

# Gender and Race: Exploring Anna Julia Cooper's Thoughts for Socially Just Educational Opportunities

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## Introduction

Many scholars, activists, and concerned educators have acknowledged that a socially just and equitable educational experience is the key to transforming lives and changing worlds. As noted by social justice scholars Maurianne Adams, Lee Anne Bell, and Pat Griffin, "In an increasingly abrasive and polarized American society . . . social justice can play a constructive role in helping people develop a more sophisticated understanding of diversity and social group interaction, more critically evaluate oppressive social patterns and institutions, and work more democratically with diverse others to create just and inclusive practices and social structures," particularly in the area of education.<sup>1</sup> Teaching for social justice is teaching that not only examines the legacy of the interlocking structures of oppression, but teaching that recognizes the fundamental requisites of human liberty, and in turn it engages students in a pursuit to resist the barriers to their full humanity.

Historical examinations of the pedagogical practices or the philosophical perspectives of social justice education are seldom studied. And the social justice ideas, writings, and intellectual discourses by past and present African-American educators who have utilized a social justice philosophical or pedagogical stance have been ignored or not taken up seriously in the dominant educational literature on social justice education. Anna Julia Cooper (1859?-1964)<sup>2</sup>, one of the most influential educators, activists, and scholars of the late nineteenth and early-to-mid twentieth centuries, developed sophisticated theoretical critiques of the race, gender, and class, ideologies underlying the U.S. and European oppression of blacks in this nation and in the black diaspora. Her writings and speeches reflected a social justice analysis in education and other sociological issues and cultural critiques that impacted the lives of African Americans. As an author and feminist, Cooper wrote *A Voice from the South* in 1892. This book, considered a black feminist treatise, consists of a collection of essays that reflects a black feminist analysis on racism and sexism. It focuses on the race problem in nineteenth-

century America as well as educational concerns for African Americans and higher education for women.

Cooper's commitment and passionate belief in the power of education as a vehicle to social, economic, and political freedom was a driving force in her life. Cooper initiated and implemented pioneering educational reforms, which reflected her distinctive vision of education for African Americans. Her vision of education challenged the dominant discourse concerning how blacks, females, and poor, working-class adults should be educated by offering alternative ways of educating these disenfranchised groups. She was also a passionate advocate for women's rights, especially for the education of African-American women. Cooper integrated her role as an educator with social, civic, and political activism. As an activist, Cooper was involved in numerous organizations and associations on the local and national level; she co-founded and assumed significant leadership roles in community improvement organizations and "racial uplift" advocacies. Cooper was also a major player in the black women's club movement during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Her activism came from her dedication to the advancement and empowerment of the African-American community. No doubt, Cooper's ideals of education were framed by her social location as an African-American woman in an era when few blacks and few women were educated, when in fact most were disenfranchised. Cooper lived and worked amid a time-frame when the political rights of African Americans were under systematic assault. This was also a period in which women were oppressed politically and economically because of their gender status in society. As historian Dorothy Sterling notes, "To be a Black woman in nineteenth and early twentieth-century America was to live in double jeopardy of belonging to the 'inferior' sex of an 'inferior' race."<sup>3</sup> Thus, for Cooper, activism and education became intertwined, thereby exemplifying a major theme in social justice education.

In an effort to advance Cooper's ideals in the canon on educational thought, this paper seeks to explore her ideas of social justice in education. Specifically, this author will use a critical feminist lens to identify and analyze themes in Cooper's writings and speeches that relate to her beliefs of social justice in education.

## **Theoretical Framework and Method**

Black feminist theory informs my theoretical framework. I use black feminist theory because it posits African-American women as a central frame of analysis and recognizes the intersectionality of gender, race, and class. Black feminist thought presents the validity of black women's cultural lived experiences and makes it possible to analyze black women, such as Cooper, within a conceptual paradigm that situates them in their own historical and cultural context. It is used to characterize the historical, socio-cultural, economic, and political standpoint of black women, a disenfranchised group that has encountered oppression in the U.S. due to their race, gender, and class status. Because of the oppressive and repressive social and political conditions African-American women have historically experienced in U.S. society, black women, especially educators like Cooper, have created social thought

devised to critique, challenge, and resist their encounters with injustices. With regards to this study, this framework allows me to examine how the interlocking forms of race, gender, and class affected Cooper's life and work and her struggle toward social justice in education. Given that black feminism attempts to explicate the lived experiences, ideas, and social activism of black women, in efforts to understand black women educators' work toward social justice, this essay will situate Cooper's thoughts and fight for social justice in education within her particular social and historical context.

