

Brittney C. Cooper, *Beyond Respectability: The Intellectual Thought of Race Women*,
Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2017. ISBN: 978-0-252-04099-3 (cloth); ISBN: 978-0-252-08248-1 (paper); ISBN: 978-0-252-09954-0 (ebook)

Dominant conceptions of place and space have been, and still are, governed by racial and gendered structures of power. Whether one engages with ideas of public/private spheres or with the notion of the mind/body split, the practice of demarcating boundaries of belonging according to racial and gendered lines has been a disciplining discursive tool throughout prevailing historio-spatial narratives. Accordingly, in her book *Beyond Respectability: The Intellectual Thought of Race Women*, Brittney Cooper highlights the ways in which black women's intellectual contributions have been eclipsed by such limiting spatial borders and seeks to map a genealogy and geography of black women's legacy of knowledge production. She argues that black women's participation in black liberation and feminist struggles has been either erased or framed around their roles as activists, rarely affording them the title of public intellectual despite their formidable theoretical outputs. Spanning from the end of the 19th century through the Black Power era of the 1970s, and also briefly touching on our contemporary era, Cooper blurs the seemingly mutually exclusive categories of thinker and activist, and traces the progression of black women's intellectual contributions. Indeed, she is re-mapping the intellectual landscape of the United States so that African American women thinkers such as Mary Church Terrell, Fannie Barrier Williams, Pauli Murray and Toni Cade Bambara, can take their rightful place.

Brittney Cooper begins her intervention by employing Anna Julia Cooper's theoretical and methodological framework of "embodied discourse". The author considers Cooper to be an origin point in *Beyond Respectability's* assessment of black women's intellectual prowess. As a 19th century African American Southern woman, Anna Julia Cooper has been recognized as an educator, a speaker, a Black liberation activist, and as an exceptional scholar. Her book of essays, *A Voice From the South* (1988), maps many conceptual arguments seeking to expose the problem with "masculinist conceptions of Black possibility" (p.5). Using what she calls an Anna Julia Cooperian approach, which consists of perceiving the black female body as a site of possibility and of centering the black female body as a location to unearth black social thought,

Cooper debunks notions of the Cartesian mind/body split by firmly asserting that race women's intellectual contributions cannot be divorced from their bodies. She specifies that her conception of "[e]mbodied discourse refers to a form of Black female textual activism wherein race women assertively demand the inclusion of their bodies" (p.3) by centering them within their written and/or oral accounts. Through various discursive techniques such as autobiographical narratives and advocacy work, Cooper highlights the ways in which race women's embodied lived experiences worked in tandem with the "project of racial knowledge production and the reorganization of place or public space" (p.8). Essentially, being a black female public intellectual cannot be dissociated from a black woman's body, lived experience and interiority.

Routing her theoretical framework in Anna Julia Cooper's work, the author subsequently proceeds to explore the life work of four other influential black women intellectuals: Fannie Barrier Williams, Mary Church Terrell, Pauli Murray and Toni Cade Bambara. Cooper's selection of these women was based on their "overlooked or understudied intellectual contributions," but also because of how they are "linked together through their work" (p.31). Indeed, many of these women were either colleagues or served as "ideological bridges" within a genealogy of race women. In Chapter 1, "Organized Anxiety", Cooper starts with the life and intellectual labor of Fannie Barrier Williams. One of the key engineers of the National Association of Colored Women (NACW), Williams fostered a space for black female knowledge production and social thought. Cooper praises the 19th century Chicago-based clubwoman by highlighting not only her strong organizing background, but her formidable intellectual prowess in formulating political theories concerning racial identity, public space and what Cooper calls the "civic unknowability of Black Women" (p.37). In her second chapter, "Proper, Dignified Agitation", the author introduces Mary Church Terrell, the first president of the NACW, and also a major participant in the founding of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). A master negotiator, Terrell's intellectual testament lies not solely in her civil rights and suffrage activism, but in her critical assessment of black racial uplift, in her theories of racial resistance and gender progressivism, as well as her articulation of black women's pleasure politics. Chapter 3, "Queering Jane Crow" draws attention to Pauli Murray, who as a young activist was mentored by Terrell, and eventually, in the 1940s, went to graduate from Howard

University Law School as the only woman and as the top student of her class. Cooper emphasizes her impressive life trajectory as an American civil rights and women's rights activist, a lawyer, an Episcopal priest, an author and a co-founder of the National Organization for Women (NOW), whilst also bringing to light the ways in which Murray's personal struggles with her own racial, sexual and gender identity, shaped her intellectual and activist path. Finally, in Chapter 4, "The Problems and Possibilities of the Negro Woman Intellectual", Cooper seeks to illuminate the gender politics surrounding ideas of race leadership from the Civil Rights to the Black Power era, while centering the educator and social activist Toni Cade Bambara, among other prominent black women who have contributed to the intellectual reframing of race womanhood. Notably, through Bambara's illustrious anthology *The Black Woman* (2005)—the first feminist collection to focus on African American women—Cooper emphasizes the importance of such a text in stressing "Black women's centrality as thought leaders and public intellectuals in racial justice struggles" (p.31). It is ultimately through the dedicated intellectual endeavors of these four women and their particular lived experiences that Cooper lays down her map of black women's legacy of knowledge production.

