Africana women's voices from the south: focusing on women's issues of the past for definition, identification, and clarification in the present

Alvelyn J. Sanders
Clark Atlanta University

Follow this and additional works at: http://digitalcommons.auctr.edu/dissertations
Part of the African American Studies Commons, and the African Languages and Societies Commons

Recommended Citation
ABSTRACT

AFRICAN AND AFRICAN AMERICAN STUDIES

SANDERS, ALVELYN J. B.S. NORTHWESTERN UNIVERSITY, 1990

AFRICANA WOMEN’S VOICES FROM THE SOUTH:
FOCUSING ON WOMEN’S ISSUES OF THE PAST FOR
DEFINITION, IDENTIFICATION, AND CLARIFICATION IN THE PRESENT

Advisor: Dr. Alma Vinyard

Thesis dated May, 1996

This study discussed the significant link between Anna Julia Cooper's *A Voice from the South* (1892) and the work of twentieth-century, black, Southern women writers through their exploration of specific issues, black feminist theory, and the conditions under which they were written.

This thesis was based on the premise that Cooper's text can provide clarification for contemporary black women's issues, show a continuum in the work of Southern writers, and prove that similar conditions exist today for black women as in the nineteenth century.

Chapter One defines some of the similar issues found in Cooper's work and contemporary writings. Chapter Two discusses the intellectual discourse that commonly identifies these issues, and how they are addressed, within the canon of black feminist theory. Chapter Three clarifies why these issues, in general, have existed in the writings of black, Southern women writers for over a century. It examines their common denominators, Southern heritage and ideological hegemony; and their position in the African-American literary tradition.
AFRICANA WOMEN'S VOICES FROM THE SOUTH:
FOCUSBING ON WOMEN'S ISSUES OF THE PAST FOR
DEFINITION, IDENTIFICATION, AND CLARIFICATION IN THE PRESENT

A THESIS
SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY OF CLARK ATLANTA UNIVERSITY
IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR
THE DEGREE OF MASTER OF ARTS

BY
ALVEYN J. SANDERS

DEPARTMENT OF AFRICAN AND AFRICAN AMERICAN STUDIES

ATLANTA, GEORGIA
May 1996
Acknowledgements

Much gratitude is to be extended to my thesis advisor, Dr. Alma Vinyard, Associate Professor, Department of English, Clark Atlanta University, who provided insightful guidance and went beyond the call of duty to help bring this project to completion. I extend my appreciation to Dr. David Dorsey, Chair of the Department of African and African American Studies, Clark Atlanta University, for his academic support throughout my graduate studies and for agreeing to serve as my "second reader". I am grateful to Dr. Daniel Black, Assistant Professor, Department of English, Clark Atlanta University, for the vital role he has played in my growth as a writer and scholar. Also, I must thank LaDonna Simmons, Department of African and African American Studies, for her support, encouragement, and kindness. Finally, I would like to thank Dr. Beverly Guy-Sheftall for taking the time to speak with me and for sharing her insight. I dedicate Chapter Two to my mother, my first feminist, and without whom this chapter may not have been written.
# Table of Contents

Acknowledgements ii  
Introduction 1  

**Chapter One**  
What African-American, Southern, Women Writers Are Saying Now 9  

**Chapter Two**  
The Legacy of Black Feminist Theory 19  

**Chapter Three**  
Same Soil, Different Trees: The Continuum of a Literary Tradition 30  

Bibliography 44
Anna Julia Cooper's *A Voice from the South* (1892) and the work of twentieth-century, black, Southern, women writers are significantly linked by their exploration of specific issues, black feminist theory, and the conditions under which they were written. In *Voice*, Cooper expressed the desire for equal rights for black women through a collection of essays which addressed racism, racism found in white women's organizations, and the education of black women. *Voice* confronted, unabashedly, the issues of racism, sexism, classism, and the interlocking of the three, as oppressive forces of black women.

Her writings on imperialism, as well as the suffrage movement, did more than insist upon the liberation of black women. She analyzed social, political, and economic forces important to this liberation. Cooper's essays demanded changes within the black community and throughout the country. The issues raised in 1892 are echoed in the writings of contemporary, African-American, Southern, women writers, as well as in the work of other African-American women in the United States and abroad. To understand how these issues have
resounded for a century, a review of the impetus for a work like Voice, as well as an examination of the era in which it was written, is necessary.

