Anna Julia Cooper, Worth, and Public Intellectuals

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A radical opening of possibilities for public engagement by academics and other intellectuals came about in 1898 when numerous French academics were inspired by Émile Zola to come to the aid of wrongfully-convicted Captain Alfred Dreyfus and expose the problem of anti-Semitism in the French military in particular and society in general. At the same time in Washington, D.C., Anna Julia Cooper, a young woman originally born into slavery and recently appointed teacher at the renowned M Street High School, was using her voice to come to the aid of scores of disadvantaged African Americans. Although the discussion about just what and who—if anyone—is a public intellectual is long, elaborate, and ongoing, I will argue that if we return to the undervalued work of Anna Julia Cooper, this discussion will be richer and more productive than ever before. I will argue this specifically because her well-worked-out notion of human worth is just what is needed to rethink how we ought to live in the world and to strive to live better. What else is the mission of a public intellectual than to advance human knowledge and freedom, to give back and better the world—or at least some piece of it? If I am right about the mission, then there must be an operative, even if not consciously formed, notion of what that better world might be like. Clearly, some standard of value or health guides intellectuals and activists in declaring a crisis or illness, as well as guides their ideas about convalescence and the process of recovery. In A Voice From the South, Cooper resituates the measure of human worth, moving it from what one has to what one does and produces, thus challenging her audience to rethink how we live in the world and to strive to live better. In this paper I intend to argue, first, that public intellectuals do aim at public betterment. Then I will turn to Anna Julia Cooper’s notion of worth and argue for it as a viable and valuable standard for public intellectual endeavors.
What Is a Public Intellectual?

There is a very long and elaborate history of the discussion about just what and who is a public intellectual, one that continues in full force today with unique and particular significance for black public intellectuals. Some insist that intellectuals are disappearing; others suggest that intellectuals are still everywhere and are still relevant. Still others admit the decline but give guidelines for how intellectuals can become relevant again. To add to the confusion, each author has his or her own definition of “public intellectual,” and no one seems to reach a consensus on which thinkers might be public intellectuals. On the one hand there is Russell Jacoby, insisting, in The Last Intellectuals: American Culture in the Age of Academe, that the “New York Intellectuals,” free writing social commentators, are paradigm cases who do not exist in the contemporary world of university affiliated intellectuals; along with the advent of public intellectualism came increasing professionalization of university life, thus rendering impossible their continuation.\(^1\) On the other hand there is Robert Boynton, asserting, in “The New Intellectuals: African American Intellectuals,” that black academic teacher-writer-activists have taken the reigns that many whites have dropped or ignored and done much for social progress in recent years. Within all the discussion and disagreement we find two points of commonality: first, the origin of the term “public intellectual” in the late-nineteenth-century Dreyfus Affair; and second, that somewhere in the definition is a sense of serving social justice.

Originally an intellectual was someone who was very much engaged in the public realm; the term itself was coined to describe those who waged the campaign in defense of Captain Alfred Dreyfus in 1898, Émile Zola among them. Further designating an intellectual as “public” would have struck a late-nineteenth-century listener as tautological, if not absurd. By then the core elements of a definition of the public intellectual were already in place: he was a writer, informed by a strong moral impulse, who addressed a general, educated audience in accessible language about the most important issues of the day.\(^2\) In Public Intellectuals: A Study of Decline, Richard Posner gives an even more general definition: “the typical public intellectual is a safe specialist . . . [a] critical commentator addressing a nonspecialist audience on matters of broad public concern.”\(^3\) Lewis Gordon, however, claims that there is more to being a public intellectual than just having an audience. In the “Foreword” to Joy James’ book on intellectuals, Transcending the Talented Tenth: Black Leaders and American Intellectuals, Gordon distinguishes between public intellectuals and popular intellectuals. Popular intellectuals are simply those that are well-known and even well-liked, whereas public intellectuals, who are often not popular, are public by virtue of “the nature of their work, which addresses issues that have an impact on the communities in which they live and conditions these intellectuals’ roles in such communities.”\(^4\) Then Gordon further distinguishes “the classical sociological model of the charismatic leader-intellectual and the leader-intellectuals who are guided by a sense of vocation and public responsibility” (Gordon 1997, xv). Charismatic leaders are often driven as much by their own egos
and desires for attention and praise; whereas, the better intellectuals—according to Gordon—keep in mind the needs of the public they address.

This is a problem John Michael addresses in *Anxious Intellectuals: Academic Professionals, Public Intellectuals, and Enlightenment Values*: “intellectuals tend to hide their self-promoting agendas and aggrandizing self-interests behind claims to serve universalized truth, justice, or emancipation.” Here we see that the definition of an intellectual is often bound up in motivations and methodology. In *Representations of the Intellectual*, Edward Said defines a public intellectual as “an individual endowed with a faculty for representing, embodying, articulating a message, a view, an attitude, philosophy or opinion to, as well as for, a public.” He goes on to explain that this definition is just the beginning of trying to understand how to best be an intellectual because he is all too aware of the dangers expressed by Gordon, Michael, and many others, the dangers not only of simply failing at the task of social improvement but making things even worse when one’s own personal desires for attention and praise from a devoted audience overwhelm activism.