With that said, this author examines the pivotal themes of Cooper's social justice educational ideas and practices. Using a historical method, I draw upon primary and secondary sources as well as a wide range of Cooper's social critiques and educational views in an effort to extrapolate those thoughts that illuminated themes of gender and race issues in education. This paper is particularly interested in knowing what educational perspectives of Cooper's gave rise to her fight for socially just educational opportunities for African Americans, black females, and for poor and working class black adults. It is important to note that the term "social justice education" was not necessarily used during Cooper's time. However, Cooper's writings, speeches, and correspondences uphold well-documented paradigms and beliefs about education for equity and justice for a group of people who lived on the fringes of a sexist and racially polarized society. This paper addresses the following questions: (1) how is Cooper's life and work informed by the social, cultural, and historical times in which she lived? (2) What contributions did she make toward the social justice efforts in education, particularly as it related to challenging the gender and race injustices in education? To unpack these questions, the first section of this paper presents a very brief overview of Cooper's life in order to set the context of events that informed her thinking on social justice education. Following this section is an examination of her perspectives on social justice in education. It highlights themes of gender and race during the different "steps," to use her word, or stages of her life and career as an educator.

### **Anna Julia Cooper: The Social and Historical Context of the Emergence of Cooper's Ideas**

Anna Julia Cooper, who lived to be 105 years old, witnessed several critical periods in United States history, from the antebellum era to the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s. Driven by a deep commitment to helping her race, gender, and the economically marginalized through education, Cooper rose to head one of the most prestigious African-American high schools in the nation's capital, the Washington Colored High School (later nicknamed "M Street" and still later renamed Paul Laurence Dunbar High School), by 1902. Later on, in 1930, Cooper served as second president of Frelinghuysen University, an independent university for working class, African-American, unlettered or semi-skilled adults. After working many years as an educator, Cooper eventually earned a Ph.D. in 1925 from the Université de Paris, Sorbonne, in Paris, France, at the age of 66.

Cooper was born Anna Haywood on August 10, 1859(?), under the inhumane

system of slavery in Raleigh, North Carolina. Her mother, Hannah Stanley, was enslaved to members of the prominent Haywood family of North Carolina. Anna Haywood's father is presumed to be George Washington Haywood, her mother's enslaver.<sup>4</sup> Annie, as she was affectionately called, was the youngest of three children. Her brothers, Rufus and Andrew, were 23 and 11 years older than Annie, respectively.

Although Annie's early years were spent during the tremendous upheaval of the Civil War, hope for freedom and full rights to citizenship brought new dreams and possibilities for her and the approximately four million newly freed people. In 1868, Annie was one of the first groups of students to attend the Saint Augustine Normal School and Collegiate Institute (now College). This school was founded under the auspices of the Protestant Episcopal Church, for the purpose of educating the newly freed people to become teachers and ministers who would provide leadership roles in the fight for racial uplift. Annie remained at this school for approximately 14 years, completing her course of study in the classical arts in 1877. Also in 1877, Anna Julia married George Christopher Cooper, an ordained Episcopalian minister and a former St. Augustine theology student. Unfortunately, the marriage ended two years later when George Cooper passed away in 1879. In 1881, Cooper enrolled in Oberlin College (now university) and pursued the "gentlemen's" course of study, which led to the four-year B.A. degree. She felt that the two-year "ladies" course of study was "inferior in scope and aim," and thus a waste of her time. Cooper graduated from Oberlin in 1884 with two other African-American women, Mary Church (Terrell) and Ida A. Gibbs (Hunt).

After graduation, Cooper taught at Wilberforce University for one year then returned to Raleigh to teach at Saint Augustine. While there, she fought to secure equal treatment and salaries for African-American teachers in the North Carolina schools and argued for public school provisions for black youth. In 1887, Cooper accepted a teaching position at the Washington Colored High School (again, nicknamed "M Street" and later renamed Paul Laurence Dunbar), the most prestigious black high school in the nation during that time. In that same year, Cooper was awarded a master's degree from Oberlin in mathematics.

The period from 1887 to 1906 marked a turning point in Cooper's professional career. In the 1890s, she became a major player in the black women's club movement on the local and national level. The numerous organizations Cooper was involved in sought to ameliorate the educational and social welfare issues that were plaguing the African-American community. One of the clubs included the National Association of Colored Women, a major black organization that heavily campaigned for an anti-lynching bill. Cooper was one of the founders of this club, which was established in 1896. Also during the 1890s, Cooper was frequently sought after to give presentations on topics pertaining to race uplift, women's equality, and education. In 1892, she published her book *A Voice from the South*, and in 1893 she spoke at a special session that focused on the progress of black women in the United States at the Women's Congress in Chicago. Two years later, Cooper attended the First National Conference of Colored Women in Boston, where she delivered a paper that outlined the need for black women to organize

