

Anna Julia Cooper: A Deeper Look into Her Impactful Life

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Abstract

This paper takes a deeper look into the life of Anna Julia Cooper, specifically focusing on her lasting impacts on Black Feminism. Through an explanation of her contributions, her ideas of intersectionality, gender, race, and education are identified and compared. Her book, *A Voice from the South*, and her involvement with the Colored Women's League are elaborated on. Her knowledge continues to be used by modern sociologists, specifically when overcoming challenges related to gender and race.

Keywords: Black Feminism, Intersectionality, Gender, Race, Education, A Voice from The South, Colored Women's League

Background

Anna Julia Cooper was an African American author, educator, and activist, leaving a powerful impact on society. Her life started in Raleigh, North Carolina on August 10, 1860. Being born into slavery, she faced many challenges, which ended up shaping her efforts and dedication to social justice. Despite the many barriers she faced, she pursued an education and would later become the fourth African American woman in the United States to earn her PhD. Her academic journey began at St. Augustine Normal and Collegiate Institute in 1868, which she received a scholarship for at the age of nine years old. Following her entry into the institution, at the age of ten, she began teaching mathematics part time. From 1881 to 1887, she attended Oberlin College of Ohio where she received her BA and master's in mathematics. In 1902, she began serving as principal of M Street High School, but the school district did not agree with her teaching approach, which led to her resignation in 1906. From the years 1911 to 1915, she attended Columbia University where she studied part time for her doctoral degree. Unfortunately, in 1915, she left the university due to her brother's death and she had to take care of his five grandchildren. She returned to her studies a few years later and in 1925 she received her doctorate in Philosophy at the University of Paris in France. Following the completion of her doctorate, she was announced as the president of Frelinghuysen University, which was a school for Black adults. She used the educational system as a tool to transform and help Black Americans thrive. In 1940, she retired from the university but continued to make an impact through her work (Lewis, 1996).

Concerns

Anna Julia Cooper took a central focus on the concept of intersectionality, taking a deeper look into the various oppressions of African American women within society. These

oppressions were related to factors such as race, gender, and class (Johnson, 2009). In such an unequal society, she pushed for educational opportunities and social reform for African American women. She powerfully advocated for education as she believed education and a wealth of knowledge was essential for freedom (Johnson, 2009). In society, African American women were provided with limited opportunities relating to education and employment due to systemic inequalities. Aside from her push for equal education, she took a large focus on the feminist movement, advocating for women's rights (Belle, 2015). She wanted to challenge the existing notions of White feminists, encouraging them to understand the challenges Black women face daily. Through her work, she aimed to achieve equality, erasing the current barriers that were prevalent within society.

Contributions

Throughout her life, Anna Julia Cooper left significant contributions. She made a lasting difference in education, civil rights, and feminism. She dedicated much of her life bettering the education system for so many, advocating for equal opportunities. Aside from her focus on bettering education, she fought for gender and racial equality within marginalized communities (Johnson, 2009). In 1882, she published her first book, *A Voice from the South: By a Black Woman of the South*. She addressed issues of gender, race, and class, while also focusing on the troubles and inequities faced by Black women in the nineteenth century. According to the National Museum of African American History and Culture (2023), she critiqued the racism and sexism within the feminist movement, pushing for solidarity among diverse groups in society. Additionally, the overall theme of this piece was a push for social reform and equality encouraging African American women to overcome the challenges they have been faced with. In 1892, she helped found the Colored Women's League and she joined the executive committee of

the first Pan-African Conference in 1900 (Belle, 2015). The Colored Women's League began in 1892, when a group of prominent Black women in Washington D.C met together to discuss forming an organization dedicated to bettering the lives of black children, women, and the poor. The Young Women Christian Association and the Young Men Christian Association did not accept African American members, so Cooper created colored branches in support of the young African American people moving into Washington D.C (Belle, 2015).

Conclusion

Anna Julia Cooper's valuable contributions are still relevant in modern day society. More specifically, her concepts of intersectionality, education, and social justice. She is recognized today as the "foremother of intersectionality" (Turner, 2023). Relating to intersectionality, oppressions due to factors such as gender, race, and class, are highly prevalent in society today and marginalized groups continue to face challenges. Kathryn Belle (2015) refers to Cooper as "the most sophisticated thinker" on what is known today as Black feminism and her book *A Voice from the South* began an argument that continues to impact Black feminist thought (Belle, 2015).

In our world today, it is quite easy to observe unequal opportunities within the education system. This can be viewed amongst various types of college students. There are individuals, specifically more affluent White people, that have the resources necessary to send their children to top notch education programs, not just in college years, but growing up too. African Americans and other marginalized groups do not have these accessibilities. Additionally, if people of marginalized groups get the opportunity to apply to college, the continuous challenges do not stop there. When it comes time for people of the institution to review applications, they may pick a White person before they select someone of a different racial identity. Also,

depending on the institution and field of study, gender discrimination can be viewed as they may select a male before they select a female.

Finally, Anna Julia Cooper's impactful work in African American feminism continues to remain relevant in modern sociology. Her insights on intersectionality, education, and peace are sought out when addressing challenges within society. She has guided theorists in bettering society and creating social change and has encouraged the push to form equal opportunities for all.

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