

Challenging White-Centered Suffragism: Anna Julia Cooper's "The Woman versus the Indian" (1892)

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ABSTRACT: In "The Woman versus the Indian," Black intellectual and activist Anna Julia Cooper offers a complex and scathing critique of the pitfalls of white suffragism rooted in white-centered political conceptualizations and organizational practices. This essay explores the complex interlacing of images and the references to the historical context that form the core of Cooper's biting representations of white women's rights activism in the early 1890s. White suffragist Anna Howard Shaw's speech, which was delivered at the 1891 National American Woman Suffrage convention, is reversed, and subtly reworked by Cooper, who does not portray white women as the victims of injustice, but as complicit and complacent participants in white supremacy. Cooper calls for an intellectual restructuring of suffragism ideology away from white-centered identity and its pretense of universalism. She furthermore envisions the possibility of a real activism for justice from the perspective of Black women. In her essay, Cooper suggests a path for a true feminist and intersectional coalition. The following article thus contributes to the research conducted on the history of the women's suffrage movement by focusing on a Black woman's critical perspective on white women's ideologies and practices.

KEYWORDS: Anna Julia Cooper, Black intellectual tradition, suffragism, racial politics, white-supremacy, suffrage ideology, feminist critique, intersectionality

Introduction

The great burly black man, ignorant and gross and depraved, is allowed to vote; while the franchise is withheld from the intelligent and refined, the pure-minded and lofty souled white woman. Even the untamed and untamable Indian of the Prairie, who can answer nothing but 'ugh' to great economic and civic questions is thought by some worthy to wield the ballot which is still denied the Puritan maid and the first lady of Virginia. (Cooper 123)

This quotation at the end of Anna Julia Cooper's essay "Woman versus the Indian," which is part of her collection *A Voice from the South*, published in 1892, perfectly encapsulates the tone, the style, and the ideas of her sarcastic, vitriolic, scathing representation of white-centered suffragism, as seen from the perspective of "[t]he black woman [who] appreciates

the situation” (Cooper 84). The perfect mirror-like construction of Cooper’s first sentence in this passage highlights the ignorant simplicity of the opinion and discourse of white women rights’ activists, which is epitomized by a series of opposition of adjectives: “The great burly black man” contrasts with the “lofty souled white woman,” “ignorant” with “intelligent,” “gross” with “refined,” and “depraved” with the “pure-minded.” Cooper’s mordant portrayal of white suffragism and its racist worldview, as exemplified in this passage, is expressed through a biting rewriting of discourses produced by white suffragists and a condemnation of their social and political ideology and practices, within and outside their organizations. Indeed, this passage is in fact a pastiche of a speech that suffragist Anna Howard Shaw delivered at the 1891 National American Woman Suffrage Association (NAWSA) suffrage convention, entitled “Indians vs. Women,” in which Shaw recalled an interview she allegedly had in South Dakota:¹

“My dear sir, I would like to inquire the extent of your knowledge of political economy. I understand that the people of South Dakota are all required to have a thorough instruction in the underlying principles of government; now, my dear sir, can you tell me if you are well posted on all matters that enter into the politico-economic status of this new commonwealth in which you are seeking the right of franchise?”
The Indian blew a cloud of smoke and uttered but the single expression, “Ugh!” (“Women in Wyoming”).²

¹ Cooper writes that the speech was delivered at the National Council of Women, which began on February 22, 1891. The sessions lasted four days at Albaugh’s Opera House in Washington, D.C. The National American Woman’s Suffrage Association held its convention at the same place right after, as it “led its sessions February 26-March 1, occupying the same beautifully decorated opera house which had been filled for four days by audiences in attendance at the Council, who kept on coming, scarcely knowing the difference.” (*History of Woman Suffrage* 175). Shaw’s speech at the National Council of Women was entitled “God’s Women” (“Society News”). Anna Howard Shaw, whose reform roots were in abolition, became a licensed Methodist preacher in the early 1870s, and a full-time lecturer for temperance and suffrage in the 1880s. In 1890, she was appointed national lecturer of the NAWSA, vice-president in 1892, and president from 1904 to 1915. The NAWSA was formed in 1890 and was the result of a merger between two suffrage organizations, which had been created at the end of the 1860s after the split in the suffrage abolitionist coalition over the Fifteenth amendment and the rights to vote for African American men (Terborg-Penn 24-35).

² This quotation from Shaw’s speech is taken from a newspaper article. Shaw’s entire speech is difficult to locate, as *History of Woman Suffrage* just included a summary of it, written in reported speech (182-183). Yet all the sources point out the supposedly wit and satire of her speech, which is in fact constructed on a racist, ableist and classist contrast between the white women, who deserve the vote, and other undeserving people.