on a national level. In 1900, Cooper was invited to speak at the first Pan-African Conference in London, along with William Edward Burghardt Du Bois. By 1902, Cooper became principal of M Street. During the four years she served as principal, the school achieved significant recognition. A large number of M Street's graduates were awarded admissions to major universities in the Mid-west and the North. Despite her successes as a principal, Cooper became enmeshed in a controversy over her refusal to allow the school board to dismantle M Street's college preparatory curriculum and replace it with a vocational one. Following her dismissal from the school, Cooper moved to Missouri to teach at Lincoln University in 1906. Four years later, she was asked to return to teach Latin at M Street in 1910. Six years after that, Cooper fought to have M Street High School's name changed to honor the famous African-American poet, Paul Laurence Dunbar. Not long after Cooper returned to Washington, she began raising one of her brother's five grandchildren while simultaneously pursuing her doctorate degree at Teachers College, Columbia University. Family and job constraints prevented Cooper from completing her degree at Teachers College; instead, she was able to get her doctorate at the Sorbonne in 1925. After retiring from Dunbar High School, Cooper became president of Frelinghuysen University. She brought many years of successful teaching, administrative skills, and a strong sense of commitment to this school. The school finally closed its doors in 1964, the year Cooper passed away at the age of 105. In honor of Cooper's commitment to education and social advocacies, the District of Columbia named a street after her, the Anna J. Cooper Memorial Circle, which is in the *Le Droit Park* community.

Cooper's career as an educator and educational administrator spanned for a period of approximately 66 years. She was a consummate educator, scholar, and feminist who was an advocate for race, gender, and class educational equalities. Her philosophical ideas about social justice and equitable educational experiences for African Americans, females, and poor unlettered adults emerged and evolved in different time-frames of her teaching career. As previously mentioned, Cooper's educational thoughts and fight for justice in the realm of education were shaped by the historical, social, and cultural context in which she lived. The interlocking structures of sexism, racism, and classism thrust her into a lifetime of social justice education.

Cooper's thinking about social justice in education fell into the categories of gender, race, and class. The interrelationship of gender, race, and class without a doubt formed the experiences of individuals in this social order, in that they were "overlapping and cumulative in their effect on people's [lives],"<sup>5</sup> and at times, Cooper may have felt the impact of one of the categories more than the others, and on other occasions, she may have felt them simultaneously. For the sake of space and page limitations, I examine the categories of gender and race below, not class. This examination includes an unpacking of Cooper's ideas and/or social justice strategies at the various junctures of her life.

## Anna Julia Cooper and Social Justice in Gender and Race

### "Give the Girls a Chance!": Cooper and Her Views on Gender Education

Cooper's viewpoints about education and social justice, and the fight for gender access in her early life, emerged from her and her mother's experiences as newly freed female ex-slaves living in the era of Reconstruction. During this time-frame, hope for economic, social, and political freedom served as a theme for many newly freed people. Cooper, her mother, Hannah, and the many freed persons were "shaped spiritually and intellectually by the optimistic worldview of the Reconstruction period," explains womanist scholar Karen Baker-Fletcher.<sup>6</sup> Many of the formerly enslaved, like Cooper, possessed a passionate thirst and desire to read, write, and critically reflect upon their world. After years of enslavement, Hannah, Annie, and many of the newly liberated viewed their freedom as enabling them to affirm their rights for the first time. Indeed, education for formerly enslaved females such as Cooper "was a matter of personal liberation and a necessary function of a free society."<sup>7</sup> Hannah no doubt believed that an education for her daughter would remove the vestiges of slavery, illiteracy, and powerlessness, and thus that she would, in turn, unselfishly "eke out enough from her poverty to send [Annie] . . . to school"<sup>8</sup> in her efforts to ensure that Annie would be granted rights to full citizenship. Hence, Cooper's early thoughts about education and social justice revolved around the concepts of gender, race, class equality, and social change.

Cooper was one of the fortunate few newly freed females to be given a chance to learn when she was offered a scholarship to attend St. Augustine. She recognized that it was her duty and obligation to use her skills to improve the lives of her people, especially the females of the race, because it was the females she believed who were "both the lever and the fulcrum for uplifting the [women and the] race."<sup>9</sup> Yet it was at St. Augustine that Cooper encountered sexist barriers to her educational development. Her exclusion from higher educational classes designated for the male students awakened in Cooper a feminist consciousness, sensitive to the need to fight for equal educational access and opportunities between the sexes. As Cooper explains about such discriminatory practices at St. Augustine,

A boy, however meager his equipment and shallow his pretensions [sic] . . . could get all the support [and] encouragement he needed . . . While a self-supporting girl had to . . . fight her way against discouragements to higher education.<sup>10</sup>

Unquestionably, sexism interrelated with race and class impacted Cooper's life and the lives of many African-American women and girls during the 1860s. For Cooper, the unequal configuration of relationships between the female and male students in her school as well as in other institutions in the world in which she lived had to be changed on a conscious and institutional level. Cooper became very critical about the "system of beliefs and behaviors" by which women and girls were "oppressed,

