

# BLACK FEMINIST VOICES IN POLITICS

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EVELYN M. SIMIEN

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Evelyn M. Simien

State University of New York Press

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To my parents, Mearline LeDee Simien and Lawrence Simien

For my nephews, Douglas, Dustin, Gabe, and Isaiah

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# Chapter 1

## CHARTING A COURSE FOR BLACK WOMEN'S STUDIES IN POLITICAL SCIENCE

*Only the black woman can say, when and where I enter . . .  
then and there the whole race enters with me.*

—Anna Julia Cooper, *A Voice from the South*

This book represents a conscious and deliberate effort to chart a course for black women's studies in political science. According to Mack Jones, distinguished professor of political science at Clark Atlanta University and founding president of the National Conference of Black Political Scientists, the responsibility of black political scientists is to “develop a political science which grows out of a black perspective” and so the chapters that follow are united by this goal (1977, 16). Understanding that it is important, but not enough, to say that the general concern from which the book originates is the paucity of scholarly research devoted to black feminist voices in politics, I maintain that the integration of leading historic black female activists aids in the explanation and understanding of group consciousness in general and black feminist consciousness in particular, as both are rooted in lived experiences with interlocking systems of oppression. Perhaps the best way to understand the simultaneity of oppression faced by black women is to study the proponents of black feminism as they engaged in public debate and grassroots activism, assuming that black feminist consciousness has in some ways shaped, or at least informed, their political activities in light of the historical contexts, material conditions,

and lived experiences that beget their acute sense of awareness. For that reason, this chapter devotes scholarly attention to one of the first black female intellectuals to focus on the race-sex correspondence in black women's lives: Anna Julia Cooper.

As the quote at the beginning of this chapter suggests, the intellectual roots of black feminism and its relevance to politics go back a long way. Overcoming racism and sexism has had a profound impact on African American women, inspiring them to actively participate in tremendously successful grassroots campaigns. Starting with the antislavery and women's suffrage movements, black female activists were among the first to speak out against racial and sexual oppression in the United States (Lerner 1972; Shanley 1988; Terborg-Penn 1998; Olson 2001). Anna Julia Cooper's seminal work, *A Voice from the South*, is considered the earliest and most visible manifestation of black feminist consciousness. Writing in 1892, prior to W. E. B. DuBois's declaration that the problem of the twentieth century was the color line, Cooper asserted that women of African descent were "confronted by a woman question and a race problem" and remarked that "while our men seem thoroughly abreast of the times on every other subject, when they strike the woman question, they drop back into sixteenth century logic" (see Loewenberg and Bogin 1976, 244; Washington 1988, xxix; Cooper 1995, 45). Given her status as a member of the black intelligentsia, her comments call attention to the male-dominated character of black leadership and raise questions about conventional notions of respectable manhood and true womanhood at the turn of the century. Taken together, these statements capture the essence of black feminist thought as interlocking systems of oppression circumscribe the lives of African American women.

A consummate teacher, intellectual mind, and much sought after lecturer, Anna Julia Cooper was critical of educational systems that failed to consider the needs of African American women. Given that she subscribed to bourgeois notions of respectability and genteel femininity that prevented her from recognizing the intellectual and leadership abilities of black women laborers, Cooper advocated liberal arts education for black female elites (Giddings 1984; Guy-Sheftall 1995; Gaines 1996; James 1997; Olson 2001). Cooper opined, "We can't all be professional people. We must have

a backbone to the race" (Giddings 1984, 103) and attributed agency to black women college graduates. Her condemnation of the women's movement and its leaders, Susan B. Anthony and Elizabeth Cady Stanton, for their unwillingness to oppose racism in women's clubs was accepted and applauded by black male authority until she expressed disapproval of those conservative black male leaders who marginalized the plight and potential of black women in their discussions of the race problem (Harley and Terborg-Penn 1978; Giddings 1984; Guy-Sheftall 1995; Gaines 1996; James 1997). Despite an academic career that lasted longer than that of DuBois, her political philosophy on a variety of issues ranging from women's rights to black liberation and from segregation to literary criticism has been virtually ignored and forgotten by contemporary scholars. Cooper, whose political philosophy was ahead of her time, has not garnered nearly as much scholarly attention as her black male counterparts, although her scholarship and political activism compel juxtaposition with fellow black leaders, specifically DuBois in whom she found an ally (Harley and Terborg-Penn 1978; Giddings 1984; Gaines 1996; James 1997; Olson 2001).