Such rewriting by Anna Julia Cooper sheds light on the seminal role of the Black woman's voice that stems from her unique social and political position, an idea which is clearly expressed in the title of the collection of essays, often described as "the first book-length example of Black feminist theory in the United States" (May, "Historicizing Intersectionality" 23).³ In this groundbreaking work, Cooper, who was born into slavery in the 1850s and became an erudite scholar, an activist, and an educator, shaped the Black woman's voice as a voice of dissent.⁴ It is altogether sharp, biting, and kaleidoscopic, as Cooper constantly shifted "analytic foci, rhetorical strategy, and narrative voice" (May, "Thinking from the Margins" 83).⁵ The essay under scrutiny, "Woman versus the Indian," is composite, even convoluted at times. It opens by mentioning Shaw's speech, moves on to narrate the story of the exclusion of a Black woman from a club, and considers the role of manners, the issue of travels, the Southern influence on U.S. history before going back to commenting on Shaw's speech.

Cooper's "The Woman versus the Indian" thus does not solely and specifically focus on the discrimination and disenfranchisement of Native Americans. Therefore, the present article will not concentrate on this issue in detail, but will explore how Cooper uses Shaw's address, "Indian vs. Women," to denounce white suffragism's racist theories and praxes. Indeed, as the title indicates, the figure of the Indian was a trope in white suffragists' discourse, which was mobilized to highlight how white women deserved the vote and thus revealed biased ideologies and practices in the women's suffrage movement.⁶ But Cooper refuted that divisive rhetoric, which made the oppressed compete for their rights, and its ideological

³ I chose to capitalize the term Black as Terborg-Penn did in her groundbreaking study of African American women in the suffrage movement. Kimberlé Crenshaw explained that she capitalized "Black" because "Blacks, like Asians, Latinos, and other 'minorities,' constitute a specific cultural group and, as such, require denotation of a proper noun," (1255n1).

⁴ In 1887, Anna Julia Cooper was recruited at the M. Street High School in Washington, D.C. She was involved in community activism and help found many organizations such as the Colored Women's League and the Colored Settlement House. She wrote in newspapers, published books, and spoke on the lecture circuit.

⁵ In this paper, the narrative voice in "Woman versus the Indian" is often described as if it were Anna Julia Cooper's own voice, but the author is aware that it not ontologically fixed and that part of Cooper's brilliant writing is the complex and sometimes elusive stance that the narrative voice takes.

⁶ For an in-depth analysis of this context, see Zackodnick (114-118).

underpinnings, which conceived that rights could depend on specific social categories or conditions, as illustrated by the following excerpt: “when race, color, sex, condition, are realized to be the accidents, not the substance of life (...) then woman’s lesson is taught and woman’s cause is won—not the white woman nor the black woman nor the red woman, but the cause of every man or woman who had writhed silently under a mighty wrong” (125). This passage epitomizes Cooper’s intersectional perspective on the women’s rights struggles and furthermore postulates the possibility of a political alliance between disempowered and disenfranchised people.

Cooper’s essay thus does not just formulate a lengthy analytical answer to Shaw’s speech, it reflects on the complex dynamics of marginalization by race, gender, class, and region, and develops the idea of intersectionality as a theory and a method.⁷ As Jennifer Nash has pointed out, intersectional histories have long recognized the contributions of Frances Beale, the Combahee Collective, Deborah King, Patricia Hill Collins and of course Kimberlé Crenshaw, but it is only recently that “Black feminist scholarship has centered Anna Julia Cooper’s work as foundational to modern intersectional theory” (Nash 7). Vivian May’s research has been particularly instrumental in replacing Cooper’s productions in intellectual genealogies (*Anna Julia Cooper, Visionary Black Feminist*). Recognizing how significant Anna Julia Cooper’s work has been to the theory of intersectionality highlights her intellectual legacy and provides a longer historical perspective on Black women’s contributions to epistemology.⁸ Yet Cooper’s thought did not just underline the importance of intersectionality as a method and as a concept, as it focused also on political alliances and social movement’s practices. Indeed, Cooper was not only an intellectual and a philosopher; she was also a dedicated activist who participated to the creation of many organizations. Therefore, this article, which is heavily indebted to the work of Hazel Cardy in *Reconstructing Womanhood*, hopes to prolong recent historiography on the women’s rights movement, which has shed light on white women’s

⁷ The essay focuses on the very specific social and political position of Black women. When travelling in the South, the narrator wonders whether she should use the restrooms that are reserved “FOR LADIES,” or “FOR COLORED PEOPLE.” (96)

⁸ This is for instance what Brittney C. Cooper does in her book on Black women as intellectuals and thinkers, *Beyond Respectability*.

exclusionary practices (Cahill, Jones, Rouse).⁹ This paper will focus on a Black woman's critical perspective on white suffragism and its discriminatory practices.