controlled and exploited" due to their alleged gender distinctions.<sup>11</sup> She scoffed at masculinist and sexist statements such as "ideas are like beards [and] women and boys have none;" at the belief that the "great law of self development was obligatory on [the men's] half of the human family;" as well as at other assumptions that higher-order thinking skills or higher educational experiences "spoiled" women or rendered them less desirable marriage mates.<sup>12</sup> From Cooper's standpoint, the prevailing social attitudes and practices about women and girls unfairly buttressed the gender inequalities that this marginalized group experienced in the familial, educational, and other social institutions they encountered. From her perspective and lived experiences, barring women and girls from higher education or other opportunities led to a female life that was not only "stagnant, indolent and wretched," but one that experienced unrelenting subordination to men and boys.<sup>13</sup> So, for Cooper, educational opportunities for females were to be an equalizing tool between the sexes. She also believed that if women and girls became better educated, the discrimination they experienced would cease, in that they would be more involved as equals to men, in a struggle for a better social order. As she poetically argues, higher education among the sexes was to give rise to the "consummat[ion] that Mercy, the lesson she teaches, and Truth, the task man has set himself, should meet together: [and] that . . . *rightness*, [italics in text] man's ideal,—and *peace*, [italics in text] its necessary 'other half,' should kiss each other," in efforts to join forces that would contribute to "a higher type of civilization than . . . attained in the nineteenth" century.<sup>14</sup>

Cooper's gradual acute awareness of the systemic manifestations of sexism in her social context contributed to her unflinching challenge to the ideas and behaviors that denied or limited educational access for females. For Cooper, an equal access to higher-order thinking skills and to higher education for females should be a space that gives rise to women and girls' creative ways of knowing, as well as a space that contributes to their intellectual and social activist work for overall community betterment. As Cooper explains, educational opportunities for females would not only "broaden and deepen" the female's "sympathies," or "extend" her "horizons" [sic], but also "add to the expansiveness and zest of her soul."<sup>15</sup> In addition, such educational chances would "swell and inspire [women and girls'] heart" and prepare each to take their rightful place "as a helpful agent in the progress of civilization" and social democracy.<sup>16</sup> As argued by Cooper,

I ask the men and women who are teachers and co-workers for the highest interests of the race, that they give the girls a chance! We might as well grow trees from leaves as hope to build up a civilization or a manhood without taking into consideration our women . . . which must be the root and ground of the whole matter. Let us insist . . . on special encouragement for the education of our women and special care in their training.<sup>17</sup>

Cooper staunchly believed that the aforementioned stakeholders of society must seriously teach black females that "we expect more of them than . . . merely

look[ing] pretty.”<sup>18</sup> She posited that members of the black community needed to raise the level of awareness of the black females to the fact that the African-American community needed them as educated individuals to assist in addressing and combating the “special needs” of the black community caused by the interlocking structures of oppression. Cooper argues,

Teach [our women and girls] that there is a race with special needs which they and only they can help [and] that the world needs them and is already asking for their trained, efficient forces.<sup>19</sup>

From Cooper’s perspective, a well-educated Christian black woman was “potent [as] a missionary agency among [black] people as is the theologian” because her fight against the social and institutional injustices that African Americans encountered, especially in the South, was undeniably needed. Hence, from Cooper’s perspective, gaining education for females was not just about individual intellectual enlightenment and self-improvement, but this education was to be used as a tool to assist in the overall black liberation battle for justice and social transformation.

### Cooper’s Fight for Racial Parity in Education

The 1887 to the 1906 time-frames denoted a defining moment in Cooper’s professional career. According to educational historian Derrick Alridge, during this period Cooper believed that “a strong foundation of leadership in the [b]lack community was needed to advance them along the road to progress and civilization.”<sup>20</sup> Yet the road to this progress was contingent upon a highly educated class of African-American students who would become, Cooper believed, the torchbearers of the race who would work toward chipping away at the racially embedded system of power relations. For those reasons, educational parity for black youth was essential in their preparation for the battle that awaited them.

Therefore, for Cooper, the fight for racial parity in education was also a fight for black empowerment. As an activist educator concerned about social justice issues, Cooper consistently stayed on the front line in her combat for equitable educational experiences for members of her race and gender. She “did more than theorize change in the abstract,” notes Women’s Studies scholar Vivian May, “she was dedicated to linking dissident thought with transformative practice.”<sup>21</sup> The concept of educational parity for black empowerment was a theme that resonated with African-American educators like Cooper, due especially to the fact that the quality of education for African Americans had been “in a state of crisis since the close of the Civil War, when educating African American . . . students became legal.”<sup>22</sup> As explained by educational scholar Carol Lee, “Through Jim Crow and inadequately resourced segregated schools, African Americans struggled to make education a tool to support community and political empowerment and economic advancement for families.”<sup>23</sup> This was the case with regards to Cooper, who was scathing in her critiques of the educational, economic, social, and political disparities that characterized the lives of many African Americans in this nation. She fervently argued that



The Colored people of the United States . . . want for themselves and their descendants . . . all the advantages and opportunities of an education as the term is interpreted and understood in the most favored groups in our American civilization. . . .<sup>24</sup>

Drawing on her experiences of living in a racist, sexist, classist social order, Cooper's argument deconstructs an image of society that is depicted by relations of power and domination. Cooper clearly recognized that equal opportunities to an education for African Americans were a fundamental right in this nation. In her view, not only did African Americans warrant, need, and expect equitable opportunities to an education, the future of the race depended on it. She realized that African Americans would "sink or swim according to the education they received."<sup>25</sup> Thus, from Cooper's lived experiences and viewpoint, an equal educational opportunity that had a liberal arts curriculum would liberate African Americans from the vestiges of enslavement and racial degradation that, "for two-hundred and fifty years," she notes, subjugated the "body, mind, and sensibility" of disenfranchised blacks to the will and control of the oppressor.<sup>26</sup> That is why Cooper's fight for racial parity in education for black empowerment was very heavily waged at the Washington Colored High School (a.k.a. "M Street" High School).