In his argument for supporting “insurgent Black intellectualism,” Cornel West delineates three other models many have followed: the bourgeois model of the humanist, the Marxist model of the revolutionary, and the Foucaultian model of the postmodern skeptic. He explains that “the insurgency model for Black intellectual activity builds upon, yet goes beyond, the previous three models” and is thus the only acceptable model drawing from the “two organic intellectual traditions in Afro-American life: the Black Christian tradition of preaching and the Black musical tradition of performance” (BB, 136). In one short essay West enlightens us to the knowledge that intellectuals need not be academics—in fact, academics rarely meet his criteria of being rooted in history, not egoistic or individualistic, and always critical of themselves and their positions. Writing and dialoguing along with West in *Breaking Bread: Insurgent Black Intellectual Life*, bell hooks provides a description of and some guidelines for public intellectuals. According to hooks, “an intellectual is somebody who trades in ideas by transgressing discursive frontiers, because he or she sees the need to do that. Secondly, an intellectual is somebody who trades in ideas in their vital bearing on a wider political culture” (BB, 152). hooks’ own career has “confirmed what Black leaders in the nineteenth century well knew—that intellectual work is a necessary part of liberation struggle, central to the efforts of all oppressed and/or exploited people who would move from object to subject, who would decolonize and liberate their minds” (BB, 150). hooks lives a life of the mind, she writes and teaches and speaks, in order to understand herself and her own world; but she does this without seeing it as disconnected from others with whom she shares that world.

The importance that hooks, West, Gordon, and others place on the libatory function of intellectualism is, as I will show below, a common feature in the black intellectual tradition, but it is also highly influenced by Antonio Gramsci. Writing extensively while a political prisoner in Italy from 1926 until his death, while still in prison, in 1937, his *Prison Notebooks* were translated into English and published in 1971, and his discussion of intellectuals, education, and revolution continues
to influence thinkers and activists. His famous distinction between “traditional” and “organic” intellectuals is often central to modern discussions about the duties and responsibilities of intellectuals today. According to Gramsci, everyone is an intellectual, even a philosopher; but most people do not fulfill a social function as an intellectual. That role is played by academics or religious leaders, men of letters: it is these he calls the “traditional intellectuals.” In order to transform society and liberate all those who are subjugated, exploited, and oppressed, Gramsci says, we need organic intellectuals. We need people to rise up from the working class and assume the social functions of an intellectual, which are to organize and explain the society we live in. The traditional intellectuals are generally conservative and serve to maintain the status quo. The organic intellectuals form a counter hegemony; i.e., rather than simply reinforcing the existing power structures, they engage the public in questions about what kind of society we want and can make. Gramsci is not opposed to professional academics functioning as intellectuals; they can even be organic intellectuals. The distinction is in intention and practice, not in profession.

Attempts to identify, create, and support organic (rather than traditional), public (rather than popular or charismatic) intellectuals have always been at the center of African-American intellectual activism. William Banks, in an important historical work on the subject, traces this sense of commitment and responsibility to help the downtrodden, battle oppression, and uplift the race to traditional African communal values and group oppression in America [which] combined to shape a collectivist orientation. This perspective encouraged a sharing of resources and a reliance on cohorts, and slaves believed that their personal interests overlapped those of the group. Indeed, the slave experience forged an ethos of interdependence and cooperation among blacks that set the tone for individual decisions. The ablest blacks in Africa, and later those in America, were accorded high community status. But they were expected to use their abilities to help other blacks.

From the earliest works of Maria Stewart and David Walker through Fredrick Douglass and Alexander Crummell, black speakers, writers, preachers, and teachers have worked to transform society and liberate all those who are subjugated. But the roots of the discussions that today’s black public intellectuals are having are most explicitly found in critical support of the work of W. E. B. Du Bois and his infamous 1903 “Talented Tenth” essay as well as his 1948 “Talented Tenth: Memorial Address” where he rethinks his original understanding of leadership and intellectualism. African-American social and political thought at the turn of the twentieth century was rich and diverse, full of urgency and excitement—as well as disagreement—about just how best to proceed. The Hampton-Tuskegee model of industrial education and assimilation pleased many white philanthropists whose money was enticing to many, but quite a few others including Cooper were quite dissatisfied with Booker T. Washington’s approach. Du Bois published not only
criticisms of Washington but also counter-methods, and his work received much attention, both supportive and critical, both in his day by the likes of such greats as Cooper and E. Franklin Frazier, as well as in the present by James, Gordon, hooks, and West to name but a few.

The 1903 “The Talented Tenth” was published in *The Negro Problem* and directly addressed Du Bois’ ideas for the best path toward racial uplift. He thought that economically and politically depressed African Americans could best be served by developing black leaders. The top 10 percent of the population, Du Bois suggested, ought to be trained to lead and uplift the other 90 percent. He opens the essay with these words:

The Negro race, like all races, is going to be saved by its exceptional men. The problem of education, then, among Negroes must first of all deal with the Talented Tenth; it is the problem of developing the Best of this race that they may guide the Mass away from the contamination and death of the Worst, in their own and other races (W, 842).10

More specifically, Du Bois argues that education for all and university education for the leaders is essential to uplifting the race. Knowledge, which comes from higher education, is key to establishing and understanding ideals for any community. Du Bois means here not just training for jobs. “[K]nowledge of life and its wider meaning,” he says, “has been the point of the Negro’s deepest ignorance, and the sending out of teachers whose training has not been simply for bread winning, but also for human culture, has been of inestimable value in the training of these men” (W, 852). In “Of Mr. Booker T. Washington and Others,” from *The Souls of Black Folk*, Du Bois further explains that the life of the mind, that intellectual pursuits, are essential to liberation because “only a firm adherence to their higher ideals and aspirations will ever keep those ideals in the realm of possibility” (W, 401). The Talented Tenth program, out of concern for the masses, encourages the few who have the talents to do rigorous work for the many who do not so that there can be less and less who cannot do for themselves in the future. The emphasis on the importance of higher education is directly in opposition to Washington’s rejection of it. Where Washington wants each to labor for himself, Du Bois demands higher expectations than mere material gain, and thus thinks a vanguard of elites can have substantial long-term success in economics, politics, and the humanities, as compared with Washington’s notion of short-term, exclusively economic, success.

