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Meeting on the Bridge: is it possible for secular feminism and public theology to work together?

Helen Ramirez*

Here I am a secular feminist sitting firmly outside of institutional religion and yet fearing the social justice silos I see dotted across the landscape are preventing each of those silos from addressing the increasing violence that surrounds us because we can't figure out how to work together. Secular feminists and public theologians spend an inordinate amount of time defining ourselves against one another or putting barriers in place that don't make it possible for us to locate one another and value what we might offer the other and give to our communities by working together in solidarity. Our critiquing of one another isn't simply about pointing out the errors in analysis and practice of the other but includes competing for the position as the most legitimate to speak on behalf of those who have been silenced. We aren't practicing what we teach. We aren't setting aside our power positions. Across silos we speak of justice, marginalization, power systems, and suffering but never look inside our own silo to see how we are instruments in the sustaining of oppression.

I come to this discussion of a possible coalition between two dissident groups with ambivalence. I hold no faith base and harbour a long list of examples of how Christianity has massacred the rights of women to ensure the continued dominance of men. I feel no need to rescue Christianity but I do see people on the inside transforming theology and church in order to forge the possibility of a more "just, egalitarian, participatory political community."¹ In part what I am doing in this piece is separating institutional power from the ecclesial expression of church that Elizabeth Schussler Fiorenza proposes. She sees anekklesia of wo/men..as a critical concept for analyzing patriarchal aspects of politics and religion and for pinpointing incongruities between egalitarian ideals and exclusionary practices in both political and religious life.²

The feminism I hold attends to the practices of patriarchal systems placing it into a parallel position to that of the feminist theology of Schussler Fiorenza. And so I understand the reasoning to contend that the merger has already occurred. But the positioning of the feminist theologian remains inside the church and their theological language, while contesting power systems centers around concepts that close the door to those of us choosing to remain outside the theological argument for activism. What I am proposing is that the reach needs to be extended deeper into the secular world and where the language of both sides is forced to shift so as not to impose a barrier blocking a partnership. But first there must be an openness to admit to the historical exclusions within both and a shedding of language that closes the door to the other.[†]

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† In this paper, my use of "woman" is problematic because its use is still embedded in the image of a white, middle class, heterosexual and probably Christian female. I ask the reader to read "woman" as representative

From a secular position what feminism offers is a profound ripping away of veils that hide the intimate locations where the matrix of domination operates.³ As a collaborator in an endeavor to address oppression more directly, it appears public theology is willing to journey in a direction that reveals the ugliness of power histories that sustains exploitation in the present. Jurgen Moltmann allows that theology should in fact be “experimental, open to adjustment and revision...’an adventure of ideas.”⁴ The only way to see the intricacies of the mechanisms of oppression is by keeping the theoretical tool alive and bending to accommodate new lessons in understanding where and how power systems operate. Still what cannot be missed is the seeing of one’s own systems as contributors to the maintenance of domination.

Feminism, for many practitioners, comes with an embodied ethical commitment that strangely mimics a similar Christian commitment of faith holders. For many of us, feminism, isn’t just a theoretical intellectual position, rather it grounds who we are as citizens in our communities in ways that parallel faith practicing Christians which is how the term “embodied” may mirror the what faith offers to practitioners.⁵ I have no god, no savior but I do hold a deep commitment to the responsibility to delve deep into the recesses of social constructs that hide the operations of marginalization because of how feminism demands ethical praxis beyond just talk.

Feminism is an uncomfortable field of inquiry. Its theoretical base forces a penetrating probing that lands very close to our own lives. It discloses the social, economic and political ugliness in our own midst and more horrifying our part in making that ugliness. It tells us – the feminist scholar/activist that the only way in which this suffering can be altered is at its base which demands we examine ourselves in how we participate in and profit from domination. Himani Bannerji knows this hidden quality of systems of power only too well by demonstrating how racism in Canada has become part of the “common sense” practices of everyday life.⁶ Sharon Welch also tells us that no gain is permanent, and instead any victory exists in a precarious state often against a mammoth oppression active in shutting any resistance to its dominance.⁷ My example is simply this, we are taught not to rape and we have a law about rape and yet the prevalence of gendered violence all around us hasn’t been reduced. Feminism is driven by unrelenting questioning. Or what Cynthia Enloe suggests a curiosity to seek answers to why the laws haven’t ridden us of sexual violence and who profits from its continued presence.⁸

Faith traditions have advantages that feminism doesn’t. In feminism all we have is the collection of narratives and analyses to rely on to mark our knowledge of oppression. Faith traditions in contrast can hold onto a sacred text and a “calling” brought to them through a relationship with the divine to add weight to their descriptors of oppression and the work they are “called” to do. The calling itself is rooted in faith and seems reflective of what the divine wishes them to do giving their work a weight that feminism cannot capture.