Brittney Cooper's analytical crux resides in an nuanced examination of the concepts of the politics of respectability brought forth by Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, and of the culture of dissemblance introduced by Darlene Clark Hine. Stemming from Higginbotham's influential article "African-American Women's History and the Metalanguage Race" (1992), and Hine's powerful piece, "Rape and the Inner Lives of Black Women in the Middle West" (1989), these theories have been, and still are, leading the historical conceptualization of African American women's sexuality in the aftermath of emancipation. Indeed, as means to "navigate a hostile public sphere", the politics of respectability and the culture of dissemblance became methods of survival to attempt to make "black women's bodies as inconspicuous and sexually innocuous as possible," and also to make "their interior thoughts and feelings inaccessible from public view" (p.3). Through her thorough analysis, Cooper critically assesses and expands on these tactics and/or theories in black feminist scholarship, disrupting the often negative interpretation that relegates any discussion of respectability with silence and inaction, class antagonism, and sexual repression. It is important to mention that the author does not deny the classist and sexually

restrictive undertones of such rhetoric, but rather seeks to highlight the complexities and contradictions of the lives of the women who seemingly bolstered such politics. For instance, in the second chapter, Cooper discusses the life and work of Mary Church Terrell and explores the ways in which her notion of “meddling” translates into a call for racial agitation from the black elite, whilst admonishing the black poor for their social standing. Delving into these analytical paradoxes, in turn, enables Cooper to theorize Terrell’s call for “dignified agitation” beyond the parameters of common respectability discourses, and to conclude that tactics couched in respectability edicts can inform uplift politics as well as “insistent and sustained agitation to bring about social change” (p.64). Moreover, Terrell’s advocacy and theoretical contributions not only span across the contours of racial politics, but also encompass a liberal black feminist vision that is committed to democracy that recognizes black female leadership in the public sphere. Such strong approaches to black women’s political recognition throw into question the supposedly self-effacing practices of the culture of dissemblance and the politics of respectability.

In charting the role of racial respectability politics, Cooper deconstructs and re-defines the confines of these tactics and incorporates them within a black feminist legacy. As aforementioned, she does not refute that racial respectability acted as a “tool of class and gender disciplining”, however she does posit that it also acted as a “tool of gender *definition* and theorization” (p.54). On one hand, she highlights how “respectable” women like Mary Church Terrell also resisted the limiting confines of black womanhood by arguing for the right to joy and pleasure. Through the “embodied discourse” lodged in her autobiographies, Terrell unapologetically positions her body as a site of pleasure, through dancing, as well as a site of political potentiality. Indeed, such revelations highlight how limiting and incomplete the dominant frame of respectability can be to explicate the breadth of black women’s intellectual thought. On the other hand, Cooper insists that the theoretical potential of respectability discourses is imperative to black feminist intellectual thought. In tracing a black feminist lineage, the author is able to point to various political shifts—from the end of Reconstruction, to Jim Crow, to the Black Power era—to draw attention to the “racialized production of gender

schema[s]” (p.95). In other words, her research brings to light black women’s intellectual task of conceptualizing the interlocking structures power that shape black social life.

One of *Beyond Respectability*’s biggest feats is the thorough genealogy of the intellectual history of black feminist thought. Of course, one needs to be careful in using the term “feminist” as to not resort to anachronistic theorizing; however, Cooper contends that using a black feminist lens does not necessarily imply a blind allegiance to current definitions of feminism. Rather, she argues that a “Black feminist analytic framework invites us to consider the ways that Black women have thought through the particularities of race and gender as identity positions—and racism, sexism, and classism as interlocking structures of power” (p.37). Indeed, from Fannie Barrier Williams’s hypothesis on the “civic unknowability” of African American women, to Mary Church Terrell’s conception of the “double-handicap” faced by black women, to Pauli Murray’s notion of “Jane Crow”, the black female intellectuals profiled in this book are integral to mapping the genealogical growth of intersectional thought within black feminism. Well before Kimberle Crenshaw coined the term “intersectionality” to explain the multidimensional burden faced by black women, in her ground-breaking article “Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory, and Antiracist Politics” (1989), Pauli Murray’s “Jane Crow” theory laid the foundation in asserting the political and legal stakes of “interlocking oppressions” by legislatively protecting black women from race and sex discrimination. Moreover, Murray’s complex queer subjectivity also shaped her black feminist contributions as she read conceptions of sexual freedom and gender fluidity through a racial lens. In celebrating the black feminist trajectory of these female thinkers, it is important not to forget the ways in which these theories were not merely thought of, but were also embodied, adding another dimension to the meaning of being a race woman.

Beyond Respectability is an intricate temporal and spatial tapestry that weaves together the development and evolution of black feminist thought. Cooper’s sophisticated analysis not only recovers the intellectual proficiency of race women, but also emphasizes the embodied nature of public intellectualism. What is beautiful and inspiring about her work is the way in which she inadvertently positions herself within the legacy of black women’s intellectual thought. In effect, by following into the footsteps of women like Toni Cade Bambara, who

engaged in listing practices by documenting the works of black women thinkers in her 1970s anthologies, Cooper's entire project consists of unearthing, listing and archiving black women's intellectual achievements. In essence, her book is a manifestation of black feminist praxis, where she is creating an intellectual space to locate and house the theoretical exploits of black women, which are inevitably intertwined with their bodies and lived experiences. In tandem with the aesthetics of the front cover of the book—artist Lorna Simpson's piece *The Daughter Of...*¹—Cooper perceives the potential of black women's intellectual capacities to be soaring to new heights, inseparable from the body and part of a continuum between the past, the present and ultimately the future!

¹ See <http://www.press.uillinois.edu/books/catalog/68emc6tz9780252040993.html> (last accessed 4 September 2017).

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September 2017