

The Black Woman: Who Represents Her?

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(1980)

IN 1892, IN HER BOOK, *A Voice from the South*, Anna Julia Cooper, a former slave, and the second female school principal in Washington, D.C., wrote:

A colored woman of today occupies . . . a unique position in this country . . . [T]he woman of today finds herself in the presence of responsibility which ramify through the profoundest and most varied interest of her country and her race . . . No plan for renovating society, no scheme for purifying politics, no reform in church or in state, no moral, social, or economic question, no movement upward or downward in the human plan is lost on her.¹

Ms. Cooper saw the black woman . . . “at the gateway of [a] new era of American civilization,” having the opportunity to wield her influence on the future social, economic, and moral achievements of the race, and to see the possibilities before it.² She was concerned that Black women be ready for this role. She wrote:

What a responsibility then to have the sole management of the primal lights and shadows! Such is the colored woman's office. She must stamp weal or woe on the coming history of this people. May she see her opportunity and vindicate her high prerogative.³

Remarks before the 1980 Annual Meeting of Zeta Phi Beta Sorority.

1. ANNA J. COOPER, *A VOICE FROM THE SOUTH* 134, 142–43 (Xenia, Ohio, The Aldine Printing House 1892).

2. *Id.* at 143.

3. *Id.* at 145.

Though Anna Julia Cooper saw the Black woman's role as clear in 1892, historically, the Black woman has had an ambiguous role in American society. Because we are women, white society has considered us less of a threat than the Black man. Accordingly, white society allowed us, sometimes forcing us, into service in the white family; raising their children, nursing their sick, and running the white home. The Black woman's intimate contact with white people often made her the interpreter and intermediary of the white culture in the Black home. At the same time the Black woman was, and still is, working very closely with the Black man to keep the Black family together and assure the survival of the Black community. This dual role that the Black woman has played since slavery, is fraught with conflict, and has imposed great tensions on her.

W. E. B. Du Bois, in his book *The Souls of Black Folk*, described another conflict to which all Blacks are subject, including the Black woman. He wrote:

[T]he Negro is a sort of seventh son, born with a veil, and gifted with second-sight in this American world,—a world which yields him no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world. It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's self by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his twoness,—an American, a Negro; two souls; two thoughts; two unreconciled strivings, two warring ideals in one dark body whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder.⁴

Du Bois wrote this passage in 1903. Many years have passed, and many changes have occurred in our society with respect to Black conditions, but who among us here can say that she has never experienced this *double consciousness* . . . In modern times, the Black woman still must contend with this dual consciousness . . . Let me just note that while called by other names, this same concept has been written about by many Black historians, writers, and psychologists . . . Today this dualism has reached a new peak for the Black woman, because of the enormous pressure that the women's movement in general has placed on her. Joyce Ladner has written,

Many Black women who have traditionally accepted the white models of femininity are now rejecting them for the same general reasons that I have proposed we should reject the white middle class life style. Black women in this society are the only ethnic or racial group which has had the opportunity to be women. By this I simply mean that much of the current fo-

4. W.E.B. DU BOIS, *THE SOULS OF BLACK FOLK* 45 (New York, New American Library 1969) (emphasis added).

cus on being liberated from the constraints and protectiveness of the society which is proposed by women's liberation groups has never applied to Black women, and in that sense, we have always been "free," and able to develop as individuals even under the most harsh circumstances. This freedom, as well as the tremendous hardships from which Black women suffered, allowed for the development of a female personality that is rarely described in the scholarly journals for its obstinate strength and ability to survive. Neither is its peculiar humanistic character and quiet courage viewed as the epitome of what the American model of femininity should be.⁵

You and I know that the Black woman suffers from two handicaps in this country—that of being Black and of being female. This would seem to indicate that we ought to be very active in the women's liberation movements. Yet, the number of Black women active in the movement have been small, and even among some of those there is not total agreement with all of the goals of the movement. Some have said that it is difficult to find a truly total Black feminist. Why is this? Is it that the problems which the women's liberation movement attempts to address are less relevant to the Black woman? Are the problems of white middle class women, basically the leaders of the feminist movement, different from those of Black women? . . .

Whether you agree with her or not, it is clear that Black women tend to view their problems larger than those of the women's movement. One characteristic of the women's liberation movement appears to be a battle between the sexes—a struggle for equalization of power in interpersonal relationships. Some would say that this is the kind of battle that Black folk can ill afford to engage in. There are too many other battles to be fought. Black women have not traditionally perceived their enemy to be Black men, but rather to be the forces in our society which tends to prevent the attainment of equal opportunity for Black men, women and children . . .

Given the status of Blacks and of Black women in particular, I want to turn to my concern for representation of the interest of Black women. Clearly, with the variety of problems which we need to work toward solving we need our interest to be strongly and aggressively represented in those forums where creative solutions and changes can be initiated. I am talking about such forums as our respective state and local governing bodies, the congress, The White House, relevant conferences and conventions, federal agencies, and state agencies. We need representation that can obtain access to and provide input into policy-making which will affect the Black community.

5. JOYCE LADNER, *TOMORROW'S TOMORROW: THE BLACK WOMAN* 280 (Garden City, N.Y., Doubleday 1972).

Although we have made significant gains in securing Black elected and appointed officials at both the local and national levels, the relative proportions of Black representatives in legislatures and the congress is still very small, thereby limiting the voting influence of these representatives. The same is true with respect to Black officials. Their influence on policies of any administration, also is limited.

