



Anna Julia Cooper: A Life Revealed

by

Melinda Lewis

Thesis  
Submitted to the Faculty of the  
Department of History of Vanderbilt University  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for Honors  
in  
History

1996

On the basis of this thesis and of  
the written and oral examinations  
taken by the candidate on 4/12/96  
and on 5/2/96 we, the undersigned,  
recommend that the candidate be  
awarded HIGH HONORS in History.

James Lewis Franklin  
Francis W. White  
John Smith H. H. H. H.

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## Introduction

Each and every day, black women simultaneously experience race, gender and class, whether they recognize it or not.<sup>1</sup> Whether relegated to domestic work because they have little opportunity to do better, harassed by an employer who values their sexual availability rather than their work, or questioned by a sales clerk because of their presence in an expensive store, black women know and live the relationship between various systems of oppression.<sup>2</sup> Major systems of oppression such as race, gender and class interact and interconnect within an overarching system of domination that perpetuates discrimination and prejudice.

For many decades, black women lived within this dynamic. It would not be an overstatement to say that the experiences of black women are universal (to them as a group), historical, and contemporary. Many black women wrote their experiences in their diaries, journals, lectures, speeches, and books. Through these mediums, black women theorized their

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<sup>1</sup>For several reasons, the terms "black women" and "African American Women" are used interchangeably throughout this text. First, I interchange them because for most of my life I and the women around me have been known and called themselves "black women". Second, and more important, the use of these terms is historical. In this introduction, I use black women to establish that in this historical study, the term black women was in common use (next to Negro and colored which I have decided not to use); in the conclusion, the terms African American women will be in greater use to signify recent changes in thought and language.

<sup>2</sup>The incidents listed here are taken from personal experience, the experiences of my friends, mothers, aunts, grandmothers and othermothers. They are also examples of the historical experiences of black women recorded in books such as Jacqueline Jones' *Labor of Love, Labor of Sorrow: Black Women, Work and the Family, From Slavery to the Present* (New York, 1985), Patricia Hill Collins' *Black Feminist Thought* (New York, 1990) and Gerda Lerner's *Black Women in White America: A Documentary History* (New York, 1972). Sexual availability does not imply black women's complicity. In fact, black women often had little or no choice in terms of their bodies being "available" to their employers or their slave master as the situation is described on page nine of this text.

experiences and claimed their voices. By capturing the ways in which they viewed themselves and their lives and putting it onto a page, black women created a theory that reflected the ways they lived. Maria W. Stewart, one of the first women to lecture publicly, Sojourner Truth, Harriet Tubman, and Linda Brent all theorized the ways in which multiple systems of oppression affected their lives.

One of the most notable and least studied of these women, however, was Anna Julia Cooper, activist, educator and author of *A Voice from the South by a Black Woman of the South* (1892), her analysis of multiple oppressions. Recent arbiters of the relationship between multiple oppressions recognize Cooper's place as one of the earliest theorists of interlocking systems of oppression. Beverly Guy-Sheftall, historian and literary critic, called Cooper's *A Voice* "the first black feminist analysis of the condition of blacks and women" and further wrote that it has the "distinction of being the first scholarly publication in the area of Black Women's Studies, though the concept had certainly not emerged during the period."<sup>3</sup> Although Guy-Sheftall recognized the contribution of Cooper's work, she and many other historians left the details of Cooper's life in obscurity. Indeed, some historians, such as Lerome Bennett, Jr. and John Hope Franklin, renowned historians of African American history, failed even to mention Cooper in their works.<sup>4</sup>

Cooper's absence from the tomes of African American history and the unequal treatment she receives compared to women such as Ida D. Wells-

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<sup>3</sup> Beverly Guy-Sheftall, *Daughters of Sorrow: Attitudes Toward Black Women, 1880-1920* (Brooklyn, 1990), 25, 168.

<sup>4</sup> See John Hope Franklin and Alfred A. Moss, Jr., *From Slavery to Freedom: A History of Negro Americans* . 7th ed. (New York, 1988) and Lerome Bennett, Jr., *Before the Mayflower: A History of Black America* . 6th ed. (New York, 1988).

Barnett, Mary Church Terrell and Mary McLeod Bethune in the works of black women historians belie her significance. Anna Julia Cooper was an articulate spokeswoman for the particular burdens of black women. She revealed on many occasions the plight created by being black and female. In many ways, Anna Julia Cooper is the historical example of the lives of African American women and the theorizing that developed from their cultural experiences.

Anna Julia Cooper's life, 1858-1964, was a commentary on the eras through which she lived. Born in slavery and buried during the modern civil rights movement, Cooper lived her life criticizing and struggling against oppression. Her deeds, especially in the social and political arena, clarified several burdens that she experienced as a young child at St. Augustine's Normal School and as a young college student at Oberlin.<sup>5</sup> In the essays, articles and lectures that she wrote preceding the last decade of the nineteenth century, Cooper dealt in various ways with the burdens of race and gender. Yet, only in 1892, when Aldine Press in Xenia, Ohio published *A Voice from the South by a Black Woman of the South* did Anna Julia Cooper explicitly connect these systems of oppression, place black women at the intersection of these burdens and offer solutions to the burdens and problems of the country.

Cooper purposely included the word voice in the title of her book. For many black women, voice was a powerful tool to enact social change; change could not occur until black women voiced the experiences of oppression, the weight of burdens. Voice invoked the burdens of suffering, slights and pain. Criticizing and pointing a finger, voice screamed anger at injustice. Voice

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<sup>5</sup>Up to this point I have used the term "oppression" to describe the social constraints that Cooper and black women experienced. However, from this point on, in keeping with Cooper's language, the term "burden" generally will be used to describe race, gender and class oppression.

motivated, challenged, rebelled, and resisted. Voice proffered solutions. Voice was power.

The voices of black women were central to social change because their perspective and experience of social burdens was unique. They knew what to criticize, how to criticize it, what to change, and how to change it because they experienced burden and oppression in a particular way. The burdens of race and gender were not unique to them but together they afforded them a particular insight into the nature of oppression. Occupying this position also afforded them a unique insight into the solution of race and gender oppression. Voice communicated that insight.

During Cooper's process of acquiring voice, education was a needed tool for strengthening it. Education was a way to ground experience in the knowledge of other people who experience burden; learning about the experiences of others and how dominant groups burdened them sharpened the ability to challenge and resist. Voice and education were means to transform the country.

Education was also a way to transform self in the process; it helped shed the burdens and restrictions of society.<sup>6</sup> In essence, it helped transform a prior existence of debasement, discrimination and disrespect into an existence of self-worth, self-respect and self-love. Thus, the primary significance of education was personal and social transformation, the end objective a humanist society.

Humanism, according to philosopher Corliss LaMont, virtually meant "human-being-ism, that is devotion to the interests of human beings,

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<sup>6</sup>The motto of the National Association of Colored Women, of which Cooper was an active member, was "Lifting as we Climb."

wherever they live and whatever their status." <sup>7</sup> Inherent in the philosophy of humanism was an appreciation of the value and worth of all human beings, whatever their gender, race, condition or, religion. Humanists constructed this inclusive society within a framework of democracy. For many humanists, democracy was the blueprint for a progressive society, a society in which discrimination was absent. Theologian Curtis Reese wrote that "Wherever any person, in any connection, is dealt with on any basis than that of justice, fairness, and consideration applied to the merits of the particular situation, without regard to age, sex, race, color, creed, place of birth, social status or any other extraneous consideration, there democracy is absent." <sup>8</sup>

Corliss LaMont, another theologian, specified the groups traditionally discriminated against but would no longer be in a humanist society. He wrote that in such a society "there is a democracy between the sexes or equality between men and women in all relevant ways" and that "there is a racial or ethnic democracy, in which all racial or ethnic groups and minorities stand on an equal basis with other ethnic groups and are not subject to discrimination in any sphere in life." <sup>9</sup> He summed it up by writing that "humanism supports the widest possible extension of democracy to all relevant aspects of human living." <sup>10</sup>

Two other aspects of humanism are relevant to our discussion of Cooper and her vision. Inherent in humanism and democracy was an

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<sup>7</sup>Corliss LaMont, *Humanism as a Philosophy* (New York, 1949), 23.

<sup>8</sup>Curtis Reese. *The Meaning of Humanism* (Boston, 1945), 37.

<sup>9</sup>LaMont, *Humanism as a Philosophy*, 325-26.

<sup>10</sup>*Ibid.*, 311.



appreciation of voice, the expression of each person's unique outlook and a recognition of the interdependence of people. In a democracy, each person had a voice and the opportunity to express it. Expressing voice was important because it allowed each unique but partial perspective to be known and understood. Because each person's identity was constructed in such a way that no two people were alike, everyone must have an opportunity to speak about their experience. In essence, then, humanism, by revealing each person's perspective, completed the circle of the world's vision and understanding of human life.

For those oppressed or burdened by social constraints, humanist society, through appreciation and advocacy of all voices and all experiences, provided an opportunity to speak and to be heard. However, the recognition and appreciation of difference did not exclude a construction and appreciation of community. Many humanists, including Curtis Reese, believed that the goal of humanism was "a community of free persons" where people, despite their differences, were tied together in many ways and in which people recognized every other person as a member of the human family.<sup>11</sup>

Recognizing that all were part of a human family carried a responsibility of service and altruism for each family member. This included, foremost, opportunities to speak, to learn, to prosper and to give. As Reese wrote, "mutual aid is a factor of the utmost importance. A new world order wherein human life shall be the first concern requires not only equality of opportunity, not only co-operation in the use of opportunity, but also social guarantees against the ill effects of misfortune."<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Reese, *The Meaning of Humanism*. 13.

<sup>12</sup> Curtis Reese, *Humanism* (Chicago, 1926), 11.

Anna Julia Cooper believed in a humanist society because of her belief in the power of God and Jesus Christ. Her religious beliefs had a liberating emphasis, a transforming power that was guided by God. Reform guided by religious beliefs gave humankind the strength to speak and to live a life worth living. Religious beliefs, Cooper believed, empowered humanity to bring justice, freedom and equality more fully into the world. The result was a society based on Christian, humanist principles in which freedom belonged to everyone. For these reasons, Cooper actively pursued reform and social transformation.

The humanist community described here was envisioned throughout Cooper's work. Humanist society was achieved through the power of voice, and the gateway of opportunity, education. Decrying discrimination and lauding the claim of all human beings to freedom and democracy, Cooper in 1892 eloquently expressed her own ideas about humanist society:

We take our stand on the solidarity of humanity, the oneness of life, and the unnaturalness and injustice of all special favoritisms, whether of sex, race, country, or condition. . . The colored woman feels that woman's cause is one and universal; and that. . . not till race, color, sex, or condition are seen as accidents, and not as the substance of life; not till the universal title of humanity to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness is conceded to be inalienable to all; not till then is woman's lesson taught and woman's cause won - not the white woman's nor the black woman's, not the red woman's but the cause of every man and of every woman who has writhed silently under a mighty wrong.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>13</sup>Anna Julia Cooper, *A Voice from the South by a Black Woman of the South* (New York, 1969), 125. (originally published in Xenia, Ohio, 1892)

In this study, Anna Julia Cooper's life is examined in terms of how she lived the philosophies that she espoused throughout her writing, particularly her book *A Voice from the South by a Black Woman of the South* (1892). The first chapter addresses the first half of her life and the ways in which she realized burden and established voice. The second chapter examines her book *A Voice* in terms of the year 1892 being the moment when Cooper cemented and articulated her belief in voice and education. The final chapter addresses the last half of Cooper's life and the ways in which she lived her beliefs.

