The Duty of the True Race Woman

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DOI:10.5406/illinois/9780252040993.003.0002

Abstract and Keywords

What does it mean and what has it meant to be a Black female intellectual? What does it mean to be a race woman? When and where are the sites of race women's becoming? Brittney Cooper argues that to arrive at an answer to the first question, we must diligently interrogate and examine the latter questions. Race women were the first Black women intellectuals. As they entered into public racial leadership roles beyond the church in the decades after Reconstruction, they explicitly fashioned for themselves a public duty to serve their people through diligent and careful intellectual work and attention to “proving the intellectual character” of the race. Pauline Hopkins declared two key tasks attached to the work of the “true race-woman.” They were “to study” and “to discuss” “all phases of the race question.” Not only were these women institution builders and activists; they declared themselves public thinkers on race questions. Though Hopkins and her colleagues were part of a critical mass of public Black women thinkers in the 1890s, they joined a longer list of Black women who had been at the forefront of debates over “the woman question” and the role of Black women in public life throughout the 1800s.

Keywords: race women, intellectual genealogy, Black female intellectual, intellectual history, Anna Julie Cooper, Mary Church Terrell, Fannie Barrier Williams, Pauli Murray, Toni Cade Cambara

From the time that the first importation of Africans began to add comfort and wealth to the existence of the New World Community, the Negro woman has been constantly proving the intellectual character of her race in unexpected directions; indeed, her success has been significant. From the foregoing we conclude that it is the duty of the true race-woman to study and discuss all phases of the race question.

—Pauline Hopkins (1902)

What does it mean and what has it meant to be a Black female intellectual? What does it mean to be a race woman? When and where are the sites of race women’s becoming? In Beyond Respectability: The Intellectual Thought of Race Women, I argue that to arrive at an answer to
the first question, we must diligently interrogate and examine the latter questions. Race women were the first Black women intellectuals. As they entered into public racial leadership roles beyond the church in the decades after Reconstruction, they explicitly fashioned for themselves a public duty to serve their people through diligent and careful intellectual work and attention to "proving the intellectual character" of the race. Pauline Hopkins declared two key tasks attached to the work of the "true race-woman."¹ They were "to study" and "to discuss" "all phases of the race question." Not only were these women institution builders and activists; they declared themselves public thinkers on race questions. Though Hopkins and her colleagues were part of a critical mass of public Black women thinkers in the 1890s, they joined a longer list of Black women who had been at the forefront of debates over "the woman question" and the role of Black women in public life throughout the 1800s.²

(p.12) In this book, I construct both an intellectual genealogy and an intellectual geography of race women, whose work as public thinkers remains undertheorized, despite more than three decades of critical work in Black feminist theory and literary criticism and Black women’s history. Thus, this book seeks to construct both an intellectual genealogy of the ideas that race women produce about racial identity, gender, and leadership between the 1890s and the 1970s, and an intellectual geography that maps the deliberate ways that Black women chose to take up and transform intellectual and physical spaces in service of their racial uplift projects.

I begin this genealogy and geography with the short epigraphic quote that Pauline Hopkins, Boston-based journalist, novelist, and clubwoman, penned for the Colored American Magazine in 1902 because it is the first explicit definition of the race woman in print.³ The fact that she offered up this theorization of race womanhood, Black female leadership, and Black intellectual identity in a piece innocuously titled “Some Literary Workers,” makes clear the idea that Black women did their theorizing in unexpected locations. That assumption guides much of the methodological approach I take throughout the text, combing through unexpected archives of Black women’s thought to construct an intellectual genealogy and geography of this group of Black women thinkers. When I initially read Hopkins’s literary profiles of Black women, I did not expect to find rich and useful social theorizations about racial politics or racial leadership embedded in what appeared to be only biographical accounts. It is my contention in Beyond Respectability that if we actually want to take Black women seriously as thinkers and knowledge producers, we must begin to look for their thinking in unexpected places, to expect its incursions in genres like autobiography, novels, news stories, medical records, organizational histories, public speeches, and diary entries. We must, as the editors of Toward an Intellectual History of Black Women charge us, “challenge common wisdom about where [Black women’s] intellectual activities take place” and recognize that “the scenes of their intellectual labor have ranged from the intimate spaces of parlors, where epistolary exchanges were produced, to highly public podiums, where the oral expression of ideas often mixed with the material demands of communities.”⁴ Thus, I draw upon an “eclectic archive” to map and then apply Black women’s theory production to questions of gender and racial identity, racial leadership, and debates about racial advancement.⁵

Hopkins’s epigraphic formulation of “true race-womanhood” codified a set of practices and discussions, which Black female race leaders had been engaging since the early 1890s, about what it meant for Black women to assume the mantle of public race leadership alongside, and often in the stead (p.13) of, Black men who were being actively and violently pushed out of the public sphere in the post-Reconstruction period. True race womanhood stands in stark contrast to what Barbara Welter has famously called the “cult of true womanhood.”⁶ The cult of true
womanhood, or “domesticity,” offered an explicit set of social expectations that circumscribed the lives of middle-class white women within the domestic sphere. The ideology of true womanhood undergirded the racial nationalism at the heart of white gender role ideology, which demanded that white women reproduce white citizens fit to propagate ideologies of white dominance in service of leading the nation. Indeed, Francesca Morgan argues that “the history of women and nationalism in the early twentieth century United States is also a history of ‘race women,’” a term which applied not just to the ways Black women expressed “racial fidelity and a commitment to justice,” but also to “white women’s Anglo-Saxonist pride.”

Black women leaders actively pushed back against attempts to relegate them to the realm of domesticity. “We know,” wrote Hopkins, “that it is not ‘popular’ for a woman to speak or write in plain terms against political brutalities, that woman should confine her efforts to woman’s work in the home and church.” But times were changing. Black women could no longer limit speaking and writing to questions of home and church, domesticity and piety:

The colored woman holds a unique position in the economy of the world’s advancement in 1902. Beyond the common duties peculiar to woman’s sphere, the colored woman must have an intimate knowledge of every question that agitates the councils of the world; she must understand the solution of problems that involve the alteration of the boundaries of countries, and which make and unmake governments.

