

## Black Womanhood

### Ryan M. Phillips

I could be off base, but I think Cooper's quote about a Black Woman's right to choose when and where she enters has a dual interpretation. She spends much of her essay driving home her contention that Black women in particular are the key to collective social progress.

Though she concedes that the turning of these tides is a Herculean task, she also insists that it is a task only achievable by elevated and trained women. One of the rationales she offers in support of her assertion is that women are the nucleus of the family unit and that the family unit is what ultimately constitutes a race. "The atmosphere of homes is no rarer and purer and sweeter than are the mothers in those homes. A race is but a total of families. The nation is the aggregate of its homes. As the whole is the sum of all its parts, so the character of the parts will determine the characteristics of the whole" (Gates and Smith 627). So, the Black woman is the neck that turns the head in whatever direction she deems fit.

This doesn't mean that Cooper discounts the achievements of Black men. She points to Martin R. Delany as an example of a purebred or unadulterated Black man who, in addition to becoming a medical doctor, was also a respected abolitionist and writer. His accomplishments would be exceptional under any circumstances but considering the social and cultural climates of his era, his success is truly remarkable. While Delany claims that his success is a success for all Blacks, Cooper argues to the contrary, arguing that when a Black man advances, he advances alone. His elevated status no longer reflects the unchanging and lowly status of the Black race as a whole. Therefore, rather than regarding the exceptional individual as an example of the exceptionality of all Blacks—something Cooper likens to "...pointing to the sun-bathed mountain tops [to] prove that Phœbus warms the valleys" (627)—she insists that we use the advancement of the average rank and file (627) as a Litmus test for the elevation of the Black race as a whole. African American women are uniquely positioned to catalyze widespread change because they are systematically undervalued and disregarded on the basis of both race and gender and are also relegated to the lowest rungs of a decidedly white, patriarchal society. Rather than place them at a disadvantage, though, the discriminations they face qualify them more than anyone else to usher in widespread change.

So, when Cooper claims that "Only the BLACK WOMAN can say 'when and where I enter, in the quiet, undisputed dignity of womanhood, without violence and without suing or special patronage, then and there the whole *Negro race enters with me*'" (627), I think she's speaking to the Black women's sole power to change the course of a nation through education, advocacy, and mobilization. While she alone decides when, where, and how to effect such change, her movement is forward movement for all Blacks. I also think that Cooper's quote alludes to the sexual exploitation of female slaves. This could be because sexual abuse among female slaves was a prevalent topic in both Douglass' and Jacobs' slave narratives. But the notions of deciding the circumstances around which one enters; granting permission to enter undisputed and without violence; and maintaining the dignity of womanhood all harken to the issue of consensual sex, having agency over one's own body, and exercising the power to say no—all of which were rights denied to female slaves.

As for why Cooper's assertion is so important during this time, we're living in a day and age that in many ways closely parallels past movements that pushed for social justice around the issues of gender and race. The MeToo and Black Lives Matter Movements are indicative of change that still needs to take place in this country. Our nation is divided along racial lines. We're a people that reaches for change but remains mired in the injustices of our past. Police brutality, racial profiling, racial bias, a penal system that disproportionately convicts and incarcerates people of color, an unequal distribution of wealth—these are all signs that there is much work still to be done. At the same time, we can look at Toni Morrison, Condoleezza Rice, Stacey Abrams, Kamala Harris, and the like as evidence that progress is, in fact, possible.

## Works Cited

Cooper, Anna Julia. "Womanhood a Vital Element in the Regeneration and Progress of a Race." *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*. 3rd ed. Eds. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. and Valerie A. Smith. Vol 1. New York, NY: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 2014. 619-633. Print.