Brittney C. Cooper
Beyond Respectability: The Intellectual Thought of Race Women
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Reviewed by Karen A. Johnson, 2018

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Black women intellectuals and activists, such as Fannie Barrier Williams, Mary Church Terrell, Pauli Murray, and Toni Cade Bambara (the main subjects of *Beyond Respectability*), have historically been committed to race, gender, and class uplift and the liberation of Blacks. The *de jure* era of racial segregation in which they lived, their experiences with oppression, and the educational institutions they attended, awakened in them a sense of responsibility to battle against the interlocking structures of subjugation that characterized the lives of Blacks. Most important, these women were race women and public intellectuals who "cared about producing accessible forms of knowledge for and with communities involved in the Black Freedom struggle . . ." (15). As Cooper notes, these women "entered into public racial leadership roles in the decades after Reconstruction" and beyond in efforts to "fashion for themselves a public duty to serve their people through diligent . . . intellectual work" (11) as activists and public thinkers. Consequently, women like Williams, Terrell, Murray, and later, Bambara have shaped a body of cultural and intellectual knowledge that reveals paradigms and constructs for understanding racism, sexism, and classism, as well as liberatory ways of viewing and fighting for a better world. Yet the content of their intellectualism remains ignored or forgotten, or rarely interpreted by scholars of black intellectual traditions and black feminist thought. Despite this neglect, the knowledge productions of these women reveal their noteworthy roles in black intellectualism and black feminism.

In *Beyond Respectability*, Cooper excavates the subjugated intellectual knowledge of Williams, Terrell, Murray, and Bambara in a painstaking process that indeed required a black feminist intellectual archaeological approach. As Cooper argues, black women have a very long history of intellectual production--longer than that of "Michel Foucault or Felix Guattari," to name two white male scholars (2). Yet "most academics have been trained to *trust* [emphasis in text] that white males . . . are capable of deep thoughts" (2). Hence, Cooper insists that "we approach Black women's long history of knowledge production with this same kind of trust" (2).

Cooper defines the subjects of her book as "race women"--black women who held leadership positions between the 1890s and the 1970s, and who attempted to theorize and "transform intellectual and physical spaces" for the purpose of uplifting and empowering the black

community from race, class, and gender tyranny (12). In her study, Cooper attempts to "explore what a careful examination of Black women's intellectual tradition might yield" for black intellectual history and black feminist thought (2). She does this by unpacking the thoughts and activism of the previously mentioned women by using what she calls an "Anna Julia *Cooperian* approach to reading and interrogating the theoretical works and lived experiences of Black women intellectuals" (3). For Brittney Cooper, this approach requires the researcher to view the "Black female body as a form of possibility, and not a burden" and second, "to center the Black body as a means of social thought" (3). Cooper maintains that from a *Cooperian* perspective, the cultural and intellectual production of black women's social thought were inextricably linked in the written and spoken text to black women's bodies (3). Thus, Cooper has coined the *Cooperian* way of analyzing race and gender oppression as an *embodied discourse*--a discourse that is a "form of Black female textual activism" wherein black women intellectuals "demand the inclusion of their bodies in . . . the texts they write and speak" (3). Additionally, Cooper utilizes an *intellectual genealogy* pertaining to Williams's, Terrell's, Murray's, and Bambara's ideas about racial identity, gender, and leadership from the 1890s to the 1970s and an *intellectual geography* that charts the intentional ways that these women opted to change "intellectual and physical spaces in the service of their racial uplift projects" (12).

The introductory chapter opens with an epigraph by Pauline Elizabeth Hopkins (1859-1930), a black journalist, playwright, novelist, and clubwoman who insisted that it was the "duty of true race women to study and discuss all phases of the race question" (11). It is from this epigraph that Cooper constructs her theoretical lens in an attempt to foreground the "critical intellectual labor" that black women engaged in, coupled with "their work as activists, organizers, educators, and churchwomen" (16). Additionally, Cooper's data collection draws from what she calls an "eclectic archive" that includes the archival collected papers of Murray and Terrell as well as a variety of secondary sources (12).