Any true race woman must be concerned not only with the moral and social character of the race, as the ideology of true womanhood dictated, but also with the “intellectual character” of the race. Whereas moral and social character traits were actively shaped by the labor of mothering that white women were asked to do in the domestic sphere, Black women did not have the luxury of confining their advocacy for the shaping of Black moral, social, or intellectual life strictly to the domestic realm. For one thing, notions of public and private were not so easily demarcated for Black people without legal protection and enforcement. Second, postslavery ideas of Black womanhood were still being fiercely contested within both white and black public spheres. Third, Black female race leaders felt that such constricted ideas about gender would prevent them from doing critical advocacy work and refashioning public opinion about Black people. Hopkins argued that for “the Negro woman,” “the more clearly she understands the governing principles of the government under which she lives and rears her children, the surer will be an honorable future for the whole race.” Hopkins’s race women colleagues had been carefully and intentionally fashioning a more public leadership role for themselves as thinkers at the nexus of the race problem and the woman question since the early 1890s.

Explicitly throwing off the parochial dictates of the cult of true womanhood, Hopkins argued for a more expansive intellectual vision for the true race woman. An explicitly Black woman-centered formulation of race womanhood became necessary because existing ideas about public and private did not accurately demarcate the social terms of Black womanhood. Unsurprisingly, the public was historically considered a male domain, in stark contrast to the private, domestic “woman’s sphere.” And even these ideas about a woman’s or domestic sphere were deeply racialized, so that “private and domestic” was a stand-in for “white womanhood.” Jean Bethke Elshtain defines the public as “the opposite of private,” and as that which “pertains to the people as a whole, to community, or nation-wide concerns, to the common good, to things open in sight, and to those things that may be used or shared by all members of the community.” Political theorist Mary Hawkesworth concludes that “because only some men—men of a specific race,
class, education, and ancestry—are positioned to represent the public, the ‘public’ is a raced, classed, and gendered concept. Thus, when Black women advocated for opportunities to engage their thought leadership “beyond woman’s sphere,” they were arguing explicitly for the right to do intellectual work in public space.

Lucy Craft Laney, a Georgia school educator and founder of the Haines Institute in Augusta, argued a similar position for an expanded public role for Black women in an 1899 speech:

The educated Negro woman, the woman of character and culture, is needed in the schoolroom not only in the kindergarten, and in the primary and the secondary school; but she is needed in high school, the academy, and the college. Only those of character and culture can do successful lifting, for she who would mould character must herself possess it. Not alone in the schoolroom can the intelligent woman lend a lifting hand, but as a public lecturer she may give advice, helpful suggestions, and important knowledge that will change a whole community and start its people on the upward way. To be convinced of the good that can be done for humanity by this means one need only recall the names of Lucy Stone, Mary Livermore, Frances (p.15) Harper, Frances Willard and Julie Ward Howe. The refined and noble Negro woman may lift much with this lever.

Now certainly, Lucy Laney’s call for intellectual Black women to be people of “nobility,” “refinement,” and “culture” betray troubling elements of an emerging respectability politic that shaped the entrance of all Black women onto the public platform. It goes without saying that to talk about early Black women public intellectuals is to talk about a class of elite women with unprecedented educational access. But in our contemporary feminist critiques of respectability and elitist class politics, often we do not acknowledge the sexual vulnerability that animated these women’s calls for “refinement.” In a historical moment wherein Black women were forced to adjudicate their moral rectitude in public, the sexual and gender policing at the center of their calls for respectability, conservative as they are, emerge as a reasonable, though not particularly laudable, approach to protecting the sanctity of Black women’s bodies. Moreover, these calls for respectability were meant to serve as a guard against white male sexual objectification. Part of the work of cultivating the public platform as a site for Black women to stand was making the space as safe as possible for Black women’s physical bodies, which would be publicly on display. Black female leaders theorized the public platform as a site for community transformation via the dispensation of useful knowledge that they themselves helped to produce. That required them to put their bodies on the line and to confront the very kinds of troubling discourses about their sexual promiscuity that shaped how public audiences would perceive them.

Though the term is contemporary, I choose to understand race women intellectuals as public intellectuals because it is my contention that the models of racial leadership and public lecturing, in which these Black women historically engaged, created the paradigm for contemporary modes of Black public intellectual engagement. Black women thinkers have always been public intellectuals, both because they cared about producing accessible forms of knowledge for and with communities involved in the Black freedom struggle, and because the confluence of racism and patriarchy exempted them from access to academic institutions and from the protections of the private sphere. Black women have never had the luxury of being private thinkers. Thus, though the term public intellectual is fairly contemporary, the origins of practices that connote public intellectual work are much longer. In fact, according to historian Lucindy Willis, the appearance of the term intellectual in nineteenth-century discourse “connotes
a distinct shift in perspective, making the concept less theoretical and more pragmatic.” (p.16)
Related to, but distinct from, thinker/philosophers like Socrates or Virgil, the term, in the
nineteenth century, referred to individuals who “generated, applied and dispensed culture. Like
great thinkers, [public intellectuals] were philosophers of sorts, but they seemed to possess a
more developed sense of audience. As did their predecessors, they viewed life in its broadest
contexts—socially, politically, and economically—yet often took active roles in challenging
contemporary social conditions.”15 In this book, I intentionally and unapologetically foreground
the intellectual work of race women because they themselves spent a great deal of time making
arguments about their importance as intellectuals. Moreover, I make this move in line with
historians and biographers of Black women thinkers who in the last decade have sought to
foreground the critical intellectual labor that public Black women did in addition to their work as
activists, organizers, educators, and churchwomen. Additionally, I understand Black women’s
knowledge production to encompass the range of places and spaces, thoughts, speech, and
writings that Black women engaged to both know and understand themselves and the world
around them more fully. In this book, I focus on the kinds of knowledge Black women produced
about racial identity, gender identity, and gender politics in their books, speeches, and
organizational work. Because I focus on women who had access to public platforms, this limits
the scope of the Black women knowledge producers under consideration here—for example,
poor and working-class Black women who produced knowledge in other forms. It is not my
contention that middle-class race women were the only or the most important producers of
racial knowledge. Rather I argue, that the intellectual contributions of race women thinkers still
remain greatly understudied, often because this work is included under the guise of
autobiographical writing or writing about organizational work. Shifting focus to these genres of
race women’s work offers new avenues for thinking about how they have enriched existing
bodies of political and social thought on issues of race, gender, and sexuality.