When Cooper was principal at M Street High School, from 1901 to 1906, the achievements of her students were significant. Many who came under her tutelage and influence made major contributions and played prominent roles in American society. As one student recalls, "at 'M Street,' we were taught that our lives were to be lives of service and uplift to our race and our country."<sup>27</sup> During Cooper's four-year tenure as principal at M Street, the school's college preparatory program was considerably changed and expanded. She standardized the college preparatory curriculum and "strove unceasingly to prepare her students for successful admittance to non-segregated northern and mid-western universities, [such as], Amherst, Brown, Harvard, Radcliffe, Oberlin, Yale, Cornell . . ." etc.<sup>28</sup>

Cooper's leadership and fight for racial parity in education reveal far-ranging accomplishments at M Street that speak to a remarkable legacy, particularly given the socio-historical context of her era. By the time Cooper was appointed head of M Street, segregation had become a full-fledged effort to subjugate and stigmatize African Americans.<sup>29</sup> Six years before she became principal of the school, the 1896 Supreme Court decision *Plessy vs. Ferguson* implemented the "separate but equal" doctrine concerning public facilities and services used by African Americans. The sanctioning of legal racial segregation by the Supreme Court gave rise to numerous public policies that articulated the importance of maintaining a caste system catering to the political and economic interests of the white ruling class while oppressing and exploiting people of color. In terms of its effects on public schooling in the District of Columbia and the South, the "separate but equal" dictum not only contributed to the solidification of a dual system of schools segregating blacks and whites, it also championed an educational ideology and curriculum that emphasized rudimentary literacy and industrial educational skills for African Americans. However, the District of Columbia's black high school (M Street) was unique in

that the liberal arts course of study it offered was the norm, as opposed to an anomaly. Unfortunately, Cooper's educational practices and initiatives at M Street eventually were tested and challenged when the school district attempted to abolish the liberal arts program and replace it with a vocational program that was meant to accommodate the presumed inferior cultural, intellectual, and biological characteristics of African Americans.

Despite the fact that Cooper's fierce struggle to maintain the college preparatory program at M Street drew citywide attention and support as well as extensive coverage in the *Washington Post* newspaper, she was charged with insubordination and was eventually dismissed from her position as principal of the school. All too often educators such as Cooper who implement anti-racist teaching practices and "who seek to redefine curriculum and social relationships inside and outside the classroom, find them in conflict with existing [racist, classist, and sexist] patriarchal ideology and hierarchical relationships," notes feminist educational scholar Kathleen Weiler.<sup>30</sup> This was indeed the situation Cooper found herself in. She ardently believed that education, especially for African Americans, should focus on the development of critical thinking, full human development, and intellectual freedom, and in turn give rise to her students' liberation. For Cooper, the type of education that would contribute to intellectual freedom was a classical arts curriculum. She argues:

Teachers from Aristotle to the present have sifted and analysed [sic] the various branches of learning to get at their worth as educative factors. . . . They are universally accepted by teachers and thinkers as a reasonable and proper basis for the education of [humankind].<sup>31</sup>

This curriculum, as Cooper maintains, "gives direction of thought-power, power of appreciation, power of willing the right . . . and to the divine possibilities in all human development."<sup>32</sup> Cooper espoused a view that any curriculum that will contribute to the racial and economic subordination of African Americans was extremely problematic and unacceptable. She argued:

no people can progress, without vivifying touch of ideas and ideals. The very policy of segregation renders all the more the necessary leadership that has been on the Mount. If any group or class cannot be allowed living contact through seeing, hearing, feeling the best of life in their day and generation, there is no compensation morally or socially except to let them find their thrills through the inspiration of the broadest education and generously equipped schools.<sup>33</sup>

Cooper's above-quoted statements reveal her unrelenting support for philosophical beliefs and pedagogical practices of education that pertain to educational equity and empowerment for blacks. Cooper was very aware of how public schools, especially those for African Americans, reinforced values of domination, power, and

oppression via the curriculum and other pedagogical practices. Cooper recognized how “the political space that education occupies de-emphasizes the struggle for teacher and student empowerment.”<sup>34</sup> As explained by critical pedagogue Peter McLaren, educational programs are “designed to create individuals who operate in the interests of the state . . . [as well as] correspond to the demands of industry, thereby reproducing in schools the existing class, race, and gender relations in our society.”<sup>35</sup> Even though white supremacist western hegemonic masculinist values were taught in segregated black schools, many of these schools were sites where alternative ways of teaching and learning gave rise to the insurrection of subjugated knowledge, marginalized experiences, and oppression.<sup>36</sup> This was the case with M Street High School with Cooper as the activist educator at its helm.