Following years of criticism, as we shall see more clearly below, and his own foray into Marxism, Du Bois reevaluated his Talented Tenth program exactly because he realized his “neglect of the masses.” At Wilberforce State University, he spoke to the alumni with “The Talented Tenth: Memorial Address.” He explains that in his original essay he

stressed college and higher training. For these men with their college training, there would be needed thorough understanding of
the mass of Negroes and their problems; and, therefore I empha-
sized scientific study. Willingness to work and make personal
sacrifice for solving these problems was of course, the first pre-
requisite and *sine qua non*. I did not stress this, I assumed it. I
assumed that with knowledge, sacrifice would automatically fol-
low. In my youth and idealism, I did not realize that selfishness is
ever more natural than sacrifice. I made the assumption of its wide
availability because of the spirit of sacrifice learned in my mission
school training (R, 348).

Du Bois was not worried about neglecting the masses because he assumed that
each of the talented men—and women; Du Bois' Talented Tenth was not gender-
exclusive, even if mostly in word rather than deed—was privately worried and act-
ing out of concern for those needs, not his own. But by 1948 Du Bois had studied
enough Marx to have learned that "not merely the upper class but the mass of
men were the real people of the world. . . . out of the masses of men could come
overwhelming floods of ability and genius, if we freed men by plan and not by rare
chance" (R, 349). So, wishing to address problems—as noted above by Gordon
and Michael—with charismatic leaders with overactive egos, Du Bois attempted
to democratize the Talented Tenth, to reduce the narrow elitism and vanguard-
ism of his original program. They are still leaders and academics, but it will no
longer be acceptable for them to be concerned with themselves at the expense of
those they are working for or writing about. Nonetheless, Du Bois was not quite
as successful as his words might make it seem. In his own day, both Cooper
and Frazier had much to offer toward his ideas, and today James’ important
work might help to keep us ever vigilant against the shortcomings of Du Boisian
public intellectualism.

Although Du Bois’ printed words would seem to indicate concern about
inequality between the sexes—e.g., in "The Damnation of Women,” Du Bois
writes, “the future woman must have a life work and economic independence. She
must have knowledge. She must have the right of motherhood at her own dis-
cretion" (W, 953)—he participated in organizations such as the American Negro
Academy that excluded women and he rarely acknowledged the work of successful
and important women contemporaries. Joy James explains that Du Bois’ feminism
is troublesome because he takes all the credit for his ideas rather than acknowl-
dge the women, namely, Anna Julia Cooper, who influenced not only his femi-
nism but all his theorizing and activism. According to James, “while condemning
the oppression of African-American women, Du Bois ‘veiled’ the achievements of
women such as Cooper and Wells-Barnett from the political landscape. In his pro-
feminist politics, he obscured black women’s radical agency in black women’s intel-
lectualism.”11 Cooper, too, was concerned with Washington’s methods and used
both her voice and pen to make clear exactly what troubled her. In fact, her argu-
ments in *A Voice from the South* not only predate Du Bois’ similar and somewhat
less nuanced claims, but they even predate Washington's own "Atlanta Exposition
Address.” She knew what the Tuskegee machine was about and was hard at work
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to counteract its ill effects. Sadly, not only has Cooper’s voice been muffled in the present, with much more attention being paid to the men, her own career suffered much from the increasing devotion many showed to vocational training and the sexist expectations of women’s roles in society. Cooper lost her job as principal of the M Street School due in part to her insistence on emphasizing college preparatory work for qualified students and due also in part to unfounded gossip stirring from judgmental people concerned with a single (widowed) woman working in such an influential position.

E. Franklin Frazier was also concerned about how much intellectual and political work was spent serving personal interests and careers rather than serving the greater good of the community. Arguing not only that too many African-American intellectuals have ignored the “fundamental fact of what slavery has done to the Negro or the group which is called Negroes in the United States” but also that the emergence of the educated and intellectual class was “the result of white American philanthropy . . . [and] are still largely dependent upon the white community” (58–59), Frazier calls for a rejection of an assimilationist model of fighting oppression. Although in “The Failure of the Negro Intellectual” Frazier notes the importance of Du Bois and even accuses rising black intellectuals of the 60s of running away from Du Bois as they run away from their black heritage in favor of accommodating whites (64), in the 1930s Frazier was often concerned that Du Bois was an elite and quasi-aristocrat who romanticized and showed no real sympathy for the common people under the slogan of the Talented Tenth, whose advocacy of economic cooperation was an intellectually bankrupt spawn of Booker T. Washington’s philosophy, and whose *Black Reconstruction* revealed an old man’s pitiful attempt to preserve liberalism in the guise of revolutionary Marxism.

Although Mio Matsumoto, in the same essay, explains how Du Bois and Frazier come to something akin to a friendly reconciliation in the end, and “in solidarity with independent Africa and Du Bois” Frazier donated his library to the University of Ghana (68), his early criticisms of Du Bois are important considerations for keeping a check on the elitist and egoist tendencies in intellectual activism.

The dangers of elitism are also a central concern in Joy James’ *Transcending the Talented Tenth: Black Leaders and American Intellectuals*, which is an invaluable resource for examining the role of the black public intellectual past, present, and future. As the title alludes, James explains that “it took W. E. B. Du Bois nearly half a century to democratize the Talented Tenth,” even if he did not do so thoroughly enough because “Despite the presence of women, this construction of black agency remained elitist and undermined democratic leadership. Intraracial inequality was endemic to this concept of race leadership” (TTT, 19). Even if Du Bois himself was not entirely successful in shaking off his own elitism, James is also quite concerned with how many subsequent activists and intellectuals are entirely indebted to his earlier and most elitist 1903 formulation and refuse to acknowledge or accept the 1948 radicalized formulation. She writes
Today many references to and representations of Du Bois disregard his evolving radicalization of agency. Some of the “most unlikely places” for a Talented Tenth fetish are located in the literature of cultural studies, critical race theory, feminism, black postmodernism, and Afrocentrism. Such writing excises Du Bois’s democratic radicalism and his conviction that those with the least to lose, and therefore the most to gain, are most likely to provide exemplary leadership in liberation struggles (TTT, 28).

