Voices from the Gaps

Anna Julia Cooper

> ***Only the BLACK WOMAN can say, 'when and where I enter, in the quiet, undisputed dignity of my womanhood, without violence and without suing or special patronage, then and there the whole Negro race enters with me.'***
>
> — "Womanhood: A Vital Element in the Regeneration and Progress of a Race"

Biography

Born a slave late enough in the course of the antebellum era not to have to endure the scourge of that cursed institution for life, Anna Julia Cooper believed that intelligent women's voices brought balance to the struggle for human rights. She manifested her superior intellect and persuasive oratory ability primarily as a Washington D.C. educator, but also worked as a teacher of mathematics, Greek, and Latin at St. Augustine's Normal and Collegiate Institute in Raleigh, North Carolina (1873-81 and 1885-87); teacher of ancient and modern languages, literature, mathematics, and language department head at Wilberforce University in Xenia, Ohio (1884-85); and teacher of languages on a college level at Lincoln Institute in Jefferson City, Missouri (1906-10). As an intellectual, embryonic feminist/womanist theorist and critic, master teacher, and philosopher, Cooper displayed consistent erudition and exactness. A Christian woman of high standards, principles, and moral caliber she seemed to have lived an errorless existence to the point of being faultless. Cooper's experiences with racism and sexism were most likely the impetus that stimulated her to challenge prevailing patriarchal exclusionary practices. She referenced herself as "Black" at a time when the nineteenth century coinage for African Americans was "Negro."

Quick Facts

* 1858-1964
* African-American activist and educator
* Born a slave, and earned her doctoral degree at the Sorbonne

Voices from the Gaps

Anna Julia Cooper

Biography continued

Racism scarred her as an activist in the North Carolina Teachers Association when she sought salaries for African American teachers that were equitable to White teachers' salaries (1886). Further humiliation of a racist nature occurred in 1892 when railroad personnel ejected her from the waiting room—first class ticket in hand—in her hometown of Raleigh, North Carolina because of color discrimination. Sexism bruised her emotionally as a student at St. Augustine's Normal and Collegiate Institute (1868-73) when she protested against the differences between boys' and girls' curricula and the availability of financial assistance for boys but no matching funds for girls. School officials later admitted her to the Greek course initially set up for men. Cooper came face-to-face with sexism again when she entered Oberlin College in Oberlin, Ohio in 1881 and discovered that it had a "Ladies" course, an experiment in educational access that was inferior to the classical course offered to men. This practice prevailed although Oberlin faculty had a reputation of being progressive thinkers, and the college was among the first to open its doors to students of African heritage. Nevertheless, university officials returned to the dominant thought of the nation and upheld the norm of racism, segregating dormitories and making admission of qualified African Americans difficult, if not impossible. Ironically, at St. Augustine's Normal and Collegiate Institute Cooper met and married in 1877 the ministerial candidate—the second African American in North Carolina in 1879 to be ordained an Episcopal priest—and professor of Greek, George A. Christopher Cooper of Nassau, Bahamas, British West Indies, only to lose him to death September 27, 1879. As a widow Cooper was free to pursue greater educational opportunities.

After entering St. Augustine's Normal and Collegiate Institute for emancipated African Americans on scholarship in 1868 as a nine and a half-year-old precocious youngster, Cooper began in 1869 at age eleven to tutor students older than she, evidence of her advanced academic ability at a tender age and indication of her future career path. The school's mission was to train future teachers, and Cooper's destiny was established. As a twenty-three-year-old Oberlin College entering freshman in 1881 Cooper selected the more prestigious classical "Gentleman's Course" of study, earning the AB (1884) and MA (1887) degrees, along with Mary Church Terrell (1863-1954) and Ida Gibbs Hunt (1862-1957). Oberlin administrators awarded Cooper the advanced degree based on her college teaching ability.