## Cooper's Early Life: Attaining Voice and Education to Enact Social Change

### Early Burdens

Anna Julia Haywood began her life under the most adverse circumstances; when she took her first breath, she was burdened by the weight of social practices and beliefs. Some were spoken, others were not, but all were accepted. On August 10, 1858, in Raleigh, North Carolina, Hannah Stanley Haywood, a slave woman, gave birth to Anna Julia Haywood, the daughter of Fabius J. Haywood, her mother's master and that of her new child.<sup>14</sup>

It was not uncommon for slave masters to have sexual relations with their female property. "Relations" is such a benign word to describe the kind of suffering that slave women endured as field workers, maids, and house slaves; harassment and exploitation would be more appropriate. Sexual exploitation and harassment of slave women were prevalent occurrences on plantations, "so widespread as to be general."<sup>15</sup> Nearly all slave women were sexually available to any white male slave owner. It was a common fact on plantations that "white male slaveholders could always claim sexual

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<sup>14</sup>The name Stanley that appears in Hannah Haywood's name possibly comes from the name of the man who was more than likely her father, Jacob Stanley, who was also owned by Haywood. Cooper later dropped the name Haywood from her mother's name and call her only Hannah Stanley. Some sources have the year of Cooper's birth as 1859; here I will use the most often used year 1858.

<sup>15</sup>Gerda Lerner, *Black Women in White America: A Documentary History* (New York, 1972), 46.

prerogatives with slave women." <sup>16</sup> Exploitation, then, was so prevalent that white men considered free and unlimited access to black women a right and a privilege.

For slave women, this meant that from the time of early girlhood harassment and rape lingered like a dark cloud over them, threatening to erupt at any time. Hannah Stanley lived under these circumstances on a very large plantation outside Raleigh, North Carolina. Haywood and his family employed Hannah in their home. Born around 1819, she would have been a young woman in her mid to late teens when Fabius Haywood acquired the property of his parents when they died. <sup>17</sup> This was an age when many mothers of slave girls were apprehensive about the real possibility of sexual overtures from slave masters. It is unclear whether Hannah had sexual relations with Fabius Haywood in her teens but she did in middle age, after she had given birth to two sons. The result of that union was, as mentioned above, Anna Julia, called Annie as a child.

Annie, though spared the threat of harassment and exploitation under slavery, was forever affected by the circumstance of her parentage. Although socially burdened by the fact that she was the product of an illicit and degrading relationship, inwardly she probably felt confusion, anger, and resentment toward her father, the owner of her and her mother. She had to have been aware of the horror surrounding the conditions of her birth. Cooper was silent for years about the matter. Years after wrestling with the relationship between her parents, she finally dealt with it when she wrote that her "mother was a slave and the finest woman I have ever known...

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<sup>16</sup>Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, *Within the Plantation Household: Black and White Women of the Old South* (Chapel-Hill, N.C., 1988), 294.

<sup>17</sup>Louise Daniel Hutchinson, *Anna Julia Cooper, A Voice from the South* (Washington, D.C., 1982), 10.

presumably my father was her master; if so, I owe him not a sou and she was always too modest and shamefaced to mention him." <sup>18</sup> Apparently, Cooper had little regard for her father. Although she probably would have liked to believe that he was not her father, she confirmed her convictions on the subject when in 1934 she wrote to Raleigh requesting information about her family tree from Haywood's nephew. He wrote back that Haywood had been a lawyer in Raleigh until the Civil War, and had "one child by his slave Hannah without benefit of clergy." <sup>19</sup>

Although Cooper may have had hostile feelings for her father, she adored her mother. She idealized Hannah Stanley and credited her with great strength and determination. <sup>20</sup> Cooper attributed her own pride and willingness to sacrifice herself for a principle to her indomitable and fine mother. Cooper often hearkened back to the black women in her mother's generation. Her later scholarly works and reform activities sought to restore the respect and dignity of black women who had suffered under the chains of slavery. Although Cooper was psychologically and socially burdened by the fact that she was conceived from rape, circumstances that tragically demonstrated the intersection of race, class and gender in the lives of black women, it was almost as though she spent her entire life reclaiming and reasserting the dignity and self-respect of black women like her mother and herself. Although slavery cemented the identity of black women as racialized, gendered and classed beings, Cooper would spend the rest of her life overcoming and helping others to overcome the burdens that black women and many others faced. One of the ways that Cooper thought would aid in

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<sup>18</sup>Anna Julia Cooper notes to self, n.d., Moorland Spingarn Research Center, Anna Julia Cooper Papers, Howard University, Washington, D.C.

<sup>19</sup>Ibid.

<sup>20</sup>Robin Kadison Berson, *Marching to a Different Drummer: Unrecognized Heroes of American History* (Westport, Conn. 1994), 77.

the process of overcoming, in addition to speaking about one's burdens, was education.

### Early Education: St. Augustine's, Oberlin, and Wilberforce

As a child, Cooper was a voracious reader. It is unclear how Annie could possibly have learned to read. Although her mother's knowledge was limited to a minimum of writing and reading of the Bible, the census of 1870, the first time that former slaves were counted, noted that Hannah and her sons were illiterate.<sup>21</sup> Cooper could have learned as a student at a small sabbath school begun by the Episcopal church that founded St. Augustine's Normal School. However Cooper learned how to read, it paid off very well. In 1866 or 1867, when she was eight or nine years old, she received a scholarship to attend St. Augustine's Normal School and Collegiate Institute.<sup>22</sup> The Executive Committee of the Board of Missions of the Episcopal Church founded the school which they established for the education of teachers for the freed slaves.<sup>23</sup> The school educated children of

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<sup>21</sup>Hutchinson, *Anna Julia Cooper*, 20. Although it is unclear how Annie learned to read, there have been incidents of slaves clandestinely learning to read. Some slave accounts cite that they learned from the children of slaveowners who would teach their daily lessons to slave children away from the eyes of their mothers and fathers. Some cite that they learned from free blacks whom they might encounter while in town or who they possibly saw romantically or were married to. The possibilities may not have been endless for slaves to learn how to read but they existed. Annie could have learned to read in a number of ways; there is a bit of evidence that Annie as a small child may have attended a Sabbath school that was operated by the same Episcopal Church that would later found St. Augustine's (as mentioned in Hutchinson's *Anna Julia Cooper*).

<sup>22</sup>Berson, *Marching to a Different Drummer*, 77.

<sup>23</sup>Normal schools were common during the last half of the nineteenth century. They were training grounds for teachers, known as "state teachers colleges" in the beginning then becoming state colleges then state universities. Despite the name changes, they never abandoned the mission to

various ages, usually between seven and eighteen who would become teachers.

The first president of the institute, Dr. J. Brinton Smith, who sponsored Annie Julia's scholarship, figured a great deal in her life as a teacher and scholar. Cooper later reflected on her experience at St. Augustine's saying that "When hardly more than kindergarten age it was my good fortune to be selected for a scholarship by Dr. J. Brinton Smith, founder of St. Augustine's Normal School at Raleigh, N.C, in the nucleus he was planning to train as teachers for the Colored people of the South. That school was my world during the formative period. the most critical in any girl's life. Its nurture and admonition gave shelter."<sup>24</sup> Anna Julia needed the years she spent at St. Augustine's because they "sheltered" her temporarily from burdens while she cultivated and strengthened her voice.

St. Augustine's affected Anna Julia profoundly; she spent fourteen years there as a student learning, giving and sharing knowledge in the way that she would for the rest of her life, as a teacher. Only a year after she entered St. Augustine's she began tutoring older students.<sup>25</sup> Cooper progressed very well at the institute, daily demonstrating her thirst for learning. By the time that she was fifteen, she and a classmate, Jane Thomas, became the first female students regularly employed as teachers by the

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train teachers. See Patricia Albjerg Graham, "Expansion and Exclusion: A History of Women in American Higher Education," *Signs*, Summer 1978, 759-765.

<sup>24</sup>Cooper in a note to herself, n.d.. Moorland Spingarn Research Center, Anna Julia Cooper papers. Howard University, Washington, D.C.

<sup>25</sup>Leona C. Gabel, *From Slavery to the Sorbonne and Beyond: The life and writings of Anna Julia Cooper*. (Northhampton, Mass, 1982), 14.



school.<sup>26</sup> Four years after becoming a regularly employed teacher, Anna Julia completed the coursework at St. Augustine's at the age of 19.<sup>27</sup>

However, before she completed her studies, she came face-to-face with sexism. Already well acquainted with the racism that fostered slavery, Cooper had not experienced the bite of sexism. She faced it though at St. Augustine's. As a teenager in the school, Cooper protested the different treatment men and women received. She expressed her ire to the principal that young men were encouraged to study theology and the classics while women were condescendingly tolerated in the school.<sup>28</sup> "A boy," she wrote later in *A Voice*, "however meager his equipment and shallow his pretensions, had only to declare a floating intention to study theology and he could get all the support, encouragement and stimulus he needed, be absolved from work and invested beforehand with all the dignity of his far away office." Giving voice to both her own experience and that of many others, she continued that "while a self-supporting girl had to struggle on by teaching in the summer and working after school hours to keep up with her board bills, and actually to fight her way against positive discouragements to the higher education."<sup>29</sup> She frankly complained to the principal that "the only mission open before a girl was to marry one of those candidates."<sup>30</sup>

In 1877, at nineteen, Cooper, ironically, married one of those ministers whom she had complained about to her principal at St. Augustine's. Not

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<sup>26</sup>Hutchinson. *Anna Julia Cooper*, 26.

<sup>27</sup>*Ibid.*, 28.

<sup>28</sup>Bert Loewenberg and Ruth Bogin, eds. *Black Women in Nineteenth Century American Life: Their Words, Their Thoughts, Their Feelings* (University Park and London, 1976), 317.

<sup>29</sup>Cooper, *A Voice*, 77.

<sup>30</sup>Gabel. *From Slavery to the Sorbonne*, 68.

much is known about George Cooper, her husband and teacher of the theology class in which she finally enrolled, except that he came from the West Indies to teach and minister. He was a very hardworking man, so much so that he died two years after they married due to the pressure and stress of his many jobs.<sup>31</sup> At twenty-one, Anna Julia Cooper became a widow. Her husband's death, though, did not spell doom as one might expect. George Cooper's death allowed Anna Julia to pursue a career as a teacher, because no married woman could continue to teach.