The cult of True Womanhood, which attacked the virtues of black women, who in turn responded by mobilizing, writing, and actively pursuing self-determination, has continued to place black women in the lower strata of social hierarchy. This is achieved largely through ideological hegemony, which uses the mass media as a primary vehicle. Furthermore, patriarchy and racism are indefatigable institutions in America which fuel ideological hegemony. Intra-racism and intra-sexism are also key.

Cooper wrote her volume to affect change. In Beverly Guy-Sheftall's work, Daughters of Sorrow: Attitudes Toward Black Women, 1880-1920 included in the series, Black Women in U.S. History, edited by Darlene Clark Hine, she refers to Albert Albrecht's theory that literature reflects society. She states the need to exploit his theory to determine racial attitudes toward black women during the selected period of her study. If this theory is further exploited for the purpose of this examination, then contemporary writing shows that the same conditions in which A Voice from the South was written over
a century ago exist today. It can be read as an interpretation of current issues, even though it was written in 1892. Voice is also useful in clarifying some present concerns because of its author, a black woman from the South, the conditions in which it was written (racism), and because of its origin (debunking True Womanhood and sexism). Voice is a historical map for contemporary writers. Looking at these factors provides a framework for a continuing literary tradition of African-American women writers, a tradition that has dared to point to race/gender oppression, call for a change, and serve as a recorder of history.

Furthermore, the historical context of A Voice from the South provides a critical foundation for the issues Cooper examined. The late nineteenth century was an era of disenchantment for blacks. The hope of emancipation was met with the despair of Jim Crow. By this point, racism was a finely tuned ideology, as were its complements, patriarchy and white supremacy. The erosion of political, legal, and social rights of blacks created an environment where exploitation was rampant. The South, where most blacks lived during this time, was a hotbed of deplorable living conditions, lynchings, and injustice.
Conversely, this era is considered a landmark in women's history. Women, black and white, saw this point as a splendid bridge to a new place in time. The women's suffrage movement and the national women's club movement reached their height in the 1890's and served as the backdrop for the triumph women were experiencing. They were in a position to attain power in a society that had long denied them a voice.

However, black women quickly realized that they were not considered a part of the emerging power structure. They were not even considered to be women. The cult of True Womanhood, shrouded in white supremacy, denoted qualities of morality, chastity, beauty, sensitivity, and domesticity, attributes whites believed were nonexistent in black women. Black women (especially the elite) were outraged over the persistent attacks on their character and the refusal of the larger society to recognize their womanhood. They were even more outraged that white women, who were purporting to be interested in the advancement of women, were adopting racist attitudes by not allowing black women to join some of their clubs. Thus, the black women's club movement began.

At the helm of this movement were leaders like Cooper, Mary Church Terrell, Ida B. Wells, and Josephine St. Pierre
Ruffin. These women set out to impart the lesson that "color, class, or the experience of slavery did not nullify the moral strength of true womanhood". Additionally, the black women's club movement, which evolved into a national organization, The National Association of Colored Women (NACW), sought the liberation of all black women regardless of their social status or class. "Lifting As We Climb" became the motto of the NACW. These nineteenth century black women recognized that the liberation of the black race depended on eradicating oppression of its women. Anna Julia Cooper espoused this very thought in *A Voice from the South*.

Cooper, born a slave in Raleigh, North Carolina, became an educator and prolific champion of women's rights and the advancement of the black race. She received her bachelor's and master's degrees from Oberlin College in 1884 and 1887 respectively. She received her Ph.D. degree from the Sorbonne in Paris at the age of sixty-five. The profundity of *A Voice from the South* earned Cooper a reputation as a scholar, and she became a formidable force in the black community.

Her initial premise for the book was the conflict between the ignorance of men and the need and desires of women. Cooper shunned the practice of measuring the achievements of black
men as representative of the whole race while black women remained subject to the abuse of white men and contempt of white women. In her opinion if a segment of the black population, especially black women, remained oppressed, then the entire race could not move forward. To Cooper, the elevation of black womanhood was integral to self-determination for all black people:

Only the Black Woman can say "when and where I enter in the quiet, undisputed dignity of my womanhood, without violence and without suing and special patronage then and there the whole Negro race enters with me."³

According to Cooper, the black woman should and would be the catalyst for change.