While DuBois has long been viewed as an intellectual giant, Cooper has been largely ignored—unexamined. The mother of black feminism, Cooper deserves special recognition for her intellectual prowess. She was a well-respected figure during an intense period of civil rights activism, marking the rise of black female-led institutions and organizations (Harley and Terborg-Penn 1978; Gaines 1996; Olson 2001). Mirroring the reality of this black woman intellectual, as she has been effectively written out of history, black feminist theory has not garnered much scholarly attention in political science. That is to say, in spite of the progress that has been made in recent years, too few political scientists deem African American women and black feminist theory worthy of intellectual inquiry. I am optimistic, however, that the present study will stimulate more theoretical and empirically based work on the subject.

Despite the emergence of the study of women and politics within the discipline of political science, efforts to transform the curriculum and integrate perspectives of African American women have met with limited success. Few political scientists have written books and journal articles about African American women as political actors—candidates for elective office, grassroots organizers, party

activists, voters, or partisan, ideologically engaged citizens—when African American women have a long history of actively participating in politics via antislavery networks, civil rights organizations, and black feminist collectives (Collins 2000). Still, they remain largely invisible. The near absence of scholarship on and by African American women in political science constitutes a void in the literature. This book fills the void by drawing a material link between those who have written about African American women as political actors and those who have engaged in black feminist theorizing. It does not profess to be a comprehensive survey of black feminist scholarship; rather, it demonstrates ways in which black feminist theory can inform quantitative analyses of black attitudes toward gender equality and feminist priorities. Until recently, no black political scientists had examined the level of support for gender equality and feminist priorities among African American men and women. Only Michael C. Dawson (2001) and I (Simien 2001) have pursued this question by using a national survey of the adult African American population.

In his book *Black Visions*, Michael C. Dawson provides empirical evidence derived from the 1993–1994 National Black Politics Study (NBPS) to support his claim that contemporary black political preferences are related to various historical political ideologies (e.g., black Marxism, black nationalism, black feminism, black conservatism, disillusioned liberalism, and radical egalitarianism). In his chapter, “A Vision of Their Own: Identity and Black Feminist Ideology,” Dawson (like myself) develops and validates a measure of black feminist consciousness that is true to its theoretical origins. He finds that black feminism has an important effect on blacks’ perceptions of the desirability of multiracial coalitions (e.g., African Americans who support a black feminist ideology are most likely to support political alliances with individuals outside of the black community). For this reason, Dawson suggests that black feminism has the greatest potential to overcome social difference and bridge common humanity with the racial specificity of blackness as it recognizes interlocking systems of oppression (Fogg-Davis 2003). While Dawson’s chapter has much to offer scholars doing empirical work on the simultaneity of oppression faced by black women, it falls short of providing a thorough and complete literature review that draws a material link between black feminist theorizing and mainstream political science.

Drawing on the same black feminist literature as I, Dawson determines that black feminist consciousness has three core ingredients: an understanding of intersectionality, a focus on community-centered politics, and an emphasis on the particular experiences of black women. However, he offers no review of the extant literature in political science relative to black feminism and his conceptualization of this construct as it differs from the mainstream conceptualization of group consciousness by political scientists. A unique and contrasting feature of my book, as compared to Dawson's chapter, is that I offer a particularly useful review of the literature on black feminist consciousness, gender (or feminist) consciousness, and race consciousness accompanied by an incisive critique of the dominant approaches used by political scientists to measure these specific strands of group consciousness. I consider all three bodies of literature in my effort to present both a broad and a balanced assessment of black feminist consciousness. The advantage to this approach is that black feminist consciousness is discussed relative to political science and dominant methodological approaches used hitherto by political scientists.

One of the leading scholars of black public opinion, Dawson does not compel survey researchers and public opinion scholars to rethink (or even consider) many of the following problems inherent to empirical investigations of group consciousness among various race-sex groups, including question wording and response choices, model misspecification, and measurement error in the independent variable. Arguing that models that fail to include all relevant variables will consistently lead to biased results that purportedly apply to all African Americans or women when political scientists fail to consider in-group variation between and among individual members of the group in question, I breach the wall between black feminist theorizing and mainstream political science by identifying ways in which public opinion scholars have ignored, conceptualized, measured, and modeled the intersection (or interaction) of race and gender consciousness. All in all, my book offers a great deal more by adding yet another voice to the debate surrounding black feminist sentiments, cross pressures, and the hierarchy of interests within the black community with an overriding purpose. Ultimately, I wish to show how the omission of black feminist voices causes survey researchers to ask the wrong



questions and base their empirical work and conclusions on uninterrogated assumptions—that, for instance, all of the women are white, and all of the blacks are men.