A New School of Thought
One of the key questions that animates my thinking about race women intellectuals is, “Where
and how did they become intellectuals?” Most of the late-nineteenth-century Black women
public intellectuals helped both to start and to shape critically the Black Clubwomen’s
movement. Thus, in Beyond Respectability, I turn to the National Association of Colored Women
(NACW) as a space integral to fashioning race women into intellectuals. This organization
constitutes a critical site in the intellectual geography (p.17) that shaped the knowledge
production of race women at the turn of the twentieth century. Founded in 1896, the NACW
acted as the training ground for the first generation of Black women public intellectuals. Though
much historical scholarship has focused on the NACW as an activist and social welfare
organization, I make a critical pivot in this book to consider the NACW as its own school of racial
thought. I do so because that is how Fannie Barrier Williams, one of the most visible clubwomen
of the early twentieth century and the theorist whose work I interrogate in chapter one,
understood the organization. “The first thing to be noted,” Williams argued in her 1901
organizational history about the function and activities of the clubs, “is that these club women
are students of their own social condition.”16 Moreover,

the clubs themselves are schools in which are taught and learned, more or less thoroughly,
the near lessons of life and living. All these clubs have a program for study. In some of the
more ambitious clubs, literature, music and art are studied more or less seriously, but in
all of them race problems and sociological questions directly related to the condition of the
Negro race in America are the principal subjects for study and discussion.17
Here, Williams argues that the NACW functioned as a school of social thought that empowered local organizations to create their own curricula of study relative to their specific needs. Tommy Curry argues that “it is of the utmost import to see Black organizations as schools of thought that dedicated their research, inquiry, and scholarship towards specific methods for investigating and resolving the race question.” These assertions require a scholarly pivot that acknowledges forthrightly the intellectual import of the NACW as the training school for the first generation of Black female public intellectuals.

Williams further argued that there had been three major preparatory schools for Black women’s leadership. “Churches have been and still are the great preparatory schools in which the primary lessons of social order, mutual trustfulness, and united effort have been taught,” she wrote. She recognized even in 1900 that “the churches have been sustained, enlarged and beautified principally through the organized efforts of their women members.” Moreover, women’s work in the church had taught them “unity of effort of the common good” and “broad social sympathies.” Next, secret or mutual aid societies, which “demanded a higher order of intelligence” than church membership, had helped Black women to do a range of care work “for the indigent,” the orphaned, and others in need. These two groups—the church and secret societies—had made “colored women acquainted with the general social condition of the race and the possibilities of social improvement.”

It should also be noted that these two groups were critical nodes in the creation of what Martha S. Jones refers to as Black “public culture” as well, lending further credence to Williams’s attempt to place the NACW on a continuum with these institutions. However, because she made a clear distinction between the moral work of churches and the care work of secret societies, it would be impertinent to continue to read the NACW merely as an amalgam of these two. Instead, the NACW, in Williams’s estimation, added another dimension to the work of these institutions by creating a systematic ideological approach to the social regeneration of the race. Not only had the NACW excerpted the church’s program of moral instruction, but it also took the local approach to care and social service work that had been pioneered by numerous women’s fraternal and mutual aid societies from the 1870s forward. Combining these approaches provided a systematic way to both meet local needs and to generate a body of shared knowledge that created a national picture of the state of African Americans. The NACW women actively embraced their role as creators of public knowledge about African Americans in general and African American women in particular. The organization desired a broad role in the intellectual reformation of public opinion regarding Black people.

Williams argued that the NACW woman was the real new woman in American life. ... She is needed to change the old idea of things implanted in the minds of the white race and there sustained and hardened into a national habit by the debasing influence of slavery estimates. This woman is needed as an educator of public opinion. She is a happy refutation of the idle insinuations and common skepticism as to the womanly worth and promise of the whole race of women.

Williams unapologetically insinuated Black women into the discourse of the new woman, a term that sought to characterize white women who were involved in the progressive movements at the turn of the century. Not only were Black women new women, but they were the real new women, even more so than their white counterparts! The role that Williams ascribed to Black new women is even more telling. In language reminiscent of both Lucy Laney and Pauline Hopkins’s true race woman, Williams described the African American new woman as “an
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Their job was to shift public perception and ideas about African American women through their work on the public stage. This call for Black women to shift public opinion, through both their pristine embodiment of respectable Black womanhood and their choice to make visible the particular struggles and precarity that attended to Black women’s lives, exemplifies Cooper’s ideas of using embodied discourse as a textual and discursive strategy to combat negative and damaging ideas about Black women.

Undoubtedly, these ideas were steeped in moral condescension toward Black women of lower-class status. Williams balked at the treatment of nonelite colored women who had “been left to grope their way unassisted toward a realization of those domestic virtues, moral impulses and standards of family and social life that are the badges of race respectability.” Though her views were steeped explicitly in respectability politics, she also critiqued middle-class Black people for their neglect of the Black poor. Moreover, she continued:

There has been no fixed public opinion to which they could appeal; no protection against the libelous attacks upon their characters, and no chivalry generous enough to guarantee their safety against man’s inhumanity to woman. Certain it is that colored women have been the least known, and the most ill-favored class of women in the country.

Here, Williams turns to the notion of changing public opinion as the animating force of race women’s “intellectual activism.” Reshaping the public discourse about Black women topped the list of racial priorities of race women and of the NACW’s intellectual agenda. Black women’s strategic deployment of respectability, on the one hand, and embodied discourse that pointed to the extreme racial and sexual vulnerability Black women experienced, on the other, was critical to shifting public perception and opinion about the value of Black women’s lives.

Thus, Laney, Williams, and others imposed a respectability requirement on those women who would become educators of public opinion, in part because the work required an intrinsic placing of the Black female body on display for white public consumption. Certainly, the class policing that anchors respectability discourse remains persistent and troubling; and I suspect it is the reason that many of these women have been given short shrift in existing conversations about Black intellectual thought. Most work has focused on respectability as a marker of problematic class hierarchies among turn-of-the-twentieth-century African Americans. Many middle-class Black women expressed acute anxiety about how the practices of poor Black women would make them look bad. But I want to suggest that we move beyond focusing only on the ways that respectability discourses attempted to instantiate class hierarchies. I am not offering social conditions as an apologetic for elite Black women’s problematic class politics. Rather, I argue throughout this book that respectability discourse also constituted one of the earliest theorizations of gender within newly emancipated Black communities.