This study will discuss the clarification Cooper's text can provide for contemporary black women's issues as addressed in the work of black women writers from the South--the link between the significance of *A Voice from the South* in 1892 and its significance now. Chapter One defines some of the similar issues found in Cooper's work and contemporary writings. Chapter Two discusses the intellectual discourse that commonly identifies these issues, and how they are addressed, within
the canon of black feminist theory. Finally, Chapter Three clarifies why these issues, in general, have existed in the writings of black, Southern, women writers for over a century. It examines their common denominators, Southern heritage, and ideological hegemony; and their position in the African-American literary tradition.
Notes


Chapter One

What African-American, Southern, Women Writers Are Saying Now

The issues of higher education, self-definition, and sexism that Anna Julia Cooper addressed are issues that can be found in contemporary writing by black women. In her essay, "The Higher Education of Woman," Cooper stresses the importance of women attending college, especially black women. She even stressed raising funds for black women to attend college and study the subjects of her choice. In her opinion, college for women was an opportunity to broaden their horizons and prepare them to be full contributing citizens to society. Cooper felt that higher education would allow women to bring their unique characteristics to various fields and offer insights that had not been previously explored. Most importantly, she felt black women deserved and needed such an education to help elevate the race.

Johnnetta Cole, President of Spelman College, also espouses the benefits of higher education for black women and its impact on the African-American community in the essay,
"She Who Learns Must Teach" in her book, Conversations:

My sisters, the time has come to take an even closer look at the role of education in the empowerment of African American women, realizing that when we are empowered so, too, will be all African Americans. . . . Women are the primary caretakers of children and, consequently, their first teachers. So, as they say, when you educate a man you educate an individual, but when you educate a woman, you educate a nation.¹

In this essay, Cole calls for a Worldcentric education, but not in an effort to devalue Black Studies for African-Americans. She specifically notes the importance of such a curriculum to empower the black woman--"an education in which our history and circumstances are acknowledged and analyzed, an education that conditions us to know ourselves."² After all, "understanding is always the first step toward change."³

Poet and essayist, Nikki Giovanni, addresses higher education on a different front. In "Campus Racism 101" found in her collection of essays, Racism 101, she focuses on blacks attending predominately white colleges and universities and the racism they might encounter as a deterrent to attaining
higher education. However, Giovanni advises students to overcome the obstacle of racism:

Where can you go and what can you do that frees you from interacting with the white American mentality? You're going to interact; the only question is, will you be in some control of yourself and your actions, or will you be controlled by others?...

We, neither less nor more than other people, need knowledge. There are discomforts attached to attending predominately white colleges, though no more so than living in a racist world.4

Giovanni recognizes, like Cooper, that higher education at any institution should be accessible to African-Americans. Cooper, herself, took a survey to determine just how many colleges and universities were educating African-American women. Cooper's battle was to ensure access. Giovanni's battle is to maintain that access and stress it as a viable option to young, prospective, African-American college students.

The optimism Cooper possessed regarding the position of the woman during her era translated into a call for women to speak out for themselves, define their positions, and influence the direction of the country. "She stands now at the
gateway of this new era of American civilization. . . . To be alive at such an epoch is a privilege, to be a woman then is sublime." These are the words Cooper used to express the opportunity women had to let their voices be heard. She was even more optimistic about the black woman whose heritage she described as "unique".

While Cooper speaks of the black woman asserting her voice, contemporary writer, Alice Walker, stresses the need to reclaim/rediscover the voice of the black woman, specifically the black woman artist. Both writers, however are acknowledging the same entity—the uniqueness of the black woman's voice. Nevertheless, in "In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens", found in her book of the same name, Walker asserts that black women, two to three generations ago, suffered because of their inability to be nurtured as artists:

How was the creativity of the black woman kept alive, year after year and century after century, when for most of the years black people have been in America, it was a punishable crime for a black person to read or write? And the freedom to paint, to sculpt, to expand the mind with action did not exist. Consider, if you can bear to imagine it, what
might have been the result if singing, too, had been forbidden by law. Listen to the voices of Bessie Smith, Billie Holiday, Nina Simone, Roberta Flack, and Aretha Franklin, among others, and imagine those voices muzzled for life. Then you may begin to comprehend the lives of our "crazy," "Sainted" mothers and grandmothers. The agony of the lives of women who might have been Poets, Novelists, Essayists, and Short-Story Writers (over a period of centuries), who died with their real gifts stifled within them.6

However, Walker does note that some women did recognize the reality of their spirituality--the basis of art--and manifested their creativity through making quilts, tending gardens, or singing in the church. Walker's urge to recover black women's art--those known and unknown--is an effort to illuminate the legacy of the black woman for social change and social reformation. Fortunately, texts like Cooper's give garden searchers like Walker a place to start.

