

Anna Julia Cooper: Human Rights Educator

Stephanie Y. Evans

The philosophic mind sees that its own "rights" are the rights of humanity. ... The cause of freedom is not the cause of a race or a sect, a party or a class,— it is the cause of human kind, the very birthright of humanity.

~ "Woman versus the Indian" Anna Julia Cooper (1892)

Anna Julia Cooper used higher education to advance human rights in theory and practice. She was born enslaved in North Carolina in the 1850s and lived to the age of 105. Overcoming substantial barriers to graduate from Oberlin College and earn a PhD from the Sorbonne in Paris, she taught at several colleges, universities, and professional schools. Anna Cooper's groundbreaking book, *A Voice from the South, By a Black Woman of the South* (1892) was published a decade before W. E. B. Du Bois' *Souls of Black Folk* (1903), yet her scholar-activist work did not gain the prominence of contemporaries like Du Bois, Booker T. Washington, and Marcus Garvey. Cooper advocated for "the rights of all" and inclusive balance of power a half century before the 1948 United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Just as Gandhi and Martin Luther King Jr. are recognized as drum majors for civil rights, Cooper's social justice work is a paradigm in human rights.

In Anna Julia Cooper: Human Rights Educator, Stephanie Evans presents Cooper's efforts alongside historic peace activists, social workers, and educators including Fannie Jackson Coppin, Jane Addams, Ida B. Wells, Mary Church Terrell, Mary McLeod Bethune, and Septima Clark. Cooper's advocacy involved numerous causes, ranging from leadership in the Black Women's Club Movement, settlement house management, child support services and poverty relief, to Pan-African scholarship, liberal arts education, and lifelong learning. Cooper's focus on the combination of gender, race, and class oppression broadens the idea of "double consciousness." Evans also argues Cooper's definition of "natural" human rights as Divine surpasses hegemonic Western definitions of "rights of man." Cooper's writing is a case study in how to use self-determination to fight dehumanization. Increased attention to Cooper's humanities scholarship and humanitarian practice is warranted based on her seventy-year career as a teacher, university administrator, and community advocate.

Professor Evans traces Cooper's work toward "progressive peace" and demonstrates how she sought to empower her students in order to manage conflict and fight individual, institutional, and social oppression. Students in areas such as Black studies, women's studies, humanities, education, theology, philosophy, and sociology will benefit from this history. Students of social justice education will particularly benefit from the historical context Cooper's story offers. This biography also provides a guide for practitioners in social work, peace and conflict studies, law and public policy, international studies, non-profit administration, and non-governmental organizations.

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