After George's death, she threw herself into her studies and contemplated higher education. Cooper believed that more education would make her better able to help the most underprivileged people in the black community. With the encouragement of Dr. Smedes, a minister and trustee of St. Augustine's, she wrote to Oberlin College requesting free tuition and employment to pay for her room and board.<sup>32</sup> In a letter she sent to President Fairchild, she said "I have, for a long time, earnestly desired to take an advanced course in some superior Northern college, but could not see my way to it for lack of means. However, I am now resolved to wait no longer, if there is any possibility of my accomplishing my purpose. I am now teaching a two months summer school in Haywood; Southern schools pay very meanly, but I expect to have money enough to keep me one or two years at your College, provided I can secure a favor mentioned by Mrs. Clarke, of free tuition and incidentals."<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>31</sup>Sharon Harley and Rosalyn Terborg-Penn, *The Afro-American Woman* (Port Washington, New York, 1978), 87.

<sup>32</sup>Ibid., 88.

<sup>33</sup>Anna Julia Cooper Letter to Fairchild. n.d., Oberlin College, Archives, as quoted in Hutchinson. *Anna Julia Cooper*, 34.

Cooper chose Oberlin for several reasons, two of them being its academic renown and its reputation for admitting blacks and women. The primary reason, though, that she chose Oberlin was because she believed that the goals of the college were compatible with her own. After reading the purpose of the college expressed by one of its presidents, resounding with the humanism that she later expressed in her writings, Cooper decided to write to the college.<sup>34</sup> Oberlin accepted her on full scholarship with sophomore standing.<sup>35</sup>

While at Oberlin, Anna Julia lived with the Churchill family, the family of one of her professors, who had agreed to board her during her career at Oberlin. Cooper would later credit the Churchills with instilling in her generosity and hospitality.<sup>36</sup> Even after leaving Oberlin, she maintained close contact with them.

The reader gets a glimpse of Cooper's Oberlin experience from the Negro College Graduates questionnaire that she completed years later. When questioned about extracurricular activities, she answered "I taught advanced Algebra in Oberlin Academy."<sup>37</sup> Clearly, Cooper spent few hours frivolously.

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<sup>34</sup>The purpose of the college as expressed by Henry Churchill King, a president of the college, is cited fully here: Oberlin seeks the education of the entire man. - physical, intellectual, aesthetic, moral and religious. It seeks an education looking preeminently to the service of the community and nation, - the indubitable of the privileged. It means to foster the spirit of a rational, ethical and Christian democracy. It aims to train its students personally to share in the great intellectual and spiritual achievements of the race, to think in world terms, to feel with all humanity, to cherish world purposes. (Oberlin College Mission, cited in Hutchinson, *Anna Julia Cooper*, 32.)

<sup>35</sup>Berson, *Marching to a Different Drummer*, 78.

<sup>36</sup>*Ibid*, 78.

<sup>37</sup>Negro College Graduates Questionnaire, n.d., Howard University, Anna Julia Cooper Papers.

She used her time prudently, always preparing herself in some way for her call to serve as a teacher.

In 1884, Cooper received a bachelor's degree with honors. After graduation she planned to return home to Raleigh and join the faculty of St. Augustine's.<sup>38</sup> But she ran into a problem. She had a professorial contract with Dr. Smedes, who was about to retire. The new principal that replaced him did not feel obliged to honor the contract and instead offered her a position as teacher in charge of girls. Cooper refused. Instead she became a professor of Modern Languages and Literature at Wilberforce University in Xenia, Ohio.<sup>39</sup> There she earned \$1000 annually; she would only have made thirty dollars a month at St. Augustine's.

Despite this generous salary, Cooper returned to Raleigh and St. Augustine's, probably upon the urging of her mother who lamented her absence and the infrequency of her letters. She joined the faculty at St. Augustine's and taught math, Latin and Greek. For all purposes, Cooper planned to stay in Raleigh and make a home for her family, which included her mother, brother Andrew and his family. She began construction of a house and assumed more and more of the responsibility of caring for her mother and the rest of the family. Almost seventy, Hannah Stanley had worked nearly all of her life and Anna Julia more than likely wanted her to stop working. She did and Anna Julia supported her for the rest of her life.<sup>40</sup>

While in her hometown, Cooper spearheaded many community activities. In 1886, she began an out-reach program to extend the work of St. Augustine's College into the community of Raleigh. She helped to establish

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<sup>38</sup>Harley and Terborg-Penn, *The Afro-American Woman*, 88.

<sup>39</sup>Cooper notes and personal letters, n.d., Howard University, Anna Julia Cooper Papers.

<sup>40</sup>Hutchinson, *Anna Julia Cooper*, 43.

a Sabbath school, much like the one where she probably learned to read, and a mission guild. She also actively participated in the North Carolina Teachers' Association whose members sent a resolution to the state legislature demanding "reasonable and just" training for black students and "appropriations for the establishment and management of a State Normal and High School Institute for its colored citizens which would be a reasonable offset for the University" that was provided for white students.<sup>41</sup>

Cooper had begun, in Raleigh, the fight for equal education opportunities that she would champion, quite vehemently, for the rest of her life. A year after she began the outreach program at St. Augustine's, she received an M.A. from Oberlin based on the strength of her three years of teaching on the college level. Anna Julia had completed the first and second steps of her education, receiving degrees from St. Augustine's and Oberlin, respectively. Before she completed the third step, she realized many goals, including teaching and educating in the nation's capital.

### **M Street High School In Washington, D.C.: Helping Others Attain Voice Through Teaching**

At M Street Cooper fulfilled her vision of education as means to empowerment, strength and self-respect. Attaining voice and strengthening it through education were Cooper's goals. The means she used to accomplish them was teaching. In 1887, Superintendent George F.T. Cook of the Colored Schools of Washington City and Georgetown encouraged a member of the black trustees to write to Oberlin and inquire about a recent graduate who

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<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

might teach math and science at the Washington Colored High School.<sup>42</sup> Oberlin recommended Cooper and she started there at a beginning salary of \$750 per year.

Although the school was formally called the Washington Colored High School and eventually became Dunbar High School, informally it was called M Street School because its main building was located on M Street in the city.<sup>43</sup> Most of the staff of the school were women. No student was ever turned away. Cooper came to find the school and its students a pleasure; she took a particular interest in the cadet corps which she felt instilled pride and patriotism.<sup>44</sup>

Cooper's teaching career at the school spanned several decades. She began first as a math and science teacher, then later became a Latin teacher in 1891. From 1899-1901, the school had a new principal, Robert H. Terrell. During Terrell's tenure, he developed a close relationship with Mary Eliza Church, Cooper's former classmate at Oberlin and now fellow teacher (Terrell and Church would later marry). As principal after Terrell from 1901-1906, Cooper became only the second black female principal in the school's history.<sup>45</sup>

During Cooper's tenure as principal, the school underwent several changes. By 1902, under Cooper's leadership, the M Street School had a four-year liberal arts or classical program and a two-year business education program.<sup>46</sup> First-year classes included English, history, algebra, Latin, physics

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<sup>42</sup>Cooper personal notes, n.d., Howard University, Anna Julia Cooper Papers.

<sup>43</sup>Hutchinson. *Anna Julia Cooper*, 48.

<sup>44</sup>*Ibid.*, 51.

<sup>45</sup>Harley and Terborg-Penn, *Afro-American Woman*, 92.

<sup>46</sup>Classical education is grounded in the instruction of Greek and Latin languages, and literature. Industrial or vocational education is driven by practical instruction as Booker T. Washington would have characterized it. It included carpentry, bricklaying, etc.

or chemistry. English and Latin were the only required courses for third and fourth year students. There were several electives including languages, trigonometry, geometry, and political economy.<sup>47</sup>

Although Cooper emphasized the classical program of humanities and the arts in her school, she supported industrial education with its emphasis on acquiring vocational and practical skills such as carpentry. In general, though, she believed that the individual needed the full range of educational services and experiences.<sup>48</sup> Education was one of the ways Cooper tried to instill the will to change the community and society in her students. Social reform was another way. In Washington, Cooper began to educate and serve the community actively in her quest to change the burdensome society in which she lived.

### **Social Change: The New Era and Cooper's Call for Change**

Black women, for the most part, took responsibility to improve the conditions of the black community around the turn of the century, the time that encompassed Cooper's tenure at M Street. Anna Julia Cooper believed that it was necessary for black women to head reform efforts because they, with their multiply informed identities, were best suited for it. Also, they could add the balance and perspective needed to reach out to others that had been missing when black men led change and when whites, men and women, sought to improve conditions in the community.

Cooper's belief that reform or the "regeneration and progress of the race", as she characterized it, suited black women best stemmed from her

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<sup>47</sup>Hutchinson, *Anna Julia Cooper*. 57.

<sup>48</sup>*Ibid.*. 61

religious beliefs. Belief in the power of God and Christ dominated much of Cooper's thinking. Probably from the time of early childhood, the church and Christianity played a primary role in Anna Julia's life. Even her education would be tied to her religious beliefs; she attended a college, Oberlin, that aimed to spread Christian faith, the Christian way of life and education for all. <sup>49</sup> Religion, then, directed Cooper's beliefs and will to change.

Cooper's belief in the power of Christ emphasized liberation, which was key to her social and personal philosophy of the transformation and development of the person and society into fully free entities. <sup>50</sup> The importance of voice, speaking about one's burdens and education, strengthening voice and improving self-respect, in this transformation have already been discussed. What remains is the part that religion plays in the process.

As mentioned, liberation from burdens played a major part in Cooper's religious beliefs. According to Cooper's interpretation of God's word and Christ's life, God created human beings fully free and equal. Cooper saw herself engaged in the universal cause to protect that freedom. She believed that all were worthy of being heard since God created everyone sacred in His image. <sup>51</sup>

Although Cooper believed that she was in a universal fight for freedom, she placed black women at the head of that fight for a reason. In Cooper's belief system, Christ identified with the "least of these," "the meek," "the dominated," and "the oppressed." <sup>52</sup> The most oppressed in society

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<sup>49</sup>Gabel, *From Slavery to the Sorbonne*, 17.

<sup>50</sup>Karen Baker-Fletcher, *A Singing Something: Womanist Reflections of Anna Julia Cooper* (New York, 1991), 64.

<sup>51</sup>*Ibid.*, 128.

<sup>52</sup>The language of the "meek" and the "strong" that appeared in the Bible applied to Cooper's beliefs as well. In Cooper's belief system, the "meek" were



included black women, gendered, racialized and classed beings. Although all the oppressed possessed a special relationship with Christ, social practices situated black women in such a way that they lived and revealed the hardship and burden of oppression. And just as Christ, the regenerator of humanity, was the ultimate reformer, black women, too, were potentially reformers, leaders of the movement for social change, for a better understanding of freedom and humanity. <sup>53</sup>

Anna Julia Cooper believed that the neediest, lowest, most underprivileged needed a hand from other members of the human family to help them overcome burdens and obstacles. On the most fundamental level, she helped to provide basic services but on a more general, social level, she agitated for changes that would eventually make the kind of social work she did unnecessary.