Feminist writer, bell hooks, writes about voice from a personal perspective. In Talking Back: Thinking Feminist - Thinking Black, she reflects on her Southern upbringing during
a time when "talking back" was a "courageous act". Listening to the women in her home, hooks says, was born in her the craving to speak, "to have a voice, and not just any voice but one that could be identified as belonging to me." In this world, hooks began to dream of writing as a "way to capture speech, to hold onto it, keep it close." She knew that she had a creative spirit to keep intact and writing was the way to do that. Additionally, hooks notes the power of writings by black women to break the silence of their oppression:

For us, true speaking is not solely an expression of creative power; it is an act of resistance, a political gesture that challenges politics of domination that would render us nameless and voiceless. As such, it is a courageous act--as such, it represents a threat.

To hooks, the voice of the black woman is one that has always existed, but one whose direction needed to be reshaped so that it could be heard.

Cooper's *A Voice from the South* rang loud and clear with the voice of a black woman from the title to the last page. The direction of her voice blazed a trail for writers like bell hooks to add their respective decibels along the way.
While the term feminism did not exist in 1892, the term sexism may not have either. Yet, Cooper was clear about its effects on the oppression of the black race:

But our present record of eminent men, when placed beside the actual status of the race in America to-day, (sic) proves that no man can represent the race. . . .

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."¹⁰

Pearl Cleage addresses sexism and the tendency of black men to focus more on race than gender when discussing the plight of African-Americans. Like Cooper, she expresses the belief that sexism must be acknowledged by black men in order to eradicate oppression. In her essay, "Basic Training: The Beginnings of Wisdom," Cleage stresses the obstacles black men and women must overcome to move forward:

But in trying to talk to black men about sexism (or to understand it more clearly ourselves) our racial history is an invaluable tool. Black men who have
experienced racism are already familiar with what oppression looks like, how it operates, how it can permeate and poison every area of your life. The problem is, we have not figured out a way to use that racial knowledge to help them understand sexism and their role in it.11

Cleage's straightforward discussion of sexism and its relationship with racism provides a contemporary, pragmatic approach to these two evils and how they can be neutralized within the black community.

African-American women writers with Southern roots and those who live and work in the South are carrying on the tradition of Anna Julia Cooper. To them, their struggle, perspective, and creative spirit is just as vital as that of Cooper's over a century ago. They are right. Cooper's text validates the work of Walker, Cole, Giovanni, hooks, and Cleage in ways beyond any critical acclaim these writers could ever receive. The connection is spiritual, liberating, and truthful. A Voice from the South is the historical precedent on which other African-American women can rely for direction.
Notes


2 Cole 169.

3 Cole 169.


5 Anna Julia Cooper, A Voice from the South (1892; New York: Oxford University Press, 1988) 143.


8 hooks 842.

9 hooks 843.

10 Cooper 30-1.

11 Pearl Cleage, Deals with the Devil and Other Reasons to
Chapter Two

The Legacy of Black Feminist Theory

In *Words of Fire*, an anthology of African-American feminist thought, edited by women's studies scholar, Beverly Guy-Sheftall, she states that Anna Julia Cooper's argument that black women confront "both a woman question and a race problem" captures the essence of black feminist thought in the nineteenth century and would reverberate among intellectuals, journalists, activists, writers, educators, artists, and community leaders, both male and female, for generations.

When Cooper addressed the racism, sexism, and classism that black women experience, she made a literary contribution to black feminist thought that had begun as early as the 1830's. Historians have linked the beginning of the women's rights movement to the abolition movement, with the most notable "feminist-abolitionist" being Sojourner Truth, who in 1851 delivered her legendary speech, "Ain't I a Woman". This speech
is considered to be a testament to feminist thought because of the connections it makes between race and gender in the lives of black women. Prior to Sojourner Truth’s speech, Maria Stewart, considered to be the first black woman to speak publicly about women’s rights, delivered four public lectures in 1832 in Boston. Stewart strongly encouraged women to define their own roles and reach their fullest potential through formal education and a fulfilling career. In addition to espousing the virtues of professional teaching, Stewart stressed the importance of women assuming leadership roles. Maria Stewart and Sojourner Truth are just two of the voices that raised pertinent women’s issues over a century ago—issues that have since been incorporated into the legacy of black feminist thought because they were key in fighting gender as well as racial oppression.