Implicit in the school district's proposal to reorganize and supplant M Street's curriculum with an industrial educational program was the design to prepare black students for lives that would fulfill the expectations of the segregated order—lives based on racial and gender oppression and economic subordination.<sup>37</sup> Cooper was not resistant to industrial educational preparation *per se*, but she was opposed to the proposed replacement of the liberal arts curriculum for an industrial one that was supposedly considered more realistic and appropriate for African Americans.<sup>38</sup> In fact, Cooper maintained that the best educational programs should include both liberal arts and vocational education. However, the type of industrial education programs she felt were appropriate were those that prepared students for practical trades and business skills. In an article titled “On Education,” Cooper argued,

The only sane education . . . is that which conserves the very lowest stratum, the best and most economical . . . [because it] . . . gives to each individual according to his capacity that training of head, hand, and heart . . . which converts him into a beneficent force in the service of the world.<sup>39</sup>

In addition to the insubordination alleged, Cooper also got fired because the board of education was opposed to her teaching methods, which she called “sympathetic” methods that enable “weak” students in their academic achievement. In addition, Cooper and her staff collectively refused to use board-adopted textbooks, instead developing and using books that Cooper felt were more appropriate for her students' academic success. Cooper and her faculty utilized these pedagogical practices and student-centered, teacher-tailor-made curriculum for the betterment of black students rather than employ textbooks and teaching methods that impeded the progress of the students. As explained by Cooper,

Segregated teachers are largely book-fed. What is worse, they believe what is in the books. . . . A white man doesn't always mean all he says in a book. . . . We [as teachers] have been so ridden with tests and measurements, so leashed and spurred for percentages and retardations that the machinery has run away with the mass production and quite a way back bumped off the driver.

I wonder that a robot has not been invented to make the assignments, give the objective tests, mark the scores and chloroform all teachers who dared bring original thought to the specific problems and needs of their pupils.<sup>40</sup>

Cooper's philosophical stance is grounded in critiques of traditional educational methods, standards, and curriculum. For Cooper, education should not be relegated to a mechanical approach of instruction that requires drill, rote, and memorization. In her view, that type of education hinders the intellectual creativity of the teacher and contributed to the lack of what she calls "any Renaissance or primal naissance of real thinking in Negro Schools."<sup>41</sup> Cooper's reflective comments reveal an understanding on her part of how subordinated groups, i.e. African-American teachers and students in segregated school sites, become dehumanized, depoliticized, and devalued. Schools, particularly during Cooper's era, have a long legacy of forcing teachers to live "lives of mechanical routine" and subjecting them "to a machine of supervision, organization, classification, grading[,] . . . uniformity . . . etc."<sup>42</sup> These schools, as one nineteenth-century educator observed, did not allow for "room in the school culture for individuality, ideas, independence, originality, study, and investigation."<sup>43</sup> Too often in the public school setting, teachers are stripped of their decision-making potential; this was because the school boards viewed teaching as "nearly synonymous with executing pre-fashioned methodologies and delivering prepackaged curricula."<sup>44</sup>

When Cooper challenged the status quo by refusing to be what critical educator Henry Giroux calls a "clerk of the empire," she was engaging in a social justice strategy that attempted to empower her students' and teachers' dreams, desires, voices, and rights to have access to an equitable and educational experience. This kind of strategy not only reflects a revolutionary pedagogy of resistance but also a form of social justice activism in education essential to the struggle for African-American empowerment.<sup>45</sup> As May observes of Cooper's fight for educational equity at M Street, "Cooper's steadfast public resistance and palpable outrage, her willingness to lose her only means of support and put her career and character on the line . . . and her rejection of an inferior curriculum for African American students all illustrate an intense devotion to realizing social change [and racial empowerment], rather than simply theorizing about principles of equality in the abstract."<sup>46</sup>

## Summary and Conclusion

Cooper's philosophical ideas about social justice equity, access, and empowerment for the women, girls, and the race via the vehicle of education were integrated with her pedagogical work as an educator and social activist.<sup>47</sup> As an educator committed to the struggle for gender and race advancement, Cooper utilized pedagogical practices and thoughts that were focused on transforming the educational experiences that circumscribed the lives of marginalized groups. Her pedagogy was political in that it was rooted in an anti-racist, anti-sexist, and anti-classist

battle. As an activist educator, Cooper developed pedagogical strategies that were intended to subvert the rules that impeded the equal educational opportunities for her students. She benevolently worked to produce accomplished black and female students who would not only seek out intellectual pursuits and human fulfillment, but who would also "serve the best of one's powers in the advancement of one's generation," to use Cooper's words. The schools Cooper headed were not only milieus where the learning of academic skills was imparted, they were also centers where she attempted to transform the lives of her students in meaningful and impacting ways. Her most significant achievement has been her re-articulation of philosophical ideals and pedagogical practices that contributed to the academic empowerment of the women, girls, and the race.

