

Book Review

Anna Julia Cooper, Visionary Black Feminist: A Critical Introduction. By Vivian M. May. New York: Routledge, 2007.

Black Women's Intellectual Traditions: Speaking Their Minds. Edited by Kristin Waters and Carol B. Conaway. Burlington: University of Vermont Press, 2007.

Black Women in the Ivory Tower, 1850–1954: An Intellectual History. By Stephanie Y. Evans. Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2007.

Daughter of the Revolution: The Major Nonfiction Works of Pauline E. Hopkins. Edited by Ira Dworkin. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2007.

Kathryn T. Gines, Pennsylvania State University

The four absolutely brilliant texts reviewed here overlap in myriad ways and give rise to a plethora of guiding themes, including black women intellectuals; black women in the academy; and the unique issues that they (we) have faced in their (our) efforts to identify and insist on their (our) voices, resist erasure and silencing, participate in racial and gender uplift, and interlace education with social and political action. I read and review these texts as a counternarrative to a prevailing narrative that can be summarized with reference to the distinction between the public and the private as articulated by philosopher and political theorist Hannah Arendt.

In *The Human Condition*, using the ancient Greek polis as a model, Arendt insists on a rigid division between the public and private spheres and explains the differences between *labor* (confined to the private realm of shadows) and *action* (which takes place in the public realm of appearances).¹ According to Arendt, the public realm allows for individualization

¹ Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 2nd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998).

and differentiation among its members. It is an arena of competition in which a man relies on his own particular deeds and achievements to be distinguished from others. In public, a man attempts to exhibit himself as the best. It is the only place where men can show who they are.² Arendt also stresses that the excellence achieved in the public sphere surpasses any achievement possible in the private. This is the case because excellence must be demonstrated before a formal audience or in the public presence of others. The activities of the public realm are illuminated so that they can be seen and heard by all, receiving the widest possible publicity.

Perhaps this model of measuring achievement and excellence is not problematic if one is a white, property-owning man with women, children, and slaves in the private sphere who create the conditions for him to enter into the public sphere (as is the case in the model Arendt describes). However, this model, which devalues that which is done in private space and celebrates that which is done in public space, has posed numerous problems for the black women activists and intellectuals of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, problems that are presented in the four texts here reviewed. The women described in these texts, who regularly participated in political activism and spoke in public spaces, have too frequently been relegated to the private realm, to a shadowy existence where their achievements have been ignored or erased rather than illuminated. In writing and assembling these texts, the authors and editors have brought these women into the realm of appearances where their actions and excellence can be seen and where their achievements are not viewed as mutually exclusive from their labor in the private realm. I describe these histories and analyses of black women intellectuals as counternarratives because the texts introduce (or reintroduce) readers to women for whom the private and the political are deeply interconnected and for whom individual achievement is intertwined with community uplift rather than just personal gains.

In *Anna Julia Cooper, Visionary Black Feminist: A Critical Introduction*, Vivian M. May offers a refreshingly original analysis of and critical engagement with Cooper's scholarship. Without hesitation, I would describe this text as one of the best books written on Cooper to date. May offers a close and careful reading of Cooper's writings coupled with equally close readings of the secondary literature available on Cooper. The result is a well-researched examination of a wide range of black feminist thought in general and scholarship on Cooper in particular, scholarship that identifies and addresses crucial debates surrounding Cooper's life and her work.

² Ibid, 41.

In the first chapter, “A Little More than Ordinary Interest in the Underprivileged,” May raises and addresses a central issue, namely, the tendency of writers to focus on black women’s lives rather than on their theories. With reference to Valerie Smith and Coco Fusco, May considers the ways in which black women’s theoretical claims have often been underengaged or even dismissed because so much attention is given to their life stories. What May describes as the “biographical imperative” (37) is applied unequally to black women theorists compared to their white male counterparts. She explains, “A critical discussion of major contributions of, for example, a well-known white male theorist does not *necessarily* begin with a lengthy reflection about his origins, his educational experiences and family life, and his life struggles. Questions of how or whether his race, class, and gender affected perception of his work or presented obstacles (or, perhaps conduits) to success are not expected . . . whether he was sufficiently close to his intellectual peers, or whether interpersonal tensions in his life loom so much that we should focus on them instead of his philosophical premises” (39).

May rightly points to a double standard in the intellectual engagement with the scholarship of black women compared to that of, for example, white men. May is clear, however, that her critique of a biographical and historical contextualization of any major thinker is connected to a risk of disengagement with that thinker’s theories and ideas. But I do not think that May would reject the possibility that one could both critically engage an intellectual’s theories and ideas and also provide a responsible biographical and historical contextualization of that thinker. Put another way, I think May would agree that we should neither abandon careful contextualizations of black women nor neglect to offer such contextualizations of white men (as if the latter are universal, pure transcendence and/or minds without bodies, biographies, and histories).

