
Brittney Cooper’s debut monograph is an intellectual history of African American women’s writing, speeches, and reform work that starts in the 1890s with the figure of Fannie Barrier Williams. Though the kernel of Cooper’s critique ends in the 1970s with a discussion of the work of Anna Arnold Hedgeman and Toni Cade Bambara, her brief epilogue extends her considerations to the present. *Beyond Respectability: The Intellectual Thought of Race Women* intervenes in discourses of black studies, philosophy, American history, and literary theory in the specific and cutting prose modeled by its title. By virtue of writing an *intellectual* history of Black women, Cooper demands that scholars contend with the concepts and theories of Black women authors with the same vigor applied to the work of, for instance, Sigmund Freud and Gilles Deleuze. Cooper’s designation of the public intellectuals she analyzes as “race women,” moreover, intervenes in the allocation of reform activity to Black *male* intellectuals—or “race men”—over the past 150 years. By referring to the thinkers she discusses as “race women,” Cooper reminds her readers of Black women’s significant roles in the public theorizing of gender, race, sexuality, and the nation throughout American history.

By using the term “race woman,” Cooper also confronts the tensions of class embroiled in the figure of “race men,” who, as in the cases of W.E.B. DuBois and Booker T. Washington, often celebrated themselves as particularly successful models of Black respectability. This response importantly engages prevailing methods of analyzing the work and lives of Black women, namely Darlene Clark Hine’s and Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham’s concepts of dissemblance and respectability, long highlighted as methods that reject Black embodiment and lower class and anti-bourgeois lifestyles. Cooper’s methodology for moving beyond these concepts is not to wholly reject or ignore them, but rather to develop a Black feminist method of critique distinguished by “care” and “trust.” To consider the work of Black women with care, Cooper writes, is to consider it with “scholarly rigor” (2). To trust Black women intellectuals is to “acknowledge, appreciate, struggle with, disagree with, sit with, and question” their work (2).

Though her overt subject here is the work of Fannie Barrier Williams (1855-1944), Mary Church Terrell (1863-1954), and Pauli Murray (1910-1985), among other intellectuals, Cooper’s history becomes a careful and trusting history of dissemblance and respectability: she locates these concepts’ tensions, uses, and restrictions in the particular contexts of what it meant for Black women to speak publicly in the Jim Crow and Civil Rights eras. For instance, Cooper relates Mary Church Terrell’s acceptance of her interpellation as white at the 1904 International Congress of Women in Berlin until the critical moment in which she took the podium, where she spectacularly identified herself as Black. While passing is often read, like respectability, as indicating “self-hatred” or “an attempt to secure white privilege” (81), Terrell’s delayed joke on the women who consistently asked her if she knew the “Negress” who would speak that weekend is both
reformative and political. Instead of forgiving or forgetting these women for promulgating politics such as respectability, Cooper locates these women in their specific contexts in order to more fully contend with their intellectual work.

Cooper’s primary analytical tool throughout this text is her theorizing of “embodied discourse,” a concept she extrapolates from the work of the post-Reconstruction Black feminist intellectual Anna Julia Cooper (1858-1964, of no relation to Brittney Cooper herself). Unlike dissemblance or respectability, embodied discourse foregrounds Black women’s representations of their physical existence. It is “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). In Berlin in 1904, for instance, embodied discourse is the means by which Mary Church Terrell makes her point clear: “by disrupting […] her colleagues’] attempts to read her as a white woman, by forcing them to see her as a Black woman after they had come to respect her intelligence and education, she was able, through the use of embodied discourse, to reframe the ways they thought about Black womanhood” (80). Historians and cultural critics cannot fully contend with nor locate the work of Black woman intellectuals in instances such as this one, Cooper argues, if they do not move beyond readings of respectability.

In addition to its critical importance for the discourse and practice of history and feminist theory, Cooper’s text is as lively and biting as the work she produces for popular venues such as the New York Times, The Root, and her co-created blog, the Crunk Feminist Collective. She terms, for instance, Terrell’s delayed embodied discourse in Berlin a “negression”:

In the spirit of Terrell’s wry and subversive humor in the face of having endured her white women colleagues referring to her as a ‘negress’ for days on end, I’d like to think that her big reveal at the podium was a negression, an act of social transgression designed to bring visibility to Black women on their own terms, and to resituate, even if briefly, the power of the gaze—of looking—in the eyes and at the hands and body of the Black woman. (80)

In other words, if Brittney Cooper designates her monograph Cooperian, following Anna Julia Cooper, she makes it easy for her readers to create (Brittney) Cooperian texts in turn: as in naming Terrell’s performance one of “negressive politics,” Cooper develops numerous useful concepts throughout her critique for the kind of work her subjects undertake and the kinds of methods authors engaging in the discourse of Black feminism can employ across disciplines. For its methodology and its development of theories of “organized anxiety” (34, 43), “dignified agitation” (58, 64), “listing” (26), and the “black radical spectacular” (121) alone, this book will prove itself to be important and game changing for generations of scholars to come.

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