In her essay, along other venues, Cooper investigated the consequences of social constructs, the limitations imposed on Black women's bodies and the strategies they had to use to minimize harm. She crossed disciplines and used the contributions of religion, science, history, literature, and political theory to develop her argumentation. Moreover, the essay is a patchwork of many texts that include speeches, newspapers articles and stories, poems, plays, essays—even nursery rhymes. Cooper explored many types of relationships between these texts, some obvious, some concealed, making her essay a palimpsest.¹⁰ It incorporated a very elaborate web of internal and external references, rooted in the specific historical context of her writing. For instance, in the quotation that opens this article, Cooper makes a reference to “the Puritan maid,” whom she had previously mentioned in her text: indeed, she had depicted the “Puritan maidens of the North” who had “been making bread and canning currants and not thinking of blood the last bit, [and who] began to hunt down the records of the Mayflower” (103-104). This passage refers to lineage-based societies which emerged in the 1890s, such as the Colonial Dames and the Daughters of the American Revolution (both created in 1890), and the United States 1812 Daughters (founded in 1892).¹¹ Mary Desha, who

⁹ Hazel Carby, in her 1987 work on the emergence of the African American woman novelist, analyzed how Cooper “theorized the relationships among race, gender, and patriarchy,” and mentioned how Cooper denounced “the inherent racism of white women's organizations” (96). She emphasized three aspects of Cooper's critique of white women's organizations: the nature of white women's power, “the dominance of Southern influence over women's activities,” and the belief that women's “interests were advanced or secured at the expense of other oppressed groups” (102). Cahill's *Recasting the Vote* and Jones' *Vanguard*, both published in 2020, placed women of color in the center of the history of the women's suffrage movements. Rouse's *Public Faces, Secret Lives*, published in 2022, explained how some white suffragists “deliberately sought to conceal the queerness of the suffrage movement” (4).

¹⁰ French literary theorist Gérard Genette has conceptualized the concept of the palimpsest in his 1982 book *Palimpsestes: La Littérature au second degré*. This work explores the different ways a text relates to previous ones.

¹¹ Shawn Michelle Smith explored how representations of middle-class motherhood was “infused with racialized discourse of blood and heredity” as the DAR claimed an “exclusive heritage of “blood,” “bone,” and “sinew,” thereby showing how such lineage-based organizations reflected contemporary eugenics and obsessions with preserving Anglo-Saxon racial stock (9). Cooper deconstructs the idea of superiority of such venerable lineage by pointing out that such ancestry is rooted in brutality and rampage, referring to “great great grandfather's grandfather [who] stole and pillaged and slew” (103).

was one of the founders of DAR, is not mentioned by name in the essay, but is nonetheless a key figure in it as she incarnates how Southern white women imposed their racist exclusionary practices in women's organizations.¹² Cooper refers to these societies to subtly denounce white women's obsession with race disguised as genealogical work, and because white suffragists, who were often members of such societies, collaborated with them, as when they organized a dinner in December 1892 to celebrate the landing of the Pilgrim Mothers on Plymouth Rocks ("In Honor of Pilgrim Mothers"). These organizations, which excluded women of color, based their membership on bloodlines. Blood is a founding metaphor in this essay: it shows the violence constitutive of U.S. history related to slavery, colonialism, imperialism, and its consequences in social conditions. It represents the brutality inflicted on those who were oppressed and the annihilation of their bodies.¹³ Such brutality was legally entrenched by blood quantum, which turned colonial and racial constructs into legal classifications, and applied differently to Black people and Native Americans to uphold white supremacy (Forbes; Ellinghaus).¹⁴ Genealogy and blood conflate in the history of sexual violence, which Cooper refers to when she describes "the Southerner" who "sowed his blood broadcast" among the enslaved people (102). The topic of blood furthermore suggests the possibility of violence erupting at any time—which is embodied by the experiences of Black women travelling on trains, "who have been forcibly ejected from cars, thrown out of seats, their garments rudely torn, their person wantonly and cruelly injured" (91).

¹² Mary Desha was born in Lexington, Kentucky. She taught in Kentucky and later Sitka, Alaska. When she returned from Alaska, she took a clerk position in Washington, D.C., and co-founded DAR in 1890.

¹³ The recurring image of blood in the essay probably refers to lynching, used to terrorize Black people, particularly in the South. The same year that Cooper published *A Voice from the South* (1892), African American journalist, activist, suffragist, and reformer Ida B. Wells published *Southern Horrors: Lynch Law in all its Phases*, a pamphlet in which she denounced the crime of lynching as part of the Southern system of white supremacy and tried to bring national attention to the issue. From 1890 to 1900, an average of more than 150 African Americans were lynched every year.

¹⁴ Unlike Indian blood, Black blood was governed by hypodescent laws, which classified as Black any person with "one drop" of Black blood. Historian Katherine Ellinghaus shows how the U.S. government used blood quantum to legitimize the theft of land, to divide, dwindle and destroy indigenous communities. She demonstrates that blood quantum discourse and its tropes were central to settler colonialism from the 1880s to the 1930s. Moreover, she explains that Native Americans with African ancestry were deemed inferior to those with European ancestry, and that the "one-drop rule" could "nullify their Indian status in the eye of the U.S. government as well as some tribal governments" (xiii).