Rather than accepting the dominant readings and interpretations that are frequently rehearsed elsewhere, May challenges Cooper’s critics to engage in a more nuanced analysis of her writings and activism. In the second chapter of the book, “Life Must Be Something More than a Dilettante Speculation,” May responds to critics who have described Cooper as elitist by emphasizing Cooper’s activism, which she notes “has yet to be fully recognized in the literature” (45). According to May, “Perhaps, then, the challenge lies in developing flexible interpretative strategies able to attend to Cooper’s different vocal registers or resonances without silencing them, and more expansive notions of political action or of counter-publics able to recognize a broader range of activities as, in fact, activist” (50). In response to Stephanie Athey’s framing of Cooper as problem-

atically relying on eugenic language and ideology, May asserts that “Cooper could be read quite differently” and “can be seen as [offering] an early materialist Black feminist analysis” of black women’s oppression (55). Against claims that Cooper was merely imitating whiteness, May points to Cooper’s contention that “imitation is the worst of suicide” and adds that “Cooper argued that what African Americans needed most was ‘deliverance’ from normative whiteness” (61).

May is able to recognize some of Cooper’s shortcomings without ignoring or excusing them. But she also boldly refuses the frequent dismissal of Cooper on the grounds that she was an elitist who bought into the oppressive habitus of “True Womanhood.” In “The Cult of True Womanhood: 1820–1860,” Barbara Welter explains, “The attributes of True Womanhood, by which a woman judged herself and was judged by her husband, her neighbors and society could be divided into four cardinal virtues—piety, purity, submissiveness and domesticity.”³ Through institutionalized slavery and in its aftermath, black women are thought to be without virtue and incapable of True Womanhood (i.e., white womanhood). But many black women activists and intellectuals of Cooper’s era sought to redefine black womanhood and underscore their own virtues.⁴ The resulting critique has been that Cooper and others attempt to conform black womanhood to white womanhood. After outlining many claims that Cooper adopted problematic notions of True Womanhood, May offers an alternate reading of Cooper and explains that “Cooper’s *manipulation* of concepts from True Womanhood discourse does not necessarily indicate her full *acceptance* of them” (69). Additionally, May asserts, “From this perspective, I maintain that Cooper’s borrowing from True Womanhood discourse, even if in the contemporary period it seems ‘disappointing’ . . . can still be read as a form of strategic redeployment” (69).

May offers rich and robust readings of Cooper coupled with meticulously constructed counterarguments to critics. The result is a smart and provocative “must read” for anyone interested in learning, teaching, or writing about Anna Julia Cooper.

³ Barbara Welter, “The Cult of True Womanhood: 1820–1860,” *American Quarterly* 18, no. 2, pt. 1 (1966): 152.

⁴ For examples see Paula Giddings, *When and Where I Enter: The Impact of Black Women on Race and Sex in America* (New York: Quill, 1984); Hazel Carby, *Reconstructing Womanhood: The Emergence of the Afro-American Woman Novelist* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987); Joy James, *Transcending the Talented Tenth: Black Leaders and American Intellectuals* (New York: Routledge, 1997); and Karen Johnson, *Uplifting the Women and the Race: The Educational Philosophies and Social Activism of Anna Julia Cooper and Nannie Helen Burroughs* (New York: Garland, 2000).

Black Women's Intellectual Traditions: Speaking Their Minds, edited by Kristin Waters and Carol B. Conaway, examines contributions of black women to private and public discourse and activism from the nineteenth to the twenty-first century. The book includes original essays seamlessly integrated with reprints of classic writings that are organized into six sections titled "Maria W. Stewart: Black Feminism in Public Places"; "Incidents in the Lives: Free Women and Slaves"; "Harper, Hopkins, and Shadd Cary: Writing Our Way to Freedom"; "Anna Julia Cooper: A Voice"; "Leadership Activism, and the Genius of Ida B. Wells"; and, finally, "Black Feminist Theory: From the Nineteenth Century to the Twenty-First."

In the introduction the editors note how difficult it is to get the voices in this anthology heard and represented in the academy and the need to complicate how we conceptualize theory and organize canons. According to Waters and Conaway, "As with all social, political, and literary theory, interpretive works such as the ones in this volume can expose systematic thought—trace the outlines, uncover formal structures and themes, develop and build upon the original material until a body of work emerges that carries force and power in contemporary argument" (2). Challenging claims and assumptions that black women's voices are "issuing from nowhere, lacking theoretical substance, and disconnected from long-standing systems of classic Western thought," they explain that "This collection of essays joins a growing body of work that serves as a corrective to the prevailing view that no long-standing black women's intellectual traditions exist" (3).