In June of 1892, she organized the Colored Women's League of Washington, D.C. The organization provided a kindergarten, teacher training for young women, rescue work for the city's indigent poor and classes designed to improve women's home making skills. She chaired the League's Alley Sanitation Committee and served as corresponding secretary for a number of years; the work of the alley committee cleaning up community streets continued under the auspices of the first Colored Social Settlement House, which Cooper helped to found. <sup>54</sup> Cooper's efforts reflected her determination to help the most needy citizens improve their opportunities for advancement in the city.

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those who society burdened and who were voiceless. But social reform would change that: the meek would gain their voices, and divest themselves of their burdens. Cooper's argument is synonymous with Christ's words that "the meek shall inherit the earth" during His Sermon on the Mount.

<sup>53</sup>Ibid., 156.

<sup>54</sup>Hutchinson. *Anna Julia Cooper*, 93.

Her greatest effort laid in the establishment of the Colored Social Settlement, a social service center, the first of its kind, that administered to the black residents of Washington, D.C. In a small six-room house donated by an anonymous young white woman who Cooper said worked "only [as] a salaried clerk in government employ, "the staff distributed milk, directed a library, a nursery and day care center for working mothers, and operated a bank to encourage savings. They also provided a free kindergarten, a sewing class, a reading club and a military club.<sup>55</sup> It was an association that tried to meet the varied needs of the community and it did so successfully.

In the last decade of the nineteenth-century, many black women believed that a new era had dawned for America, a time of tremendous change and opportunities to effect change. As previously mentioned, the growth in the black women's club movement skyrocketed during this decade. Black women embraced education, women's issues, race uplift, freedom and equality.

Many journals, newspapers, and magazines, including one called *Woman's Era*, heralded the decade. Anna Julia Cooper hailed the age too. In 1892, she proclaimed that the decade was a "gateway" of a "new era of American civilization." In 1892, Anna Julia Cooper paved the way for change by publishing *A Voice from the South by a Black Woman of the South*. That year served as a moment of vision, clarity and direction for Cooper. One could say that she created a manual for the change she sought in society. By 1892, she had attained voice; she had educated herself and strengthened her voice; she had taught others to speak, learn and understand, and written a series of essays in which she clarified the very ideas that she so eloquently expressed in *A Voice*. She had endured a great deal, but by 1892 she had

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<sup>55</sup>Ibid., 120.

spoken enough, experienced enough and learned enough to clarify the changes she sought in the country. The time had arrived for change and *A Voice from the South be a Black Woman of the South* served as her vehicle of change.

1892:  
*A Voice from the South by a Black Woman of the South*

In 1892, Anna Julia was still a new teacher at M Street. She had accomplished much since she had taken the position in 1887. Before Aldine Press published *A Voice*, Cooper had written for numerous magazines and newspapers; primarily, though, she wrote for a circular called *The Southland*, considered by the black community an important vehicle for black progress and race uplift.<sup>5 6</sup> A few of the essays that she wrote for *The Southland* appeared later in *A Voice*. As mentioned in the previous chapter, Cooper, serving as the organizer of the Colored Women's League in D.C., also participated actively in the black women's club movement.

Therefore, by 1892, Anna Julia had established her voice and the role she would play through education in social change. She envisioned a transformed society. *A Voice from the South by a Black Woman of the South* told the story of Cooper's journey to vision. It also carefully established the solutions to the burdens of society. *A Voice* did not mark the end of Anna Julia's life, but it did articulate beliefs that gained strength with the passage of time.

### **The Book: Establishing a Belief System and a Path of Life**

Anna Julia Cooper wrote only one book: *A Voice from the South by a Black Woman of the South*. The press printed the first edition, priced at \$1.25, in small size, though over three hundred pages long. Divided into two

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<sup>5 6</sup>Hutchinson. *Anna Julia Cooper*. 89.

parts, Soprano Obligato and Tutti ad Libitum, respectively, it included essays, speeches, and lectures that Cooper had formerly written.<sup>57</sup>

The press received the book well. The newspaper *The Public Opinion* wrote, "This volume possesses a fresh attraction, because it comes from the eager heart and mind of a 'Black Woman of the South.'" The *Detroit Plaindealer* told its readers, "There has been no book on the race question that has been more cogently and forcibly written by either white or black authors. The book is not only a credit to the genius of the race, but to women whose place and sphere in life men have so long dictated."<sup>58</sup> Furthermore, the *New York Independent* reported that it sounded like "a piercing and clinging cry which it is impossible to hear [and] not to understand - which it is impossible to shake off." It concluded by saying that Cooper wrote "with strong but controlled passion, on a basis of strong facts."<sup>59</sup>

Cooper's book joined a number of other books that black women recently wrote and published. In the same year, Ida B. Wells-Barnett wrote *U.S. Atrocities* in which she described and criticized the horrors of lynching and other violent acts against blacks. In 1890, Amelia Etta Hall Johnson wrote *Clarence and Corrine; or God's Way*, the first book by a black author to be published by the American Baptist Publication Society.<sup>60</sup>

Although the press lauded Cooper's book, many prominent black intellectuals failed to recognize it. A small circle of black intellectuals dominated the literary canon, which primarily recognized the works of black men. Many of them belonged to the American Negro Academy, a society in

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<sup>57</sup>Ann Ellen Shockley, *Afro-American Women Writers, 1746-1933: An Anthology and Critical Guide* (Boston, 1988). 204.

<sup>58</sup>*Ibid.*, 207.

<sup>59</sup>Hutchinson, *Anna Julia Cooper*, 104.

<sup>60</sup>*Ibid.*, 248, 162.

which Cooper was the only female member. Frederick Douglass, W.E.B. duBois, and Booker T. Washington dominated the literary field and this organization. Interestingly enough, the academy considered itself a forum for the "promotion of literature, science, and art. . . fostering higher education, publication of scholarly work and the defense of the Negro against vicious assault." <sup>61</sup> Cooper's book did all of these things and was probably known by this group; yet they did not recognize it publicly. In fact, the very year that Cooper's book debuted, Frederick Douglass, when asked by M.A. Majors, the historian, to name some women to include in his biography on black women, responded: "I have thus far seen no book of importance written by a Negro woman and I know of no one among us who can appropriately be called famous." <sup>62</sup> Granted Cooper was hardly famous at the time, but her work was highly significant. It was probably the first attempt in book form by any one to establish the relationship between race and gender. What was even more significant was that she placed black women at the intersection of the relationship and at the head of social change.

The title of Cooper's book was also significant. Cooper's use of the term voice in the title was a personal and political statement. Throughout the book, Cooper told many stories of her life. She used her voice to explain who she was and what she lived and continued to live. She also used her voice to critique the social and political injustices in the country. Spelling the word voice with a capital "V" revealed Cooper's feelings about the importance of black women's voices. Referring to her own voice as that of "a" black woman of the South rather than "the" black woman of the South was also

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<sup>61</sup>American Negro Academy Mission, as quoted in Hutchinson. *Anna Julia Cooper*, 109.

<sup>62</sup>Letter written to M.A. Majors from Frederick Douglas, quoted in Dorothy Sterling, ed., *We Are Your Sisters: Black Women in the Nineteenth Century* (New York, 1984), 436.

important. Cooper did this because she was conscious of both her uniqueness and identification with a community effort among black women in America; black women were unique individuals, not all alike. Finally, the use of the preposition "by" suggested that she was well aware that she was constructing and presenting her voice.

In an introduction that she called "Our Raison D'être," Cooper established the primary theme of her book: voice as a tool of empowerment. Specifically, the voices of black women and the silence they maintained concerned Cooper. Regretfully, she said,

"One muffled strain in the Silent South, a jarring chord and a vague and uncomprehended cadenza has been and still is the Negro. And of that muffled chord, the one mute and voiceless note has been the sadly expectant Black Woman."<sup>63</sup>

In this quotation, Cooper characterized black women's voices as muted as opposed to the vague but heard voices of black men. The voices of black women were muted because black women were among the most dominated. Therefore, Cooper exhorted black women to speak for themselves so the world might understand their particular burden, bearing the "race problem and the woman question."

Neither black men nor white persons, then, could be "expected fully and adequately to reproduce the exact Voice of the Black Woman."<sup>64</sup> For this reason, the voices of black women especially needed to be heard because they had insight and could help solve what Cooper called "our Nation's Problem," the suppression of voices and the injustice of social burdens. Cooper's portrayal of black women as "calorimeters" underscored their sensitivity to

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<sup>63</sup>Cooper, *A Voice from the South*, "Our Raison D'Etire," 1.

<sup>64</sup>Ibid., "Our Raison D'Etire," 3.

the social and political climate in America. Recalling her own reason for speaking, Cooper wrote that a

calorimeter may well be studied on the interest of accuracy and fairness in diagnosing what is often conceded to be a 'puzzling' case. If these broken utterances can in any way help to a clearer vision and a truer pulse-beat in studying our Nation's Problem, this Voice by a Black Woman of the South will not have been raised in vain. <sup>65</sup>

Since black women possessed a special sense about burden, according to Cooper and many other black women, they had a responsibility to create a just and moral social order. Black women believed that Christianizing the home and educating individuals were key to solving the problems of the community and nation. Through them, the black community could be saved and lifted to greater heights. <sup>66</sup>

The belief that women should take charge of the improvement of society derived from beliefs situated in the "cult of true womanhood." Black women were avid supporters of the cult, primarily because they saw it as a way to spearhead reform and reclaim their dignity, diminished during slavery. In the early nine-teenth century, as white women participated in a variety of social reform movements, a strong sense arose that women's proper role was in the domestic sphere. Two salient interpretations have risen out of the work of current scholars about the "woman's sphere": women used domesticity to advance their own agenda, including educational opportunities; and the woman's sphere was the basis of a subculture that created a source of strength and identity for women. <sup>67</sup> Both theories explained the prominent role that domesticity played in the lives of black women.

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<sup>65</sup>Ibid., "Our Raison D'Etre."

<sup>66</sup>Emilie M. Townes. *Womanist Justice, Womanist Hope* (Atlanta, 1993), 91.

<sup>67</sup>Ibid., 86.



The development of "true womanhood" in the black community began in the mid 1870's with the emergence of a southern black middle class.<sup>68</sup> The cult of true womanhood was a way for these black women to recast the prevailing images in the popular culture of black womanhood. They were true to the tenets of domesticity and to being the true moral guardians of the home. They emphasized the woman's sphere in activities that included "women's" projects such as kindergartens for children of working mothers. Black women believed that a woman's true calling was to make people's lives better, improve conditions within the community and fight to end injustice within the country.

In the first essay, "Womanhood A Vital Element in the Regeneration and Progress of a Race," Cooper began her official delineation of the role of black women. In the context of the cult of true womanhood, Cooper asserted her theory of "woman's influence" in society.<sup>69</sup> In essence, the "vital agency in the regeneration and progress of a race" was womanhood because women molded children of both sexes from birth.<sup>70</sup> In terms of the black community, Cooper wanted to "add her plea" to the black women of the South to take up their role. Only until the black woman realized her role would the race progress, because "the retraining of the race, as well as the ground work and the starting point of its progress upward, must be in the black woman."<sup>71</sup>

Cooper believed that for a very long time black men had dominated the drive for black liberation; at this moment, it was time for black women to

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<sup>68</sup>Ibid., 87.