The theme of blood and the violence it refers to is symbolic of the exclusion of Black women from white suffragists' organizations, while also making clear that Black women experienced violence in their flesh. In "Woman versus the Indian," Cooper transformed the process of marginalization into a site of situated knowledge, critical analysis, and resistance, suggesting that knowledge emerged also from painful, incarnated experiences, as Shirley Moody-Turner and James Stewart underline: "Cooper establishes her personal experience, and the personal experience of other Black women as both valid and necessary sources for the construction of social theory and as the basis for social and political action" (38). This essay will analyze how, from this specific position, Cooper shaped a complex, penetrating analysis of racial dynamics in the women's rights movement. It will put her criticism of suffragism in its specific historical context and show how she interlaced an intricate web of references and images to make her point. Cooper depicted suffragism as having reached a turning point and a critical phase: because it was white-centered, suffragism was in crisis. Suffragists, by hesitating between supporting Southern white women or Black women, were compared by Cooper to the man who was "befuddled" as he had to take singly across a stream a bag of corn, a fox, and a goose, and had to choose between death or destruction (83-84). As Cooper asserted, the cause of the women's movement was "not the intelligent woman vs. the ignorant woman, nor the white woman vs. the black, the brown, and the red" (121). Thus, the influence of bigotry in suffragism brought this crisis, whose outcome would mean recovery or death, depending on the path white women chose. Cooper clearly pointed to the role white women played in the perpetuation of violence, and she used the topic of "manners" to demonstrate the importance of the ethics of responsibility of white women.

This essay will thus focus on three aspects of Cooper's analysis of white-centered suffragism: first, Cooper draws attention to suffragists' practices within their organization, which is here epitomized by Wimodaughsis; second, Cooper shows that this is a symptom of a larger social issue—white women's willing and oblivious participation to forms of domination; finally, Cooper explains how white suffragism affects Black women, and suggests an alternative to white-centered ideological constructs and organizations. By scrutinizing these different elements in Cooper's essay, the following paper underscores how central critical and

dissenting voices are in the history and historiography of the U.S. women's suffrage movement.

Wimodaughsis, the Symbol of Exclusionary Practices in White Women's Organizations

The series of events that happened at the women's club Wimodaughsis, which Cooper recounted at the opening of her essay, epitomized, and crystallized the issue of white supremacy within women's organizations at the turn of the century. The scandal, which was reported at length by newspapers at the time, took place just a week after Anna Howard Shaw's speech, and Cooper conflated the two to question white women's positions on race issues in their societies and clubs.

Set up in July 1890, Wimodaughsis, whose name was made of the first few letters of the words wives, mothers, daughters, and sisters, was incorporated in July 1890 and financed by the sale of five dollars share.¹⁵ It was a national club which intended for all associations of women to meet on common ground and work together ("The Club"). Anna Howard Shaw was the president and Adelaide Johnson the vice president.¹⁶ Mary Desha was Wimodaughsis' secretary—Cooper calls her the "Kentucky secretary" (82-3). The club's headquarters in Washington, D.C., were originally those of the Woman's Suffrage Association and the Woman's Christian Temperance Union. Classes took place there—they included art needlework, French, Spanish, German, shorthand, typewriting, painting, and drawing—and different clubs, such as the Indian Association, the French club or music and literary clubs held their weekly meetings there ("The Club").

¹⁵ Sociologist Charles Lemert and archivist / curator Esme Bhan, who edited a collection of Cooper's essays, letters, and papers, view the name as a possible joke from Cooper, who might be "making up the ridiculous acronym." (28n.50). They ponder whether Cooper was the rejected woman herself, and whether the story was fictionalized (29-30). However, it was all true, and the newspapers at the time reported the story at length.

¹⁶ Adelaide Johnson was a sculptor and a women's rights activist. Her *Portrait Monument* statue of Susan B. Anthony, Lucretia Mott, and Elizabeth Cady Stanton was unveiled in 1921 and is located in the United States' Capitol rotunda.

The display of women's solidarity and equality, symbolized by the name of the organization, was however jeopardized by the racism of club members, when a Black woman named Fannie Smith enrolled for classes. Cooper describes it with biting irony: "Pandora's box is opened in the ideal harmony of this modern Eden without an Adam when a colored lady, a teacher in one of our schools, applies for admission to its privileges and opportunities" (81).¹⁷ The press reported the issue and explained that Fannie Smith paid her fee and began to attend evening classes: "She was beautiful, and as white as Miss Desha herself, but the Southern ladies were a few days since horrified to discover that in Miss Smith's veins ran the blood of the negro race" ("Dissension in Wimodaughsis"). Mary Desha told Fannie Smith she was no longer welcome and expelled her. Anna Howard Shaw, with the support of the board of directors, reinstated Fannie Smith: as the incorporated stock company came under the provisions of the civil rights bill, it could not exclude on the basis of race. Shaw furthermore publicly opposed Desha, and the press relayed Shaw's remarks: "I would rather see the club go to pieces than as a club it should lend itself to such unjust, unchristian, outrageous proscriptions" ("Society's Race War").