Given that one of Cooper's key questions pertains to her interest in where and how late nineteenth-century race women intellectuals became public thinkers and activists, in chapter 1, she sets forth to examine the role that the National Association of Colored Women (NACW) played in shaping their thinking and activist work. NACW, which was established in 1896, was the leading black organization of the time, and it predated the creation of the NAACP by fifteen years. It aimed to tackle wide-ranging problems that Blacks encountered during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, such as education, poverty, self-definition, racial violence, and gender repression, to name a few.

Williams and Terrell played major leadership roles in this organization. For Cooper, NACW represented a central organization in the intellectual geography that influenced the critical thinking of race women like Williams and Terrell. In this chapter, Cooper probes Williams's ideas about *organized anxiety*, *American peculiarity*, *race public opinion*, and *racial sociality* as ways to critically investigate Williams's complex understanding of race and gender tyranny within US society, and the building of black organizations to fight against these forms of oppression.

Williams (1855-1944), a Chicago-based clubwoman and an activist in a variety of capacities, spent her life intellectualizing the problematics of race and gender discrimination as well as

fighting against them. For Williams, *organized anxiety* grew out of black clubwomen's anxiety regarding racism, and this anxiety gave rise to their collective fight for social reform via the clubwomen's movement. Additionally, Williams consistently unpacked the contradictions of this nation's democratic ideals of liberty, equality, and justice for all. Yet as she observed, this was a nation that denied these ideals to Blacks. Thus, for Williams, this represented an *American peculiarity*. In her critiques of racial tyranny, Williams consistently articulated the concept of *race public opinion*. Black women leaders like Williams were troubled by the mainstream racist and sexist imagery and stereotypical beliefs about Blacks. These images and beliefs served to set Blacks aside from humanity. Hence, Williams and black clubwomen created organizations such as NACW as a way to redefine black personhood and to use these rearticulated definitions as a way not only to shape public opinions about Blacks, but also to collectively fight against racism. Williams also believed that if one embraced a divine love for humanity, then that would in turn contribute to a *racial sociality*--a sociality that would help to solve racial problems. With each of these aforementioned concepts, Cooper methodically helps the reader to understand Williams's critiques of oppression and her activist work to fight for justice. And as a result, the reader gains an appreciation for how, through the vanguard of Williams, Terrell, and other black women leaders, they formed NACW into a remarkable "intellectual and political force" that had a great impact on African American politics in the early twentieth century (55).

Chapter 2 examines Terrell's ideas about racial uplift. Terrell (1863-1954), who was born into an elite black family in Memphis, Tennessee, fought tirelessly for the rights of Blacks through the 1950s. In this chapter, Cooper taps into Terrell's concept of *dignified agitation*, a concept that laid the foundation for the politics of respectability. Although the concept of respectability politics is problematic for present-day black activists, Cooper does a successful job in helping the reader understand the root of the respectability concept and the role it played as a tactic in "twentieth-century racial resistance efforts" (58). Cooper notes that Terrell's construct of *dignified agitation* forges a link from the nineteenth-century racial uplift movement to the twentieth-century Civil Rights Movement.

Second, Cooper's analysis reveals that in Terrell's autobiography, titled *Colored Woman in a White World* (1940), she presents what appears to be an early conception of the contemporary term *intersectionality*. Finally, Cooper provides a meticulous examination of Terrell's autobiography in her endeavor to present the influences that molded Terrell's public and private lived experiences and critical thinking. Out of all of the chapters in the book, for this reader, this one offers the most original and invigorating analysis and a brilliant engagement with Terrell's intellectual ideas.

Pauli Murray (1910-1955) was born in the twentieth century, and she is the subject of chapter 3. Murray, a civil rights activist, attorney, educator, Episcopal priest, feminist, and queer woman, spent her life not only fighting against racial oppression, but against gender and queer oppression as well. Murray was a mentee of Terrell, and for this reason, Cooper felt it would be fascinating not only to examine Murray's theories, but also to investigate the impact that the "NACW School of Thought had on succeeding generations" of race women like Murray (88).

Murray, as a subject of examination, was also compelling to Cooper because Murray wrestled with her racial identity as well as with her sexuality. Her "refusal to classify herself in the Black-

White racial classification system" as well as her belief that she was "physiologically an intersex" (88) reveals that Murray was well ahead of her time in terms of embracing more inclusive race and non-gender-conforming ways of existing.