Although ignored by historians attempting to document the development of feminism in the mid-nineteenth century, black women’s self-help, abolitionist, and other reform activities also contributed to a climate of discontent which foreshadowed the historic women’s rights gathering at Seneca Falls in 1848. The discontent of black women was also present in their literature long before scholars began to identify it as such.
Whereas the study of African-American literature has primarily focused on its account of the black experience, replete with the struggle against racism, the literature of African-American women has not been properly analyzed for its inclusion of feminist thought.

This tendency to ignore long years of political struggle aimed at eradicating the multiple oppressions that black women experience resulted in erroneous notions about the relevance of feminism to the black community during the second wave of the women's movement. Rewriting black history using gender as one category of analysis should render obsolete the notion that feminist thinking is alien to African American women or that they have been misguided imitators of white women. An analysis of the feminist activism of black women also suggests the necessity of reconceptualizing women's issues to include poverty, racism, imperialism, lynching, welfare, economic exploitation, sterilization abuse, decent housing, and a host of other concerns that generations of black women foregrounded. Therefore, the black woman's struggle against oppression has
been marginalized by the African-American community and white America for its perceived lack of originality.

Nineteenth century, African-American women writers like Cooper, Frances Ellen Harper, Pauline Hopkins, Ida B. Wells, and Harriet Jacobs made significant contributions to the literary legacy of African-American women that resonate today in celebrated writers like Alice Walker and Toni Morrison. In particular, Cooper's stance on the oppression of black women is echoed in contemporary writings on black feminist theory. Noted black feminists like Barbara Smith, bell hooks, Hazel Carby, and Guy-Sheftall have shared their perspective of black feminist theory and black feminist criticism and their value to the lives of black women. In 1892, Cooper recognized that one of the "crucial questions of the hour" was the "womanhood of the race."5

Now the fundamental agency under God in the regeneration, the re-training of the race, as well as the ground work and starting point of its progress upward, must be the black woman.6

She also argued that sexism within the black race would have to cease in order for the entire race to move forward.

Essentially, black feminist theory addresses the
oppression black women face because of their race, gender, and class combined—an oppression that grants limited access to societal resources due to patriarchy and racism. Therefore, the problems black women face are unique. Their struggle for liberation is multi-layered. Furthermore, because black women experience the plight of three detrimental "isms," racism, sexism, and classism, black feminist theory also encompasses the eradication of dominant forces everywhere that seek to oppress.

The second black feminist movement which emerged in the 1970's with the publication of Toni Cade's *The Black Woman: An Anthology*, Shirley Chisholm's autobiography, *Unbought and Unbossed*, Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*, and Audre Lorde's *Cable to Rage* highlighted the priorities of black women that were quite different from those of the white feminist movement. These works of literature and the intense consciousness-raising activities of national black feminist organizations were reminiscent of the black women's club movement of the 1890's and the literature, speeches, and organizations that resulted. Both movements are largely identified by the literature produced. As mentioned, Cooper's *Voice* gives significant insight into the conditions black women faced.
during that era. However, feminist Barbara Smith contends that black feminist criticism should be applied to the work of black women writers for further insight. In other words, it is not enough to have works that explicitly discuss the interlocking oppression of race, sex, and class. Literature, in general, should be analyzed for its exposition of black feminist theory as well.

Smith's essay, "Toward a Black Feminist Criticism" (1977), discussed the connection between the politics of black women's lives, what they write about, and their role as artists. She asserted that the primary commitment of a black feminist critic would be to explore "how both sexual and racial politics and Black and female identity are inextricable elements in Black women's writing." Furthermore, Smith acknowledged that black feminist criticism would owe its existence to a black feminist movement, simultaneously contributing ideas the movement could use. Smith emphasized the commonality of work by black women due to their shared experiences--experiences which she felt identified a distinct literary tradition and included the struggle against race and gender oppression:

A Black feminist approach to literature that
embodies the realization that the politics of sex as well as the politics of race and class are crucially interlocking factors in the works of Black women writers is an absolute necessity. Until a Black feminist criticism exists we will not even know what these writers mean.8

To Smith, black feminist criticism was the ultimate form of analysis of the work of black women.