Anna Julia Cooper's efficacy as an educator provides a constructive resource and noteworthy supplement to contemporary literature on social justice education. The themes of gender and race in social justice education are found throughout Cooper's work. These themes are important, particularly in light of the fact that for many low-income, urban black and female youth, the promise of educational equitable experiences continues to be a fleeting reality in contemporary society, more than 50 years after the U.S. Supreme Court's *Brown vs. Board of Education* decision, a decision that declared that the "separate but equal" dictum had no place in public education. Yet there continues to be a nagging and unrelenting persistence in *de facto* school segregation or re-segregation of public schools nationwide.<sup>48</sup> The ongoing pervasive disparities in the academic achievement among male and female students, racial/ethnic student groups, and students from low-income and affluent socioeconomic backgrounds are a well-documented dilemma in this nation's public schools. This major problem has indeed drawn national attention to the urgent need to improve the academic achievement for all children via initiatives that would close the achievement gaps between various student groups. If we as a nation are committed to the equitable educational experiences of urban minority youth, we need to explore a different, more proactive approach to educating them. Research has revealed that for the most part, black educators from the past and the present have produced valuable cultural paradigms that could inform educational research on how to effectively educate African-American male and female students. In today's society, we need educators such as Cooper who sincerely believed that "all [students] are capable and desirous of living a life of meaning and that all can be educated to be free and responsible."<sup>49</sup> We need educators who are committed to teaching in the urban school setting, implementing a curriculum that is inclusive and reflective of culturally, linguistically, and racially diverse urban school populations. Finally, we need educators such as Cooper who will not only impart the prerequisites under which all students can convey their full human potential but who will, like Cooper, tear down the walls of gender, race, and class oppression and in their place build institutions that support educational parity and justice for urban school youth. As articulated by Cooper,

Life has meant a big opportunity and I am thankful that my work has always been the sort that beckoned me on, leaving no room

for blasé philosophizing and rebellion's resentment and with just enough opposition to give zest to the struggle, just enough hope of scoring somewhere among the winners to keep my head unbowed though bloody.<sup>50</sup>

Hence, the legacy Cooper leaves for those of us in the present is a vision for a more just experience for all students, particularly for those on the fringes of the U.S. dominant social hierarchy.

## Notes

1. Maurianne Adams, Lee Anne Bell, & Pat Griffin, *Teaching for Diversity and Social Justice* (New York: Routledge, Taylor & Frances Group, 2007), xvii.
2. There are questions as to Cooper's birth year. Most people give her birth year as 1858, however, there is no hard evidence that she was born that year. Cooper's birth year also has been reported as 1860 by the Moorland-Spingarn Research Center, Howard University. Cooper recorded her birth year as 1860 on the 1930s Negro College Graduates' Questionnaire. On this same form, she writes that she was 17 years old when she got married in 1877, thereby putting her birth year at 1860. I have recorded her birth year as likely being 1859 because on the 1900 U.S. Census for the District of Columbia, Cooper's age is recorded as 41. Also, the International Genealogical Index of North America, founded via the Church of Latter Day Saints Family Search site, lists Cooper's birth year as 1859. In addition, interviews I conducted with a former Paul Laurence Dunbar High School student of Cooper's revealed that there is a possibility that Cooper's birth year is 1859. The archival papers and information on Cooper at Oberlin University also list her birth year as 1859.
3. Dorothy Sterling, *We are Your Sisters: Black Women in the Nineteenth Century* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1984), ix.
4. This information was obtained from an interview with Cooper's great, great, great nephew Sterling Smith, in Washington, D.C., in 1996 and from an unpublished paper by Regina Smith, Cooper's great, great, great niece. This information comes also from research conducted on the Haywood family by Dr. Paul Philips Cooke, a former Paul Laurence Dunbar High School student when Cooper was a teacher there. See also historian Mary Helen Washington's introduction to the reprinted edition of Cooper's *A Voice from the South by a Black Woman of the South*. In this introduction, Washington notes that Cooper got confirmation that George Washington Haywood was her father.
5. Margaret L. Anderson & Patricia Hill Collins, *Race, Class, and Gender: An Anthology* (New York: Wadsworth Publishing Co., 1995), xi.
6. Karen Baker-Fletcher, *A Singing Something: Womanist Reflections on Anna Julia Cooper* (New York: Crossroads, 1994), 33.
7. James Anderson, *The Education of Blacks in the South, 1860-1935*, (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1988), 18.
8. Anna Julia Cooper, in Bert Loewenberg & Ruth Bogin edition, *Black Women in Nineteenth Century American Life* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1976), 330.