In that spirit of more thoroughly democratizing public intellectuals James is harsh in her criticism of both West and hooks for so closely associating intellectuals with academics. She explains, “when one renders black intellectualism synonymous with black academics, the intelligentsia increasingly distances from past and present material, democratic struggles for social justice” (TTT, 156). She insists on intellectuals coming from outside the academy, from the community, so that all ranges of important questions can be addressed:

Questions aside from bread and land—for instance, political and cultural independence, spiritual renewal, sexual, ethnic, and religious freedom—preoccupy us as well. But physical sustenance or survival remains the sine qua non that only propertied elites may take for granted. . . . In our work for these as well as social and political freedoms, for lives with dignity and spirit, our life stories shall reflect, democratize, and radicalize an agency that transcends the limitations of the Talented Tenth (TTT, 189).

It is the call to democratize and to always be mindful of and open to the voices and needs of the masses that motivates James to continue to refine her definition of a good public intellectual. She is pleased with Du Bois’ growth but disappointed both that it came so late and that it is still not radical enough. An intellectual, for James, must remain true to his or her purpose of liberation at its most fundamental level. Just as in her book on intellectuals, James ends one important anthology of Fanon studies by reminding us that intellectuals working for liberation must always keep in mind just what is at stake and what dangers we face. In “‘Bread and Land’: Frantz Fanon’s ‘Native Intellectual,’” James reminds us that Fanon is always “reminding intellectuals that radical libatory theory serves those lacking sufficient land and bread. . . . Fanon warns us not only of intellectual concealment, but against an intellectualism that distances itself from the specificity of justice struggles in order to offer truncated concepts of liberation and a myopic view of repression.”15 When in 2004 Richard Philcox translated The Wretched of the Earth, and it is generally considered a much improved translation that better represents both the ideas and the tone of Fanon’s work, he changed the “native intellectual” to the “colonized intellectual.” This better captures the conditions of indoctrination by and assimilation into white society and academia that Fanon is arguing must be rejected. For anything like successful decolonization, the intellec-
tual must realize his or her dependency on the colonizer, reject the colonial agenda, and build a new solidarity with the masses, walking a fine line between fully two-sided conversations and becoming an uncritical mouthpiece of the people. This repeats Frazier’s anger toward African-American intellectuals whose disconnection from the legacy of slavery leaves too much room for pandering to whites as well as highlights the difficulty and yet the need to find that balance between becoming an elitist and refusing to be a leader at all.

Despite the fact that many (white) academics are still debating about the possibility of intellectuals continuing to exist in the future given the overly professionalized state of academia, we can distill some commonality amongst all these notions of what makes for a public intellectual. A public intellectual is at the very least a person who engages ideas about the meaning, purpose, and value of life in a way accessible to the general public, i.e., not limited to professional academic work for an exclusively academic audience. Public intellectuals are often academics who use their specialized field—and any field will do, from philosophy, sociology, and history, to economics and political science, to biology and physics—to find better ways of living and make them more possible, even more probable. Still, we often find public intellectuals as independent writers, artists, and politicians. These individuals address particular problems for particular communities as well as for all of humanity. The content and the mode for public intellectualizing depends on the problem(s) and community(ies) being addressed, as well as on the strengths, skills, and interests of the intellectual. In fact, diversity of modes is beneficial to successfully reaching the entire public with the diversity of wants and interests of its members. This necessitates that at least one norm govern public intellectuals’ work, especially when it is focused on only a segment of the human population: the prescriptions and expectations for local betterment must never exclude or overrule another group or the whole of humanity; your own freedom cannot come at the expense of another’s.

Anna Julia Cooper

Anna Julia Cooper was born without record during slavery, so the best estimate of her birthday, given that she knew the month and day and claimed to be 19 when applying for a marriage license in 1877, is August 10, 1858. She died on February 27, 1964. Cooper dedicated her 105 years of life to activism on behalf of those who were not a part of a political system, especially black women. Through education, Cooper believed that everyone could have opportunities for a better future, or even more to the point, that without education, we have very little hope for success and happiness. Beginning her career while still in grammar school, Cooper assisted her teacher with the other students, and she continued as a formal educator or administrator until her retirement in her 80s. Cooper studied and taught a wide range of subjects, from math and science, to classical and modern languages and literature, to sociology and social change. In addition to her many years as a high school and university teacher, her (contentious) tenure as principal of M Street School, and her time as president of Frelinghuysen University, Cooper was also a prolific speaker and writer.
Her speaking career began with a then highly controversial speech on the role of black women in racial and social progress at a Convocation of Clergy at the Protestant Episcopal Church in 1886, when she was just 28. This speech, “Womanhood: A Vital Element in the Regeneration and Progress of a Race,” became the first full chapter of *A Voice from the South*. That text, which began her public writing career with its publication in 1892, was a collection of previously given speeches and newly written essays explaining the special role black women must play in progress. Claiming “that the position of woman in society determines the vital elements of its regeneration and progress” (AJC, 59) because “a stream cannot rise higher than its source” (AJC, 63), she writes a scathing attack on both black men and white women for understanding and not acknowledging that they, respectively, cannot represent all Negroes or all women. Thus her famous dictate, in response to Martin Delany’s similar claim: “Only the BLACK WOMAN can say ‘when and where I enter, in the quiet undisputed dignity of my womanhood, without violence and without suing or special patronage then and there the whole Negro race enters with me’” (AJC, 63). Hoping to get to the heart of the matter of sexist, undemocratic practices within black public intellectualism, Cooper begins her career demanding more from the men whose exclusionary elitism runs counter to their own goals of liberation. Much of her work will focus on transforming intellectual attitudes and practices so that they are actually helpful to all African Americans.

In 1892, Cooper delivered another important address to the World’s Congress of Representative Women at the Columbian (Chicago) World’s Fair. After white women protested the exclusion of women from the program, black women had to further protest so that they, too, could be included. Once there, Cooper spoke of “The Intellectual Progress of the Colored Women in the United States Since the Emancipation Proclamation: A Response to Fannie Barrier Williams,” in which she bolstered Williams’ claims regarding the moral and intellectual value of black women in American life. Once again, Cooper was unwilling to be idle or silent in the face of racism and sexism.