Christian public theologians can call on verses from the sacred text to uphold their commitment to the disenfranchised. The stories of Jesus destroying the stands of those selling wares of wealth, the calling up of those without status to stand with him and for

of the intersection of race, class, religion, ethnicity, ability, age, language, gender fluidity, and sexual orientation and while at different points the specificity of woman is clarified this paper does not allow me to move into longer and larger historical and analytical examinations of intersections of power.

others in a position of privilege to value those voices and those lives. This attention to the life of Jesus seems to confirm the public theologian's questioning of poverty and violence. Secular feminism begins from a different location. It begins with an agreement that all forms of suffering emerge from the practices of power and has no transcendent text to affirm its positioning or argue the worth of its statements.

Feminists are tossed all kinds of disparaging labels meant to reduce the worth of their activism and research. The problem is that feminism does call out to the function of white masculine power in the very locales many want to protect like the patriarchal family and of course in this case the church. It threatens the identity of people who want to preserve any modicum of privilege they have and fear its loss should the demands feminist propose be adopted.

Really secular feminism on the inside labors to avoid creating fear, hoping instead to be a system of inquiry that opens people to new ideas for understanding themselves or choosing new options for defining themselves without being driven into a deep hole of despair. For those who have known the violence of oppression feminism can provide them with a language to grasp the macro operations of the violence they know and too often live with. It names the systemic source of the hurting and proposes possibilities for ridding the violence of its searing power in the interior of one's body. But feminism never seeks to silence those who live with violence nor does it relinquish the responsibility of feminists to work toward the elimination of the causes of violence. Therefore, the tools of feminism offer the possibility of solace and community. Such solace comes from knowing that one can begin the process of shedding the guilt and shame gathered because of their sense that they caused it and were deserving of it.

Emma Goldman in those early years of feminism spoke of the value of an individual's own experience but saw how the collective stories of many women illuminated the systemic causes of that violence.⁹ When an institution only deals with the singular, the other work of addressing the macro is never conducted which means that violence will in fact continue to occur at the level it does presently.

There are no texts that act as a sacred source in feminism and no institutional building where all feminists can gather and sing songs of unity, or engage in rituals that affirm our commitment as we sit among others in an architecture designed to affirm the rightness of our principles. The home of the feminist is singular and often unsafe in a world that continues to use any attention to the conditions of women as a reason to denounce their voices, or in some cases kill them. Feminists need a collaborator with whom they can forge a security as they move into a dangerous world of contestation.

Current day Christianity is also fraught with divisions as denominations compete against one another to hold the title as the most faithful to the biblical texts. Public theologians then, like the feminist, find themselves ridiculed and silenced as they speak about the suffering of others from the practice of power inside its own walls.

Roxane Gay wrote in *Bad Feminist*, "The problem is, cultural critics talk about privilege with such alarming frequency and in such empty ways, we have diluted the word's meaning. When people wield the word "privilege", it tends to fall on deaf ears because we hear the word so damn much it becomes white noise."¹⁰ Feminists are guilty of diluting language. In the same way that Christians use the word god, grace, and Jesus, with such frequency that there is no singular meaning or purpose to them aside from asserting the position of one's own position within their faith practice. In both cases these words work to

specify identity and one's membership in their group which indicates the words have a covert function to argue "truth" in an internal hierarchical structure. New ways of conveying similar ideas are essential if these contained groups hope to reach people beyond their constructed boundaries and actually attend to the lived experiences of people's lives. All of these critiques lead me to wonder if a coalition is viable when the differences are larger than what might be the similarities. Are each actually more likely to accomplish their goals by simply remaining in their contained units?

