

Toward Respect: A Review of Brittney Cooper's Beyond Respectability: The Intellectual Thought of Race Women

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Brittney Cooper. *Beyond Respectability: The Intellectual Thought of Race Women*. Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2017, pp. 208.

In chapter 7 of her 2008 book, Lose Your Mother: A Journey Along the Atlantic Slave Route, Saidiya Hartman writes, "I too am trying to save the girl, not from death or sickness or a tyrant but from oblivion. [...] These words are the only defense of her existence, the only barrier against her disappearance" (Hartman 2008: 137-38). Hartman's project in Lose Your Mother is a search for a life beyond the archive; it is a search for a living narrative, written on, in, and by the body—an act of re-membering. The same sentiment is echoed in Brittney C. Cooper's Beyond Respectability: The Intellectual Thought of Race Women. Cooper offers a sympathetic rejoinder to Hartman's investigation of what it means to be the contemporaries of the enslaved, and what it means to theorize: to produce a living history by a loving engagement in, with, and through the body. Cooper's approach is to utilize the practice of listing. Listing is the "intentional calling of names [that] create[s] an intellectual genealogy for race women's work and was a practice of resistance against intellectual erasure" (26).

Beyond Respectability engages with some key thinkers in early Black feminist thought: Anna Julia Cooper, Fannie Barrier Williams, Mary Church Terrell, and Pauli Murray. In this review, I briefly summarize the key theories described in the book. I conclude by arguing that Cooper's reading is limited when it comes to reading Pauli Murray as a "race woman."

Key words: Brittney Cooper; Ana Julia Cooper; Fannie Barrie Williams; Mary Church Terrell; Pauli Murray; respectability; race women; embodied discourse

Brittney C. Cooper's *Beyond Respectability: The Intellectual Thought of Race Women* utilizes the process of listing as the "intentional calling of names" in order to create an "intellectual genealogy for race women's work." This book uses listing as the "practice of resistance against intellectual erasure," particularly that of Black women in the vast field of intellectual history (26). Cooper's book is an accessible, straightforward account of theoretical works by some key thinkers (and practitioners) of early Black feminist thought (particularly as this thought emerged from and within the post-Reconstruction-era¹ Club Movement): Anna Julia Cooper (1858-1964), Fannie Barrier Williams (1855-1944), Mary Church Terrell (1863-1954), and Pauli Murray (1910-1985). Cooper's goal is to do more than honor these thinkers by relegating them to a high shelf never to be touched again (2). Rather, Cooper sets out to engage these thinkers and bring attention to their significance in a particular intellectual tradition in order to scaffold and fuel current Black feminist thought. In order to do this successfully, Cooper states that one must use *in-handing*—an approach that establishes these theories and theorists as a canon while simultaneously preventing their petrification. Cooper wants readers to take these thinkers as serious intellectuals with a distinct approach to theorizing.

Their understanding of the Black body—particularly the Black female-assigned body—as an epistemically productive site distinguishes them from theorists who limit theory to a function of the mind. For the thinkers Cooper profiles, we see that these theorists uphold no such limit and that their theory is imbued with phenomenological riches. Cooper however, does not desire that these thinkers be revered in the ways that make them untouchable totems. At its heart, Black feminist theory speaks to the lived experiences of Black women (and their relations with others and the world) and is marked by an openness to continued and future conversation. Cooper’s desire to prevent the ossification of these thinkers is a desire not just of preservation but of perseverance. Hers is an attempt to take up foundational interlocutors not as sacrosanct but as persisting conversants. It is also an attempt to demonstrate a living relation to history that helps to shape the future of Black feminist thought.

