with a return to those thinkers and those intellectual traditions grounded in the production of “the West.” Queer writers and artists of color pose a threat to this logic, not by claiming to be outside of Eurocentric thinking regiments, but by exploring their own geopolitics of knowledge production. This is different than acknowledging the “situatedness” and “constructedness” of experience and identity, Walter Dignolo reminds us, for it involves a critical *decolonial* emphasis.¹⁹ It entails an attention to the experiences, contradictions, and minutia of thinking and feeling within what has been called the *colonial matrix of power*, a matrix that has oppressed and dominated at a global scale not only through racism and the control of labor, but through the control of subjectivities and the regulation of knowledge production.²⁰ The decolonizing challenge posed by queer writers and artists of color regarding knowledge production deserves further attention, especially at the level of textual meaning and cultural interpretation. What we understand certain texts to mean, and how we might endorse certain understandings of the social world over others, demands mindfulness about habits of reading and attention to communities of readers who justify certain forms of social literacy over others.

With respect to reading habits in the academy, an additional assessment is warranted regarding the challenge queer writers and artists of color pose to anti-realist schools of thought first popularized by poststructuralist and postmodernist thinking in the late 1980s and 1990s. Antirealist standpoints are rarely named “antirealist.” Still, they are recognizable by the lingering afterlife of their iconic claims: identities are fictions, normative claims are violent, linguistic reference is indeterminate, subjecthood is only and always a form of subjection, intelligibility (if desired) is a normative yearning to be recognized as a legitimate subject. Antirealist frameworks share, among other things, a propensity for skepticism toward identity categories. They also endorse suspicion regarding the possibility of accurately referencing an objective reality. On the surface, none of these claims is necessarily objectionable, and it is certainly true that these approaches have been useful as a critique of Western universalism, foundationalist methodologies, and poorly conceived identity politics. But they have left too many critics eager to find fault with a notion of identity- and experience-based human

inquiry that conflates the desire to produce *better* knowledge about minority groups and about social injustice with the naive quest for error-free certainty about the social world. The importance one might attribute to the initial iterations of antirealist perspectives becomes difficult to substantiate when these perspectives are taken as dogma in their extreme, unqualified form. When too much emphasis is laid on the elusiveness of identity, knowledge, and experience, scholars can be left with too few tools for recognizing the real substance of the contributions made by artists and activists.

Antirealist frameworks have been uniquely dominant in literary and cultural studies. As a consequence, identity-based knowledge claims made by minority writers and artists of color have often risked distortion and underappreciation. For example, critics informed by antirealist frameworks have tended to rehearse a teleological narrative that characterizes experience-based knowledge and identity-based projects not only as theoretically naive, exclusionary, and politically pernicious but also as antiquated remnants of the past. A number of critics have challenged this implicit teleology. In the field of queer studies, Michael Hames-García has criticized the notion that queer theory solved the pernicious essentialisms of feminist and lesbian and gay politics in the 1970s and 1980s.²¹ He notes that queer declarations of theoretical originality and political progress presuppose genealogies that misrepresent, when they do not completely ignore, the contributions of writers and intellectuals of color. He reminds us that in 1981, Cherríe Moraga collaborated with Amber Hollibaugh and then with Gloria Anzaldúa, publishing paradigm-shifting feminist intersectional social analysis before Gayle Rubin argued in 1984 that feminism had not and could not articulate a radical theory of sexuality because it had only been a theory of gender oppression.²² Hames-García goes on to show that a range of black feminists were producing antiessentialist work in anthologies like the 1982 *All the Women Are White, All the Blacks Are Men, But Some of Us Are Brave* and in essay collections like Audre Lorde's 1984 *Sister Outsider*, long before Diana Fuss argued in 1989 that black women theorists had shown a preference for essentialist modes of theorizing rather than embracing poststructuralist critiques of identity.²³ In her full-length study of lesbian feminism and queer theory, Linda Garber similarly notes that any careful engagement with the cultural and literary production of working-class lesbians and queer people of color of the 1970s and 1980s shows no overwhelming evidence of crude thinking or a naive reliance

on identity and experience.²⁴ Likewise, Sharon Holland, E. Patrick Johnson, Ann Pelligrini, Judith Halberstam, and Hiram Pérez, among others, argue that the continued vilification of sophisticated forms of identity politics practiced by working-class lesbians and queer people of color calls into question queer theory's status as an ethical discourse. Indeed, they suggest that queer theory's claims of sophistication and originality coexist uncomfortably with its erasure of people of color and working-class white women as critical thinkers.²⁵