Voices from the Gaps

Anna Julia Cooper

Biography continued

In her career as a public school educator at the Washington High School in Washington D.C. Cooper worked first as a mathematics and science teacher (1887-1902). She then became a Latin teacher and principal of the distinguished M Street High School, established in 1891, formerly the Preparatory High School for Colored Youth. Cooper was the second woman—the first was Emma J. Hutchins—to serve the institution in this male-dominated capacity—(1902-06). This institution produced some of the greatest African American professionals of the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Not far from the old M Street High School location a larger edifice on a new site to serve a greater population was completed in 1916 (razed in 1976) and renamed Paul Laurence Dunbar High School. Cooper was an influential force in the new name of the M Street High School, as well as lyrical composer of its *Alma Mater* (1924), which was set to music by Mary L. Europe, her former student turned colleague.

However, for Cooper the leadership role of principal became daunt, overshadowed with disdain by some school officials who abhorred Cooper's managerial style and record of success rather than the lack of it. Cooper's White supervisor Perry Hughes urged the school board to force Cooper's resignation and relieve her of her position following controversial statements printed in the Washington Post regarding pending restrictions of classical education to African Americans, a controversy precipitated by a speech delivered at the school in 1902 by W. E. B. Du Bois (1868-1963), author of *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903) and the twentieth century's most esteemed African American intellectual and Atlanta University professor at the time. Hughes objected to Cooper's college preparatory course design and her determination to make African American students competitive with Whites.

A classical course of study gave African American students an advantage to compete for scholarships to prestigious universities, including Ivy League institutions, but business courses were offered at the school as well. Moreover, the academic performances of M Street High School students created a perplexing problem for many Whites regarding stereotypical notions of intellectual inferiority among African Americans. The students proved the stereotype untrue. Hughes was a proponent of *Up from Slavery* (1901) author Booker T. Washington's (1856-1915) educational philosophy to instruct African Americans in the industrial and vocational trades.

Voices from the Gaps

Anna Julia Cooper

Biography continued

More accurately, racist school board members frowned on women in leadership roles and married or widowed professional women guiding youth. An independent thinker and the fortitude to stay the course, Cooper could not be swayed from her vision of superior education and the mastery of high academic content for African American youths. She was also a proponent of higher education for women and compassionate about educational opportunities for the children of former slaves. Although she had the support of the faculty, students, and citizenry, she paid the highest penalty of dismissal. Upon the appointment of a new superintendent Cooper returned to the M Street High School/ Dunbar High School in 1910 as a Latin teacher and retired from the institution in 1930.

In the summer of 1911 Cooper enrolled at à la Guilde Internationale à Paris, returning in the summers of 1912 and 1913 to study the history of French civilization with Professor Paul Privat Deschanel, French literature, and linguistics, earning a Certificate of Honorable Mention. Columbia University in New York City accepted her as a doctoral candidate July 3, 1914 based on her academic achievement in France and certified her language proficiency in French, Greek, and Latin. She began a doctoral thesis in French but was unable to meet Columbia's mandatory one-year residency rule. In the summer of 1924, the decade of the 1920s considered the height of the Harlem Renaissance, Cooper transferred her Columbia equivalency status credits to Université Paris—Sorbonne where she completed her doctoral requirements at the age of sixty-five, becoming the fourth African American woman affiliated with the M Street High School/Dunbar High School to earn a PhD. The others were Georgiana Rose Simpson, Eva Beatrice Dykes, and Sadie Tanner Mossell Alexander. She also was the fourth African American woman in the United States to earn a PhD. Cooper was also the first woman and the first African American woman resident of Washington D.C. to earn a PhD from the Sorbonne, as well as the first African American woman born a slave to do a doctoral defense at the Sorbonne.

Voices from the Gaps

Anna Julia Cooper

Biography continued

In keeping with her standard as the consummate educator, Cooper advocated extension education for employed adults. She devoted long uncompensated hours to Frelinghuysen University in Washington D.C. , founded in 1906 by Dr. Jesse Lawson and his wife Rosetta E. Lawson, serving as one of its teachers and its second president (1930-41), as well as relocating the school to her home at 201 T Street, NW in the LeDroit Park community to hold classes when university authorities faced eviction from the main campus building. Today Cooper's home is part of the African American Heritage Trail and the Historical Society of Washington D.C. Struggling economically through the depression and losing its charter in 1937, the financially strapped establishment became Frelinghuysen Group of Schools for Employed Colored Persons in 1940, and Cooper served as registrar (1940-50), continuing her loyal commitment to the edification of African Americans even as an elderly educator.