However, Hazel Carby in Reconstructing Womanhood, finds Smith's essay problematic as a "critical manifesto, particularly in its assertion of the existence of an essential black female experience and an exclusive black female language in which this experience is embodied."9 The question then becomes not just whether a black feminist criticism is relevant, but whether it's the sole appropriate method of literary analysis of the work of black women? Sandra Adell explores this question in her book, Double-Consciousness/Double Bind. In chapter four, "Seeking the Other Women of (Black) Feminist Literary Critical and Theoretical Discourses," Adell focuses on the "other" black woman writer:

Does not the race, class, gender formulation of black feminist discourse in fact imply an "actual"
or potentially totalizing universal value (indeed a universal subject) with which all other black women involved in literary critical activities must identify? If so, does not black feminism risk practicing its own forms of exclusion by censoring--silencing--those feminine voices that, for whatever reasons, do not adequately adhere to this new holy trinity? In other words, who speaks for the other women of (black) literary critical and theoretical discourse?¹⁰

The privileged and academic nature of black feminist literary discourse, Adell contends, alienates the "other" black woman writer, for whom gender is not a primary preoccupation. She asks, "Does Anna Julia Cooper's work on Charlemagne disqualify her as a black woman writing? And what about her very scholarly work, written in French, which deals with slavery and the French revolution? Does she cease to be a black woman writing because she deals with race rather than gender?"¹¹

Cooper's Voice is celebrated as a black feminist text because it makes the connection between a black woman's life experiences and her race, gender, and class. Feminist scholars who heeded Barbara Smith's call to develop black feminist
criticism, found a viable text with Cooper's *Voice*. Celebrated as a pioneer feminist activist, writer, and scholar, Cooper was in fact writing for the benefit of the "other" woman who was not a part of the elite class that she and other leaders of the club movement occupied. However, because black feminist theory now exists in the canon of intellectual discourse, the result of a gradual movement from margin (1980's) to center (1990's), *A Voice from the South* is easily defined in feminist terms. Nevertheless, when the text was first written in the absence of feminist theory as a concept, it occupied a space for African-American women to visit for affirmation of their womanhood and value to the country and the black race. In that era, black women as a whole were the "other" women, marginalized by white patriarchy and racist white women. To exploit Adell's argument, Cooper's work, itself, has moved from margin to center, so to speak. Now, the "other" woman exists within the black race. *A Voice from the South* has surpassed its position as a profound, unique document of its time to an esteemed member of the current dominant discourse on feminist theory.

Cooper's collection of groundbreaking essays is referred to more often than not when discussing black feminist
literature and the black women's literary tradition. What clarification does Cooper provide for black women's issues in the present? She renders validity to the continuum of the struggle against oppression. Activists today are able to review her writings and assess the historical, sociological, and cultural implications that still exist in order to eradicate their destructive tenets. "Black feminism," as a term, did not exist during the era in which *A Voice from the South* was written, but the struggle to end black women's oppression did.
Notes


3 Guy-Sheftall 3.

4 Guy-Sheftall 1.

5 Cooper 27.

6 Cooper 28.


8 Smith 139.


11 Adell 112.
Chapter Three

Same Soil, Different Trees:
The Continuum of a Literary Tradition

Hazel Carby, a scholar on black feminism, states in her book, *Reconstructing Womanhood*, that "novels of black women should be read not as passive representations of history but as active influence within history".¹ She further states that novels are not only determined by the "social conditions within which they were produced but also as cultural artifacts which shape the social conditions they enter."² Expanding her premise to include non-fiction works by black women, Anna Julia Cooper's *Voice* then becomes a "cultural artifact" mirroring the political and social climate of the 1890's in regard to black women, as well as operating as a mechanism for change.

The black writer, especially the black woman writer, is bombarded with many experiences that shape her work, even though her response may be attributed to factors such as a Southern heritage. Specifically, her work is influenced by the ideological hegemony which perpetuates the notion that black
women are inferior. This is achieved by disseminating the idea that success is predicated upon factors such as race, gender, and class and inherent qualities that accompany those factors. The power of the privileged to control the allocation of societal resources to certain groups positions African-American women at the bottom of the social hierarchy of discrimination.