Mary Desha resigned from her secretary position, and many Southern women left the organization. But the way Cooper described the position of Shaw, whom she however praised, was more ambiguous than what it seemed, especially when put in perspective with Shaw's speech the week before—Cooper here showed herself as an ally of Native Americans, by denouncing how inconsistent Shaw's stance was. Cooper thus revealed the contradictory and problematic handling of race in the women's movement. Cooper indeed called this episode "a lost opportunity" for white women's rights leaders to make their position clear and firm and to address racism in their ranks (83). Indeed, she reflected that as Shaw was "one of the most powerful of our leaders, (...) we feel her voice should give no uncertain note" (117).

¹⁷ The use of the pronoun "our" is very revealing here of how this episode does not just affect one person, but an entire community. Furthermore, this passage perfectly encapsulates how white women's organizations refused to consider other issues besides gender, and how they viewed the presence of Black women within their organizations as disruptive. It exposes, thanks to Cooper's perspective, how Black women perceived these racial dynamics within women's organizations.

What happened at Wimodaughsis revealed a larger issue in the women's rights movement, which ignored the priorities of Black women and alienated them (Terborg-Penn 56). When Cooper published *A Voice from the South*, the suffrage movement was at a turning point. The newly founded NAWSA welcomed segregationist women in its ranks and was developing strategies based on conservative, exclusive and racist ideologies, choosing to establish "the white woman as the primary definer and beneficiary of woman's rights at a time when the country was growing increasingly hostile toward attempts to redress the political, social, and economic injustices to which African Americans were subjected" (Newman 4-5). White suffragists chose to develop a coalition with white women in the South, at a moment when white supremacy was triumphantly reinstated in the South with ferocious violence, through the annihilation of Black dignity, life, and democratic hopes. Cooper indeed noted that "some clauses of the Constitution [we]re a dead letter" in the South and that the "pet institution," slavery, remained in another form (106). The report of the 1891 NAWSA Convention published by *History of Woman Suffrage* made it clear that suffragists would focus on the South: "It was decided to give especial attention to suffrage work in the Southern States during the year" (184).

Cooper opened her essay with the story about Wimodaughsis to show that if Shaw refused to support Southern women in this specific instance, she had nonetheless opposed white women's rights to those of "Indians" a week before. Cooper therefore documented that this apparent paradox in fact revealed a shift in the woman's movement—the choice of a new alliance with the South. But instead of presenting this change as an anomaly, she signaled that it was absolutely in-keeping with U.S. history and white women's role in it. White suffragism was not just a problem of exclusion of Black women from organizations, it had deep social, political, and ideological roots.

White Suffragists' Racial Complicity

In her essay, Cooper highlighted that while facing gender discrimination, white women "have privileges based on race and class" (May, "Thinking from the Margins" 86). One revealing example Cooper used was that of American girls traveling without male companions to

document the “ease and facility, the comfort and safety of American travel, even for the weak and unprotected,” for a lecture or an article (89). She contrasted this carefree and exhilarating experience for white girls with the vulnerability, humiliation, and fear many Black women endured while travelling (90-91).¹⁸ Cooper showed that even though white women could not vote, they benefited from racial politics, held some power through it, and helped sustain it. Cooper indeed described white women as active participants in forms of institutionalized domination, as was expressed in the speech by Shaw, who was said to have “made a strong plea for the women and demonstrated their infinite superiority to many kinds of citizens allowed in the United States” (“Women in Wyoming”). This sentence suggested that Shaw most probably pitted white women’s rights against those of men of color. Thus, Cooper portrayed white women as agents of nationalism and imperialism, who engaged in socially enforced dynamics of racial exclusion.

To emphasize her point, Cooper used the topic of manners. She explained that according to social expectations, the “American woman then [wa]s responsible for American manners” (86). Manners were described as a series of unwritten rules and codes used to create a “network of perfect subordination” (86), with white women at the top.¹⁹ Cooper, however, explained that when Black women and men were badly treated, white women turned a blind eye to it, and looked the other way, rather than holding themselves to account (92). This suggested that white women were complicit in a system based on physical violence and political injustice. This echoed what Ida B. Wells Barnett wrote in her pamphlet on lynching about the hypocritical use of a Southern code of honor to justify the brutality of lynching, and white women’s complicit participation in it. She indeed explained that the South was

¹⁸ Cooper thus highlights how white women’s experiences were wrongly considered to be applicable to all women and writes that she could furnish some material that would contradict these girls’ observations, but that it might not please them (89). She explains for instance the deep and awful humiliation she felt when a conductor refused to help her when she had to disembark a train after a white woman who was offered diligent assistance (90).