Cooper was a tireless community, political, and social activist. She was one of three African American teachers (Parker Bailey and Ella D. Barrier) who participated in a Toronto, Canada cultural exchange program arranged by the Bethel Literary and Historical Association (1890s). She also addressed the Convocation of Black Episcopal Ministers in Washington D.C. (1886) and the Convocation of Clergy of the Protestant Episcopal Church the same year on the topic of "Womanhood: A Vital Element in the Regeneration and Progress of a Race"; read her essay "The Higher Education of Women" at the American Conference of Educators in Washington D.C. (1890); shared the podium with Booker T. Washington at the Hampton Conference (1892)in Virginia; was one of three women (Fannie Jackson Coppin and Fannie Barrier Williams) to explicate poignantly at the Women's Congress in Chicago which coincided with the World's Columbian Exposition (1893); was one of three women (Helen A. Cook and Josephine St. Pierre Ruffin) to address the National Conference of Colored Women (1895) in Boston, spoke at the National Federation of Afro-American Women (1896) in Washington D.C. ; was one of two women (Anna Jones) to represent African American views at the Pan-African Conference in London (1900); and lectured at the Biennial Session of Friends' General Conference in Asbury Park, New Jersey (1902).

Voices from the Gaps

Anna Julia Cooper

Biography continued

Moreover, she helped to organize the Colored Woman's League (1892), founded the Colored Women's Young Women's Christian Association — Phyllis Wheatley YWCA — (1904) and its chapter of Camp Fire Girls (1912), and was one of the founders of the social services organization The Colored Settlement House (1905). She was women's editor of *The Southland* magazine (1890), possibly the first African American magazine in the United States devoted to keeping readers informed of issues and progress. Impressively, Cooper was the lone female invited to membership in the elite American Negro Academy, an African American intelligentsia organization founded by Rev. Alexander Crummell March 5, 1897. Officials of the organization included W. E. B. Du Bois (1868-1963), president and Rev. Francis J. Grimké, treasurer. Members included the father of Black History Week/Month Carter G. Woodson and co-founder of the Negro Society for Historical Research Arthur A. Schomburg (1874-1938) whose collection of Africana documents would culminate into the New York Public Library's Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture.

Cooper was born Annie Julia — named for the woman for whom her mother was leased out to work as a nanny — August 10th to Hannah Stanley Haywood (1817-99), a slave woman with minimal reading and writing skills. She paid homage to her mother by naming a division of Frelinghuysen University the Hannah Stanley Opportunity School, designed for the purpose of educating adults with limited opportunity for advanced schooling. Her father was George Washington Haywood, brother of her mother's owner Dr. Fabius J. Haywood, Sr. , a wealthy entrepreneur who amassed a fortune through family enterprises involving the acquisition of land, assumption of loans and promissory notes, leases and rentals, merchandising, partnerships, pharmaceuticals, and slaves. Her siblings were musician and bandleader Rufus Haywood (1836?-92) and Spanish-American War veteran Andrew Jackson Haywood (1848-1918). Andrew married Jane Henderson McCraken in 1867. They adopted a son, John R. Haywood who married Margaret Hinton whose untimely death led Cooper to assume guardianship of their children—Regia, John, Andrew, Marion, and Annie—at a time when she pursued higher education and assumed a mortgage to house her burgeoning family (1915). Their ages ranged from six months to twelve years. The infant Annie, her namesake and future heir, died from pneumonia at the youthful age of twenty-four, a devastating blow to Cooper and her hope of a successor. She was also foster mother to Lula Love Lawson, an 1890 graduate of the M Street High School, and her brother John, orphaned by the death of their parents. Cooper's maternal grandfather, the slave Jacob Stanley, was skilled in the building trades and was instrumental in the planning and construction of the North Carolina State Capitol.