The practice of listing allows Cooper to draw the distinction she wants to make between preservation and conversation. To list is to take the knowledge production of these thinkers seriously. As a genealogical practice, listing testifies to the existence of Black feminist thought through time and situation/context. Listing is a dynamic practice that blends the personal and the general. Different people will make different lists.² To list is to take up the thinkers’ work as living texts—to hold them close and to bring them into conversation. Cooper uses this practice (which begins in and animates her “Acknowledgments” [ix-xii]) both as a guide for herself (the personal) as well as a map for the reader (the general). We are encouraged to look to this practice as a land of promise, to the living freedom of our explorations. This is Cooper’s North Star³ as well as her challenge to the reader.

Cooper is a Cooperian—following Anna Julia Cooper, noted sociologist, educator, and intellectual⁴—and is informed by “two of [Anna Julia] Cooper’s cardinal commitments [...]: seeing the Black female body as a form of possibility and not a burden” and “centering the Black female body as a means to cathect Black social thought” (3). For Brittney Cooper, that means taking seriously what living as a female body means for the theoretical development as well as the practical social, political, and intellectual engagement of these thinkers. It also means going beyond current views of respectability. Respectability⁵ is a social and political strategy of public/social comportment and engagement. It was a “push to style Black people as respectable men and women” (20). This strategy has been subject of critique as a “marker for problematic class hierarchies among turn-of-the-twentieth-century” (19) Black people that persists today.

Taking *Brittney Cooper* seriously means developing a respect for the ways that respectability made possible this theorizing (8). Together these cardinal commitments form the basis of what Brittney Cooper calls “embodied discourse”:

Embodied discourse refers to a form of Black female textual activism wherein race women assertively demand the inclusion of their bodies and, in particular, working-class bodies and Black female bodies by placing them in the texts they write and speak (3).

Embodied discourse is a living practice that fuels the “two key tasks attached to the world of the ‘true race-woman’”: studying and discussing “all phases of the race question” (11). What Cooper’s embodied discourse gives us is an understanding of the necessary tie between intellectual pursuit and public persona (13-5). For Black female intellectuals, theoretical work is public service (21) done under the auspices of respectability politics (19).

The book is divided into four chapters and each one focuses on a canonical figure in the history of Black feminist intellectual thought production. Chapter 1 is a profile of Fannie Barrie

Williams (1855-1944), one of the “key architects” of the National Association of Colored Women (NACW).⁶ Cooper explores the connection between respectability politics and the club’s organization, calling the NACW a “School of Thought” (32). Cooper states that:

[T]he clubs themselves are schools in which are taught and learned, more or less thoroughly, the near lessons of life and living. All these clubs have a program for study. In some of the more ambitious clubs, literature, music and art are studied more or less seriously, but in all of them race problems and sociological questions directly related to the conditions of the Negro race in America are the principal subject for study and discussion (17).

Williams’ engagement with the club recognizes the “‘peculiar condition’ of Black women [that] rendered them invisible” (38, 44, 45) within the realm of knowledge production by whites and Black men alike. Williams understood the assigned sex, gender, and raced roles (38) bound up in this peculiar condition as an anxiety that leads to organizing. Her theory of “organized anxiety” is an affective theory that brings the feeling body into theorizing.⁷ Such theorizing done on/in the body demonstrates the existence of what I would like to suggest is an *intellectual body* (41) that is unique to certain Black female and woman-identified intellectuals. The intersection of Black and non-male-identified identity positions the body of work for these thinkers in tension with the norms of whiteness and maleness. NACW and other clubs of organized Black women felt duty-bound (50) to reshape the raced body in social discourse (43) by putting the intellectual body into public service. This was achieved through what Williams theorized as a loving practice of “racial sociality,” “an increasing commitment to a kind of social relationship based on acknowledgment of a shared set of conditions” (52).

