Historically, African Americans have viewed the literary canon as a space for resistance, and for the expression of political thoughts on racial uplift. Within the contours of language, black writers and intellectuals have established a foundation of social influence. Although traditionally silenced and obscured in academia and the literary sphere, the voices of black women, and particularly 19th century women writers, signify the locus of this African American literary tradition. One of the monumental writers of the era was Anna Julia Cooper, a “self-made woman born into slavery,” devoted educator, spokesperson and the fourth black woman to earn a PhD. Cooper published a number of commendable works; however, the most laudable is *A Voice from the South, By a Black Woman from the South*. Published in 1892, this collection of essays and speeches is revered as an “unparalleled articulation of black feminist thought.” Cooper cultivates a language that interrogates pressing issues of the 19th century such as racial uplift and womanhood. In the text, Cooper emphasizes that, “Only if 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.’” In this illuminating declaration, she asserts that the progress of African Americans is impossible without black women. Cooper also advances in *A Voice from the South*, that black women are not only the gatekeepers of not only the black community, but modern American civilization.

In achieving her goals of educating her audiences and informing their political perspectives, Cooper not only utilizes an interdisciplinary method, but employs a multi-voice rhetorical strategy. One of the voices Cooper adopts is that of her white audience and this is noted in her accommodation of “the cult of true womanhood.” Cooper applies “true womanhood” characteristics to black women and emphasizes the value of domesticity and motherhood. Scholars argue that this identification allows Cooper to demonstrate shared values between white and black women. In establishing these similarities, Cooper anticipates an inclination amongst her white female audience to sympathize with black women and broaden their efforts to support their black sisters. Cooper’s identification with the voices and views of her white audience emerges as a plausible strategy and effective method of persuasion, as she appears to challenge the white, aesthetic gaze.

In *The Mask of Art: Breaking the Aesthetic Contract – Film and Literature*, Clyde R. Taylor defines aesthetics as having two institutionalized functions. One of these dimensions “relates to cognition, in which a space of contemplation is marked out as characterized by the aesthetic or experience.”
functions like an "internalized psychic policeman operating through the body politic, maintaining the society’s symbolic order."[8] For a capitalist society, the honesty of workers, value of patriarchal lineage and the honor of womanhood exemplify "aesthetic expressions of respect for the established order."[9] Historically, for capitalist and Eurocentric societies, a racialized hierarchy is the "established order" that the aesthetic maintains. The aesthetic is essentially, as indicated by Taylor, "an ethnic gaze and a class-bounded one at that."[10] The ethnic gaze is "fixed on discrimination of self/other, sameness/difference, or identity/monstrosity."[11] The gaze reinforces whiteness as ideal, knowledgeable and beautiful and black humanity as immoral, undesirable and the obscure other.

Cooper debases the ethnic gaze and the notions of whiteness and blackness to which it is attached through her use of the multi-voice strategy. In *A Voice from the South*, she radically shifts from the position of the "object" to the "gazer." Traditionally, whites are the "gazers" and define the aesthetic experience, determine what is aesthetically displeasing and police themselves and society based upon their own sameness, as well as their own difference from blacks. In advocating for the values of her white audience Cooper places herself in this customarily white position, and asserts herself as a producer of knowledge, capable of dictating the aesthetic. Cooper emerges as a "black beauty" and pushes her audience to question the value of the enduring and undisputed "parasitical" system of "White beauty" and "Black ugliness" upon which they depend.[12]

Telling of Cooper’s tactful deconstruction of the white aesthetic gaze is Elizabeth Alexander’s "We Must Be about Our Father’s Business." Alexander argues that Cooper strategic use of "I" and the first person “allows her own experience – her own existence, even – to inform the rhetoric of her text as evidence of the feminist strategy she advocates."[13] The extent to which her "own existence" strengthens the arguments of *A Voice* is noted in her use of the first person in references to "intellectual fathers."[14] Alexander contends that by injecting “anecdotes from her own experience” in her discussion of these canonical figures, Cooper fuses political theory with the lived experiences of African American women.[15] The chapter “Has America a Race Problem; If So, How Can it Best Be Solved?” speaks to this fusion of the political with the lives of African American women. In this section, Cooper analyzes the historical role of peace and racial difference in various nations. Central to this section is her incorporation of the ideologies of French historian, Francois Guizot. In positing the voice and perspective of an African American woman as "evidentiary," Cooper integrates "first person-phrases" in her explication of Guizot’s philosophy and that of other intellectuals.[16] Through this specific literary technique, "Cooper places herself as an active, visible agent in the writing of the book... Cooper places herself in the active present tense; the book reads not like a moldering tome, but as work...with a definite sense of source and agency."[17]