(p.20) The post-Reconstruction push to style Black people as respectable men and women indexes a community’s attempt to understand and articulate what it meant to be a man or a woman. As Hortense Spillers has suggested, the Middle Passage and chattel slavery stripped all but the most crude gender identifications from the Black body. To the extent, Spillers reminds us, that the “New-world, diasporic plight [of Black people] marked a theft of the body. ... [W]e lose at least gender difference in the outcome, and the female body and the male body become a territory of cultural and political maneuver, not at all gender-related, gender-specific.” “The materialized scene of unprotected female flesh—of female flesh ‘ungendered’ created an indeterminate social terrain for the articulation of Black gender identity.” Although I think much of the violation and violence that shaped Black life during enslavement was predicated on
a denial of access to gender norms—which is to say that much of the treatment was gender-specific (e.g., denying Black women the protections of womanhood) or, at the very least, specific to the biological sex of the person—Spillers’s larger observation is instructive, namely that enslavement was predicated on a dialectical doing and undoing of gender that frequently rendered the Black body a space of indeterminate gender terrain.

The Black female body, because it was the conduit through which enslavement passed to her descendants, was historically deemed the ground zero site for the propagation of Black inferiority. Katherine McKittrick argues that the ownership and exploitation of Black women during slavery has geographic implications, for such practices “territorialized the body,” making it “publicly and financially claimed, owned, and controlled by an outsider. Territorialization marks and names the scale of the body, turning ideas that justify bondage into corporeal evidence of racial difference.”32 McKittrick continues, clarifying that “once the racial-sexual body is territorialized, it is marked as decipherable and knowable—as subordinate, inhuman, rape-able, deviant, procreative, placeless.”33 But the terms upon which Black bodies came to be gendered (and ungendered) were imprecise, capricious, and contingent, such that much of the political project of Reconstruction among Black people became preoccupied with creating legible categories of manhood, womanhood, and childhood that would make clear the “undisputed dignity” of Black people.

So race women, engaging in the project of what Hazel Carby called “reconstructing womanhood,” confronted a social terrain of gender for the Black body that was wholly indeterminate and discursively illegible. Thus, many of the intellectual concerns of the NACW School focused on making Black women epistemologically significant by addressing the problematic ways that Black women were (un)known and publicly conceived in social discourse. Race women took it as their political and intellectual work to give shape and meaning to the Black body in social and political terms, to make it legible as an entity with infinite value and social worth. In doing so, they hoped to create livable terms upon which Black women could be both known epistemologically, and upon which Black women could live and engage socially. So when race women like Cooper talked about the race as being only twenty-one years old, she and others made the literal claim that the Black person (and forms of Black personhood), which emerged after Emancipation, constituted an entirely new conception of Black life, Black gender, and the human. Moreover, when she and her NACW counterparts insisted on using embodied discourse to make the Black female body legible, such acts attempted to counteract an obtrusive history of “ungendered,” or “de-gendered,” Black female flesh shaped by experiences of trauma and violence.

*Beyond Respectability* makes the critical intellectual pivot toward viewing the NACW as its own school of thought because such a move makes the NACW visible as a key intellectual site in which race women theorized notions of both gender and sexuality. Much of the scholarship on race women has focused so much on the unsavory nature of the class politics that elite and aspiring Blacks sought to impose on their counterparts without fully examining how respectability ideology provided a foundation for articulating what a Black woman or Black man actually was.34 For instance, E. Frances White’s groundbreaking book *Dark Continent of Our Bodies: Black Feminism and the Politics of Respectability* first turned our attention to what she termed the “double-edged” nature of the politics of respectability. She noted that while Black club and churchwomen used respectability as a “discourse of resistance,” their investment in social propriety often unwittingly authorized negative stereotypes about Black people.35 Scholars of Black women’s history have read the NACW as the primary location for the creation
and dispensation of the ideologies of respectability and dissemblance.\textsuperscript{36} However, \textit{Beyond Respectability} joins a growing body of critical work in Black women’s history and literary studies that seeks to complicate the narrative of the politics of respectability among Black women. Susana Morris has pointed to what she calls the “paradox of respectability,” a desire to achieve respectability in the face of racist denigrations of Black humanity while being confronted over and over again not only with the way that structures of power hold respectability out of reach for many Black people in the United States, but also its limits as a strategy for achieving freedom.\textsuperscript{37} Danielle McGuire has written about the ways that rape compelled Black women to overcome the dictates (p.22) of dissemblance and respectability during the Civil Rights Movement and to testify publicly to the violence they experienced. But these public testimonials have a much longer history, as Black women can be found attesting to violent treatment publicly and in print throughout the nineteenth century.\textsuperscript{38}

Much of the contemporary foothold that respectability discourses have in Black communities has everything to do with the fact that ridding ourselves of respectability entirely would mean completely upending the gender system that Black people, particularly Black women, theorized and created after Reconstruction. We have failed to think through the implications of respectability and dissemblance as part of a gender system theorized by Black intellectuals because, politically, this gender system is rooted not only in a conservative form of class politics, but also in a conservative form of sexual politics. Darlene Clark Hine argues that “at the core of essentially every activity of the NACW’s individual members was a concern with creating positive images of Black women’s sexuality.”\textsuperscript{39} Redeeming images of Black women’s sexuality was inarguably a core concern of the NACW School of Thought. However, because early scholarship in Black women’s history collapsed ideas of gender and sexuality, rather than decoupling them as later feminist scholarship has done, our strident critique of the NACW’s attempt to restyle Black women’s sexuality has missed the ways that respectability and dissemblance were also part of a broader system of attempting to create legible gender categories for Black men and women.