¹⁹ It is also important to note that Cooper explained that manners impacted everyone’s experiences in public places. She indeed mentioned the “atmosphere of street cars and parks and boulevards, of cafes and hotels and steamboats” (86). These locations map women’s experiences of public places at the turn of the 20th century. Cooper described how her experience of public places had been much better in England (88-89).

“shielding itself behind the plausible screen of defending the honor of its women” (14). This also meant that the codes of honor, or in Cooper terms, manners, which were the prerogatives of white women, were inherently based on the acceptance of the oppression of people of color and sanctioned white women’s violence. Cooper wondered, “am I right in holding the American Woman responsible?” (99). She asserted, “I think so.” The topic of manners allowed Cooper to tackle the power that white women held, as she wrote that women set the tone for the whole country, “Like mistress, like nation” (88).²⁰

Cooper linked the topic of manners with the images of blood, disease, and the body to represent and explore the political conditions of the American nation. More precisely, she described the United States as infected with a disease that came from the South. She wrote that at the Wimodaughsis club, Mary Desha, the secretary from Kentucky, “inoculated” other women with her prejudices (83). The metaphor of blood and disease was used to show how Southern ideas had spread to the North, symbolizing the political and ideological rise of the South in the years after the end of Reconstruction. This central bodily metaphor that runs throughout the essay suggests that white-centered feminism could not be separated from different ideologies of race, class, and gender, and that it was rooted in a social, economic, political context that echoed U.S. history. The theme of railway travelling in the essay encapsulated this idea as it symbolized the social and political dysfunctions at a national level—discriminations permitted by Jim Crow laws in the South and imperialistic expansion in the West at the expense of Native American land. Furthermore, the railway car embodied a microcosm of national power dynamics and the oppression of people of color.

²⁰ Cooper used this topic of manner as an echo of Oscar Fay Adams’ essay “The Mannerless Sex,” which was published in the *North American Review* in 1890. In this paper, Adams described women as badly mannered, ungallant, capricious, arrogant, selfish, and unsympathetic in an accumulation of sexist clichés. Interestingly, he mentioned the behaviors of women in railway cars, who were expecting other men to liberate a seat for them. Cooper acknowledged that she was emboldened when she read this article: “In fact the Black Woman was emboldened some time since by a well put and timely article from an Editor’s Drawer on the “Mannerless Sex,” to give the world the benefit of some of her experience with the “Mannerless Race” (99). Indeed, Cooper did not see in Adams’ paper a matter of gender, but an issue of white entitlement.

At the end of her speech at the 1891 NAWSA convention, Anna Howard Shaw declared that white women could solve “the Indian problem” and asserted that if Alice Fletcher were to head the Indian Bureau, “there would be no more trouble with the red men” (“Women in Wyoming”). Fletcher, an anthropologist, had “drafted what became the blueprint for a national severalty program that would exchange Native American lands for Native American citizenship” (Zackodnik 114). Shaw’s assertion placed white women as agents of imperialism, who would act on behalf of “civilization” and the nation state to strip Native Americans of their culture to turn them into citizens.²¹ This clearly revealed that women’s quest for political power rested on their ability to subdue and control people of color.

Cooper’s essay thus exposed how white women, as a dominant group, contributed to the institutionalization and naturalization of domination that infiltrated Black women’s daily experiences. They had internalized their status and their role as superiors, which completely invalidated their political project. Furthermore, it highlighted how “the Black Woman” also needed to navigate this violent context.

Dismantling White Suffragism

“The Woman versus the Indian” documented the effects white women’s complicit participation to systemic violence had on Black women, elaborating on Shaw’s speech to show the deep ramifications such discourse had. In this essay, Cooper gave examples of different forms of violence Black women experienced. Black women were faced with violence everywhere in public spaces, in clubs, and in schools—Cooper mentioned that an exceptionally gifted artist was refused final admission to the Corcoran school after it was discovered she was Black (113-114). Cooper explained how the Black woman felt that her body and her mind were in constant danger and described the strategies she used to avoid or

²¹ Zackodnik explains that white women were already involved in Indian “reform,” through for example the Woman’s National Indian Association (WNIA), which “was founded in 1879 by white women ostensibly to protest the encroachment of railroads and settlers into Indian territory in violation of federal treaties” (115). These efforts, which included the dismantlement of the reservation system, had disastrous consequences, including the 1887 Dawes Severalty Act, which led to the loss of millions of acres of land of Native American land. Furthermore, the WNIA’s missionary work furthered the destruction of native culture through Christianization schemes in the name of “civilization.”

minimize harm. She made herself invisible or inconspicuous in her choice of dress and activities—for example, she dressed modestly and read the newspaper on the train so that she could be vigilant while remaining unnoticeable to those around her. Yet violence could erupt anytime, anywhere—even at a women's suffrage convention.