Arguably, the persuasive and rhetorical strength of "I" lies in its ability to displace the gaze of whiteness. Through the use of first person, Guizot’s thoughts on the predominance of one race in “Asiatic types of civilization” appear to become Cooper’s own thoughts. [18] In fusing her voice with the intellectuals she references, Cooper declares that the production of knowledge isn’t specific to whiteness. Through her engagement of the first person, black women also emerge as gatekeepers of knowledge. She asserts that the obscurity of blackness and the perceived privileged knowledge of whites are fluid, indefinite categorizations.

In “Thinking on the Margins, Acting at the Intersections: Anna Julia Cooper’s *A Voice from the South*,” Vivian M. May poses that in identifying with her audience, Cooper constructs, “inter-subjective, dialogic relationship with her audience, an active pedagogical and methodological space of encounter.”[19] A central manifestation of this “space of encounter” are Cooper’s challenges to white intellectuals such as August Comte. May states that in creating this dialogue, "Cooper inserts herself into a rhetorical position of authority, of a fully rational person speaking with other open – minded persons."[20] Reflected in this use of dialogue is Cooper’s negotiation of aesthetics. As stated by Taylor in “The Mask of Art,” the aesthetic functions to maintain social order. The aesthetic expressions in a capitalist society reflect and reinforce social ideals. Cooper disrupts this aesthetic system of control on multiple levels. Cooper evokes an aesthetic expression in her language that removes her from the obscurity of
blackness. Through this rhetorical technique, she not only emerges as a “fully rational person speaking with other open-minded people,” but a “gazer,” equipped with right and ability to mark a space of contemplation about aesthetic expression.

Upon first sight the difference Cooper constructs between herself and black women prevents her from completely evoking black women’s socio-political potential as the “ideological brush of true womanhood” was largely incompatible with the realities of black women at the turn of the 20th century. However, as Alexander and May suggest, readers must be hesitant to employ the oversimplified, binary imposing white aesthetic gaze Cooper seeks to deconstruct. In *A Voice from the South*, Anna Julia Cooper transforms the conventions and formalized symbols of the genteel language of true womanhood. A revised language emerges; capable of communicating both racial and gendered politics and capable of speaking to the “multiplicity and complexity of her own situation”.

– Channon Miller

**WORKS CITED**


From here, the main topics covered include an in-depth analysis of her scholarship with special attention given to A Voice from the South By a Black Woman of the South, her dissertation.


[8] Ibid., 14.

[9] Ibid., 15.

[10] Ibid., 15.


[14] Ibid., 338.


[16] Ibid., 344.

[17] Ibid., 345.


[20] Ibid., 77.


[22] Ibid., 339.

By robertr / Posted in Uncategorized
Anna Julia Cooper’s best-known written work, A Voice from the South by a Black Woman of the South, was published in 1892. Cooper advanced the view that it was the duty of educated and successful black women to support their underprivileged peers in achieving their goals. The essays in A Voice from the South also touched on a variety of topics, from racism and the socioeconomic realities of black families to the administration of the Episcopal Church.

Childhood and education. Anna “Annie” Julia Cooper was born into enslavement in Raleigh, North Carolina, in 1858 to Hannah Stanley Haywood, an enslaved woman in the home of prominent Wake County landowner George Washington Haywood. Haywood is widely believed by historians to be the biological father of Stanley’s seven daughters. Or might the claim also be that black men and black women, like men and women of all kinds, view things differently because of different natural predispositions?

But Cooper’s chain of reasoning regarding this example is quite different from what May suggests. Cooper first admits that it seems to contradict her theory that it is “the thinking woman’s mission to put in the tender and sympathetic chord in nature’s grand symphony” (53-54). Faced with this seeming contradiction, she considers two possibilities: one, that her theory is flawed because educated women can be untrue to the instincts she ascribes to women or, two, that her theory is not flawed because educated women may unconsciously exert their special influence even while contradicting it on a