That gender system made Black women’s and men’s lives legible as humans rather than as chattel and has subsequently created deep affective investments in Black communities over the last 150 years. Thus, we cannot only see respectability politics as a problematic mode of articulating class identity, though it certainly is that. It is also a complicated, contingent, and (rightfully) contested mode of articulating Black gender identity vis-à-vis the social resuscitation of Black women’s sexual morality. In fact, all of the NACW intellectuals did not subscribe to respectability as a wholesale ideology for racial progress. In one moment, Mary Church Terrell, Fannie Barrier Williams, Lucy Craft Laney, and others evinced the most conservative kinds of ideas about the value of respectability in Black women’s lives. In other moments, however, clubwomen followed in the footsteps of Anna Julia Cooper, deploying forms of embodied discourse that offered up the Black female body for social consideration on their own terms. In chapters one and two of this book, my examinations of the political theorizing of two of the NACW leaders—Fannie Barrier Williams and Mary Church Terrell—reveal a far more complex picture of the gender and sexual ideologies that emerge (p.23) from the NACW School than a singularly focused set of investments in respectability politics and the culture of dissemblance.

Turning to the places where Black women made Black female–embodied experience visible complicates a respectability narrative that casts them as wholly parochial and gives Black women thinkers credit for the complexity of their theorizations of both race and gender identity. Moreover, since these complex adjudications of Black gender identity happened in the context of
Black women’s formal organizational and intellectual work, we must approach the NACW in a manner befitting of its intellectual function in Black communities—which is to say, as a school of thought. Under the valence of the NACW, race women acted as theoreticians of Black gender identity. In the first two chapters of the book, I delineate the range of concerns about gender and sexuality that emerge from the NACW School. In the last two chapters, of the book, I consider the ways that mid- to late-twentieth-century Black women intellectuals respond to, revise, or reject these ideas. The ideas about gender and racial identity put forward by the NACW School have had an inordinately long shelf life, having laid the foundation for debates well into the twenty-first century about what it means to properly perform and inhabit the categories of Black manhood and Black womanhood.

Moving beyond the Great Race Man Narrative
Race women were not the only people invested in theorizing a robust and clear definition of racial leadership. Local Black communities also had strong opinions on the matter and joined in naming their expectations for race leaders. In an extensive footnote in their 1945 book, Black Metropolis, St. Clair Drake and Horace Cayton included a discussion of race men and race women. The race man, they argued, “is one type of Race Hero,” a person who “‘fights for the race,’ and is ‘all for The Race.’”

Drake and Cayton found it noteworthy, however, that race men and race women were perceived very differently within the community: “It is interesting to note that Bronzeville is somewhat suspicious generally of its Race Men, but tends to be more trustful of the Race Woman.”

Deemed more “sincere,” community members alternately described the race woman figure as “‘forceful, outspoken, and fearless, a great advocate of race pride,’ ‘devoted to the race,’ and as one who ‘studies the conditions of the people.’” “The Race is uppermost in her activities,” they continued, she is “known by the speeches she makes,” and finally, “she champions the rights of Negroes.” Cayton and Drake observed that the Race Woman had been “idealized as a fighter” and that “her role as ‘uplifter’ seem[ed] to be accepted with less antagonism than in the case of the Race Man.” These rich locally based, community descriptions of Black female leaders confirm that many Black communities in the twentieth century placed great value on the work of race women. They indicate that fifty years after race women first came to theorize and embody the race woman archetype, race women as leadership figures remained critically important to the ways local Black communities understood themselves and their prospects for racial advancement. Though these fleeting moments of celebration did not exclude race women from encountering sexism and attempts at silencing, communities vested race women with a tall and public order to fill when it came to the project of racial uplift.

Yet when scholars tell the stories that comprise Black intellectual history, they persist in using a Great Race Man framework to guide the narrative. This study, Beyond Respectability, is driven in part by the desire to challenge the study of Great Race Men as the primary paradigmatic frame through which scholars understand African American intellectual history and African American knowledge production. Such an approach obscures the ways in which the term and category of the intellectual is both historically contingent and deeply contested ideological terrain among African American women and men. Moreover, intellectual work and the material conditions that affect knowledge production were, and are deeply contoured by, the politics of racial manhood and the attendant masculinist gender regimes that have persisted across time, although to varying degrees, within Black communities.

Although Black women have professed and proclaimed intricate, compelling, and important ideas about the state of Black people in the public—since Phillis Wheatley began writing poetry
—when the term Black public intellectual is used, only a limited number of people come immediately to mind. In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, there is Frederick Douglass (but not his mentees, Mary Church Terrell and Ida B. Wells); Booker T. Washington (but not his wife, Margaret Murray Washington); W. E. B. Du Bois (but not his contemporaries, Anna Julia Cooper or Fannie Barrier Williams); E. Franklin Frazier, Martin Luther King (but not their contemporaries, Anna Arnold Hedgeman and Pauli Murray); and Harold Cruse (but not his contemporary, Toni Cade Bambara). The history of Black public intellectualism is a history of race men.

I think here of a spate of Black intellectual history texts written over the last decade, which continue to narrate the major ideas that have undergirded the Black freedom struggle through two dominant frames. First, W. E. B. Du Bois predominates as the central intellectual figure of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Second, his supporting cast is always men. Representative (p.25) texts include Jonathan Holloway’s Confronting the Veil: Abram Harris, Jr., E. Franklin Frazier, and Ralph Bunche, 1919–1941, Eben Miller’s Born along the Color Line: The 1933 Amenia Conference and the Rise of a National Civil Rights Movement, and Zachery Williams’s In Search of the Talented Tenth: Howard University Public Intellectuals and the Dilemmas of Race, 1926–1970. Despite laudable attempts by both Miller and Williams to substantively include and make clear that Black women shaped the social environs of Black intellectual production in the early twentieth century, these texts simply do not go far enough in disrupting an intellectual history narratively enamored of race men. For instance, while Williams mentions many women that were a part of what he terms the “Howard Public Intellectuals,” he says little about their intellectual contributions, and more about their work challenging sexism and recruiting more women to train at Howard. Pauli Murray, a student at Howard during the heyday of Howard’s public intellectual dominance and a key figure under consideration in this book, created the term Jane Crow specifically to respond to the sexist and homophobic forms of intellectual exclusion that she experienced as a law student there.

More recently, Martin Kilson’s Transformation of the African American Intelligentsia reveals how deeply entrenched the Du Boisian narrative is to our framing of Black knowledge production. Based on Kilson’s 2012 Du Bois lectures at Harvard, Transformation returns to the Du Bois–Washington debates as the paradigm through which to understand key issues in Black political thought in the twentieth century. Recycling the well-worn framework of Washington, the accommodationist, and Du Bois, the civil rights strategist, Kilson argues that Washington and Du Bois were responsible for “producing two competing leadership methodologies to guide the transformation of twentieth-century African American society.”