No prior study has so broadly explored, using a national telephone survey sample of the adult African American population, the extent to which black women and men support black feminist tenets, or the simultaneous effects of race and gender on political attitudes. Empirical assessments of black feminist consciousness are rare. Most national surveys of Americans do not include a large enough sample of black respondents and most national surveys of African Americans lack the items necessary to construct a full measure of black feminist consciousness. Thus, the analysis at hand is the first comprehensive attempt in years to gauge black attitudes toward gender equality and feminist priorities via public opinion data gathered by a national telephone survey.

Much of the data analyzed in this book come from the 1993–1994 NBPS, which is a unique study in that it contains questions that measure black feminist consciousness with multiple survey items. It was conducted between December 1993 and February 1994. Respondents were selected in two ways: (1) from a national random digit dial sample or (2) randomly from a list of households in black neighborhoods. The response rate was 65 percent, resulting in 1,206 black respondents, all of whom were eligible to vote. A full description of the survey may be found in the codebook, which was compiled by its principal investigators Michael Dawson, Ronald Brown, and James Jackson (1993). Additional data come from the 1984–1988 National Black Election Studies (NBES), which is a unique study in that it contains questions that measure sex role socialization and the comparative influence of women with multiple survey items at the core of a basic feminist belief system. The 1984 NBES was conducted from late July through November 6, 1984, with reinterviews that began immediately following the national election. The 1988 NBES was conducted from August through November 8, 1986, with reinterviews that began immediately following the national election. Comprised of 1,150 interviews of black citizens, the 1984–1988 NBES were modeled after the University of Michigan's landmark National Election Studies (NES). A full description of the surveys may be found in the codebook, which was compiled by its principal inves-

tigators Katherine Tate, Ronald E. Brown, Shirley J. Hatchett, and James S. Jackson.

Given that my objective is to chart a course for black women's studies in political science, I challenge the ways in which political scientists have traditionally defined and conceptualized group consciousness as either race or gender consciousness. More specifically, I reject the singular approach that dominates the group consciousness literature in an effort to address the simultaneous effects of race and gender. I therefore define and conceptualize black feminist consciousness, drawing on the ideas and experiences of African American women as they have endured the racism of their white sisters and sexism of their black brothers. I examine intra-group differences because this practice has long been omitted from feminist scholarship and black politics research.

Building on prior research, I posit that black feminist consciousness arises from an understanding of intersecting patterns of discrimination. Because the totality of black female experiences cannot be treated as the sum of separate parts, they must be analyzed together. If race and gender are studied as separate categories, one cannot explain how attitudes might change as a result of cross-pressures to subordinate the interests of black women so as to protect black men from racism. With this in mind, I start with a discussion of black feminist consciousness, providing a brief overview, offering a definition, and emphasizing themes that delineate its contours. To underscore the importance of studying black feminist consciousness and its determinants, I discuss the limitations of available data and quantitative approaches used hitherto by political scientists, as well as omissions in feminist scholarship and black politics research. By so doing, the present study sets itself apart from the extant literature on specific strands of group consciousness in political science.

### **In Defense of Ourselves: Black Feminist Theorists**

Since slavery's abolition and women's suffrage, the character of black women has been attacked and impugned repeatedly, stereotypes of black women have been promoted for political ends

(e.g., the matriarch, the jezebel, and the welfare queen), and black women have been blamed for numerous social and political ills (Davis 1981; Jewell 1993; Roberts 1997). Feeling called on to defend black womanhood and reject a plethora of cultural images that support stereotypes about intelligence and innate ability, black feminists from Anna Julia Cooper and Ida B. Wells-Barnett through bell hooks and Patricia J. Williams have explored the related ideas of “dual consciousness,” of writing “from the borders,” of theorizing as an “outsider” making creative use of their marginal status as “seventh sons” or “outsiders” with unreconciled strivings and warring ideals (W. DuBois 1994, 2). Black feminist theorizing then constitutes a pragmatic response to those circumstances that impinge the lives of black women (James and Busia 1993; Collins 1998, 2000; P. Williams 1991). For black female intellectuals who produce such independent specialized knowledge, the “outsider status is a kind of unresolved wound,” whereby the burden of race and gender discrimination almost ensures the rejection of their intellectual work on epistemological grounds by a more powerful insider community (P. Williams 1991, 89). This sort of rejection is due to their lack of control over the apparatuses of society that sustain ideological hegemony and make the articulation of a self-defined standpoint difficult (Collins 1998, 2000).