Scholars eager to make space for experiential knowledge and minority political perspectives have had to contend with the normative pressures of anti-realist thinking, most recognizably in the 1990s by conceding "essentialism" and arguing instead for its "strategic" deployment. Chicana feminist theorist Emma Pérez is frequently associated with this careful maneuvering in her much cited 1994 essay "Irigaray's Female Symbolic in the Making of Chicana Lesbian *Sitios y Lenguas* (Sites and Discourses)." She writes, "I essentialize myself strategically within a Chicana lesbian countersite as a historical materialist from the Southwest who dares to have a feminist vision of the future. My essentializing positions are often attacked by a sophisticated carload of postmodern, post-Enlightenment, Eurocentric men and by women who ride in the back seat, who scream epithets at those of us who have no choice but to essentialize ourselves strategically and politically against dominant ideologies that serve only to disempower and depoliticize marginalized minorities."²⁶ Here we see Pérez courageously confronting, on the frontlines of the postmodern theory debates, Eurocentric antirealist doctrine. Since then, similar battles have been fought, with the result of "strategic essentialism" circulating and continuing to serve as a rhetorical touchstone for rationalizing the analysis of queer racialized identities. Cindy Patton and Benigno Sánchez-Eppler, for example, gesture toward this sentiment in 2000 when they state that the debate over identity in gay and lesbian studies has been "well-rehearsed," and that "now, identity is viewed as strategic, rather than essential."²⁷ Eight years later, Latino literary critic Lázaro Lima reaffirms the political expediency that motivates the deployment of Latino identities as "real," while simultaneously acknowledging the theoretical incoherence that accompanies this necessity. He writes, "I am interested here in invoking Gayatri Spivak's well-known recourse to 'strategy' and its necessary interests in praxis value over theoretical use value. . . . Latino identity is therefore strategic . . . , grounded in the knowledge that it is a necessary fiction."²⁸

What we see here is a kind of subversive ambivalence. With few exceptions, identities first get framed in the language of antirealism (as “fictions”), but these framings are then neatly set aside or obfuscated in practice. This is accomplished in ways that suggest not only hesitancy in embracing antirealist standpoints, but also a much different and nuanced alternative understanding of what identities might actually be, and what relationship their “constructedness” may have to the production of reliable knowledge.²⁹ Far from being idiosyncratic deviations, these predictable shifts have served a function in the wake of antirealist theorizing: preventing experience-based knowledge and minority cultural production from being easily dismissed as theoretically naive and simplistic. But this tactic has come with a price. It has enticed scholars to embrace an unjustifiably high level of incoherence between theoretical commitments and political practices.³⁰ Indeed, with remarkable predictability, identities are often framed in these studies as arbitrary illusions of homogeneity utilized pragmatically from political necessity, but they are then treated less cynically in the practice of interpreting particular case studies. It would seem, then, that a less hyperbolic notion of identity as “constructed” has been available in minority literature and cultural production, and in the body of criticism that takes it seriously, for quite a long time now. This understanding of identity seems closer to the one minority realist critics have advocated for, an understanding of identities, not as essences or fictions, but as bits of social theory. Identities, from a realist perspective, are “socially significant and context specific ideological constructs that nevertheless refer in non-arbitrary (if partial) ways to verifiable aspects of the social world.”³¹