<sup>69</sup>Cooper, *A Voice from the South*, "Womanhood A Vital Element in the Regeneration and Progress of a Race," 23.

<sup>70</sup>Ibid., 24.

<sup>71</sup>Ibid., "Womanhood a Vital Element...", 28.

take up their role, because the black man "can never be regarded as identical with or representative of the whole." <sup>72</sup> In other words, the black man's role was only half of the picture. The circle could only be completed when black women entered the arena, with both their race and their womanhood, because "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 *Negro race enters with me*." <sup>73</sup> Race and gender were inextricably connected in the lives of black women; their particular perspective was needed to fully understand oppression and to better realize the cause of freedom. Their voices and experiences were absolutely necessary in the cause for change.

In the essay, "The Higher Education of Women," Cooper championed the cause of women's education, too, as a source of influence in social change. Through her own personal experiences noted in the essay, Cooper began to clarify the ways in which education combated social burdens. In the beginning of the essay, Cooper discussed the myth that intelligent women who have been schooled will be adversely affected. She said that when women went to school, "they performed their tasks modestly and intelligently. Once in a while one or two were found choosing the gentlemen's course. Still no collapse." <sup>74</sup> Cooper believed that women would become better persons with education. They would become "thoughtful" and "quick to see and eager to help the needs of this needy world-women who can think as well as feel, and who feel nonetheless because they think-women who are none the less tender and true for the parchment they bear in their hands-women who have given a deeper, richer, nobler and grander meaning to the word "womanly"

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<sup>72</sup>Ibid., 30.

<sup>73</sup>Ibid., 31.

<sup>74</sup>Ibid., "The Higher Education of Women," 50.

than any one-sided masculine definition could ever have suggested or inspired." <sup>75</sup> Not only did Cooper disclaim the notion that women will become less "womanly" with education but here she established the idea that education provided women with the wherewithal to fight for the "needs of this needy world," those who are disadvantaged and burdened. Education was necessary for personal growth and social change.

Cooper knew, however, that many did not share her views about the higher education of women and the role education played in social reform. She, in fact, indicted black men for their attitudes about education for black women. Acknowledging their fight for black liberation and other issues, she nevertheless, felt that the "majority" of colored men "do not yet think it worthwhile that women aspire to higher education." <sup>76</sup> Cooper claimed that black men were just not ready for women's voice in education. Even though black men could be very effective when dealing with race issues, they failed at the woman question and what that question meant for black women. Cooper was concerned that people such as the black men she cited wanted women on pedestals but not on the lecture platform addressing the problems of the day just as they did. Cooper angrily wrote that "the atmosphere, the standards, and the requirements of our little world do not afford any special stimulus to female development." Women needed to "tug at the great questions of the world" too.<sup>77</sup> Every perspective and experience needed to be heard and understood if change was to be effective.

Given Cooper's support of women's education, it was not surprising that she supported the women's movement and its ability to challenge gender discrimination. However, she realized that many white women

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<sup>75</sup>Ibid.

<sup>76</sup>Ibid., 75.

<sup>77</sup>Ibid.

perpetuated race prejudice in the movement; these attitudes, she thought, needed to be addressed. In the essay, "Woman versus the Indian," Cooper indicted two of the movement's national leaders, Susan B. Anthony and Anna B. Shaw, for their failure to take a stand against racism in the women's movement. Cooper recalled an incident regarding a woman's club, to which both Anthony and Shaw belonged, that refused to admit a black applicant.<sup>78</sup> Cooper remembered that the name of the club was "Wimodaughsis (which, being interpreted for the uninitiated, is a woman's culture club whose name is made up of the first few letters of the four words wives, mothers, daughters and sisters)" and that Anna B. Shaw was president.<sup>79</sup>

She continued to recite the incident and its meaning to her. "Pandora's box is opened in the ideal harmony of this modern Eden without an Adam when a colored lady, a teacher in one of our schools, applies for admission to its privileges and opportunities." She wrote further,

The Kentucky secretary, a lady zealous in good works and one who, I can't help imagining, belongs to that estimable class who daily thank the Lord that He made the earth that they may have the job of superintending its rotations, and who really would like to help 'elevate' the colored people (in her own way of course and so long as they understand their places) is filled with grief and horror that any persons of Negro extraction should aspire to learn typewriting or languages or to enjoy any other advantages offered in the sacred halls of Wimodaughsis.

Sarcastically, Cooper lauded the white women of the club for their "efforts" to "help" colored people; she found it hypocritical that the aid did not extend to membership in a club that would afford the applicant some measure of independence. Cooper commented further that the white women

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<sup>78</sup>Ibid.. "Woman vs. The Indian," 81.

<sup>79</sup>Ibid.. 80.

had not calculated that there were any wives, mothers, daughters, and sisters, except white ones; and she is really convinced that *Whimodaughsis* would sound just as well, and then it need mean just *white mothers, daughters and sisters*.. Accordingly, the Kentucky secretary took the cream-colored applicant aside, and, with emotions befitting such an epoch-making crisis, told her, 'as kindly as she could,' that colored people were not admitted to the classes, at the same time refunding the money which the said applicant had paid for lessons in type-writing.<sup>80</sup>

Although Cooper knew that many of these women had such attitudes, she was disappointed in their leaders because she believed that Shaw and Anthony had the power and position to communicate through their networks their scorn for such attitudes and beliefs. "As leaders in the women's movement of today," Cooper wrote, "they have need of clearness of vision as well as firmness of soul in adjusting recalcitrant forces, and wheeling into line the thousand and one-such, never-to-be-modified, won't-be-dictated-to banners of their somewhat mottled array."<sup>81</sup> Cooper believed that these women could have made a powerful statement if they had stood up for the young black woman. As she said, "The 'leading woman,' the preacher, the reformer, the organizer 'enthuses' her lieutenants and captains, the literary women, the thinking women, the strong, earnest, irresistible women; these in turn touch their myriad church clubs, social clubs, culture clubs, pleasure clubs and charitable clubs, till the same lecture has been duly administered to every man in the land (not to speak of sons and brothers) from the President in the White House to the stone-splitter of the ditches."<sup>82</sup> In other words, their words and actions could have had a tremendous impact around the country. To explain further, Cooper remarked that

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<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*, 81-82.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*, "Woman vs. The Indian," 83.

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*, 85.

the American woman then is responsible for American manners. Not merely the right ascension and declination of the satellites of her own drawing room; but the rising and the setting of the pestilential or life-giving orbs which seem to wander afar in space, all are governed almost wholly through her magnetic polarity.

At the head and center in this regime stands the Leading Woman in the principality.

But the lessons and teachings of the leading woman should not stay in the home. They were lessons and ways of being that women should carry into society and demand that their families did the same. Everywhere woman had an influence.

Cooper realized though that even the leaders of the movement had their racist attitudes. Naming this essay for a speech given by Anna B. Shaw called "Woman versus the Indian," Cooper attacked the prejudice and racism of Shaw and others like her who sacrificed other's liberation for their own. In that speech, Shaw complained that white women were humiliated at being treated less courteously than "Indians in blankets and moccasins." In the essay in her book, Cooper attacked the race prejudice and the "caste" prejudice evident in this comment.<sup>83</sup> Sardonicly, Cooper wrote that these white women were fearful of losing the position into which they were born, just like the Brahmin caste of India:

The one talismanic word that plays along the wires from palace to cook-shop, from imperial Congress to the distant plain, is *Caste*.

With all her vaunted independence, the American woman of to-day is as fearful of losing caste as a Brahmin in India.<sup>84</sup>

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<sup>83</sup>Ibid., "Woman vs. The Indian," 87.

<sup>84</sup>Ibid., 86-87.

Influential women were afraid of losing the position they had been accorded since birth. If they included anyone else in their circle of being, their position would be threatened. Cooper's characterization of "caste" was quite interesting; caste was an umbrella term for any social category such as race, gender and class which Cooper believed society determined at birth. For example, society determined one's race category at birth; you were either black or white and that never changed in the society constructed. The same could be said for class and gender. In order for change to occur, all caste categories had to be abolished so that people could live freely without being restricted to social categories which they could not change.

Cooper knew, then, that before women and others could ally, they had to be released from the "paralyzing grip of caste prejudice."<sup>85</sup> She realized that the attitudes of leaders in the movement were driven by race and class prejudice. Yet, she also knew that they had to abandon their ideas if they were really in a movement for freedom and equality. Freedom was a universal birthright that all were entitled to regardless of race, gender, or class.

Though before Cooper finished her attack on Anna B. Shaw and her attitudes, she launched a campaign, couched in an argument on courtesy, that showed the racism and sexism that plagued black women everywhere. Recalling in an article she read that a group of white American girls were traveling the country to research "the ease and facility" of traveling in America, Cooper said that she could give the young ladies quite a good deal of research.<sup>86</sup> She painted a picture of the ordeals black women underwent to travel in the country. For instance, when white women traveled by rail, a pullman helped them from the car and took their bags. However, Cooper

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<sup>85</sup>Ibid., "Woman vs. The Indian," 116.

<sup>86</sup>Ibid., 89.

knew that when a black woman stepped from the car, the rail conductors "deliberately fold their arms and turn round when the Black Woman's turn came to alight- bearing her satchel, and bearing besides another unnamable burden inside the heaving bosom and tightly compressed lips. The feeling of slighted womanhood is unlike every other emotion of the soul."<sup>87</sup> The "unnamable burden" that Cooper mentioned here is the burden of being a black woman, not acknowledged nor accorded the respect typical for a lady in society. In other words, because Cooper did not belong to a respectable "caste", she would not receive the respect of white women.

Cooper mentioned other slights to black women. She recalled a time when she was sitting in a train car and thinking about the outrageous expense of providing separate and expensive accommodations when a man approached her. She says "but when a great burly six feet of masculinity with sloping shoulders and unkempt beard swaggers in, and, throwing a roll of tobacco into one corner of his jaw, growls out at me over the paper I am reading, "Here gurl," (I am past thirty) "you better git out 'n did kyar 'f yer don't, I'll put yer out." Cooper's recollections of these events demonstrate the racism that led companies to have separate quarters for blacks and that would propel this man to call Cooper a girl.

The conflict that Cooper embodied as a black woman at a time when black women were on the periphery of both movements for black liberation and women's liberation is best understood through her observation of a train station after she stepped down from the rail car unassisted. She was on the same train where she had run into the previously mentioned "gentleman" when

farther on in the same section our train stops at a dilapidated

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<sup>87</sup>Ibid., 90.



station, rendered yet more unsightly by dozens of loafers with their hands in their pockets while a productive soil and inviting climate beckon in vain to industry; and when, looking a little more closely, I see two dingy little rooms with "FOR LADIES" swinging over one and "FOR COLORED PEOPLE" over the other.<sup>88</sup>

Cooper's hesitation over which category she fell under (although the majority would have put her in the latter) was indicative of the conflict black club women felt at the time. Seeing themselves caught between the idea of women and black people and knowing that often women meant white women and black people often meant black men, these black women seemed caught between two worlds. So, they had to create their own. Black women had to break out of caste; they had to abolish all categories that multiply constricted them. Furthermore, they had to lead the creation of a new society based not on marginalization, discrimination and oppression but on equality, inclusion and freedom.