A key concept that Cooper examines in this chapter is a term that Murray coined, *Jane Crow*. While she was a law student at Howard University, Murray experienced repressive sexism from the otherwise all-male student body and faculty. Cooper concludes that the Jane Crow concept is perhaps an "early formulation of intersectional theory" (88). She insightfully argues that the Jane Crow oppression that Murray encountered was supported by a system that called for "proper sexual and gender performances from Black women who desired to be race leaders" (88). As a non-gender-conforming queer woman, navigating these repressive terrains indeed proved challenging for Murray. Still, as Cooper's analysis reveals, it was at Howard that Murray embraced her role as a race woman.

In chapter 4, Cooper focuses on the 1960s and 1970s and introduces or reintroduces the reader to the political thinking and activism of women such Toni Cade Bambara (1939-1995), who was an activist and writer during the mid-twentieth century. Cooper revisits the question of what it means to be a black woman intellectual, particularly considering the 1966 *Ebony Magazine* article entitled "Problems of the Negro Woman Intellectual" and the erasure of black women's voices and ideas, through the late scholar Harold Cruse's *Crisis of the Negro Intellectual*. In light of the 1960s US social uprisings, the magazine article blamed the social unrest on black women and questioned black women's political ideas and leadership abilities. Hence, in this chapter, Cooper is very effective in utilizing Bambara's book of essays *The Black Woman* as a counternarrative and a lens of analysis to respond to Cruse's erasure and to resituate black women's voices in the public discourse on race and the struggle for black freedom and gender equality.

Cooper ends the book with an epilogue that briefly provides the reader with a discussion of contemporary black women thinkers and activists, such as the Black Lives Matter (BLM) founders Patrisse Khan-Cullors, Alicia Garza, and Opal Tometi, as well as other present-day activists. In this epilogue, she reveals that the BLM movement's female leaders are not only molding a significant political movement in its challenges to the interlocking forms of oppression, but it is also inserting the voices of black women's bodies, be they cisgendered or trans, as central to political discourses on black liberation. In the end, Cooper hopes that *Beyond Respectability* will reveal to the reader the long history of black women's intellectual traditions, the significance of their work, and its potential for driving a "new era in our thinking about the most effective models of racial leadership" (142).

Although there has been a growing body of literature over the past decade that has examined the intellectual thought and activism of black women during the late 1800s through the Black Power era of the 1970s, such as Vivian M. May's *Anna Julia Cooper, Visionary Black Feminist* (2007) and Mia E. Bay et al.'s *Toward an Intellectual History of Black Women* (2015), *Beyond Respectability* offers profound conceptual interpretations and a historical framework for understanding the roots of black intellectualism and black feminism. This book reveals that black women have not only constructed distinctive interpretations of race, racism, gender, sexism, and other intersecting forms of power, privilege, and oppression, but they have done so by employing

alternative ways of producing and validating black and female cultural and intellectual knowledge.

In this book, Cooper's theoretical and methodological approaches are original, meticulous, ambitious, and rigorous. She provides the reader with sound, well-crafted, and sophisticated explorations of the "theoretical concepts put forth by [Black women intellectuals] in hopes . . . that their intellectual work can inform contemporary thinking" (150). Cooper does an excellent job of revealing maps and linkages of each of the women in the book to one another. Most important, by bringing from obscurity to the center the buried ideas and cultural knowledge of Williams, Terrell, Murray, Bambara, and others, Cooper has without a doubt emancipated and empowered the subjugated voices, writings, speeches, and thoughts of these women. Her book offers a valuable perspective for understanding past and contemporary black women scholarship and activism, in new and compelling ways.

Beyond Respectability demonstrates the ongoing importance of the work of contemporary scholars to continue to unearth, reclaim, and reanalyze the obscured and unheralded works of black women across the various disciplines, via the utilization of critical theoretical frameworks, such as black feminist thought, that center the ideas of black women. Taken as a whole, I argue that this is one of the best books written on black women's intellectual traditions thus far. This book is an intellectually stimulating must-read for individuals interested in, but not limited to, black feminism and black intellectual thought. It should be a required text in African American studies, gender studies, feminist philosophy, and literary studies, among others. Additionally, the language in this text is accessible, thus making it highly recommended for a variety of audiences.