In addition to these and other influential speeches, Cooper also regularly published essays and articles in newspapers and magazines, including a few essays in *The Crisis* in the 1930s after having retired from full-time teaching. She was also active in the Social Settlements and Club movements. A long-time trustee and program supervisor of the Colored Settlement House in Washington, D.C., Cooper published a brief history of the movement in the Oberlin College alumni journal in 1913 and made reprints herself to distribute and elicit support for the movement. She also co-founded the Colored Women’s League in D.C. and was very active in the YWCA.

Cooper did not confine her efforts to helping black women in America; her work took her across the globe to confront oppression everywhere. At the end of her Columbian Expo address, she explains that the “colored woman feels that woman’s cause is one and universal . . . not till the universal title of humanity to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness is conceded to be inalienable to all; not till then is woman’s lesson taught and woman’s cause won— . . . the cause of every
man and of every woman who has writhed silently under a mighty wrong” (AJC, 205). She attended the Pan African Congress in London in 1900, and in 1925, at the age of 66, she successfully defended her Ph.D. thesis at the Sorbonne in Paris, on the attitude of the French toward slavery during the French Revolution. Her 1917 translation, from old French to new French, of Le Pelerinage de Charlemagne was published in Paris and remained the definitive source for decades.

Not only are her career, speeches, and publications a testament to her ideals, her home life shows just how committed she was to living out those ideals. Widowed after two years of marriage, at only 21 years old, Cooper never remarried and never had children of her own. Just as it should be according to her writings, her home was, nonetheless, always the center of her life. She writes:

A stream cannot rise higher than its source. 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 (AJC, 63).

She took in two foster children and later five orphans. Her door was always open to friends, and she also ran a night school for poor students out of her living room. Her close circle of friends and many intellectuals and artists living in and traveling through D.C. were invited to “The Art Club,” Friday evening gatherings for discussion organized around Cooper’s “spirit driven by the inner spur and need for life—the more abundant life” (AJC, 313). As Charles Lemert explains “everything she did seemed always to issue from or return to her homes. Nothing better expresses Cooper’s sense of her life’s work than the ways she used and effectively redefined her home . . . a figurative as well as literal hearth of domestic warmth for a cosmopolitan life of many accomplishments” (AJC, 7–8). Much of this biographical information helps to draw attention to the ways that Cooper focused her attention on others much more than herself, generating not a cult of personality around herself but integrating an activism into her daily life. She opened her home up not only to well-known and influential people but also to those in need. Her life is itself an example of her ideas in practice; she attests to the possibility of living up to a standard of radical democratic black public intellectualism.

At the base of her ideas and practices is a sense of human health and worth. To understand both the methods and goals of her works, we must look at attempts to articulate human dignity for African Americans in the face of racism and oppression. This reconsideration of worth is carefully worked out in a chapter of A Voice from the South entitled “What Are We Worth?” Published in 1892, “What Are We Worth?” is an effort to explain how and why we can go on in this rough world. Lewis Gordon explains that, with gusto and nuance, “she addresses head-on the implications of demanding a race of people to justify their right to exist.” During the time Cooper is writing A Voice From the South, Jim Crow is the law of the South. Reconstruction has failed. As people are realizing the severe negative social effects of capitalism, labor movements are on the rise, and there is increasing black migration to Northern cities where work is tough and pays little but is at least
available and getting better through unionization. Given the bleak state of Southern
blacks, both urban and rural, Cooper argues that “Carnegie’s men at Homestead,
for instance, were among the best paid workmen in the country . . . If the North-
ern laboring man has not become a tyrant, I would like to know what tyranny is”
(AJC, 172). In the South, men cannot find work; and if they do, they labor all day
for wages that cannot shelter, feed, and clothe themselves, let alone their families.20
Showing that (and how) Negroes have worth is a life and death issue.

Cooper explains that, in considering worth, one must be practical and, to con-
tinue her metaphor, read the balance sheet fairly: “sentiment and cant, then, both
being ruled out, let us try to study our subject as the world finally reckons it—
not certain crevices and crannies of the earth, but the cool, practical, business-like
world” (AJC, 163). Sentiments, both adverse and favorable, must be ruled out so
that worth is assessed without prejudice or emotional entanglements. Free to look
fairly, we consider the material, the labor, and the waste in our calculations of con-
sumption and production.

First, one considers the material. When considering a person, the material is
more than just the body; it is also the character. And, since no human “personal-
ity dates its origin from its birthday” (AJC, 164), one must consider the family and
community in which the person was raised, or “find out the nature of the soil in
which it has been forming and growing” (AJC, 164). Families can assist us, but
they can also work against us. We can start our lives with gifts and assistance from
families. We can also start out our lives with debt, encumbered by property that
needs tending or other responsibilities.

In terms of African Americans, Cooper explains that, “there is no doubt that
the past two hundred and fifty years of working up the material we now inherit,
has depreciated rather than enhanced its value . . . [And, so] a man is to be praised
primarily not for having inherited fine tools and faultless materials but for making
the most of the stuff he has, and doing his best in spite of disadvantages and poor
material” (AJC, 166). The conditions and residual effects of slavery present signifi-
cant barriers to having a fair chance in life. Even the material that African Ameri-
cans start with has had to endure hundreds of years of hard labor, physical abuse,
disconnection from cultural and ancestral roots, and prohibitions to forming and
maintaining families and communities. Given such a history, that African Ameri-
cans even survived needs to be acknowledged as a great achievement. What they
have managed to make of themselves and give to the world in abundance is—even
given Cooper’s efforts to do just this—incalculably worthy of respect and praise.