According to the many reports of the 1891 NAWSA Convention, Anna Howard Shaw's speech was a success: "Her address was one of the brightest and wittiest of the week. It was just filled with droll stories and appropriate anecdotes and was repeatedly interrupted by laughter as well as applause" ("Women in Wyoming"). Even though newspapers articles pointed out that Shaw "criticized the recent Indian war as being unholy, unrighteous and wicked," she nonetheless expressed contempt and hostility towards Native Americans. According to *The History of Woman Suffrage*, she lamented "how Indians in blankets and moccasins were received in the State convention with the greatest courtesy, and Susan B. Anthony and other eminent women were barely tolerated; how, while these Indians were engaged in their ghost dances, the white women were going up and down the State pleading for the rights of citizens" (182). The hilarity in the audience triggered by Shaw's racist description of the situation in South Dakota, her denigration of Native American cultural and spiritual practices, her claims to racial entitlement and the rage at white women's situation conveyed very sinister undertones, which did not escape Cooper. Cooper chose to reappropriate Shaw's weapon, humor, but at the expense of racist white women, and used irony and satire to debunk their bigoted ideas and discourse, in a text that echoes and wittily reverses Shaw's speech. This essay, however, seems to bear the traces of Cooper's anger at how white women treated Black women while supposedly fighting for equality. Cooper's oblique use of antiphrasis and irony, her writing of digression might point to feelings of indignation and exasperation at white women's hypocritical stance, that needed correcting. "Woman versus the Indian" is endowed with a reparative function that, through writing and through argumentation, aims at repairing the women's rights movement.²²

²² In a passage of the essay, Cooper writes about how Black women could not express their anger or indignation when they were badly treated: "Its first impulse of wrathful protest and proud self vindication

Cooper suggests different lines of reflections to address the issue. By showing that white-centered suffragism was equivalent to white supremacy and sustained by it, Cooper invited white women to recognize their own responsibility in perpetuating oppression, to clearly confront and address racism within their suffrage organizations, and to reconfigure and expand their definitions of political concepts and their activism. Cooper distinctly focused on how the term woman was encoded as “white woman,” as illustrated by what happened in Wimodaughsis: “she had not calculated that there were any wives, mothers, daughters, and sisters, except white ones” (81). This emphasized the centrality of whiteness in these women’s identities, which Cooper made visible by naming it. Toward the end of her essay, Cooper commented on the concept of freedom, which was “not the cause of a race or a sect, a party or class,—it is the cause of human kind, the very birthright of humanity” (120-121) and she specifically called out women’s rights leaders, so that they would not get confused “as to its scope and universality” (121). Cooper showed here that suffragists’ theoretical concepts and their language of rights were inherently flawed and tainted by racism, and that those had very concrete consequences for women of color. She encouraged white women to take on Black women’s political perspective. “Woman versus the Indian” was an attempt at showing white women how Black women saw, understood, and analyzed issues differently because of their unique social position and history. It also underlined that preventing the marginalization of women of color in white women’s rights organizations was not enough. As pointed out, recognizing racism, calling it, rebuking it, and practicing inclusivity and inclusion was not enough, “if that does not, in turn, mean a reconfiguration of the political concepts that have been complicitous with white supremacy” (Athey 95).

Cooper furthermore addressed white women’s “missionary work,” to make the point that white women’s sense of mission was misplaced. In her speech, Shaw stated that white women would solve the “Indian problem,” and Cooper answered by pointing to another direction of

is checked and shamed by the consciousness that self assertion would outrage still further the same delicate instinct” (91). This essay could be seen as Cooper finding her voice and refusing to remain silent in the face of violence and injustice, which acts as a perfect foil to white women’s silence when Black women are badly treated.

work. Instead of acting as agents of imperialism at the service of the nation state, she suggested white women stood up against the federal government to give justice to Native Americans: "If the Indian has been wronged and cheated by the puissance of this American government, it is woman's mission to plead with her country to cease to do evil and to pay its honest debts" (123-124). Cooper furthermore encouraged white women to advocate for the rights of African Americans: "If the Negro has been deceitfully cajoled or inhumanly cuffed according to selfish expediency or capricious antipathy, let it be woman's mission to plead that he be met as a man and honestly given half the road." (124) Earlier on in the essay, when Cooper described her travels through the South, she also pointed out that it was "a field for the missionary woman" (96). This passage pointed out the selective condemnation of "barbarity and cruelty" in distant lands, whereas the inhumanity imposed on people of color in the South was widely accepted (97). These suggestions of women's mission reversed the role of white women, who would no longer be complicit with structures of oppression, but defend what is fair and stand up for the downtrodden. To do so, Cooper urged white women to rest their plea "not on Indian inferiority, not on Negro depravity, but on the obligation of legislators to do for her as they would have others do for them were relations reversed" (124). So instead of compromising ideals of equality and citizenship by collaborating with the government to participate in dynamics of imperialism, white women should promote the doctrine of natural rights as expressed in the Declaration of Independence: "when race, color, sex, condition, are realized to be the accidents, not the substance of life, and consequently as not obscuring or modifying the inalienable title to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness ... then woman's lesson is taught and woman's cause is won" (125). Cooper recognized white women's impulse to dominate and their role as agents of oppression within white supremacy that affected both Native Americans and African Americans. By linking their experiences of oppression, Cooper implicitly drew a proximity between all women of color who suffered from racial hierarchies. This could be seen as "an argument for the importance of a black and red feminist coalition" (Zackodnik 110).