Cooper discussed specifically the role of black women in social change in the last essay of the first section, called "The Status of Woman in America." Cooper believed that black women would play a major role in social reform, primarily because of their position in society.

The colored woman of to-day occupies, one may say, a unique position in this country. In a period of itself transitional and unsettled, her status seems one of the least ascertainable and definitive of all the forces which make for our civilization. She is confronted by both a woman question and a race problem, and is as yet an unknown or an acknowledged factor in both.<sup>89</sup>

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<sup>88</sup>Ibid., "Woman vs. The Indian," 96.

<sup>89</sup>Ibid., "The Status of Woman in America," 134.

Cooper's comments indicated the social attitudes of her time; she believed that the position of black women dictated a choice as to which oppressed groups she belonged. There was no category for those belonging in two or maybe three groups. Cooper demonstrated the dilemma when she stepped off the railway and saw the two signs for "ladies" and for "colored persons." But Cooper did not see this as an obstacle. The black woman's position was best to judge the movements of a race and the movements of a gender, being constrained by both. The time was ripe for black women to forge ahead in the movements for liberation.

In the essay called "Has America A Race Problem?", Cooper continued her idea about the period of age being "itself transitional and unsettled" by discussing how each part of the world had progressed in dealing with problems of race. After ending the discussion of Europe, she needed to go "one more degree westward" to America to really understand the implications of discord and dissension.

Here surely was a seething caldron of conflicting elements.  
 Religious intolerance and political hatred, race prejudice  
 and sex discrimination and caste pride- Conflict, Conflict,  
 Conflict. America for Americans! This is the white man's  
 country! The Chinese must go, shrieks the exclusionist.  
 Exclude the Italians! Colonize the blacks in Mexico or  
 deport them to Africa. Lynch, suppress, drive out, kill  
 out! America for Americans!

Cooper aptly asked after these comments "'Who Are Americans'? Who are to do the packing and delivering of the goods? Who are the homefolks and

who are the strangers? Who are the absolute and original tenants in fee-simple?"<sup>90</sup>

The conflict arose from the fact that Cooper believed that "exclusive possession" of this country "belongs to no one." Hostility would arise when one group strove for exclusive possession and dominance. Cooper contended, though, that no one could be supreme in this country "where a hundred free forces are lustily clamoring for recognition and each wrestling mightily for the mastery, individual tyrannies must inevitably be chiseled down, individual bigotries worn smooth and malleable, individual prejudices either obliterated or concealed."<sup>91</sup>

It was important that "all interests must be consulted, all claims conciliated." The only way that this nation of conflicting forces could survive was through compromise, "a general amnesty and universal reciprocity."<sup>92</sup> Anytime one group attempted to overcome this reciprocity and harmony, Cooper believed that the "opposition" should "tone down and polish off all such ugly excrescences as that."<sup>93</sup> For Cooper, America was the testing ground of whether a society could exist and thrive with conflicting forces. "In this arena then is to be the last death struggle of political tyranny, of religious bigotry, and intellectual intolerance, of caste and sex illiberality and class exclusiveness."<sup>94</sup> All categories of "caste" must be abolished.

Continuing vehemently she wrote that,

If it takes the dearest idol, the pet theory of the darling 'ism',  
the pride, the selfishness, the prejudices, the exclusiveness,

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<sup>90</sup>Ibid., "Has America A Race Problem," 163.

<sup>91</sup>Ibid., 164.

<sup>92</sup>Ibid., 165.

<sup>93</sup>Ibid., 167.

<sup>94</sup>Ibid., "Has America A Race Problem." 168.

the bigotry and intolerance, the conceit of self, of race, or family superiority, - nay, if it singe from thee thy personal gratification in thy distinction by birth by blood, by sex- everything, - let them go- let them go!

Whatever it took, Cooper wanted to see an end to exclusiveness and prejudice.

Now in my judgment writings of the first class will be the ones to withstand the ravages of time. 'isms' have their day and pass away. New necessities arise with new conditions and the emphasis has to be shifted to suit the times. No finite mind can grasp and give out the whole circle of truth. We do it well if we can illuminate just the tiny arc which we occupy and should be glad that the next generation will not need the lessons we try so assiduously to hammer into this.

Caste categories and prejudices had to go. One of the ways to abolish and transcend them was to understand all experiences, all peoples to grasp truth. She reminded people that

The art of 'thinking oneself imaginatively into the experiences of others' is not given to all, and it is impossible to acquire it without a background and a substratum of sympathetic knowledge.

One of the best ways to do this, as Cooper recommended, was through education. "Education is the word that covers it all. . . But there is no other labor that so creates value. Education, then, is the safest and richest investment possible to man." <sup>95</sup>

Although Cooper believed in the power of education and voice, religion, the framework for many of her ideas about humanity, guided her

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<sup>95</sup>Ibid.. "The Negro as Represented in American Literature," and "What are we worth," 183, 185, 244.

belief system. In the final essay, "The Gain From A Belief," Cooper revealed through her discussion of the shortcomings of agnostics, her belief in her convictions to improve and better the lives of others. Cooper's faith in one truth led her to criticize the beliefs of agnostics because she believed that "the great, the fundamental need of any nation, any race, is for heroism, devotion, sacrifice; and there cannot be heroism, devotion, or sacrifice in a primarily skeptical spirit."

For Cooper, faith guided all attempts to change the country; faith provided one with power. Faith in God who transformed the world provided strength, anchorage and hope. She wrote that "at such times most of all, do men need to be anchored to what they *feel* to be eternal verities." In order for any attempt to change conditions and opportunities to be successful, one must "*believe* in the infinite possibilities of devoted self-sacrifice and in the eternal grandeur of a human idea heroically espoused."<sup>96</sup> Religious belief and faith gave humankind the strength to speak and to live a life worth living. It empowered humankind to bring justice, freedom and equality fully into the world.<sup>97</sup> "It is the enthusiasms, the faiths of the world that have heated the crucibles in which were formed its reformations and its impulses toward a higher growth."<sup>98</sup>

Cooper used the example of Jesus to demonstrate the heights that can be achieved through faith. "Jesus *believed* in the infinite possibilities of an individual soul. His faith was a triumphant realization of the eternal development of the best in man- an optimistic vision of the human aptitude for endless expansion and perfectibility. He could not lay hold of this truth and let pass an opportunity to lift men into nobler living and firmer

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<sup>96</sup>Ibid., "The Gain from a Belief," 297.

<sup>97</sup>Karen Baker Fletcher, *A Singing Something*, 157.

<sup>98</sup>Ibid., "The Gain from a Belief," 298.

building." <sup>99</sup> Jesus did not lay by idly and allow the opportunities to aid, cure, heal and protect to pass. He lived his conviction; Cooper believed that religion must be practiced in this way too. "Religion must be life made true." Each day one must live the beliefs that one holds. Power to change lies in the words "*I believe....* without them I have no inspiration to better myself, no inclination to help another." Cooper ended her book with these words, "if thou believest, all things are possible; and as thou believest, so be it unto thee." <sup>100</sup>

The image that Cooper drew throughout her book involved a futuristic community, respecting difference, appreciating knowledge and work, accepting and valuing the voices of all, tied together by the strength from belief in God. On the other hand, she also described a very harsh reality, the world in which she lived and of which she was very critical. Being identified by caste boxed individuals such that they could not escape from the prejudice and discrimination of not belonging to the "right" caste. In the almost "crazy" world that Cooper described, people were punished for characteristics they could not change. The only way to abolish such ideas was to construct a new society based on inclusion, democracy, community, voice and education. In 1892, Anna Julia had established her beliefs and cemented her faith in God and the capacity of humanity to change. Cooper's belief in the power of the human spirit, evident in this book, dictated much of what she did throughout the rest of her life.

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<sup>99</sup>Ibid.

<sup>100</sup>Ibid., 304.

## Living into Belief: The Rest of Cooper's Life

Almost a decade after *A Voice* was published and after fourteen years as a teacher at M Street, as mentioned in the first chapter, Anna Julia became principal at M Street after Robert Terrell's tenure. As principal, Cooper made many changes in the school, keeping with her belief in education as a means to personal and social change. However, many of her beliefs and accomplishments were not met with the approval and enthusiasm from administrators one might expect. Shortly after taking the reigns of the school, Cooper beliefs and vision of education for the Washington's black high school students were tested.

### **The M Street Controversy: The Test of Cooper's Beliefs**

During Cooper's tenure as principal of M Street, she faced several difficulties administering the school and teaching. One of the problems she faced involved maintaining a classical curriculum in the classroom as opposed to the vocational curriculum the school board favored. When the city board began to consider industrial education in the black schools, the school board decided to make an investigation of the black schools in the district.

The investigation, then, entailed a way to determine how best to institute the new changes. When they came upon M Street, they ran into a problem: what to do about a school and its leader who "actually prepared pupils who entered Harvard, Yale, Brown, & Oberlin and won for the first time a place in the list of accredited High Schools for the Washington High

School for colored children known then as the M Street School." <sup>101</sup> When the city board came across reports, scattered at best, of drunkenness among the students at M Street, they knew what to do. <sup>102</sup> Anna Julia Cooper was brought up on charges, trumped at best, of lack of discipline and control in the school.

The allegations and charges that led the investigation were reported in two Washington, D.C. newspapers, the *Washington Bee* and the *Washington Post*. The press kept the city population abreast of what occurred in board meetings, how community leaders felt about the issue and how the general public sided, whether with Cooper or Percy M. Hughes, the white director of Washington high school, who instigated the charges against Cooper.

In an article titled "Various Factions Are Agreed that It Will Be Better for Teachers and Pupils If Accusations Are Promptly Disposed Of. Contention Began Over Two Years Ago, and Grew Out of a Lecture," the *Post* commented on the outcry of the students and faculty that the issue quickly come to an end; it also reported that Cooper "is popular. Those who question her efficiency as a teacher make no war upon her personally. But while they admit that she may be a woman of unusual intelligence, they say her personality is not impressive and that she is incapable as a disciplinarian." <sup>103</sup>

The *Post* went on to write that Cooper's critics blame her for the fact that students had been drinking and smoking in the school. When the charges were made, as the *Post* reported, the board of the black schools replied in a letter that "the charge of drunkenness had been investigated by the principal, Mrs. Cooper, who reported that there was no evidence to sustain

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<sup>101</sup>Unidentified newspaper account of the controversy over M Street High School, n.d., Anna Julia Cooper Papers, Howard University.

<sup>102</sup>Hutchinson. *Anna Julia Cooper*, 69.