Explaining that labor—changing something raw into something useful—
makes material valuable, Cooper goes on to explain and evaluate the labor that
goes into turning a baby into a worthwhile adult. The long infancy and childhood,
and the extreme dependency of human children on their parents and larger com-

munity, adds up to serious expense; however, the efforts put into raising them care-
fully are necessary. The long and tedious labor is the only way to make worthy
humans who can eventually produce amazing things and more than offset those
consumption costs. Labor comes in the form of education: education is the key to
making a person. Education is
the working up of all this raw material and fitting it into the world’s work to supply the world’s need—the manufacture of men and women for the markets of the world. . . . Education, then, is the safest and richest investment possible to man. It pays the largest dividends and gives the grandest possible product to the world—a man. The demand is always greater than the supply—and the world pays well for what it prizes (AJC, 168).

So individuals and communities need to educate the young, from childhood through higher education.21 Maybe not everyone given a good education will continue on to do intellectual work on behalf of others, but one cannot much hope to do such work without some education.

Cooper does something very interesting and important in valuing labor. She uses the term “labor” in two ways: first, as the general working of raw material, and, second, as the more specific term for a job that is manual. Making use of this double entendre, Cooper demands a revaluation of manual labor in spite of its connections to slavery. On this point, she actually has much in common with Booker T. Washington who, in his “Atlanta Exposition Address,” is also trying to stress the value of labor, especially paid labor, that too many African Americans are, to their own detriment, eschewing in the post-Bellum South hoping to establish their worth on other terms more related to their minds rather than their bodies. Cooper insists that the value of a classical education is not diminished by simultaneously valuing industrial and technical education; however, the reverse is a problem—and it is here that she parts ways with Washington, who stresses vocational training alone. She explains that

industrial education has been hitherto neglected or despised among us, due, I think, as I have said elsewhere, to two causes: first, a mistaken estimate of labor arising from its association with slavery and from it having been despised by the only class in the South thought worthy of imitation; and secondly, the fact that the Negro’s ability to work had never been called into question, while his ability to learn Latin and construe Greek syntax needed to be proved to sneering critics (AJC, 175).

Labor has been devalued by African Americans because it is the work that—unlike reading and writing and other mental or spiritual endeavors—no one doubted they could do and that was forced from them under duress and without reward; it is often the work of animals or machines rather than of human minds and spirits. However, taking pride—and profit—from the industrial and technical skills mastered over the many years of chattel training are essential to economic and social uplift. Cooper writes, “Work must first create wealth, and wealth leisure, before the untrammeled intellect of the Negro, or any race, can truly vindicate its capabilities” (AJC, 176). Nonetheless, unlike Washington, Cooper values more than just technical and industrial education; she also values studying the classics and a wide
variety of disciplines that are seemingly impractical but are essential for developing an entire person. Education is to "train our people to think, which will give them the power of appreciation and make them righteous" (AJC, 251). Coming out of slavery and continued oppression, African Americans must prove to themselves, as much as to white folks, that they have keen minds; further, they must do so without internalizing the idea that their labor is worthless. Black minds and bodies both will be cherished, especially when taken together, when the right person is matched to his or her right job and those jobs correlate to the balanced needs of the community. Here we can get a glimpse of the authenticity of Cooper's anti-elitism in that she does not overvalue classical training nor undervalue technical training but wants everyone to have open possibilities to pursue what best suits them.

The practical attempt to rigorously calculate the worth of a person and a people is not quite as simple as Cooper seems to make it out to be at the beginning of the essay. She is not working with a strict materialism where all material and labor can be easily quantified, although she is insisting on an honest foundation in the material world, so one must consider costs and contributions not monetary. When describing some of the things that one can be made into and that one can produce, Cooper shows just how carefully she considers all that people can offer the world. From the physical labor of farming and brick-making, to the artistic contributions of poets and sculptors, to the political offerings of soldiers and statesmen, figuring the balance sheet is both more complicated and more enjoyable than we can imagine. "For after all, the highest gifts are not measurable in dollars and cents" (AJC, 181). She explains that there is a class of "men who have taken of the world's bread and paid for it in immortal thoughts, invaluable inventions, new facilities, heroic deeds of loving self-sacrifice; men who dignify the world for their having lived in it and to whom the world will ever bow in grateful worship as its heroes and benefactors" (AJC, 182). Sure, this might make being certain that we are making the calculation without sentiment or cant less clear, but Cooper actually does not think it all that difficult to tell good people and good contributors. Recognizing artists and heroes is not too hard, nor is figuring the significance and importance of their productions for the world.

The last consideration to be figured on the balance sheet is the "necessary waste," or that which is lost in making productive people because "the number spoiled in the making necessarily adds to the cost of those who survive" (AJC, 171). Here Cooper is referring to the people that die before adulthood as well as those who succumb to crime or insanity. This is especially relevant for measuring the worth of African Americans because "they tell us that the waste of material is greater in making colored men and women than in the case of others—that a larger percentage of our children die under twenty-one years of age, especially in large cities, and that a larger number who reach that age and beyond, are to be classed among the world's invalids and paupers" (AJC, 170). What is really important here is that Cooper is insisting that each person is not responsible only for him/herself. The worth of any and every individual is calculated along with the worth of everyone else, especially those of the same family and race. Cooper reminds us that "no man can dissociate himself from his kind." . It is God's own precaution to
temper our self-seeking by binding our sympathies and interests indissolubly with the helpless and the wretched” (A/JC, 171). So, everyone must devote their labor to improving the situations of the worst off: the poor, the starving, the homeless, the sick all need to be cared for and given the chance for a productive life if any of our lives are to have any worth.