The problem of silenced voices and nonrecognition regarding this intellectual tradition cannot be understated. Waters and Conaway assess, quite accurately, that "Since the intellectual productions of women and especially black women, often have been *silenced*, making these theorists heard and recognized is of central importance. Self-generated and authentic 'voices' constitute a powerful means of reclaiming the territory of black women's intellectual production" (3). The editors implore their readers to "listen carefully" to these black women intellectuals as well as to "the voices of those who elucidate and amplify their work, bringing their legacies into the present" (3).

The anthology opens with Maria W. Stewart, frequently cited as the first black woman to speak publicly about women's issues or, more specifically, black women's issues in the United States. The section on Stewart begins with a historical and biographical essay by Marilyn Richardson in which she also describes Stewart as "America's first black woman political writer" (13). Following Richardson's essay, Lena Ampadu analyzes Stew-

art's major speeches from a theological and womanist perspective. She offers some background on the rhetoric of black preaching and situates Stewart as a "womanist and contributor to the Black preaching tradition" (39). Ebony A. Utley provides what she calls a rhetorical analysis of Stewart's speeches that "considers how her attention to audiences advances her intrepid political agenda" (55). Utley offers the following thesis: "I argue that Stewart's inclusion of white *and* black, male *and* female audience members adds clarity to the complexity of her vision of racial and gender parity and participates in a tradition of black public dual audience construction commonly referred to as the antebellum black jeremiad" (55).

The remaining four sections of the book follow a similar inclusive model, featuring essays from varying disciplinary and theoretical standpoints. The reader, whether familiar with the intellectuals and traditions covered in this text or seeking knowledge about them for the first time, is guaranteed to learn something new from this masterful collection of essays.

Stephanie Y. Evans proposes two main arguments in *Black Women in the Ivory Tower, 1850–1954: An Intellectual History*: "first, black women's educational history complicates ideas of what an academic should do or be; and second, black women's intellectual history can outline a more democratic approach to higher education" (2). In the first part of the book, "Educational Attainment," Evans maps out black women's attainment of collegiate education in a historical and geographical framework. In the second part of the book, "Intellectual Legacy," she emphasizes black women's intellectual production and philosophies of higher education in a way that "reveals how black women raised their voices as educators and contributed in significant ways to the development of higher education in the United States" (3).

Evans's historically situated analysis frequently makes use of philosophical methods in considering the conditions under which black women earned degrees of higher education. She also provides biographical backgrounds (some more in-depth than others) of black women including, but not limited to, Sarah Kinson, Lucy Stanton, Mary Jane Patterson, Mary Annette Anderson, Fanny Jackson Coppin, Mary Church Terrell, Zora Neale Hurston, Lena Beatrice Morton, Rose Butler Browne, and Pauli Murray. Of course, the book would not be complete without highlighting, as Evans does, the first four black women to earn doctorate degrees in the United States: Eva Dykes, Sadie Alexander, Georgiana Simpson, and Anna Julia Cooper. Evans goes beyond their biographical information (though such information is itself important insofar as several

of these women are virtually unknown to many) to examine the ways in which they contributed to research, teaching, and service within and beyond the traditional boundaries of the academy. She uses social contract theory (including that of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Charles Mills, and Carole Pateman) and gestures toward standpoint epistemology in insightful ways to “posit the existence of a *standpoint social contract* for black women that is an intersection of the racial and sexual contracts” and to introduce a “language that allows us to move beyond the ‘outsider within’ victimization interpretations of black women’s public history” (5).

One of the most powerful aspects of the text is the analysis that it offers across a span of more than a century, pointing out continuities (or in some cases discontinuities) along the way. In the final chapter, “Living Legacies—Black Women in Higher Education, Post-1954,” Evans recognizes the theoretical contributions of black women currently in the academy. She is also candid about her own challenges and experiences as a black woman scholar and explains, “Researching this history bolstered my resolve to succeed despite internal anxieties or external blockades” (215). This is an important point because it resonates with so many women and especially women of color (whether they are just joining or still persevering) in the academy. We continue to do our research, teaching, and service in excellence, and we insist on being seen and heard even when many of our colleagues close their eyes and cover their ears. I conclude with a quote from Evans: “There was once a time when some scholars believed that the world was flat, the sun revolved around the earth, and that black women did not belong in the academy. The first two myths have been dispelled; let this book lay to rest the third” (13).