<sup>103</sup>*Washington Post*, 19 September 1905.



the charges made."<sup>104</sup> One of the boys found drunk when the city board performed its investigation made an affidavit that he had appeared intoxicated before his principal Mrs. Cooper. The *Post* reported that "Mrs. Cooper eventually had opportunity to reply to these and other charges made afterward by Director Hughes. It is claimed on her part that the boy made the affidavit because of his pique at having been suspended for putting talcum powder on the collar of his pal, who occupied a seat in front of him."<sup>105</sup> Interestingly, enough, the boy who made the affidavit was no longer at M Street and there were no other specific cases in the formal charges. Yet, the investigation and the hearings continued.

As the hearings progressed, members of the black community began to organize in support of Cooper. In an article in the *Washington Bee*, members of the community claimed that because she refused to "compromise her principles" she should not be removed.<sup>106</sup> Reverend Frances J. Grimke, pastor of the Fifteenth Street Presbyterian Church, was more explicit in his support and forthright about what he believed was the real issue. Although the comments he made to the *Post* are long, they are worth citing here in full:

As a rule I do not mix in school affairs. In this case, however, I have made an effort to get at the facts. I have satisfied myself that there is a concerted movement to persecute Mrs. Cooper. She is an estimable woman and has been doing excellent work in our schools. Those who were opposed to her appointment as principal of the M Street School seem to have continued their opposition.

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<sup>104</sup>*Washington Post*, 19 September 1905.

<sup>105</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>106</sup>*Washington Bee*, 30 September 1905.

Grimke realized that the charges of which the board accused Cooper were not the real issues; Cooper was the victim of a deliberate attempt to remove her from a position of authority in which she could continue to send students to Harvard and the like. Grimke addressed this very issue of the education that opened doors for students at the best colleges in the country when he said

The best answer to the charges of inefficient teaching in the M Street High School is found in the fact that its graduates under Mrs. Cooper's instruction go into the Northern colleges; like Harvard, Williams, and Cornell. Without conditions, Francis, a recent graduate, entered Harvard not long ago, passing the entrance examinations creditably. In fact, Mrs. Cooper is able to show that one of the pupils who graduated while deficient, did not graduate with her consent, but with the consent of Director Hughes, to whom she referred the young man's case.

When asked about the supposed lack of control and discipline of which members teaching staff were accused, Grimke said that he knew nothing about that but

I know that, from all appearance, there is a plot for the undoing of Mrs. Cooper. The five teachers opposed to her have been favored by Supt. Stuart and Director Hughes, and promotions have been given those teachers in preference to the teachers that have been loyal to her. Under such conditions, with all the responsibility of that large school upon her shoulders, delay of the school committee is unwarranted. It is a miserable situation.<sup>107</sup>

From Rev. Grimke's comments, one learned a great deal more about the situation. For instance, even though Cooper was accused of inefficient

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<sup>107</sup>*Post*, 19 September 1905.

teaching, along with lack of discipline and personality, one of the students who she recommended not graduate did graduate with the approval of the director of the city schools. This gives further credence to the argument that the real issues were not lack of discipline and control but that Cooper was providing black students educational opportunities of which the city's white school board did not approve. It is telling that Director Hughes preferred to graduate deficient black students rather than graduate black students who would go on to Harvard, Cornell and the other schools to which Cooper sent her students.

Shortly after the *Washington Post* printed its article, recapitulating the events that had occurred during the past two years, the board came to its decision. On Monday night, October 30, 1905, the Board of Education convened to pass upon the charges against Cooper. Although the board formally announced Cooper's retention, it "arraigned her severely for the loose methods which [had] prevailed at the school under her administration."<sup>108</sup> This decision clearly did not exonerate Cooper. To make matters worse, as principal of the school, Cooper was forced to be closely supervised by Director Hughes, instead of the black assistant superintendent, as the hierarchy formerly dictated. Cooper had lost all autonomy in the running of the school; she had to comply with any rules and decisions that the board made, whether dealing with curriculum or conduct, even to the detriment of the students whose lives she was helping to change.

Although Cooper had been retained with the help of the community in 1905, her tenure would not last much longer. Almost exactly a year later, in October of 1906, the board brought Cooper up again on similar charges as before. This time though the issue was not dragged through the newspapers

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<sup>108</sup>*Post*, n.d., as quoted in Hutchinson, *Anna Julia Cooper*, 75.

and the board quietly dismissed Cooper for being sympathetic to weak students.<sup>109</sup>

After the decision, Cooper left Washington and became chairperson of the Department of Languages at Lincoln Institute in Jefferson City, Missouri. Yet, she had not given up on M Street and surrendered to the will of the partial board. In January 1907, she wrote a letter to the board asking for reinstatement to her position and back salary. The board only noted that "On motion the same was referred to the attorney for the Board."<sup>110</sup> Cooper did not return, then, to M Street but she did a few years later. In a letter dated May 1, 1909, included in a collection of class letters of Oberlin graduates of 1884, she reflected on the incidents of 1905 and 1906:

My last letter was written from Washington, D.C., where I taught in high school work twenty years. During five of this time I served as principal of the M street high school, the largest school of secondary education for colored youth in the country. In this work I had the satisfaction of believing that I was able to broaden the outlook on life for some and to encourage the effort for higher development. I can say only that my labor in this direction met with appreciative recognition from the people whom I served.

Anna Julia thought that she served a valuable purpose educating students, helping them to find their voices and strengthen them by broadening their ways of seeing and dreaming about change and a better life. Often, though, students such as the ones she taught did not have champions such as she; in

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<sup>109</sup>"Dismissal of Mrs. Cooper," *Post*, 15 October 1906.

<sup>110</sup>Minutes of the meeting of the Washington D.C. Board of Education, 16 January 1907, as quoted in Hutchinson, *Anna Julia Cooper*, 83.

fact, they did not even have voices yet to cry out for better opportunities and change because

they are the lowly, and for the most part, *voiceless*. The dominant forces of our country are not yet tolerant of the higher steps for colored youth; All of which, according to my way of thinking, is unfortunate and unfair. No people can progress, without the vivifying touch of ideas and ideals. The very policy of segregation renders all the more necessary a 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.

Cooper believed in education and its ability to help people, especially the voiceless and lowly, enact change. Her students needed the broadest education and the best equipped schools because they, living in the desolate and hopeless situations in which they lived, were not afforded opportunities to experience all that life had to offer. Education helped people "to live."<sup>111</sup>

Although Cooper faced many challenges in her efforts to help students "live" through education, she did not give up on her charge to serve and help others help themselves. Despite the fact that Cooper temporarily lost this challenge to her beliefs, she did not surrender the war. She went on to pursue and receive a doctorate and fight for the education of the most lowly, poor and working class members of the black community.

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<sup>111</sup>Anna Julia Cooper in a letter included in the Oberlin Class Letters. 1 May 1909, as quoted in Hutchinson, *Anna Julia Cooper*, 83.

### The Third Step: Doctorate from the Sorbonne

In 1906 Anna Julia moved to Jefferson City, Missouri, where she taught at Lincoln University after she had been dismissed from M Street High School. In the fall of 1910, she returned to Washington and M Street High School. However, she returned as a Latin teacher not as the principal.

While in Washington with fewer duties, Cooper began to travel again and continue her own education. She began studying for her doctorate at Columbia University in New York City in 1914, accepted on the basis of courses she took in Paris. She quickly completed her course credit by 1917 and was considering a way to meet Columbia's one-year residency requirement.<sup>112</sup>

However, a challenge to her plans presented itself. At about the age of fifty-five, she adopted her five grand-nieces and grand-nephews. She now had the opportunity to put into action her beliefs that the community should collectively shape the minds of the youth. As she said in "The Third Step," an autobiographical pamphlet about her journey obtaining the doctorate that she had privately printed, she had taken responsibility for the care of the children "with the hope and determination of nurturing their growth into useful and creditable American citizens."<sup>113</sup>

After she found a suitable home for the family, she started on her thesis. As she did her "homework" as she called it, she also continued her community service. Then, the time came for her to begin the research for her

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<sup>112</sup>Cooper, Anna Julia. "The Third Step." n.d., Anna Julia Cooper Papers Howard University.

<sup>113</sup>Cooper. "The Third Step" n.d, 4, Anna Julia Cooper Papers, Howard University.

thesis, which entailed going abroad to France. By that time, she had decided to continue to work on her doctorate at the Sorbonne in Paris, the best place to obtain a doctorate in French history and literature. But Cooper faced another obstacle; she had caught the flu. But instead of staying in bed as she said, she took the opportunity to take a leave of absence from M Street. While recovering, she completed her Ph.D in Paris.

In spite of the objections of the administrators at Columbia who thought it improbable that she was completing her thesis in Paris, Cooper forged ahead with her plans. She was on her way, tickets for the boat trip, "passports, photographs and identification assurances" in hand. Once in Paris, though, she found that "the most formidable hurdle of all was getting my thought boiled down to a topic acceptable to the Faculte des Lettres de L'Universite de Paris."<sup>114</sup> Her final decision was the topic: "L'Attitude de la France dans la question de l'Esclavage entre 1789 et 1848."

With that decision made, she began her research at the archives. Trouble, though, was not far behind. She received a cable from home that said, "Rumored dropped if not return within 60 days." M Street was no longer going to tolerate her absence; they would not honor the year that had been previously promised. She had to think quickly if she was to solve the matter. She came to the conclusion that she had to leave. She arranged to have archival material copied and sent to the Library of Congress where she would work after school and weekends on her thesis. She also arranged to return to Paris for the defense of her thesis when it was completed.

When she arrived back in Washington, she was just in time. She wrote, "when I walked into my class room 5 minutes before 9 on the morning of the 60th day of my absence, I did not sense the true inwardness of the

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<sup>114</sup>Ibid., 8.

gleeful applause that greeted me till sometime afterwards when I learned that these little friends of mine had all the excitement of fans holding ringside seats at a race; for the substitute had confided to them 'I'll be your permanent teacher if Mrs. Cooper does not get back by next Thursday.'" <sup>115</sup>

Cooper took every free opportunity, including summer vacation and holidays, that she had to complete the thesis. By Thanksgiving, she was ready to return to Paris, but this time with the express permission of the administrators at Dunbar. Again, once in Paris, she faced more problems. As she wrote, "my Washington typist had no French accents on her machine, and I burned out a devastating number of Madame L's candles, sitting up all night to put in accents and make necessary corrections."<sup>116</sup>

Finally, though, Cooper completed her thesis and defended it successfully. She received her diploma in "a pleasing ceremony at Howard University under the auspices of Xi Omega Chapter of Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority December 29, 1925." <sup>117</sup> Cooper had completed the third and final step in her education with "flying colors."

Anna Julia Cooper was sixty-five years old when she received her Ph.D. Although that was amazing in itself, the most incredible thing was that she did it in spite of all the challenges, hurdles and obstacles that she met. Cooper's attainment of the Ph.D is addressed here for this very reason. Anna Julia Cooper had an unshakable belief in education which she pursued all of her life. Yet, it was not easy for her, evident from the many obstacles she faced as a teacher at M Street and as a student for the Ph.D. Her belief in education was no more clear than in her last fight to protect educational opportunity for everyone when she took the reins of the Frelinghuysen school.