And here's the problem that slams against this question. We have in our own midst terrible examples of religious movements that seem in part to come from the secular world's tossing away of what religions can offer communities of people who see their lives more fully lived when mainstream religion is opened to them without guilt. A vacuum that was created when religion was forced to the sidelines by the West by claiming that the State and the Church must occupy separate domains.[‡] This separation opened an opportunity for fundamentalism to expand. Adherents could then pit their identity against all actions undertaken by the secular world.

Fundamentalism presents itself as a savior to the conditions faced by people in their social, political and economic lives. It offers structure, directions for living and kinship to those who feel lost in a world that they feel marginalized by and a strong sense of righteousness in actions and beliefs that destroy others outside their arenas.

Michael Walzer has suggested that what we are living with in terms of fundamentalism comes out of a failure of secularism to recognize the value of faith based systems. A secular world functions by shaming any talk of religion.¹¹ Rejection by the secular then ignites the seeds that lead to extremism. In North America mainstream Christianity has held on to outdated conceptions of itself rather than figuring out how a relationship with the secular world could be formed. In this non-religious world, many might classify themselves as atheists in part because of the language used by the church to express a relationship with the divine, others stand outside the church wanting a "spiritual" life making them uncomfortable in the church and still others like myself find no connection to the theology. If the project of a coalition is undertaken the public theologian and the feminist will need to find a way through a morass of barriers.

Leaving the question of fundamentalism aside briefly, the history of Christianity for many feminists keeps us unable to trust that churches have held themselves accountable adequately for the ways in which they have ensured women's subordination inside and outside the institution. And we worry that fundamentalism has re-entrenched women's subservience to male power.

The history of institutional practice in all forms of Christianity has for the most part been an example of how theology and liturgy uphold the hidden operations of patriarchy. The white male divine figure even when not overtly acknowledged emerges in most of the language of the church and the practices of the faith holder. This divine figure who is omniscient, omnipresent and omnipotent has a penetrating authoritarian presence in the lives of Christians. From the perspective of a secular feminist what is gleaned from this theological leaning is that free will operates only when humans fail to live justly.

[‡] John Locke argued the necessity of this in 17th century and Thomas Jefferson would later take up the importance of the church/statue separation in the First Amendment to the American Constitution in 1802.

The divine is riddled with contradictions when talk emerges of humans being designed in the image of god. This image certainly isn't female which results in her creation coming from the male and not from the divine. The *imago dei* has done its job well in a patriarchal context to keep girls and women distant from power positions. Even though many churches no longer contain images of the deity, they do of Jesus which functions again to deny women and girls access to equal standing with boys and men. The Marys of the New Testament are often herded out to suggest that a new church is emerging. The Marys are representative of commitment, and trusting faith. Still they remain in a subordinate position and their rescue so they might sit equally with the male disciples seems impossible.

Language is not neutral. And so the language of the church is certainly levelled with centuries of meaning that keep notions of white male dominance firmly in place which the secular domain has taken advantage of. The images and the language around these constructs are difficult to climb over and for the secular feminist the evidence of their continued use in the church is a battle that many secular feminists no longer want to forge deciding instead to keep their distance from the institution.

What about the Bible? Could it offer a purview into a coalition? The question for many secular feminists is why the Bible is consistently called on to defend a position? Christians use it like a primary source to legitimize any action or position. And for the secular feminist the use of the New Testament, particularly the stories about the twelve disciples are too deeply reflective of male power and the subservience of women.

The text is used in tandem with statements about god and Jesus working in mysterious ways in the world of humans. Christians seem to know precisely who these two (god and Jesus) are and what their presence in lives of Christians constitutes. All that is good is allotted to the divine and all that is bad is allotted to humans. It's a problem for a secularist who isn't an atheist or agnostic but desires a more convincing reason to enter into a space that promises inclusion and wants to defend the importance of free will.

A critique of the secular realm results in the same conclusion that my critique of the church forces. All the major government and economic systems in Canada have at their head white men. Their positioning as legitimate leaders and caretakers of the rest of society is in their image and not the image of men of colour and certainly not of women in any form. Our language continuously places men at the center of our structuring of these systems. Even now, it is a white heterosexual middle class man who represents the hallmark of a good family as long as he's married to a white woman who has a job but whose mothering takes first place.