One part of adjusting the balance sheet to increase worth would be to decrease necessary waste. A healthy society is one with the least possible necessary waste. One way to misunderstand Cooper would be to attempt to reduce that waste simply by eliminating the weak that drain the community bank. However, we cannot read Cooper as advocating some eugenics program. She is insisting on reducing the waste, but she contends that we must do so by making serious efforts to make every person worthy and thus make every kind worthy. This revaluation of worth is precisely organized to forestall arguments about the worthlessness of African Americans such that all persons and groups have or can make themselves worthy. Cooper is refusing to accommodate white norms of worthiness and white views of black worthlessness especially. She refuses to stand for the continuation of Negroes being undervalued and demoralized by accepting narrow, exclusionary standards. For humanity to have worth, every nation, every race, every person must have worth; and we need to create a society and government where it is possible for everyone to be worthwhile. This call to each of us to be accountable to those who cannot become producers as well as to be accountable to a society that works to make more and better opportunities for more people to actually become producers is another explicitly anti-elitist move. If you choose to become an activist or an educator, then you must work for the sake of those whom you serve lest you be not actually producing but only consuming and using up good people in the process of fulfilling your own career goals. Whether or not this is an explicitly African worldview, as Banks argues, I cannot say. Cooper gives us an argument for why and how to live one’s life in service to others, which is a central tenet to being a public intellectual, insisting that we consume less and produce more, change the world for the better.

Cooper’s standard for worth is quite unlike the more common measure of worth in terms of what assets you have such as cash, investments, and property. And it is a departure from counteracting the latter position with measuring worth on more spiritual terms such as love, family, friends, and happiness. Cooper uses the same economic terms to shift the discussion of worth from having to doing. She measures worth in terms of the relation between consumption and production. Consumption is measured in terms of material stuff, from cotton to art, as well as in service to the community, such as by military service. If you consume as much as you produce, then you are nil—you have no effect on the world and serve no purpose, but you also cost nothing. If you consume more than you produce, then you are a blight on the world. If you produce more than you consume, then your worth can begin to be measured according to those excessive productions. By also taking consideration of one’s starting point, Cooper first enters into the calculations of consumption and production whether or not one begins with a balance or a deficit. People then begin accruing a deficit because children consume much
while producing nothing, or almost nothing. Finally, she takes account of whether or not one has to fight against circumstances such as slavery that make producing even enough to stay alive incredibly difficult. So, in the end, the slave that succeeds in actually producing anything positive will likely have more worth than the heir to a fortune who consumes very little. As well, worth is measured in communities and kinds, not solely in individuals. What a person and a community are worth is a function of what they produce for the world less what they take from the world. To be worthy, one must take as little as possible while offering as much as possible. “Each can give something . . . we can at least give ourselves” (AJC, 186).

What Are Public Intellectuals Worth?

As I explained above, public intellectuals work with a goal of social improvement, at least for some segment of humanity. In order to accomplish such a goal, we need a standard for determining what is lacking and when we have succeeded. I take Cooper to be a paragon public intellectual, not only because of the example of her life, but because her writings, particularly “What Are We Worth?”, give us the ideals and the methods through which we can realize for ourselves such a career that can attempt to help make the world better. The example of her life shows us that we can integrate the life of the mind and on-the-ground activism. Cooper was a feminist fighting for civil rights. She worked for fair wages and posed serious challenges to exploitation from capitalist enterprises. Although she was focused on the specific problems facing the American South, Cooper also turned her attention to the international scene, insisting on basic rights for everyone, everywhere. She was an educator and a foster mother. She advocated for Social Settlements. She also earned a Ph.D. and spent her life researching and writing academic papers.

Although not as well-known or widely received in her own day as contemporaries and former Oberlin colleagues Mary Church Terrell or Ida B. Wells-Barnett (or the men of the day like Du Bois and Washington), Cooper was a significant voice of her time and has had lasting influence in the 44 years since her death. She was something of a solitary woman, and while she regularly interacted with Du Bois and Terrell—in person and ideas—they rarely returned the favor in print. Du Bois did publish some of Cooper’s submissions to The Crisis and she served alongside Terrell as a trustee of the Settlement House. In fact, Cooper and Terrell lived almost parallel lives but their stations in life were not the same, as Terrell was born and married into economic comfort while Cooper was early widowed and had to work to pay her own way through life. Content in her solitary life, dedicated to teaching and writing and working with the poor, Cooper falls prey to few, if any, of the ego traps of public intellectualism addressed above. She is “guided by a sense of vocation and public responsibility” rather than by the need for praise, and her influence has been increasing over time rather than fading or turning into mere historical markers of the path we followed to get where we are now. Cooper “virtually alone, gave precise and unflinching voice to the theoretical attitude [of black feminism] that today is very well known. . . . Though today Sojourner Truth’s
ideas are well understood, Cooper’s Voice from the South was the first systematic working out of the insistence that no one social category can capture the reality of the colored woman” (AJC, 14). In addition to having a street in D.C.’s LeDroit Park neighborhood named for her, we are regularly reminded of Cooper’s words. They now appear on pages 26 through 27 of all U.S. passports and are found in many titles and subtitles to influential books on African American women writers, including Paula Giddings’ When and Where I Enter.

Cooper’s method for measuring worth shows us that her intellectualism and her activism are not separable parts of her identity but are one whole way of being and doing in the world. Evaluating the health and worth of a person, a community, and humanity can serve all public intellectuals. It requires us to focus on outcomes, to make sure that our ideals can be and are being realized. It is practical and concrete but not at the expense of general theoretical questions. Ideals of a healthy society, concepts of justice, theories of human personhood and development are all fair and necessary domain for a good intellectual, as long as they are grounded in and actualized in service to living people. Cooper’s notion of worth demands focus on individuals as well as on groups; we must understand that we need to always address both to work at betterment for either. Cooper shows us that a healthy community must consider all of its members, as well as consider who counts as a member. A healthy community is always striving for more, not more stuff but more worth, more purpose and meaning, always striving to do better and give more back to the world. To be worthy, we can take only a little, need to give a lot, and must always consider the context.