One might argue that the tendency to invoke identities from a strategic essentialist perspective (as “necessary fictions”) has run its course, and that my summary, while applicable perhaps to the 1990s and with a few key examples in the early twenty-first century, is overstated with respect to contemporary criticism. I agree that fewer scholars today feel the need to explicitly make such claims. The tapering of strategic essentialist rhetoric, however, feels more like an arrived-at consensus of what we presumably already know to be true than a revised understanding of certain inconsistencies and underjustified theoretical assumptions. Not enough attention, I think, has been given to the incommensurability between schools of thought that prioritize and accentuate the *instability* of meaning in texts, identities, and experiences, or that dismiss ac-

curate reference to an objective reality, and those queer writers, artists, and intellectuals of color who—despite attending to the deeply mediated quality of experiential knowledge and creative cultural production—still make claims to understanding real features of their social world.³²

In the context of discussions over minority identity, cultural production, and social theory, a realist framework aids the process of epistemic decolonization. Realism offers theoretical justification for the disposition to *think from* the locus of suppressed knowledges and subaltern subjectivities. Realism understands the complexity of engaging identity- and experience-based knowledge (and theory-mediated knowledge broadly speaking) but does not give up on the ideal of objectivity so central to the evaluative claims of antiracist, antihomophobic feminist projects. Realism is not simply an *alternative* theoretical framework for contemporary criticism. It is one of the implicit decolonizing assumptions at work in much queer ethnic literature and cultural production. It is worth noting that the realism functioning in this body of work has less to do with achieving error- or presupposition-free certainty about oppression, and more to do with tackling the complex epistemic issues at stake in resistance and survival for queer of color communities, as well as understanding the unique role literary and cultural production might play in articulating knowledge that has emerged from subjugation, distortion, and attempts at erasure.

TO KNOW AND BE KNOWN

The more than fifty-year period between Baldwin's reflections on literature and social justice and APLA's bold inauguration of *Corpus* represents an eclectic and vibrant outpouring of queer ethnic cultural production in the United States. More important than this exponential output, however, is the recurrence and redeployment of an argument—about the importance of cultural production and identity-based knowledge in addressing profound forms of injustice affecting queers of color, particularly affecting them in their capacity to know and be known. In this book I juxtapose key texts produced by black, Latino, and Asian queer writers and artists to argue that, across ethnic groups and genres, and over an extended period of time, queers of color have been developing a decolonial realist understanding of knowledge acquisition in oppressive contexts, one distinguished by a recurring preoccupation with intelligibility. This

preoccupation is best understood as a concern with the everyday labor of *making sense of oneself* and of *making sense to others* in contexts of intense ideological violence and interpersonal conflict. The necessity of making sense in these texts should be understood less as a desire to be recognized or accepted by society on society's terms, and more as a desire to confront specific forms of, what philosopher Miranda Fricker has termed, "epistemic injustice"—injustice that affects people in their capacity as knowers and as community members worthy of being known.³³ In their capacity as knowers, queers of color often experience a peculiar set of difficulties. These come in hermeneutic and testimonial forms, as queers of color often struggle not only to interpret their lives accurately, but to be seen as legitimate bearers of knowledge. In their capacity as community members worthy of being known, queers of color often experience challenges, due in large part to the systematic erasure of queer people of color from the social imaginary (i.e., they are simply *not* represented and therefore rarely thought of as important) or through the experience of distorted or diminutive incorporation (i.e., coerced into visibility, but only so long as they remain entertaining, marginal, witty, and benign).

When societies work against queer people of color, they do so not only by ascribing incoherence to their desire and gender expression, not only by making them vulnerable to racism and homophobia (and delegitimizing their experience of it), but also by making it difficult and painful to find community backup and solidarity. This compounded form of oppression induces confusion and fear with respect to burgeoning identities, imposes social isolation and displacement, and naturalizes ridicule and violence. In response to these circumstances, queer writers and artists of color have explored provocative ways of living and resistant forms of consciousness worthy of further critical attention. Chapters 3 and 4 in this book highlight two innovative routes of social theorizing, one having to do with the ways queers of color have represented the process of knowledge acquisition about oppression *spatially*, often as a process of "migrating" in and out of different collectivities, and the other having to do with strategic shifts in narrative perspective, direct confrontations with *where* one reasonably should expect to hear queer stories of resistance and resilience. In both cases, we witness a decolonial realism in practice, particularly as these forms of social theory help us to reframe communities of color as locations from which to elaborate liberatory possibilities.