Chapter 2 focuses on the first president of the (NACW), Mary Church Terrell (tenure: 1896-1901). During her time with the NACW, Terrell developed her theory of meddling (62-4). Meddling is a kind of “racial agitation” whereby “the meddler should take it upon himself to ask disagreeable questions” about the systemic and systematic disenfranchisement faced by people of color—specifically the formerly enslaved and descendants of the formerly enslaved Black people. Cooper argues that:

[The meddler] inquire[s] why intelligent, worthy, and well-to-do citizens are denied the rights guaranteed them by the constitutions, because their complexions happens not to be fashionable in the particular sections which treats them as peons and slaves, while men who are inferior to them in both intelligence and respectability are granted all their rights, privileges, and immunities simply because their faces are white, although it is through no effort, or merit, or prowess, on their part that this desirable complexion has been secured (62).

Furthermore, “Dignified agitation took as its goal the shifting of public opinion by unapologetically calling attention to the violation of rights and the preponderance of wrongs” (64). This meddling is distinct from a contemporary account of protest, in that it is framed through an appreciation of appropriate mode of discourse. Meddling is a questioning—an asking—and a positioning of the questioner (and members of her community) as occupying the same class-space as middle- and upper-class whites. Protest can be done by anyone; meddling cannot. Terrell’s clear reference to “well-to-do citizens” speaks to the classed dimension of respectability and uplift politics. Cooper takes great pains to tease out a claim that such agitation is enriched and not hindered by this

association in the chapter's sections on writing (68), marriage politics (69-73), pleasure politics (74-5), and Terrell's sense of duty to serve (75-6). For Cooper, respectability made Terrell's commitment to agitation and reshaping the public image/discourse of her people all the more urgent and possible. It was because of her successful negotiation with respectability that she developed her intellectual/practical voice.

Perhaps the most intriguing account of embodied discourse is present in Cooper's handling of Terrell's theorizing on her tactic of passing (77-82). For Terrell—as examined by Cooper—passing was a mode of affirming her dignity and the dignity of her agitation. That is, for Terrell, being read as a white woman provided her the opportunity to take advantage of the kind of safety and access that she was not granted when read as Black. It was part of her strategy to facilitate the intellectual uptake of her thought by others. She got to decide how and when she was seen, and by whom. Cooper states that:

Terrell's subversive performance of race womanhood constitutes, then, a broader “negressive politics” that indexes an unapologetic occupying of space, a claiming of visibility, a repositioning of gaze, and a determination of how one's body gets to be made spectacle (80-1).

Cooper's distinction between passing as dignified agitation and those who “cross the color line, never to return” (82) is provocative, though perhaps a little too rushed to be thoroughly interrogated (81-2) when coming on the heels of a counter-reading of respectability. The fact remains that Terrell passed as white for comfort and personal/social gain. On the one hand, her ability to fracture the myth of whiteness as a real and exclusive property is a brilliant performance of purposeful and uplifting transgression. On the other hand, Terrell reinforces whiteness as a privilege, and her passing appears to engage with colorism that reinforces it (while demanding that those who can pass do pass for the overall good of others). That is, Terrell's passing does not indicate a desire to do *away* with whiteness.

Yet such an engagement with the gaze and its hold on the body sets up Cooper's account of the (organized) anxiety operative in regarding Pauli Murray's negotiation with the sex, gender, and sexuality tenets of respectability (95) as outlined in chapter in chapter 3. Cooper argues that:

Racial respectability demands not only heteronormative gender role performances and sexual relations, but also cisgender identity performances as well. Though [...] clearly committed to the uplift of [the] race, Murray struggled to ‘become a woman’ (99).

It is this anxiety that seems to have fueled the theorizing of what Murray calls Jane Crow, “the discriminatory sex bias [...] ‘twin evil’ of Jim Crow” (96), a term named at Howard University in the 1940s. Murray's transgression of respectability strictures also resulted in numerous hospital stays throughout the 1930s and 1940s because of the extent of Murray's battle with depression and anxiety, caused by an inability to reconcile the expectations and limitations generated by social norms about the body. Murray sexually and romantically preferred women-identified (and femme) persons. Murray also expressed a preference for male pronouns and wanted “to be classed as a man among men” (96). The ill-fit and disorientation of what Murray termed a mere “accident of gender” led Murray on an extensive medical search for “intersex characteristics, such as undescended testicles” (91). Woman-*un*identified but female-assigned, Murray was positioned to theorize about the expectation of womanliness and the pain it creates within and enacts upon the body of Black

women (as cis, as heterosexual, and as unquestioning in both of those arenas). The lived experience of the body fuels Murray's work.