... this privileged class, in constructing a system to maintain its power, has developed a belief system to explain the differential access and acquisition of various societal groups to resources and institutions in the United States. This belief system uses race, gender and class to explain achievement and why different groups of individuals have more or less access to societal resources. These same qualities have also become systems of division and domination which protect the interests of those who mediate societal resources and institutions.¹

In order for the privileged class to protect its monopoly over societal resources an explanation must be devised as to why other groups do not enjoy the same access. Thus, the mass
media becomes a primary vehicle for this explanation.

Images purveyed of African-American women living in poverty as single, head of household, mothers with several children are problematic because they contribute to racial stereotypes, cultural assumptions about African-American women, and contradict the work ethic that is believed to be the root of success. These images are necessary to validate social policies aimed at eradicating poverty and elevating the African-American woman. However, the need for social policies is a smoke screen for the real reason African-American women are positioned on the lowest strata of social hierarchy—controlled domination by the privileged class. It is not simply poverty or lack of education that is the reason for the disparity between African-American women and white men.

Still, the images in the media, which are controlled by the privileged class, send the message that certain restrictive characteristics can be found among particular categories of gender, race, and class. Thus, the goal for African-American women, and others who seek equality for all people as well as an equitable allocation of resources, is one of societal transformation rather than reformation. The former requires eradicating stereotypes, dispelling myths and
supplanting ideologies which serve as the basis for patriarchy and other systems of domination.4

Societal transformation is the impetus for the literary works of African-American women writers like Cooper, Alice Walker, and Pearl Cleage. The latter two are more closely related to the ideological hegemony carried out through the media than Cooper. However, A Voice from the South was the by-product of an era where images of black women were largely based on plantation derisions which were perpetuated even after emancipation. The reputed immorality of black women, which was used as an excuse by white slave masters to explain their mulatto offspring to their wives, was carried out, largely by white men, in an effort to prevent black women from achieving any parity during this "woman's era". Fortunately, the black women's club movement prevailed.

In Voice, Cooper makes reference to how ideological hegemony manifests itself while travelling through the South. At one particular train station, she notices two waiting rooms "with 'FOR LADIES' swinging over one and 'FOR COLORED PEOPLE' over the other."5 She wonders, "under which head I come..."6 This image at the train depot is an example of how the idea that the black woman was the antithesis of womanhood had
permeated images of everyday life. Furthermore, Cooper especially notes the disregard she received from railroad conductors, who took special care not to help her, or any black woman, disembark from the train:

The feeling of slighted womanhood is unlike every other emotion of the soul. Happily for the human family, it is unknown to many and indescribable to all.  

Occupying the lowest strata of social hierarchy, black women were faced with racism and sexism even as an elite few were working to eradicate this image:

The colored woman of to-day (sic) 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 unacknowledged factor in both.  

Cooper wrote specifically about this "least ascertainable" status in order to move black women to speak out for themselves, pursue higher education, and mobilize to make a
difference in the elevation of the black race and the progress of the country as a whole. Cooper realized the forces of oppression, but also felt they could be conquered.

In an essay, "Why I Write" in her collection of essays, Deals with the Devil and Other Reasons to Riot, Cleage responds to the present day ideological hegemony that continues to oppress black women:

I am writing to expose and explore the point where racism and sexism meet. I am writing to help myself understand the full effects of being black and female in a culture that is both racist and sexist.9

Cleage's severe criticism of the treatment of black women resounds with the same seriousness and sincerity found in Cooper's text. Their difference lies in the contemporary language and contemporary issues, such as domestic violence. However, the conditions of racism, sexism, and the devaluation of the lives of black women still exist. Undoubtedly, Cooper wrote to find solutions. Cleage admits to doing the same:

I am writing to find solutions and pass them on. I am writing to find a language and pass it on.

I am writing, writing, writing, for my life.10

In her volume, In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens, Walker
also comments on the critical role writing plays in her life. "It is, in the end, the saving of lives that we writers are about. . . . the life we save is our own." Walker notes the importance of historical authenticity when recording the experiences of black women or the black community at-large. This desire to illuminate an authentic black female experience follows in the tradition of Cooper's desire to present an accurate picture of the status of the black woman during her era.