Voices from the Gaps

Anna Julia Cooper

Biography continued

In 1925 under the guidance of Professor Alexander (French history and language) of Columbia University Cooper published her Columbia University thesis, *Le Pélerinage de Charlemagne: Voyage à Jérusalem et à Constantinople* (*The Pilgrimmage of Charlemagne: Journey to Jerusalem and to Constantinople*), a translation into modern French of an eleventh-century French epic that became a standard classroom text. Her Université Paris — Sorbonne dissertation, "L' attitude de la France à l'égard de l'esclavage pendant la Révolution" (*The Attitude of France towards Slavery during the Revolution*), also written completely in French, was the culmination of her formal education leading to the doctorate. Cooper's French instructors at the Sorbonne were sociology professor Célestin Bouglé, political history professor Charles Seignobos, and literature and American civilization professor Charles Cestre. The French Embassy in the United States was instrumental in Cooper's receiving her diploma. District Commissioner William Tindall, the French ambassador to the United States, the American ambassador to France Emile Daeschner, and a representative from Columbia University presented the PhD diploma to her at Howard University's Rankin Chapel on December 29, 1925 in a ceremony hosted by Xi Omega chapter of Alpha Kappa Alpha sorority and Dr. Alain Locke (1886-1954), Howard University philosophy professor, first African American Rhodes scholar, articulator of the New Negro Movement which became the Harlem Renaissance, and speaker for the occasion.

Cooper's dissertation is an inquiry into French president Raymond Poincare's (1860-1934) attitude regarding racial equality. She also examines the 1896 French-Japanese Treaty and French naturalization laws as they pertain to Japanese, Hindu, and Black people. The Society of Black Friends is explored. Cooper also analyzes a speech given by Alphonse de Lamartine (1790-1869), French poet and politician, and a speech delivered during the French revolution at the National Assembly. Cooper discusses, too, a March 1842 banquet regarding slavery abolishment.

Biography continued

Over the span of a few years the flame of Cooper's early feminist/womanist thinking exploded into a full fire. The result is the seminal publication *A Voice from the South, By a Black Woman of the South* (1892), a compilation of various speeches and lectures that she delivered on public platforms. The book's recurrent themes are education and feminism. Cooper espouses a non-confrontational approach to issues of race, class, and gender and the domination and oppression of women by both Black and White men and encourages women to expose and attack injustice wherever it exists. She gears the essays to a learned audience, not to the emancipated slaves who were mostly illiterate, though she champions their cause. The book is for the teachers of this deprived population who have the responsibility and the authority to introduce new ideas and challenge minds, especially women in the profession, all women in general and African American women in particular. Her genre is the formal essay. She uses it to explain her philosophical stance, combining facts, theory, and sincere purpose. Her essays are classical in form, structure, and style, but they are also autobiographical and introspective narrative, incorporating her perspectives of life's experiences. She uses the language of Christian doctrine to examine, support, and specify her ideas, quoting relative scriptural texts that illustrate her views. She considers scriptural references manna for living the right kind of life. She also uses poetry within her essays to emphasize important points. Her essays are discussions of political topics to inspire change by appealing to the consciences of reasonable readers who may be empowered to act. The book is indicative of the cultural value of the essay as a political tool for nineteenth-century African American women.

Cooper feels that the "woman's era" (1890s) when women activate their voices in the National Association of Colored Women's Clubs and woman suffrage is an excellent time to "examine the feminine half of the world's truth." Her book contains two sections of four essays each. The first section, "Soprano Obligato," focuses on women's issues, nineteenth century women facing the new era of the twentieth century in which they will have vital impact. The next section, "Tutti Ad Libitum," analyzes the race problem and its negative effects in American society. Both sections address the human condition and how best to improve the status of those relegated to the lowly places in life. In Cooper's opinion America failed to provide mechanisms of uplift to all its citizens, for any society that dooms any of its members to a permanent low caste will never achieve the fullness of its possibilities. The period in which Cooper writes, the 1890s, is an era in which women, African American and White, tear down barriers that prohibited them from becoming productive and meaningful contributors to society.

Biography continued

However, society at this time is more receptive to White women although mass protests are the channels used to gain them this tolerance. The 1890s also mark a backlash in African American progress, and it is a climate that tolerates an increase in lynching. Cooper feels that the time is suitable for the "voiceless Black Woman of America" to explain in detail America's problems, and the relevance of the time in which African Americans are twenty-seven years out of chattel slavery.