Feminism looks like a spider's web shifting in multiple directions to reach the areas that need attention while always being hit from outside by invaders who desire its destruction. Its bearings come from a commitment to question anything and everything that establishes status by diminishing others.

And so when a church history and its theologies have kept the second class status of women in place not only in the church itself but beyond its walls, it becomes the subject of feminists who probe the operations of various denominations, their rituals, their liturgies, their institutional structures and their collective theologies to figure out how they can argue women's subordinate status and maintain it. What kind of god would support such subjugating outcomes?

Thirty years ago feminist theologians were writing the stories of white male heterosexist theologies and institutional construction. These critics hit against a powerful

sexist hierarchy intent on keeping their white masculine authority in a ruling position. Even still these white feminists would have to learn the lessons they were accusing the church of as Black, Latina, Asian feminist theologians would hold white feminists accountable for their racism and for the church's.[§]

What becomes clear in this questioning of whether a coalition is possible or even viable is that Christianity cannot be universally transformed in all its divergent locations at the same moment and if truth were told the same could be said of the secular domain leaving feminists wondering where their efforts are best served to alter the minutiae of domination.

Where are voices of the most marginalized controlled or allowed and in what form? Feminism allows for the expression of anger while the church emphasizes forgiveness to those who have damaged the lives of individuals and communities. The church shifts the emphasis by burdening the victim by implying she is a better Christian if she forgives whereas feminism forces accountability on the assailant and the system that breeds violence by allowing a response of anger at one's victimization.

The question of anger is core to how both feminism and public theology can control the meaning of the experiences of those who have been hurt. Because of my standing as a white woman with enormous privilege I cannot frame the experiences of women of colour or of transwomen. If I do, I am profiting from systems of domination. The church and the secular sphere have been speaking for women and about women for such a long time that women are still trying to find ways to assert their own voices without being silenced but the intricacies of power systems are adept at insuring that individuals fall prey to their operations when people are at their most vulnerable and needing of support and guidance.

The long history of women contains an enormous list of the mechanisms and arguments used to deny women equal standing with men. Through a process of "othering", women have been continuously forced into dependence and service to men, and their patriarchal institutions. Women have had to fight for every expression of agency including the right to their own bodies and how to define their bodies, their sexuality, their reproductive rights, their right to believe or not to believe in a god and the right to be safe wherever they are. Not one of these battles is a *fait accompli*. Each battle is a remains a work in progress. The church and the secular world have told women who they are, what their bodies are for, and who they are to obey. The kind of Christian theology and church practice that has reached the mainstream confirms the rightness of an image of a silent but always dangerous woman with an unfettered sexuality who must be controlled. Girls and women are taught to be sexual objects but also innocent. School dress codes are often directed at girls who are essentially told if they show any skin boys won't be able to control their sexual urges. It is a present day example of what the writings of the early Christian father Augustine claimed when he said that women seduce men sexually with their bodies drawing men away from their "higher" work with god. Young women in universities and colleges get the message to appear "dumb" in their relationships with young men to gain social and personal acceptance. In 2015 the problem is that these messages are no longer visible

[§] The feminist theologians who were key to reviewing the patriarchy of the Christian Church were figures like Mary Daly, Carol Christ, Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza and Rosemary Radford Ruether beginning in the 1060s and who all aside from Mary Daly continue to develop a liberatory theology.

because they're buried in an assumption that they speak the truth about the nature of gender groups. We claim equality has been achieved and when incidents of sexism including rape occur the girl or woman victim is blamed proving that such assertions are far from the reality.¹²

Feminism works to have women retrieve the right to define themselves and live safely. It is about ridding all the shame and guilt placed on the being of women by the church and the church's partner – the masculine secular domain. The second class status that Simone de Beauvoir wrote about decades ago is still very much a part of Western culture. Rebecca Solnit has written about "mansplaining" or the act of men speaking over women and for women and that these seemingly innocent actions of masculine men are part of culture are what can produce violence.¹³ So even when there seems to be a movement for women to stand freely as subjects along with men, the cultural production of masculinity demonstrates over and over that it has no real interest in framing a different form of equality. The problem is that there remains a strong hierarchy of women putting women of colour, lesbians, and transwomen at greater risk of exploitation than white women.