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<sup>115</sup>Ibid., 11.

<sup>116</sup>Ibid.

<sup>117</sup>Ibid.



## The Frelinghuysen Years: The Last Fight

As the 1920's ended, Cooper came close to retirement. But she became involved in a dispute with the D.C. school system that would threaten her retirement. Cooper claimed she had received an unfair professional rating which she felt undeserved considering that those who received favorable ratings had educational claims below hers. In a long letter to the Board of Examiners, she lamented her rating and questioned the impartiality of the board. Yet, it was to no avail; she still did not receive the superior rating and salary increase for which she was obviously entitled.<sup>118</sup> She retired from the system without the added benefits that she would have received with the promotion.

After retiring from the D.C. school system, Cooper remained an educator. She became president of Frelinghuysen University of Employed Colored Persons, an institute founded in Washington in 1906 by Jesse Lawson.<sup>119</sup> The school administered to employed black men and women who could not attend college during the day. It provided an academy offering high school education, a business school offering shorthand, typing, bookkeeping, filing business mathematics, business law, elementary banking procedures and business English. The school was committed to offering practical skills that would help its students improve their lives financially. It also offered courses at the junior college and college level; there were schools of liberal arts, sociology, applied science, fine arts, applied Christianity, theology, law and pharmacy.<sup>120</sup>

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<sup>118</sup>Hutchinson, *Anna Julia Cooper*, 147.

<sup>119</sup>Gabel, *From Slavery to the Sorbonne*, 75.

<sup>120</sup>Hutchinson. *Anna Julia Cooper*, 160.

Lawson presided over the school until his death. After his death, the school floundered for two and a half years before Cooper became president. Cooper's command of this college reiterated her convictions that education would be the vehicle for improving the conditions in which blacks lived. Education was the key to social uplift and fighting the constraints of social burdens. Cooper often used her position in the school to further her educational beliefs. In the Decennial Catalogue of the university she wrote that the "all 'round education led to the broader brotherhood, and deeper understanding of the eternal significance and beauty of human serving," which was the "honest to goodness American ideal." She considered the "Frelinghuysen idea" an "innovation of American education."<sup>121</sup>

Most people did not share her enthusiasm for Frelinghuysen. She often expressed her concern that the community was not supportive. She sent out many letters in a fundraising drive to support the school but was unsuccessful. The situation became so desperate that the trustees received a notice to vacate the building which housed the school. Cooper offered the use of her home to house the school; some of the trustees, though, opposed the move because they believed that it would force the school backwards in its efforts to improve.<sup>122</sup>

Cooper, however, did not share their concerns. She forged ahead with plans for the school. In the accreditation efforts she headed, she appealed to Howard University for support as a way to show that the school had legitimacy. She made her appeal noting that Howard, "the richly endowed institution for the Talented Tenth" could support "the modest effort at Frelinghuysen to open doors of opportunity and service for a sadly neglected

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<sup>121</sup>Cooper in the Decennial Catalogue of Frelinghuysen University, 1950 (?), Howard University, Anna Julia Cooper papers.

<sup>122</sup>Hutchinson. *Anna Julia Cooper*, 164.

group of underprivileged people." Her appeal failed; Howard refused because of the school's lack of accreditation.<sup>123</sup>

Anna Julia tried everything to save the school, her last attempt at providing education for the lowly and unprivileged. She mortgaged her house to pay off the debts of the school; she bequeathed the house to the school to ensure that it would have a home after she died. In that will, she included a proviso making it impossible for future trustees to dissolve the school.<sup>124</sup> In her efforts to continue running the school, Cooper sought gainful employment, since she had refused to take a salary as president. She sought a position with the Education Division of the WPA in 1937.<sup>125</sup> She was well past seventy-five and was turned down; she attributed their decision to her age. Trustees continued to file suits for recognition of the school but they were continually refused for reasons such as absence of students and an inadequate library. Cooper made one last effort. She appealed directly to the school superintendent. But it was inevitable; the school did not receive recognition.

Finally, in 1940, near eighty, she decided that "a decade is long enough for one to head the fight for recognition." She stepped down as president and became the registrar. By then, though, there were only a handful of students and the positions were only ceremonial. It was finally over; she had lost the battle and the war this time. The school closed just a few years later. Frelinghuysen took something from Anna Julia that none of the other obstacles and challenges had taken, her hope. She surrendered the fight

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<sup>123</sup>Ibid.

<sup>124</sup>She also willed that part of the bequest of her property also include the Hannah Stanley Opportunity School, an annex that would serve retarded students. Interestingly enough, Cooper had dropped the surname Haywood from her mother's name; her rejection of her biological father was complete.

<sup>125</sup>Hutchinson, *Anna Julia Cooper*, 168.

because there was no hope for success. Yet, why this time when all the other challenges to her goal of educational opportunity provided little hope of success? This time, there was little fight left in her; she was almost a century old. Although Cooper surrendered the quest for education at Frelinghuysen, she never lost faith in its power.

### The Last Years

When Anna Julia Cooper turned 100 years old in 1958, she was honored publicly. The *Washington Evening Star* reported that she received birthday greetings from the White House, signed both by the President and Mrs. Eisenhower. She also received the flag that was flown over the Capitol on Sunday, August 10 in honor of her birthday. In the *Washington Post*, Cooper was extolled for her life of service and her dedication to education. When Cooper was asked to reflect on her life, she said, "It isn't what we say about ourselves but what our lives stand for." When asked about her selflessness and her willingness to give her entire life to her causes, she said, "I don't remember ever having taken anything for myself" and went on to extol the benefits of a life of service.<sup>126</sup>

In 1964, Anna Julia Cooper died at age 106, having lived through three major wars, slavery and emancipation, Jim Crow, suffrage, and temperance. Her life was a century-long quest for voice, knowledge and higher learning as the keys to true emancipation. She agitated for the improved status of women, both black and white, and the recognition of the role of women as equal to that of men. Cooper's advocacy of the end of the race problem and the female question was all part of a greater cause of seeking justice for all

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<sup>126</sup>*Washington Post*, as quoted in Hutchinson. *Anna Julia Cooper*, 168.

oppressed people. She died leaving a legacy of activism, service and scholarship.

## Conclusion

Anna Julia Cooper led an extraordinary life. Born during a time when the words, thoughts and actions of African American women, African Americans in general, were not valued, she lived and worked through an age that sought to assert the value inherent in all people, especially those who were oppressed by forces such as racism, sexism and classism.

As a teenager at St. Augustine's Normal School, Cooper began to realize the ways in which external constraints would become manifest in her life. After graduating from Oberlin College, she threw herself into movements to combat such external constraints. Cooper was very active in the movement for women's suffrage but issues of racism prevented her from the kind of protracted and in-depth involvement that she had in the black women's club movement at the turn of the century. As a teacher in the Washington D.C. M Street School, Cooper shaped minds, guided lives and sent her students off to the likes of Harvard and Williams College, despite the attempts of many to stifle her efforts. Her work in education continued throughout her life until the very last years.

The life described above was distinguished and worthy itself of study alone. Yet, what was even more astounding about Anna Julia Cooper was that in addition to her accomplishments, she published several essays and one notable book about the very issues she dealt with in her everyday life and in the extraordinary life she led as a activist. Anna Julia Cooper's *A Voice from the South by a Black Woman of the South* was a landmark book. In this collection of essays and lectures, Cooper addressed the problems of race,

gender and class and confronted the many elements which eroded the existence of African American women in her society.

In the book, Cooper laid the groundwork for later discussion of the relationship between race and gender (and other forms of oppression). Cooper revealed, through her description of the experiences of African American women, the ways in which dual constraints such as race and gender shape an existence and identity that cannot be bifurcated. One cannot be black one day and a woman the next and vice versa. One is a woman who is affected by both a woman question and a race question; many are people who are affected by several questions, all of them simultaneous. Cooper believed that the position of black women challenged the terms under which gender and race were being discussed. African American women's unique perspective on racist and sexist oppression granted them insight into the oppression of many peoples. Cooper did not mean, however, that these oppressions were the same but they extended from a system of white male patriarchy which she confronted in her book.

The manner in which different oppressed groups have insight into the oppression of others was indicative of Cooper's belief that attempts to end sexism and racism were all part of a greater cause of seeking justice for all oppressed people. Although Cooper dealt primarily in her book with the problems of race and gender, interwoven throughout its chapters was a discussion of the cause for human rights. Cooper condemned all social constraints, all caste categories, whether of race, sex, country, religion or condition. To Cooper, the issue was not just a matter of the cause for the black woman or the white woman or the black man or the red man, it was a matter of every human being. Cooper believed that in the fight to end forms of

oppression, people must remember that they were part of a larger struggle to end oppression.

The broad struggle that Cooper spoke of often aimed toward a humanist society, based on the Christian principles by which she lived. Although Anna Julia fought for the voices and liberation of black women, she sought the liberation of all people. If one person was not free, everyone was not free. Anna Julia Cooper believed, spoke and lived this idea.

It is often surprising that Cooper believed this, considering the extremely trying times through which she lived. She was always confronted with an obstacle, a discriminatory attitude, an expression of disbelief, or a closed mind. Yet, she forged ahead, pressed to her goals. Why? Why was she not a cynic? Why did she believe in people when people had disappointed her so many times? Cooper held these convictions because she believed that people could change. She believed that humanity was on a journey, progressing every day, every year, every century. Ultimately, she believed human beings would one day achieve the perfection of Christ, accepting everyone for the simple reason that everyone was a child of God. Everyone was due freedom, liberty and opportunity because these were universal gifts from God.

Cooper's activities were included in this study to demonstrate her belief in the necessity of reform, grounded in religious belief. Cooper has been characterized here as a reformer. Yet, in many ways her goals were hardly reformist but revolutionary. Change to a humanist society was completely antithetical to the practices and beliefs that led to the segregated, discriminatory society in which Cooper lived. Her goals were radical. However, in the sense that Cooper realized that change would be a slow,



gradual process, she was a reformer who happened to want radical social change.

Although it is tempting to conclude this study with my words, I cannot. Words, the product of voice, were so important to Anna Julia Cooper that it is only fitting that she has the last words. Anna Julia Cooper was very modest about her life and the accomplishments that she made; when she wrote the Decennial Catalogue of Frelinghuysen University, she minimized her achievements and made one request:

It is a kind Providence which enables my mental faculties to continue into the 91st year...I cannot take it with me and...it is presumptuous to expect this small accumulation of a lifetime to go on serving in its own small way. The one disappointment, the only failure that can come, is not the absence of eulogistic sanction and public adulation, but a lack, if proven, of the ability to appreciate and utilize advantages here made possible and of the character and insight to know and judge true worth in spiritual values.

No flowers please.<sup>127</sup>

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<sup>127</sup>Anna Julia Cooper in the Second Decennial Catalogue of Frelinghuysen University, 1950 (?), as quoted in Hutchinson, *Anna Julia Cooper*, 172.

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