Cooper chooses her segment of humanity—black women—for their own needs as well as for the needs of all. She works from the position of the least well off to raise the entire race and all people. None of what she expects or prescribes excludes or undermines black men or non-black people (except in terms of the racist and unjust ideas and policies that do not themselves meet any standard for legitimate intellectual activity, public or private). She allows for and makes use of a plethora of contents and modes, from pedagogy to politics to poetry and through writing, speaking, and teaching. She embodies that healthier balance of our physical and mental abilities. Using this standard, we can assess other public intellectuals, namely, some of those already mentioned. This standard is not too strict or rigid, but then I think that is part of its value. From Du Bois through West and hooks, and on up to both James and Gordon, all seem equally deserving of the title “public intellectual.” Using this standard, we can also assess our own practices both inside and outside the academy and professional institutions. We can caution ourselves and one another against the dangers of elitism, of putting our careers far ahead of our philosophical and political commitments, our students, and our communities. We can caution ourselves and one another about the dangers of seeking popularity rather than publicity, of being trendy rather than right.

Cooper ends “What Are We Worth?” by turning her standard onto American political institutions and demanding that we measure the worth of a people and a community by what it produces—not what it claims it can, or hopes it will, or insists it must produce, but what it actually produces. This is especially relevant
to America because our founding ideals and goals are so far from our actual existence. So, measuring accomplishments, rather than measuring ideals, reveals something important for all of us but especially for African Americans who have not been allowed to participate fairly and fully in the government that claims that all men are created equal.

I care not for the theoretical symmetry and impregnable logic of your moral code, I care not for the hoary respectability and traditional mysticisms of your theological institutions, I care not for the beauty and solemnity of your rituals and religious ceremonies, I care not even for the reasonableness and unimpeachable fairness of your social ethics,—if it does not turn out better, noble, truer men and women,—if it does not add to the world's stock of valuable souls,—if it does not give us a sounder, healthier, more reliable product from this great factory of men—I will have none of it. I shall not try to test your logic, but weigh your results—and that test is the measure of the stature of the fullness of a man (AJC, 187).

This could look like an anti-intellectual move, to only care about outcomes, not ideals. But what it is really getting at is James’ assessment of what an intellectual must both be and do, that intellectuals must always be working for land and bread, for the lost and starving, the ignored, exploited, and oppressed. Those ideals are not at all irrelevant. But if people are starving or crime rates are skyrocketing, then what purpose are those ideals? We need ideals that can be achieved and lived. We need healthy people to establish and enact those ideals that we are constantly checking in our intellectual work.

Notes


16. The following is a short list of some persons commonly considered public intellectuals, past and present. Whether or not each adheres to my definition and standards will not be determined in this paper but is up for consideration. I just want to show the diversity of areas and interests of public intellectuals. James Baldwin, Ruth Benedict, Pierre Bourdieu, Noam Chomsky, Richard Dawkins, E. L. Doctorow, Ralph Ellison, Stanley Fish, Milton Friedman, Stephan Jay Gould, Andrew Greeley, Jurgen Habermas, Vaclav Havel, Henry Kissenger, Richard Lewontin, Walter Lippman, Toni Morrison, V. S. Naipaul, Ezra Pound, Colin Powell, Ayn Rand, Condoleezza Rice, Jeffrey Sachs, Carl Sagan, Edward Said, Jean Paul Sartre, Amartya Sen, Edward Shils, Susan Sontag, Gloria Steinem, Gore Vidal, Patricia Williams, E. O. Wilson, Howard Zinn.

17. All biographical information is taken from Charles Lemert’s “Anna Julia Cooper: the Colored Woman’s Office” as well as “The Life of Anna Julia Cooper: A Chronology,” in *The Voice of Anna Julia Cooper*, eds. Charles Lemert and Esme Bhan (Rowman & Littlefield: Lanham, MD, 1998). All citations of Cooper’s work are also taken from this latter collection; it is henceforth cited as AJC.

18. Although I see some sex-positive feminist concerns about some of Cooper’s writings, I tend to reject the assertion that she embodied the nineteenth-century Cult of True Womanhood. I prefer to read her more generously as being ahead of her time in claiming that the personal is the political and that an inappropriate public-private distinction is more hurtful than helpful to society in general and women in particular.


20. Cooper is not opposed to unionization; however, when it serves only to legitimize a sense of human worth as coming from participation in capitalist acquisition of money and goods instead of making life actually better for workers and making labor worthwhile and meaningful, then she is not supportive of it.
21. Interestingly, this is not just a trope used for the purposes of one essay. In an essay “On Education,” probably written in the 1930s, some 40 years after “What Are We Worth?”, Cooper writes “education has been well defined as the building up of a man, the whole man; which, I take it, implies putting your crude material through whatever processes insure the highest return of the entire product at its best” (A/C, 249).

22. Just what constitutes a “kind” here is not directly stated; however, I think it is reasonable to interpret Cooper to use the term first to refer to the Negro race, that is the group of people she has been writing about in the entire piece. Still, I think it is also fair to interpret her as suggesting that we all need to be responsible for everyone, that “kind” could mean “humankind.” Although this is an important discussion to elaborate elsewhere, I think the general point that worth is not measured individually is enough for this project.

23. I think this is also the kind of response to be given to someone who reads Cooper’s argument as unsympathetic to persons with disabilities. There are disabilities that would make it seem entirely impossible to contribute more than one takes. However, I would like to interpret Cooper very generously and imagine that although she is not addressing the problem directly, there is no reason to see her not having an answer already in these pages. Everyone matters, and no one is to be eliminated because he or she is not contributing. Figuring the worth of persons with disabilities would necessitate factoring in the specific disabilities in a fair way. Expectations of consumption and production must be relative to each individual and group. I think Cooper’s notion of worth is more congenial to disability studies than any I have seen before.

24. I find nothing coincidental that public intellectualism began in resistance to anti-Semitism and that it continues today, in the face of claims to the contrary, in resistance to racism, sexism, and the exploitation of other people on the margins of society and the academy.