Murray's attempts to be seen as an intellectual first and a body (coded female and woman) second were frequently rebuffed (104), resulting in job rejections (96) and a rejection from Harvard Law (99). Despite the fact that after a series of tests Murray *acquiesced* in female assignation, "woman" was not an identity that Murray readily or wholly accepted (100). Yet even with such a fraught relation to binary classification, Murray's body was central to theorizing. With such an intimate knowledge of the storm of sex and gender expectations that fueled racial expectations (101), Murray deployed a race-sex analogy and developed the practice of "reasoning from race" (102). Murray drew on the intersectional groundwork developed by Terrell (66-69) and enlivened it with personal experience of those ill-fitting limits. Though Cooper's embodied discourse lens sees Murray as a race woman, Murray emerges in Cooper's work as a body oriented toward the multiple—outside of the created and enforced binaries of respectability, and rich with possibility (92, 107-13).

Chapter 4 focuses on the 1960s and 1970s, starting with Freedom Now and ending with Black Power. Cooper problematizes the notion of the race man as the "charismatic leader" (118-21) by offering a close reading of Anna Arnold Hedgeman's account of the 1963 March on Washington in *Trumpet Sounds* as well as a close reading of the 1966 *Ebony* article "Problems of the Negro Woman Intellectual," which lays out four models of intellectual pursuit demonstrating the ongoing need for and challenges of the Black Woman intellectual. The epilogue finds Brittney Cooper staying true to Cooperian ethics insofar as she brings this work back to her own body and makes a final list (141-52). In these pages she lists a number of other thinkers of the 1970s and 80s, such as bell hooks, Toni Morrison, and Alice Walker; into the 1990s: Patricia Hills Collins; and through the 2000s: Melissa Harris-Perry, Patsisse Khan-Cullors, Alicia Garza, and Opal Tometi, before finally culminating in two final, more personal lists in which she lists some of the thinkers that inform her work.

There are some limits to Cooper's use of Cooperian ethics that I hope will be fleshed out in a future text. I worry that Cooper does not sufficiently problematize the swift move in the embodied discourse schema between "female textual activism" and the "race woman." Nor does she appear to effectively interrogate this shift's link to the elements of respectability that are problematic for non-cis and/or non-hetero bodies. There is certainly room in Cooper's approach that allows for more agency with regard to trans*, genderqueer, and other non-conforming bodies that Cooper does not take up, and in the process renders those bodies mute. This is the case in her treatment of Pauli Murray.

Throughout Cooper's text Murray neither cleanly nor willingly (88) fits into any classification that has hitherto been defined as the race woman. Murray spent several of their major theoretically productive years in intensive interrogation of their status as female-assigned (91) and openly embraced a racial identification as multiracial, *contra* "the binary logic of race" (107-11). To include Murray as a race woman is to ascribe to Murray a kind of binary identity whereby Murray is raced, sexed, and gendered and conforms in some way to rigid expectations of comportment and community. This is a troubling move, as it denies the fluidity of Murray's self-identification as multiracial and in conflict with gendered and sexed norms/expectations—though I leave open the possibility that today Murray might have identified as trans*.⁸ That is, Murray did not identify as Black and acceded to certain modes of woman in such a way that it is a leap to apply the term "race woman" to this thinker. Moreover, I worry that Cooper's approach denies the violence done to Murray insofar as the expectation that they conform to the "woman" role (as well as the violence done to Murray by women who conformed to the role).⁹ Cooper's decision—not addressed once in

the 91 footnotes on chapter 3—to refer to Murray exclusively with the pronouns “she” and “her” is terribly disheartening. It flat-out ignores Murray’s discourse of embodiment. It is therefore particularly vexing to see that Murray is relegated to these binary concepts when Murray believed and understood themselves to be intersex or male.