Many scholars have already problematized the drawing of strict lines of ideological demarcation between Washington and Du Bois. Yet, this narrative persists. But what is more troubling than the mischaracterization of Du Bois is the way that this narrative perpetuates the wholesale erasure of these men’s female colleagues. Race women like Fannie Barrier Williams and Mary Church Terrell disrupt the neat ideological boundaries that Kilson draws between Washington and Du Bois. Williams, for instance, was an ardent Bookerite, but also a strong defender of training Black women in communities to be intellectuals and social theorists. Williams believed that Black women could be trained to be thinkers and theorists about their own social condition, a critical dissension from the kinds of training that Washington thought Black communities should have in the move “up from slavery.” In the case of Terrell, she moved with aplomb across the social and political circles of both Washington and Du Bois, managing to gain the respect of both. She wrote and thought across the breadth of her career about effective
strategies of activism, forging a unique path, as I will argue in chapter two, between respectability and agitation. Neither woman fits neatly into the overdrawn Washington–Du Bois binary. In fact, interrogation of Williams’s and Terrell’s intellectual contributions disrupts our desire to continue to read the early twentieth century on Washington’s and Du Bois’s terms at all.

One of the key ways that Black women thinkers have actively combated the Great Race Man narrative across time is to compile their own lists—their own genealogies of Black women thinkers. I do not think of these lists as mere lists. Instead, this intentional calling of names created an intellectual genealogy for race women’s work and was a practice of resistance against intellectual erasure. The way Hopkins used her biographical profiles of Black women literary workers to do the work of Black women’s intellectual history points us to important methodological approaches among Black women thinkers well into the twentieth century.

Hopkins’s profiles of Black women literary workers participate in a long practice of what I term listing, in which African American women created lists of prominent, qualified Black women for public consumption. These lists situate Black women within a long lineage of prior women who have done similar kinds of work, and naming those women grants intellectual, political, and/or cultural legitimacy to the Black woman speaking their names. Listing also refers in the fashion industry to an edge produced on a piece of fabric and applied to a seam to prevent it from unraveling. In similar fashion, Black women’s long traditions of intellectual production constitute a critical edge, without which the broader history of African American knowledge production would unravel and come apart at the seams.

Hopkins’s list began with Phillis Wheatley. Through Wheatley, Hopkins mapped the course of Black women’s literary and intellectual production since the era of the American Revolution, pointing to a long and prominent lineage in her intellectual genealogy of race women thinkers. She demonstrated through Wheatley that Black women’s intellectual development was coterminous with the development of the American nation-state. Her other profiles included Gertrude Fortune Grimke, Ida B. Wells, Mary Church Terrell, and Frances Harper. In her own list, Hopkins, like Laney, made sure to speak to the intellectual character of these women. Wheatley was characterized as an “intellectual prodigy.” Gertrude Grimke had an “intellectual countenance” and a “gifted mind.” Wells, she noted, was “an acknowledged power upon the public platform.” In part two of the series, she heaped effusive praise on Frances Harper whose “seventeen years of public speaking” had “moved” mountains of prejudice.” She also celebrated the rising star of Mary Church Terrell, who, having stepped down from her post as the first president of the National Association of Colored Women just one year prior, had become “highly ... thought of as a public speaker on race questions and women’s work.” Finally she profiled Mary Ann Shadd Cary, a teacher, newspaper publisher, and attorney, as “a brilliant speaker, ready and witty in debate.” In this regard, Hopkins followed more than a decade of work by race women who had been constructing lists of their best, most qualified women. Anna Julia Cooper’s “list of chieftans in the service” included Frances Harper, Sojourner Truth, Amanda Smith, Sarah Woodson Early, Martha Briggs, Charlotte Fortin [sic] Grimke, Hallie Quinn Brown, and Fannie Jackson Coppin. Gertrude Mossell’s 1894 book, Work of the Afro-American Woman, included profiles of Black women journalists, poets, novelists, and “our representatives at the World’s Fair” alongside her own short essays and poems.

Given the important political function of Black women’s lists, we cannot dismiss this practice as mere racial self-congratulation. It is clear from a close reading of any of these biographical profiles that race women used listing not only as a practice to combat their historical exclusion
but also to resist sexism, theorize about racial politics, and even gesture toward the kinds of political priorities that mattered based on the fields of work of the Black women they highlighted. More pointedly, these lists challenged the Great Race Man leadership model (and the liberal white leadership model) by offering profiles of qualified, talented race women who could lead.47

In *Want to Start a Revolution? Radical Women in the Black Freedom Struggle* (2009), the editors Dayo F. Gore, Jeanne Theoharis, and Komozi Woodard address the broad historiographical tendency to treat women as “subsidiary or symbolic figures.” “Rather than examining women as pivotal historical actors,” they note, “far too many of these studies simply mention various women as key participants and note the damage of sexism and the relevance of gender politics.”48 The scholarly tendency to be preoccupied with mentioning gender and sexual politics over and above a substantive engagement with the intellectual contributions of many Black female leaders is mirrored in analyses of the women themselves. Black women’s intellectual contributions are frequently reduced to the terrain of the gender intervention, wherein the primary thrust of Black women’s intellectual work is calling out sexism. Certainly, Black women did spend time challenging Black male sexism because they had to. But these women went far beyond merely pointing out that gender matters.