However, one cannot ignore the title of Cooper's text; named as such to emphasize her Southern heritage and the unique perspective she brought to the volume as a black woman from that region. Indeed, scholars have noted the distinctive voice of the black Southern writer and the literary tradition that it has spawned. John Oliver Killens notes the following in his anthology, Black Southern Voices:

It is a voice, more often than not, that is distinguished by the quality of its anger, its righteous indignation, its truthfulness. It is a voice that speaks eloquently, and artistically for change. A voice that has the strength and awesome courage of its convictions, a Robesonian integrity.
It speaks of the past in order to impact upon the present and the future.\textsuperscript{12}

Killens' analysis appropriately describes Cooper's \textit{A Voice from the South}.

Killens attributes the uniqueness of the black Southern writer's voice to the cultural and humanistic influence of African roots, the impact of slavery, and the resulting psyche of the black Southerner, which rejects the status quo. "We look at life out of dark eyes from the vantage point of the bottom rung of the ladder. . . .Our viewpoint is more profound."\textsuperscript{13} However, this viewpoint is often unacknowledged by critics who herald the great Southern literary tradition as consisting of authors such as Tennessee Williams, William Faulkner, and Flannery O'Connor. The institution of slavery, and its prolonged, but tumultuous demise, are largely the reasons for this oversight. It is precisely the heritage of the enslaved African that formed the black Southern literary tradition.

As a part of that tradition, Cooper acknowledges the impact of the South and slavery on America:

One of the most singular facts about the unwritten history of this country is the consummate ability
with which Southern influence, Southern ideas and Southern ideals, have from the very beginning even up to the present day, dictated to and domineered over the brain and sinew of this nation. . . . the Southerner has . . . so manipulated Northern sentiment as to succeed sooner or later in carrying his point and shaping the policy of this government to suit his purposes. Indeed, the Southerner is a magnificent manager of men, a born educator. For two hundred and fifty years he trained to his hand a people whom he made absolutely his own, in mind, and sensibility.¹⁴

She acknowledges the South's far-reaching influence, and indirectly implies that this influence adversely affects the lives of blacks. However, existing within the larger Southern dominion over the sentiment of the country was a group of people whose lives planted the seeds of black literary tradition and culture. Addison Gayle, Jr. makes this observation in his essay, "Reclaiming the Southern Experience: The Black Aesthetic 10 Years Later":

... we are a people whose history and culture exemplify those values by which men throughout the
history of the world have lived and died, and that these values found their greatest expression in the Western world in the South. . . .15

A Voice from the South built upon the values and the injustices of Cooper's Southern heritage.

While Cooper's text is itself a historical document that has been celebrated in the writings on black women's history and especially black feminist theory, Walker's In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens is a celebration of the historical achievements of black women. Yet, like Cooper, she acknowledges her Southern roots, as well as their impact on her writing. In "The Black Writer and the Southern Experience," Walker uses her mother as a guide to interpret black "Southern womanhood" and the character, values, and faith one needed to possess to survive life in the South. Specifically, she speaks of a sense of community inherited by the black Southern writer. Walker believes that the socially conscious black Southern writer has double vision. "For not only is he in a position to see his own world, and its close community ... but also he is capable of knowing, with remarkably silent accuracy, the people who make up the larger world that surrounds and suppresses his own."16
Walker's reference to the black Southern writer's accurate awareness of the world directly relates to her interest in the liberation of all people--an attribute of a womanist (a term coined by Walker as an alternative to "feminist"). Cooper's essays also acknowledged worldwide oppression. Both writers, though separated by almost a century of struggle to uplift black womanhood, yet still possess the characteristics of a black Southern writer.

No one could wish for a more advantageous heritage than that bequeathed to the black writer in the South: a compassion for the earth, a trust in humanity beyond our knowledge of evil, and for an abiding love of justice.\(^{17}\)

The influence of the Southern experience is powerful enough to connect the work of two distinct eras, expressing a continuum in the concerns of the black Southern writer.

Using Carby's theory and examining the work of black women over the last century, the black woman writer's voice has definitely emerged, oftentimes shaping cultural and political debates within the black community. The parallels made between Cooper, Cleage, and Walker as Southern writers, and the conditions under which their work was produced,
exemplify the continuing struggle for black women to end their oppression. One need only to refer to earlier works such as *Voice* to understand the issues raised today by African-American women writers. These issues and concerns are not new or easily solved. They simply point to a century-long struggle for parity.
Notes


2 Carby 95.


4 Jewell 3.


6 Cooper 96.

7 Cooper 90.

8 Cooper 134.


10 Cleage 7.


13 Killens 3.

14 Cooper 101-2.


16 Walker 19.

17 Walker 21.
Bibliography