In this sense, the present study can be added to a relatively short list of scholarly work that poses a fundamental challenge to the paradigmatic thought of a more powerful insider community. By demonstrating that the dominant conceptualization of group consciousness has been ineffective in articulating the politicized group consciousness of black women, this analysis urges public opinion scholars and survey researchers to reconsider the ways in which social scientists traditionally measure specific strands of group consciousness. It is argued here that black female intellectuals in particular, and black women in general, readily recognize disadvantage and discrimination due to their “dual identity” and their “politicized group consciousness” stemming from day-to-day encounters with race and gender oppression. The idea is that interlocking systems of oppression (racism and sexism) predispose black women to double consciousness. This notion of double consciousness connotes an acute sense of awareness.

Black women begin to see themselves through the eyes of others and measure their self-worth by the tape of a hegemonic society that expresses contempt for cultural images that promote negative stereotypes of black women for political ends (W. DuBois 1994, 2). Given that black women face discrimination on the basis of race and gender, it is likely that many black women possess a sense of group consciousness derived from their unique disadvantaged status in the United States. Similarly, it is quite possible that many black men are cognizant of and sympathetic toward the particular predicament of black women because they suffer from race oppression and class exploitation in the occupationally segregated labor market (M. King 1975; Stone 1979; D. King 1988). Thus, black women and men share a common experience that makes their individual fate inextricably tied to the race as a whole (Davis 1981; Jaynes and Williams 1989; Dawson 1994).

### **Defining Black Feminist Consciousness**

Any discussion of black feminist consciousness must begin with some sort of definition, based on the literature derived from the ideas and experiences of black women. Many black academics, feminist scholars, and grassroots activists argue that African American women are status deprived because they face discrimination on the basis of race and gender. Having to bear the burdens of prejudice that challenge people of color, in addition to the various forms of subjugation that hinder women, African American women are doubly disadvantaged in the social, economic, and political structure of the United States. African American women occupy the lower stratum of the social hierarchy, are predominately found in clerical and service jobs, and are most likely to be single heads of households (Malveaux 1990; Rothenberg 1995; Rowe and Jeffries 1996; Smith and Horton 1997; Browne 1999). African American women also lag behind other race-sex groups on practically every measure of socioeconomic well-being: income, employment, and education. As a result, they are subject to multiple burdens—joblessness and domestic violence, teen pregnancy and illiteracy, poverty and malnutrition—which define their cumulative experience with race and gender oppression in the United States.

Much of the important work on black feminism comes from a small cadre of black female intellectuals outside of political science. The work of Audre Lorde (1984), Paula Giddings (1984), bell hooks (1984, 1989), Barbara Smith (1995), and Patricia Hill Collins (1990, 2000), among others, is both theoretical and qualitative. While these scholars provide a range of perspectives, several recurring themes that delineate the contours of black feminist thought appear in their work. I discuss the most salient themes in the following section.

First, black feminist scholars have focused on the concept of intersectionality. This is the notion that “race, class, gender, and sexuality are co-dependent variables that cannot be separated or ranked in scholarship, political practice, or in lived experience” when classism and heterosexism constitute twin barriers linked with racism and sexism (Ransby 2000, 1218). For this reason, Tamara Jones (2000, 56) reminds us that African American women “don’t have the luxury of choosing to fight only one battle” because they contend with multiple burdens. Similarly, Adrien Wing (1997) argues that the actuality of layered experiences cannot be treated as separate or distinct parts when interlocking systems of oppression uphold and sustain each other in contemporary American society. Second, black feminist scholars have addressed the issue of gender inequality within the black community (Collins 2000; Harris 1999; hooks 1984, 1989; B. Smith 1995; Smooth and Tucker 1999). During the civil rights movement, black women were not recognized for their numerous political activities, such as behind-the-scenes organizing, mobilizing, and fund-raising (Payne 1995; Robnett 1997). Positions of leadership were reserved for black males. Wendy Smooth and Tamelyn Tucker (1999), who cite the Million Man March as yet another classic example, argue that in more recent years black women’s activism has been ignored and black men have been given credit. Other scholars charge that the black church has validated the patriarchal nature of black male-female relationships through its biblical teachings and exclusion of black women from the clergy, key decision-making processes, and financial governing boards (Stone 1979; Higginbotham 1993; Harris 1999). Thus, black feminists recognize that gender inequality exists within the black community and point to the patriarchal