Kristin Waters and Carol Conaway’s *Black Women’s Intellectual Traditions* (2007) asks us to revisit the significance of the intellectual thought of women (p.28) like Maria Stewart, Frances Harper, Anna Julia Cooper, and Ida B. Wells.49 Waters and Conaway’s work “serves as a corrective to the prevailing view that no long-standing Black women’s intellectual traditions exists.”50 The editors of *Toward An Intellectual History of Black Women* (2015) note that “most scholarship on black women [has] focused on their work as activists, or discussed them as the objects of intellectual activity, but they rarely receive attention as producers of knowledge.”51 Although groundbreaking works of Black feminist scholarship like Paula Giddings’s *When and Where I Enter* (1984), Hazel Carby’s *Reconstructing Womanhood* (1986), together with Patricia Hill Collins’s *Black Feminist Thought* (1990) laid the groundwork for taking Black women seriously as thinkers and theorists, Black feminist theorizing has reached a state of critical inertia in its engagement with the intellectual work of early Black women theorists. White argued that this inertia was somewhat visible more than a decade ago when she called for black feminists to “engage each other’s ideas more seriously,” and to stop worrying about whether “racists were looking to reveal our failures.”52 Still much of the inertia has persisted. For instance, Vivian May’s *Anna Julia Cooper, Visionary Black Feminist* (2007) is the only book-length scholarly work on Cooper to critically engage her entire body of intellectual work, including her book of essays *Voice from the South*, alongside two doctoral dissertations, and a host of other short essays. May, together with Karen Baker-Fletcher, whose book contextualized Cooper’s contributions to womanist theology, have rescued her from the problem of what May calls “bodily hypervisibility” but intellectual obscurity.53 Because May’s work resists a biographical imperative and focuses in each chapter on the body of Cooper’s thought, it exists as a singular type of in-depth intellectual engagement of a Black woman intellectual. Additionally, much of the critical work on Black women thinkers like Claudia Jones, Ella Baker, Ida B. Wells, Fannie Barrier Williams, Eslanda Robeson, Rosa Parks, and Anna Arnold Hedgeman are critical biographies.54 Although this book is indebted to the intellectual foundations laid by many of these works, which do take great care to engage the intellectual contributions of the women under study, these biographies are bound in many respects by the limits of biography as a genre. Rarely among male thinkers is the presence of a critical biography the precursor to engaging the male thinker as theorist. But in Black feminist theory, frequently Black women have to be
established as “somebody” before the theoretical import of their contributions enters the scholarly narrative in a significant way.

Considering the ways in which otherwise respectable, educated, middle-class, liberal Black women refigure the terrain of Black gender, Black militancy, and Black queerness, this work augments a growing body of (p.29) scholarship that locates Black radicalism in the work of Black women labor activists. The story of serious Black women’s intellectual thought is not solely the province of Black women on the radical left. While elevating the stories of radical left Black women demonstrates the pitfalls of focusing on respectable racial elites like many of the women under consideration in this book, again, our contemporary commitment to rejecting the ideology of middle-class respectability should not foreclose our engagement with significant sites of Black women’s knowledge production in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

A Procession of Chapters
In chapter one, I expand the intellectual geography I am mapping in Beyond Respectability by examining the National Association of Colored Women (NACW) as a site of Black female knowledge production. In particular, I use the work of Fannie Barrier Williams, a Chicago-based clubwoman, to map many of the key intellectual interventions of the NACW as a school of social thought. Drawing on Williams’s theorization of what she calls organized anxiety, I take up and critically examine her claim that the NACW was responsible for creating “race public opinion” and, by extension, giving shape and form to an emergent Black public sphere. As a concept, organized anxiety politicizes the emotional lives of Black women and constitutes one more iteration of the ways that race women invoked embodied discourse in their public intellectual work. I also examine her invocation of a discourse that I term American peculiarity, a kind of oppositional discourse challenging claims of American exceptionalism. Finally, I interrogate her concept of racial sociality, a sophisticated way to think about ideas of racial unity and social connections between African Americans of different geographic and class backgrounds. Williams was a formidable political theorist, who, through her work in the NACW, introduced a rich conceptual milieu through which to think about Black politics, Black organizations, and gender politics in the late nineteenth century.

In chapter two, I seek to recuperate Mary Church Terrell as a critical theorist of Black racial uplift. The first President of the NACW, Terrell went on to have a sixty-year career in Civil Rights activism. This chapter moves across the span of her career, mapping her development of a concept called “dignified agitation,” which she introduces in a 1913 speech. She returns to this formulation throughout her career, and I argue that this idea of dignified agitation is one that she both learned and propagated as part of the NACW school of thought. But it also acts as a bridge concept, and she, as a bridge (p.30) figure to Civil Rights–era Black women intellectuals, who both respected the NACW school of thought and sought to move beyond it in critical ways. Because of the deliberate ways that Terrell wrote about her love of dancing in her autobiography, I also consider in this chapter the ways in which she is part of a genealogy of Black women’s pleasure politics, even though the current Black feminist discourse on pleasure typically focuses on blues women in this time period. Because Terrell is considered one of the foremost proselytizers of respectability, a turn toward her articulation of pleasure politics richly complicates the manner in which we read her as a theorist of racial resistance and gender progressivism.

In chapter three, I turn to the work of Pauli Murray, one of the young activists that Terrell mentored. In the 1940s, Murray enrolled at Howard University Law School and went on to graduate as the only woman and top student in her class. In the 1930s, the convergence of
several important Black male intellectuals at Howard University, including Abram Harris, E. Franklin Frazier, and Ralph Bunche, had cemented a new formal model of the academically trained Black male public intellectual. When Murray enrolled in the 1940s, she experienced great sexism from these Black male intellectuals. She termed their treatment of her Jane Crow. While she went on to have a storied career as a legal expert, Episcopal priest, poet, and writer, all of which place her firmly in the tradition of the race woman, her identity as both a woman and queer person in the 1940s and 1950s collided with the Howard model of public intellectual work. This chapter brings together Murray’s time and training at Howard, her archives, and an examination of her two autobiographies to suggest that her concept of Jane Crow grew out of the collision of race-based sexual politics and limited ideas among Black men about who could provide intellectual leadership for Black people. Moreover, Jane Crow exposed the heterosexist proclivities of Black public leadership traditions, and offers a framework for thinking about how Black women negotiated gender and sexual politics even as they devoted their lives to theorizing new strategies for racial uplift.