Cooper’s understanding of embodied discourse is tied to the race *woman* and Black *womanness as an extension of femaleness*. That is, embodied discourse appears to assume that female bodies are necessarily women’s bodies. This means that the inclusion of Murray—when read through this lens—silences and obscures all of the ways in which Murray did not demonstrate identification with Blackness or womanness. Murray “did not automatically see herself as a woman” (94) and as such the term “race woman” does great harm to Murray. Murray’s investment in the multiplicity means that raced and gendered embodied discourse as it is currently presented is neither flexible nor *respectful* enough to justify their inclusion in this work.

Yet this also points to what is most exciting about this book: its potential for use in the future. Its futural promise ensures that the practice of taking seriously the knowledge production of Black women intellectuals—such as Kathryn Sophia Belle, Patricia Hill Collins, Kimberlé Crenshaw, Angela Davis, Kristie Dotson, Lorraine Hansberry, Saidiya Hartman, bell hooks, Zora Neale Hurston, Denise James, June Jordan, Nella Larsen, Audre Lorde, Toni Morrison, Melissa Harris Perry, Nina Simone, and Alice Walker—will continue. And it feels entirely appropriate that Cooper should find her name added to this (incomplete) list.

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¹ Respectability arose in the communities of formerly enslaved peoples post-Reconstruction (1865-1877). Reconstruction is the time period immediately following the end of the American Civil War (1861-1865).

² The list I make will contain some different thinkers (or even the same thinkers, but in a different order or relation) than the list you will make, but our lists will most likely share some thinkers in common, and in general our lists will be able to be in conversation with each other’s.

³ During the practice of chattel slavery in the United States of America (in the seventeenth through the nineteenth centuries) slavery was roughly limited to southern states. (The border became more formalized in the late eighteenth century with the establishment of the Mason-Dixon Line that officially demarcated the borders of Pennsylvania and Maryland; and then in nineteenth century with the Missouri Compromise. The South became synonymous with slave-holding and the North became synonymous with non-slaveholding. As such, enslaved folks who escaped from plantations made the dangerous and harrowing journey North for their freedom (mostly traveling at night). As their guide the enslaved people followed the stars. The Little Dipper—Ursa Minor, also referred to as “the drinking gourd”—with the North Star (or Polaris) lit their nightly path.

⁴ Brittney Cooper’s prologue includes one of the most famous quotes from Anna Julia Cooper’s influential book *A Voice from the South* (1988: 12): “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 race enters with me.’” See: Anna Julia. *A Voice from the South*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1988.

⁵ Respectability is also referred to as “respectability politics.”

⁶ Cooper focuses on Williams’ engagement with the NACW between 1893-1905.

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- 7 Williams's term "organized anxiety" roots the intellectual content of racial change within Black women's bodies, identifying collective racial discontent and collective racial anxiety as forces that propelled institutional and social change through the work of organized Black women (39).
- 8 As it is, I am very uncomfortable with labeling Murray beyond what is given in Cooper's text.
- 9 Straight Black women particularly vexed Murray, despite her fervent defense of them in her manifesto. Murray was repeatedly rebuffed by putatively heterosexual Black women who, when they became attracted to her, told her to obtain psychiatric help and treated her as a deviant. Because of these conflicts, Murray did not always move unencumbered through the Black female social networks that characterize earlier generations of Black female leadership (105). While Murray's private sexual life suggested far more fluidity and non-conformity to heteronorms, her desire to move into public life subjected her to the disciplining forces of racial heteronormativity. (106)