And yet what must be included is the daring work of Christian social activists from whose work secular feminists have benefitted. Many of the suffragists in the 19th century felt their faith demanded their entryway into the space of the public realm and so they fought for the working poor, children, and for women.¹⁴ The same convergence of religion and social action happened in Latin America in the 1980s when liberation theology took hold. The church became a safe haven for women to organize and gave them reason to fight against forces that were impoverishing and killing them and their communities. Inside faith bases, there are groups of people who in defiance of institutional constraints continue to resist the power systems that keep the matrix of domination in place. The problem is that the two cases I've provided illustrate how women were allowed into the public realm and the church only until their efforts seemed to challenge the positioning of men and men's control over women's reproductive lives.

At this point I am returning to the question of whether secular feminists can work with those who profess an identity shaped by Christianity. The converse of this question needs to be asked as well. Can public theologians work alongside and with secular feminists? I recognize the shared impulses of public theology and secular feminism. They both seek to identify systemic injustices and to name the shape of suffering of those who are shunted to the margins of society. Both are compelled to act. And both know they must gaze inwards at their own practices.

Still Christianity carries a history that has done enormous damage to women. And what might not be recognized is the continued privilege men take inside the institution and systems of operations outside the housing of ritual and prayer. Christianity uses a language that is inherently difficult because it brings the divine to the foreground in the conversation pushing the work of free will to the sidelines. The good work being done by humans becomes the product of divine intervention. It is further layered by a divine still wrapped in masculine features and attributes even when not openly specified. The question I ask then is, can the public theologian release themselves from the pressures of those historical groundings?

Conventional Christianity and secular political ideologies have failed to reach beyond their own drives that keep them focused individually on projecting an image of their righteous voice to determine the contours of a good Christian social construct. Their

necessary separation from one another sealed a wall that opened a painful hole that fundamentalism and far right political agents have filled. They have sold how marginalized groups should know themselves against the dominant culture in terms that do not negate the possibility of making sure that others on the outside are diminished.

And so there is an urgency that must compel feminism and public theology to pull down their fences and come together to figure out how to work with one another, what language to use, and how to act in order that political and religious fundamentalism find a loss of adherents willing to drive their violent practices to attain more expansive power. Because secular feminists and public theologians reject all exercises of domination they stand against the methods and organizing structures of fundamentalism.

It seems the choice is a logical one just not an easy one. Public theology and secular feminism must find a way to work in conjunction with one another and it should be by building on the similarities, and the benefits the differences can offer as both face each other and the world. The two have to cease the divisive stance each takes against one another otherwise neither will learn how to listen and how, as Gloria Anzaldua has said to meet midway on the bridge.¹⁵ The route to one another is riddled with land mines.

Religion offers something that secular feminism cannot. It can provide a community inside its institutional doors but faith holders can also stand outside and be fed by a purpose and a spiritual support that gives both strength and healing in hard times. Feminism has never had the advantage of holding status or power to develop an institutional presence. It continues to come with a label that is either politely accepted by outsiders or fully dismissed as having any value because it hits against all forms of questionable power practices. It leaves those who use it or take on the marker of a feminist as not socially, or politically acceptable. The ridicule is increased when the woman who identifies as a feminist isn't white, middle class, heterosexual, cis gendered, or Christian. Since feminism is associated with women, it is easily and openly shamed in daily life. What secular feminism offers is a journey into the underside of the belly of power and a challenge to stand with those tyrannized. What secular feminism also offers is a history that has never held power enabling it to look at itself and at others who may be too embedded in their own histories to see themselves unambiguously.

But secular feminism has also failed. For too much of its history it was the tool of white middle class heterosexual women who had little interest or compulsion to allow others in who might threaten their gaining of public attention by the state. Secular feminism in these times can too easily reflect the cultural tendency to allow spirituality but not faith. To believe in a deity from the hallows of an institution in at this moment in history in the West is not part of the "progressive" identity that secular feminism sells. This is a problem because it occludes the work of those inside the institution pushing for its change.

Neither the secularist nor the theologian glances at the other to see what they might offer one another. Secular feminists have abandoned their faith holding colleagues and vice versa. The walls are thick resulting in a painful binary of exclusion.