Daughter of the Revolution: The Major Nonfiction Works of Pauline E. Hopkins, edited and with an introduction by Ira Dworkin, is unique in many ways. It stands out from the other three texts discussed thus far because it is a collection of primary writings. It is also exciting and new because the book features nonfiction writings of Pauline E. Hopkins, the prominent author who is better known for her exceptional fictional work. Dworkin’s introduction to the text helps to situate Hopkins both historically and in terms of what these writings offer to the contemporary reader. I would like to highlight two points (among many) that stand out in Dworkin’s introduction—points that apply not only to this text but also to the others already mentioned. The first point is the idea, one Dworkin cites from C. K. Doreski, that Hopkins’s biographies offer “a culturally defined, intertextually enriched vision for the way in which all history is biography” (xxiv). The idea that “all history is biography” offers new possibilities for thinking about the biographical imperative issue raised by

May. Understanding biography as history may provide a paradigm in which we can both take seriously a thinker's arguments and still offer a biographical and historical analysis—whether the thinker is a white male or a black female or falls into another identity category. The second point is the international, diasporic scope of Hopkins and numerous other black women within this intellectual tradition. Dworkin describes Hopkins as having an “international commitment to racial uplift,” “a strong diasporic consciousness,” and an “internationalism, which would be one of the characteristic elements of her nonfiction” (xxiii).

Dworkin divides these writings into ten parts. Part I, “Juvenilia,” comprises Hopkins's writings in her youth; part II, “Famous Men of the Negro Race,” includes biographies of twelve figures ranging from Toussaint L'Ouverture to Lewis Hayden to Booker T. Washington; and part III, “Famous Women of the Negro Race,” features women as part of certain groups such as vocalists, literary workers, and educators and gives attention to specific women such as Sojourner Truth and Harriet Tubman. Part IV, “Furnace Blasts, by J. Shirley Shadrach,” contains two stories written by Hopkins under this pseudonym. Part V, “The *Colored American Magazine* Controversy,” consists of writings on the so-called race problem in America, on how the Colored American League began, and a letter to William Monroe Trotter in which Hopkins outlines her confrontation with Booker T. Washington regarding the *Colored American Magazine*. She states in the letter: “Herewith I send you a detailed account of my experiences with the *Colored American Magazine* as its editor and, incidentally, with Mr. Booker T. Washington in taking over of the magazine to New York by his agents” (238). Part VI, “Selected Biographies from the *Colored American Magazine*,” features nine biographical writings, including one of poet Elijah William Smith.

Part VII, “The Dark Races of the Twentieth Century,” contains five sections by Hopkins on varying “dark races” in different regions of the world (“Oceanica,” “The Malay Peninsula,” “The Yellow Race,” “Africa,” and “The North American Indian”). Included are descriptions of the lands and physical descriptions of the people, their cultures, and so on. According to Dworkin, “The series suggests that African American attention to Africa was part of a political vision that emphasized worldliness and transnationalism, something different than what recent critics of racial solidarity might deem a narrow ‘identity politics’” (305).

Read this book! There is much to learn from and be inspired by in the nonfiction writings of Hopkins. May we all glean from and follow the lead of the trailblazing and revolutionary women discussed here.

By way of conclusion, allow me to share a recent experience on a panel

with two other black women professors at a mainstream philosophy conference.⁵ During the discussion following our presentations, one of the panelists shared her experience teaching a philosophy course on black feminism, which provided her with the rare opportunity to bring to the center of the class texts written by and about black women and black feminism. Like so many women of color teaching and researching in disciplines that marginalize us, she expressed her exuberance at the opportunity to teach a course using texts such as Beverly Guy-Sheftall's *Words of Fire*, which documents black women speaking and writing in their own voices as early as the 1830s.⁶ Like Guy-Sheftall's important anthology, the four books discussed in this review are much needed additions to the written records on the contributions of black women intellectuals. Such books must continue to be written, edited, taught, researched, and cited—not only in African American studies or women's studies classes but also in courses on philosophy, history, literature, and sociology, among other disciplines. We must not allow these voices, theories, contributions, and lives to be abandoned and forgotten. ■

⁵ It should be noted that having three black women on one panel at this particular conference is not a frequent occurrence insofar as there are currently only about thirty black women holding a PhD in philosophy in the United States, while the American Philosophical Association has more than 11,000 members.

⁶ Beverly Guy-Sheftall, ed., *Words of Fire: An Anthology of African-American Feminist Thought* (New York: New Press, 1995).