Cooper made it very clear that she would not pursue association with white women if they did not change. In a passage of her essay, the author explained that when she asked for access to

cafés or railway cars, it is not because she “want[ed] association with those who frequent these places” (111). This suggested that if white women did not examine their exclusionary behaviors and practices, and the very racist concepts their suffrage ideology was based on, Black women would go their separate ways. Ultimately, this meant that coalitions and political solidarity between women were impossible if they remained on white women’s terms, because they reflected the dominant ideology of their time and excluded the perspectives of women of color. The 1890s was in fact “a remarkable decade in terms of black women’s organized political activity” (Athey 96). Black women established thriving local and national groups, which were engaged on many fronts, advocating for social justice, civil rights, education, and against lynching. All in all, Cooper asserted that Black women definitely did not need white women to create their own clubs and associations and pursue their own social justice agenda.

Conclusion

“Woman versus the Indian” is not just a complex work of philosophy, political theory, and sociology as many scholars have already amply underlined. It also documents a critical moment in the history of suffragism from the perspective of a Black woman. The essay expounds the pitfalls of white-centered feminism, for a readership that included “white women reformers and suffragist and fellow black feminists and fellow black intellectuals, both male and female” (Zackodnik 118). It represents white suffragist Anna Howard Shaw as an exploiter of language, who made it an instrument of domination and manipulation, with real and terrifying consequences. Shaw indeed used her speech to reverse the position of white women in relation to Native Americans and to portray them as victims and not complicit in the government’s policy. This speech illustrated how powerful a white woman’s words were, and how they could be linked to power and violence, something reminiscent of Wells’ analysis of white women’s responsibility in lynching in the South—and their impunity.²³ Cooper’s essay

²³ Cooper underlines that the reason why violence “breaks out most readily and commonly against colored persons in this country” is because “they are, generally speaking, weak and can be imposed upon with impunity” (92).

furthermore denounced how white suffrage leaders missed an opportunity to build a coalition with Black women and chose instead to ally with racist white women, instead of standing up for the rights of the oppressed, which would have made their struggle a truly emancipatory one: “But, may not be that, as women, the very lessons which seem hardest to master now, are possibly the ones most essential for our promotion to a higher grade of work?” (84).

The position of the NAWSA in the 1890s showed that white suffragists did not learn such lessons. In a history that repeated itself, in 1894, Fannie Barrier Williams was denied membership by the Chicago Women's Club because of her race. Susan B. Anthony asked Frederick Douglass, the longtime and unwavering ally of women's rights, not to attend the 1895 suffrage convention in Atlanta for fear of Southern white women's hostility. In 1899, at the NAWSA convention in Grand Rapids, Lottie Wilson Jackson asked delegates to pass a resolution stipulating that Black women should not be compelled to ride in smoking cars, and that suitable accommodations should be provided for them. This resolution, which would have protected Black women while they were traveling, was tabled because of white Southern suffragists' protests. In 1903, NAWSA formally endorsed the doctrine of states' rights, which was a clear and explicit support of white supremacy.

Cooper has long been hailed for her clarity of vision and unequalled intellectual approach to feminism. “Woman versus the Indian” is also a sharp commentary on the (im)possibilities of “coalitional feminism” (Zackodnik 113). Cooper indeed elucidates what white feminism does to women of color; and her analysis brings a seminal perspective on a key moment in failed feminist coalitions. In her essay, Cooper tackled the issue of how women could struggle together by denouncing the pitfalls of viewing the struggle for emancipation as a matter of competing rights. She thus invited activists to consider the fight from the perspective of the oppressed: “When the weak shall have received their due consideration, then woman will have her ‘rights,’ and the Indian will have his rights, and the Negro will have his rights” (117). Therefore, Cooper's work clearly made the connection between the epistemological stakes of intersectionality and its consequences for social movements. That's where her essay is probably the most groundbreaking. Indeed, she not only explained what the specificity of her

social position was and how it informed her political perspectives and her critical views of white women's universalism, she furthermore reflected upon what differences in social positions meant for women's struggles within social movements. She exposed how white women dictated their views and implicitly expected women of color to comply. Her representation of the suffrage movement raised important questions about leadership and the power dynamics in its organizational practices, which might still be relevant to social movements today.

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