Alone, what right do we as secular feminists or public theologians have to peddle our wares as justice seekers if we can't even figure out how to invite each other into a relationship? The story of violence seen all around us is about more than simply the failure of the secular state and mainstream religious systems to see the growth of fundamentalism filling the holes left by their dismissal of one another. Still collectively these two traditional combatants must begin the process of examining how they contributed to opening the hole

that allowed the violent expression of fundamentalism to gain force. If secular feminists and public theologians don't partner to examine this emergence they will look too much like hypocrites for not having found a way to practice inclusivity of ideas and people with each other.

Feminism functions first by daring to issue questions where conditions are ignored by dominant systems. The answers to the questions posed don't remain just as answers but are developed into strategies of action. A hermeneutical circle emerges of questions, action, review, self-critique, more questions, and a new set of actions.¹⁶ Feminism is rooted in communities and while there are plenty examples of feminists imposing actions on marginal communities, there are also many histories of feminism emerging from those very communities. Feminism avoids talk of large victories. It's rooted in a history that can only mark small gains and often those gains are also precarious. It means that feminism can commit to an idea that realizes the importance of the methods used toward any victory and the obligation that the method cannot forfeit others for the goal. Feminism has learned the hard lesson of the harm done by choosing the victory over the method.

Public theology rests on a similar ground to that of feminism as it speaks to the questions of disenfranchisement in the social realm. It faces the problem of action or appearing to cross into the political space in a context where the separation of the political and religious are seen as a fundamental feature of a democratic Western society. This potential conflict makes the alliance with secular feminism important but dangerous for public theologians. Secular feminism can offer a form of security to public theology through a voice that is not tied to theological language or intent. It doesn't risk its own standing by being politically engaged, in fact it loses its standing if it fails to do so.

As a secular feminist I am afforded an independence from systems and institutions. My work relies on this commitment to questioning all aspects of the world I belong to and a pressing responsibility to act in it and against all features of destructive power. The church, and here I want to be more specific, a church that practices public theology can provide a caring community and a deep dedication to work toward a more just society because of its tie to a god who loves the most marginalized and wants for them a life free of systemic suffering. But such an alliance must also stand with other feminists whose faith bases aren't Christian and often feel marginalized by the church and the language of the church. Somehow we have to learn how to have those difficult conversations that move from accusation and guilt into a new working and caring community of action.

Could we imagine the creation of a different kind of home? In the writing of new scripts, the use of this image is not without understanding that home has not been a locale of belonging as bell hooks details for many who know only violence or silencing but it can be rescued so as to offer a place of healing and possibilities of safety.¹⁷ The home in the context I'm proposing is meant to capture a gathering of people where each regardless of race, sex, class, sexual orientation, age, language, ability and religion or no religion can learn from one another so that the silos are dismantled. It becomes a home where learning and solidarity are held as essential pieces of practice. A place that we can move from with courage to forge the difficult acts of resistance and return to for belonging.

The home I imagine seems utopic but it isn't because it's not a final destination it's just one link in this intent to attend to the explosion of violence from those who have been expelled from one place and have entered into another that offers them membership into a version of home that has a frightening purpose. Our tools when used in separation from one

another don't offer those who move into the world of extreme fundamentalism a reason to leave it.

The silos we created are justified by claiming that the gulf between us is too great. We blame each other. In this paper I have written about my reluctance to forge an alliance and yet I know if I don't I will have simply fed the systems that sustain harm doing. I must dare myself to be open to what my public theologian colleagues give to the struggle for social justice. I must applaud their efforts to hold their institutional history to task for the building of oppression. If we can't collectively figure out how to form a home free of dominating matrixes, what evidence is there that we carry the knowledge and expertise to work for a more just world in other spaces? My commitment is then to invite the conversation.

Endnotes

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¹¹ Michael Walzer, "Islamism and the Left," *Dissent*, Winter 2015.

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¹⁵ Gloria Anzaldúa and AnaLouise Keating, eds., "(Un) Natural Bridges, (Un) Safe Places," in *This Bridge We Call Home: Radical Visions for Transformation* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 3.

¹⁶ Paul Ricœur, *Memory, history, forgetting* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004).

¹⁷ bell hooks, *Belonging: A Culture of Place* (New York: Routledge, 2009), 144.