The first essay in the book, "Womanhood a Vital Element in the Regeneration and Progress of a Race," identifies two sources responsible for perpetuating images of women, the Feudal System and Christianity. The former initiated honor and respect and the latter reverence, but, according to Cooper, both are unrealized. Cooper believes that women's past is not their doing, but the future is theirs to control if they reject ignorance and accept higher goals, i.e. , acquiring higher education. She warns that intellectual weaknesses in the nineteenth century are attributable to patriarchs of the institution of slavery but a century later will be used as proof of innate inferiority. She recapitulates some of the myths surrounding women and intelligence in "The Higher Education of Women," which includes a section that addresses "The Higher Education of Colored Women." She maintains that higher education does not reduce women's eligibility for wifehood or motherhood or nullify their domestic ability; men and women can approach matrimony as equals educationally and economically, for their higher knowledge qualifies them even more in the managing of households and in the training of children. For African American women she espouses intellectualism with the balance of Christian virtues, indicating that a strong moral fiber must accompany in-depth knowledge of arts, sciences, business, and social work. The essay "Woman Versus the Indian" highlights dedication to the survival and wholeness of all people, but its title is misleading. She posits a theory that all avenues of social life are under the auspices of women, e.g. , a national standard of courtesy—"like mistress, like nation." She believes that women are the moral conscience of the nation, practitioners of good manners and the Golden Rule, which if women apply universally would shake the foundations of racism and the stronghold that men have on society. "The Status of Woman in America" pays homage to women's strength and to the celebration held in Chicago of the "fourth centenary" of the continent's discovery. Since the nation's founding Cooper believes that women have been in training to assume leadership positions, to effect change in the twentieth century, and to recognize the contributions of African American women to America.

Biography continued

"Has America a Race Problem; If So, How Can It Best Be Solved?" is the lead essay of the second section. Cooper elaborates on issues of race and class and identifies two kinds of peace, the kind that comes from suppression and the kind that evolves from adjustment. Her preference is the latter, that compromise, reciprocity, and tolerance are the only survival tools of the nation. Cooper assumes the role of literary and social critic in "One Phase of American Literature." Her commentary centers on economic self-determination, reparations for African Americans, and love and appreciation for the folk, the "silent factor," the producers of true American literature (folklore and folk songs). "What Are We Worth?" examines the economic ramifications that form African American civilization since Emancipation. She writes that the world benefits from inventions by African Americans but is unaware of the role played by them in making lives easier. She pays tribute to individuals whose contributions and inventions improved the lot of humanity, calling this litany of names a "noble army" and "roll of honor." In "The Gain from a Belief" Cooper has a spiritual focus and explores absolute and eternal truth, knowledge, and virtue, necessary in the building of faith. Her view is that people need something in which to believe, and "faith means treating the truth as true." She believes that faith benefits the newly freed African American nation to persevere and drum up the gumption to get to the next century and beyond.

Cooper delivered many of her lectures in African American churches and perhaps for that reason the essays have a Christian emphasis. She also introduced her ideas before learned societies and community organizations. She uses the lecture circuit as a political platform to postulate her theories of educational access and social action and responsibility. Cooper's critical expressions are idealistic, philosophical, and practical. Her theories are not just ideas of the imagination but something more fundamental, the incorporation of consciousness into what might be perceived as thinking in the abstract. She considers each and every thought and concludes that cognizance and consciousness are inseparable. The experiences of the new African American nation do not occur independently of what goes on in the mind. She believes if individuals can think things, then people can achieve things.

Anna Julia Cooper

Biography continued

Her theories differ from traditional Eurocentric theories because they are not merely academic exercises to be discussed in academic circles. They are aesthetic and practical; they are for the masses, not just the cultural elite, although she stresses that an educated African American class with the capacity to lead must implement the theories. Cooper basically states tactics of survival. She encourages people to do as nature does, take examples from nature's book of fair play. Hers are theories in conflict resolution, a prototype which stresses never to give up the struggle against misconceptions regarding race, class, gender, politics, education, and economics. She remained an academic motivator until her death from cardiac arrest at the age of 105, concerned with the educational development of women and the underrepresented. Cooper felt that her work in the progression of higher education of women was unfinished. She ran out of time, but she left a powerful legacy.