Chapter four returns to the question of what it means to be a Black woman intellectual by interrogating the claims in an article in Ebony Magazine in 1966 called “Problems of the Negro Woman Intellectual.” Given the ferment of racial crises in the 1960s, this chapter argues that much like the transitional period of the 1890s, the transition from Civil Rights to Black Power was marked by a tension over the roles that Black women would play, not only as political activists, but as intellectual leaders. Thus Harold Cruse’s Crisis of the Negro Intellectual erased a long and significant history of Black women’s intellectual labor in order to sustain his narrative of racial crisis. What really seems to be in crisis are the terms of Black masculinity. I read Toni Cade Bambara’s book of essays Black Woman as a critical corrective to Cruse’s assertions because Black Woman presses the case for Black women’s centrality as thought leaders and public intellectuals in racial justice struggles, and Bambara and her comrades approach the same political moment as an opportunity for creativity around the articulation of new modes of what she terms Blackhood rather than embracing the narrative of crisis. In many ways, her anthology and the feminist anthologies that come after it expand on Black women’s intellectual practice of listing from the nineteenth century. In every period where Black communities struggled to find their thought leaders, Black women always named the women doing the work, but usually receive little credit for it. By the late twentieth century, these lists became full anthologies of Black women’s thinking about race, gender, and politics. This chapter makes clear that the struggle to be known and to have the range of Black women’s experiences properly articulated in the public sphere is a recurring struggle for Black women thinkers. At the same time, these women engage in a range of creative practices to make Black women’s lives legible in public discourse.

Like the works of late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century Black women intellectuals, Beyond Respectability proffers its own kind of list of Black women public intellectuals. But it is just one list out of many that have yet to be constructed. I chose these women not only because of their overlooked or understudied intellectual contributions, but because they are linked together through their work. Anna Julia Cooper, Fannie Barrier Williams, Mary Church Terrell, and other nineteenth-century Black women who make cameos in this book were colleagues, who in many cases knew each other. Mary Church Terrell is offered here as an ideological bridge between the early race women and later ones like Pauli Murray and Toni Cade Bambara. Terrell and Murray met while doing desegregation campaigning in Washington, D.C., in the 1940s, and Terrell was always among Murray’s own lists of influential Black leaders. Murray herself was connected with the advent of the Black feminist movement of the 1970s and was a key legal and
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social theorist, alongside colleagues like Toni Cade Bambara. There are many maps and linkages that could be drawn when telling the stories of Black women intellectuals. This is one intellectual map, offering one set of geographic and genealogical routes that can be taken to more clearly understand the long and rich history of African American women’s knowledge production. My hope is that this map, this genealogy, leads us all, as Hopkins foresaw, in luminous and unexpected directions. (p.32)

Notes:
(1.) Hopkins, “Some Literary Workers,” in Dworkin, Daughter of the Revolution, 142.
(2.) See Jones, All Bound Up Together.
(4.) Bay et al., Toward an Intellectual History, 5.
(5.) Ford, Liberated Threads, 3.
(6.) The “cult of domesticity,” also referred to as the “cult of true womanhood,” promoted a belief that women should be chaste, pious, private, homemakers and mothers who were overseers of the moral conscience of their families. See Welter, “Cult of True Womanhood.”
(7.) Morgan, Women and Patriotism, 9–10.
(8.) Hopkins, “Some Literary Workers,” in Dworkin, 142.
(9.) Ibid.
(10.) Arguably, Black women weren’t the only women who could be called race women. The mothering work that white women were called on to do certainly was tethered to ideas about the reproduction of whiteness.
(11.) Ibid.
(13.) Ibid.
(16.) Williams, “Club Movement,” 127.
(17.) Ibid.
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(19.) Williams, “Club Movement,” 118.

(20.) Ibid.

(21.) Ibid.

(22.) Ibid.

(23.) Martha Jones’s *All Bound Up Together* and Michele Mitchell’s *Righteous Propagation: African Americans and the Politics of Racial Destiny after Reconstruction* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004) both point to vibrant Black women’s intellectual cultures in the church (Jones) and in public life (Mitchell). Jones’s work maps the public debates and sites of gender activism for nineteenth-century Black women seeking to move the needle toward gender inclusivity in Black public culture and in the church. Mitchell maps conversations about eugenics, vitality, and sexuality in Black public discourse, with significant attention given to Black women’s contributions to these public conversations.

(24.) Williams, “Club Movement,” 130.


(26.) Williams, “Club Movement,” 117.

(27.) Ibid.


(29.) Victoria Wolcott, *Remaking Respectability: African American Women in Interwar Detroit* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001). Wolcott argues that in the context of Detroit, although respectability does emerge as a form of intraracial, interclass policing, as a strategy it has limited effectiveness and falls increasingly out of favor as strategy for social reform by the 1920 and 1930s. See introduction.


(31.) Ibid., 261.


(33.) Ibid., 45.

(34.) See Gaines, *Uplifting the Race*, introduction and chapters 1 and 5.
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(37.) Morris, Close Kin and Distant Relatives, 3.


(39.) Hine, “Rape and the Inner Lives,” 918.

(40.) Drake and Cayton, Black Metropolis, 394-95.

(41.) Ibid.


(43.) See Williams, In Search of the Talented Tenth. Chapter 3 includes the most substantive discussion of women at Howard.


(46.) Cooper, Voice from the South, 140-42.

(47.) Black women’s listing practices persist well into the twenty-first century. In 2002, when Halle Berry won the Academy Award for Best Actress, becoming the first and only Black woman to date to have won the award, she began her speech, saying, “This moment is bigger than me. This moment is for Dorothy Dandridge, Lena Horne, and Diahann Carroll. It’s for the women that stand beside me. Jada Pinkett, Angela Bassett, Vivica Fox and it’s for every nameless, faceless, woman of color that now has the chance because this door tonight has been opened.” At Oprah Winfrey’s Legend’s Ball in 2005, novelist Pearl Cleage presented a poem called, “We Speak Your Names,” to honor the scores of Black women pioneers in artistic and creative fields. In one stanza, Cleage wrote, “We are here to speak your names / because we have sense enough to know / that we did not spring full blown from the / forehead of Zeus / or arrive on the scene like Topsy, our sister once / removed, who somehow just grewed / We know that we are walking in footprints made / deep by confident strides / of women who parted the air before them like / forces of nature you are.” Pearl Cleage and Zaron Burnet Jr., We Speak Your Names: A Celebration (New York: One World, 2005).

(48.) Gore, Theoharis, and Woodard, Want to Start a Revolution? 8.
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(49.) Carla Peterson’s *Doers of the Word* also played a critical role in considering the intellectual contributions from 1830 to 1880, but she focused solely on Black women living up North. See Peterson, *Doers of the Word*.


(51.) Bay et al., *Toward an Intellectual History*, 2.

(52.) White, *Dark Continent*, 16.

(53.) May, *Anna Julia Cooper*, 38.