9. Anna Julia Cooper, *A Voice from the South by a Black Woman of the South* (Reprint, New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 45.
10. Cooper, *A Voice from the South*, 77.
11. Anderson & Collins, *Race, Class, and Gender*, 67.
12. Cooper, *A Voice from the South*, 68, 65
13. Cooper, *A Voice from the South*, 70.
14. Cooper, *A Voice from the South*, 57.
15. Cooper, *A Voice from the South*, 63
16. Cooper, *A Voice from the South*, 63
17. Cooper, *A Voice from the South*, 78.
18. Cooper, *A Voice from the South*, 78.
19. Cooper, *A Voice from the South*, 78.
20. Derrick P. Alridge, "Of Victorianism, Civilizationism, and Progressivism: The Educational Ideas of Anna Julia Cooper and W. E. B. Du Bois, 1892-1940," *History of Education Quarterly*, vol. 47, no. 4, Nov. 2007: 426.
21. Vivian M. May, *Anna Julia Cooper: Visionary Black Feminist* (New York: Routledge, 2007), 45.
22. Carol D. Lee, "The State of Knowledge about the Education of African Americans," in Joyce E. King edition, *Black Education: A Transformative Research and Action Agenda for the New Century* (Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2005), 46.
23. Lee, "The State of Knowledge."
24. Undated document by Anna Julia Cooper, in Anna Julia Cooper's Papers, Moorland-Spangarn Research Center, Howard University, Washington, D.C. Hereinafter, AJC Papers in MSRC.
25. Adam Fairclough, *A Class of their Own: Black Teachers in the Segregated South* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007), 7.
26. Anna Julia Cooper, *A Voice from the South by a Black Woman of the South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 102.
27. Ursuline Brooks, quoted in Jacqueline Moore, *Leading the Race: Transformation of the Black Elite in the Nation's Capital, 1880-1920* (Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia Press, 1999), 93.
28. Henry S. Robinson, "The M Street High School, 1891-1916" (unpublished paper loaned to this author courtesy of Dr. Paul Philip Cooke's private collection.), 6.
29. Robert Cottrol, Raymond T. Diamond, & Leland B. Ware, *Brown v. Board of Education: Caste, Culture, and the Constitution* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 2003).
30. Kathleen Weiler, *Women Teaching for Change: Gender, Class, and Power* (Westport, CT: Bergin & Garvey, 1988), 101.
31. Anna Julia Cooper "On Education," in Charles Lemert & Esme Bhan edition, *The Voice of Anna Julia Cooper, Including A Voice from the South and Other Important Essays, Papers, and Letters* (New York: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 1998), 252.
32. Cooper, "On Education," 252.
33. Louise Daniel Hutchinson, *Anna J. Cooper: A Voice from the South* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press 1982), 81.

34. Peter McLaren, *Life in Schools: An Introduction to Critical Pedagogy in the Foundations of Education* (New York: Longman, 1994), 1.
35. McLaren, *Life in Schools*, 1-2.
36. bell hooks, *Teaching Community: A Pedagogy of Hope* (New York: Routledge, 2003), 1-2.
37. Karen A. Johnson, *Uplifting the Women and the Race: The Educational Philosophies and Social Activism of Anna Julia Cooper and Nannie Helen Burroughs* (New York: Garland, 2000), 82-83.
38. Leona Gabel, *From Slavery to the Sorbonne and Beyond: The Life and Writings of Anna Julia Cooper* (Northampton, MA: Smith College, 1980), 51.
39. Cooper, "On Education," 250.
40. Anna Julia Cooper, "The Humor of Teaching," in Charles Lemert & Esme Bhan edition, *The Voice of Anna Julia Cooper, Including A Voice from the South and Other Important Essays, Papers, and Letters* (New York: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 1998), 234
41. Cooper, "The Humor of Teaching," 235.
42. Henry Giroux & Peter McLaren, "Teacher Education and the Politics of Engagement: The Case for Democratic Schooling," in L. P. Woodrum & S. A. Sherblom, eds., *Breaking Free: The Transformative Power of Critical Pedagogy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Educational Review, 1996), 301.
43. Giroux & McLaren, "Teacher Education and the Politics of Engagement," 301.
44. Giroux & McLaren, "Teacher Education and the Politics of Engagement," 301.
45. Johnson, *Uplifting the Women and the Race*, 84; hooks, *Teaching Community*.
46. May, *Anna Julia Cooper: Visionary Black Feminist*, 46.
47. See Karen A. Johnson, *Uplifting the Women and the Race: The Educational Philosophies and Social Activism of Anna Julia Cooper and Nannie Helen Burroughs* (New York: Garland, 2000).
48. Jonathan Kozol, *The Shame of the Nation: The Restoration of Apartheid in Schooling in American* (New York: Three Rivers Press, 2005).
49. D. E. Purpel, *The Moral and Spiritual Crises in Education* (Granby, MA: Bergin & Garvey, 1989), 10.
50. Anna Julia Cooper, "My Racial Philosophy," in Charles Lemert & Esme Bhan edition, *The Voice of Anna Julia Cooper, Including A Voice from the South and Other Important Essays, Papers, and Letters* (New York: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 1998), 237.



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