Thus, there is a major role to be played by Black women's organizations to bring their influence to bear on issues, and on officials and politicians who will make the policy and legislative decisions on matters involving employment, education, housing, urban development, and other issues which directly impact on Black women, and on the Black community.

The history of the Black women's organization movement is a long one. Black women organized at first at the local level. During the Civil War, local Black women organizations performed many daring rescue feats supplying relief to the Black regiments and to freedmen. Local women clubs sprang up in cities and they began to exchange information and delegates and to form loose federations.

However, it was not until 1896 that any viable national organization of Black women was formed. Students of history know that after the Civil War lynching of Black men increased. In 1895, European countries began to protest such conduct. Part of this protest resulted from the speaking campaign abroad conducted by Ida Wells Barnett, an Afro-American woman whose speaking tour of England, aroused a great debate in that country over lynching and was the basis for the formation of a British anti-lynching society. The south was offended by this campaign, and in a widely circulated statement by the president of the Missouri Press Association to British Society it was stated, "The Negroes in this country were wholly devoid of morality, the women were prostitutes and all were natural thieves and liars."

We are told that as a result of this response, Black club women were determined to fight back. This statement by the Missouri Press Association promoted the convening of the First National Conference of Colored Women, which led to the formation of the National Association of Colored Women in 1896.

We know that the Black sororities were formed in the early 1900's, with Zeta Phi Beta being founded in 1920. We are all aware of various church women's groups that were formed in the first half of the 1900's as well as professional organizations. In 1935, Mary Macleod Bethune founded the National Council of Negro Women, an umbrella organization made up of some 26 Black women's organizations, and representing over 3 million Black women.

Too little tribute has been given to the role that Black women's organizations have played in the life of the Black community, or to the larger role they have played in this country. In summary they have:

- 1) Provided local community services, welfare and charitable assistance;
- 2) Been instrumental in providing training programs and/or making training information available to the Black community;
- 3) Fostered and facilitated higher educational goals and opportunities for Black youth, both male and female, through scholarship assistance, stay in school programs, and through local remedial education assistance;
- 4) Promoted Black cultural programs and artists, fostering the development of cultural pride on the part of all Blacks;
- 5) Played a significant role in voter registration of Blacks, and encouraged utilization of the vote as an effective instrument of change in this country;
- 6) Encouraged and assisted in the development of home ownership programs affordable by all income levels, and worked for adequate housing for the poor;
- 7) Raised funds and collected funds for hunger programs and implemented systems for distribution of such funds and food;
- 8) Lobbied, both local and state legislatures, as well as congress for legislation promoting the rights of minorities and women, as well as for legislation which would improve the quality of life for all Americans;
- 9) Provided a mechanism for fellowship among Black women and for socializing and sharing common goals and objectives; and finally, but certainly not least,
- 10) Provided a mechanism through which Black women could develop and exercise leadership skills, which have in a number of instances been translated and utilized in services beyond the organization of the Black community . . .

My own observations are that as Black women we need to make a greater commitment to our Black organizations. *Believe me politicians and policymakers are influenced by the pressures brought by numbers.* Our organizations provide us a means of collectively exercising the influence of our total membership on those who exercise power in our system. For some of us, it is the only way to be heard effectively. Yet, we have to understand that it takes more than just an organization to be effective. It takes leadership, resources, and the ability to gain access to the right sources, as well as the ability to form coalitions around issues, or problems. The issues are becoming more sophisticated, the stakes are higher, the competing interests larger . . . To represent us well, our Black organizations must devise means of finding out what it is we want to do, how we the membership stand on an issue . . .

Anna Julia Cooper believed in 1896 that the opportunities for us, as Black women, to make significant impact on how our lives and the lives of Black people are fashioned is there. We must determine that we are going to continue

to support our Black organizations, not just at the level of the past, but at an increased level. For those of us who may have been disenchanted because our leadership was not as active as we would like; or our programs are not ones we would choose, or for any other reason, we must not let this disenchantment turn us away from our organizations. If we believe in what we want, we must work within for change, while continuing our support.

This article was written by Soror Issie Lee Shelton Jenkins: Jenkins, I.L.S. (1998). "The Black Woman: Who Represents Her." In J.C. Smith, Jr. (Ed.), *Rebels in Law, Voices in History of Black Women Lawyers* (pp. 70-75). University of Michigan Press. It is out of this plight that Zeta Phi Beta Sorority was founded on January 16, 1920.

Zeta Phi Beta Sorority, Incorporated, founded January 16, 1920 at Howard University.

The Klan was very active during this period and the Harlem Renaissance was acknowledged as the first important movement of Black artists and writers in the U.S. This same year the Volstead Act became effective heralding the start of Prohibition and Tennessee delivered the crucial 36th ratification for the final adoption of the 19th amendment giving women the right to vote. The worst and longest economic recession to hit the U.S. would define the end of the decade-The Great Depression.

It was within this environment that five coeds envisioned a sorority which would directly affect positive change, chart a course of action for the 1920s and beyond, raise consciousness of their people, encourage the highest standards of scholastic achievement, and foster a greater sense of unity among its members. (2017) *Zeta Phi Beta Sorority, Incorporated, History*. Available at: <https://zphib1920.org/our-history/>.

Attachments: Photographs (3)

FOUNDERS' NAMES: **Arizona Cleaver Stemons, Pearl Anna Neal, Myrtle Tyler Faithful, Viola Tyler Goings, and Fannie Pettie Watts.**

1. Zeta Phi Beta Founders' Dinner
2. Zeta Phi Beta Founders
3. Zeta Phi Beta Founders' Vintage