

## Esther V. Cooper's "The Negro Woman Domestic Worker in Relation to Trade Unionism": Black Left Feminism and the Popular Front

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Esther V. Cooper's brilliant 120-page 1940 M.A. thesis, "The Negro Woman Domestic Worker in Relation to Trade Unionism," still stands as the most thorough sociological and historical study written on the working conditions and status of black women household workers and their efforts to unionize during the Depression.<sup>1</sup> The "Negro Woman Domestic Worker" was a crucial part of her early intellectual foundation, helping to set the stage for her staunch support for civil rights, social justice, internationalism, and radical democracy with special concern for African-American women that were trade marks of her life's work. It also stands as a marker for what could have been a significantly different life journey for her.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> When discussing her life before her marriage to James E. Jackson in May 1940, I will refer to her as Esther Cooper. Following her marriage, I will refer to her as Esther Cooper Jackson.

<sup>2</sup> Esther V. Cooper, "The Negro Woman Domestic Workers in Relation to Trade Unionism" (M.A. Thesis, Fisk University, 1940); Erik S. McDuffie, "Long Journeys: Four Black Women and the Communist Party, USA, 1930-1956" (unpublished Ph.D. diss., New York University, 2003); Robin D.G. Kelley, *Hammer and Hoe: Alabama Communists During the Great Depression* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 204; David L. Lewis, *W.E.B. Du Bois: The Fight for Equality* (New York: Henry Holt, 2000).

This article joins a growing body of work focused on black women's encounters with the American Left, see Carole Boyce Davies, *Left of Karl Marx: The Political Life of Black Communist Claudia Jones* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008); Erik S. McDuffie, "A 'New Freedom Movement of Negro Women': Sojourning for Truth, Justice, and Human Rights during the Early Cold War," *Radical History Review*, 101 (Spring 2008): 81-106; Fanon Che Wilkins, "Beyond Bandung: The Critical Nationalism of Lorraine Hansberry, 1950-1965," *Radical History Review*, 95 (2006): 191-210; Jacqueline Ann Castledine, "Gendering the Cold War: Race, Class and Women's Peace Politics, 1945-1975" (unpublished PhD diss., Rutgers University, 2006); Erik S. McDuffie, "[She] devoted twenty minutes condemning all other forms of government but the Soviet: Black Women Radicals in the Garvey Movement and in the Left during the 1920s" in *Diasporic Africa: A Reader*, Michael A. Gomez, ed., (New York: New York University Press, 2006), 219-250; Dayo Falayon Gore, "To Hold a Candle in the Wind: Black Women Radicals and Post-World War II U.S. Politics" (unpublished PhD diss.,

The thesis, above all, contains broad significance for understanding black women's activism and black radicalism during the Popular Front. It reveals an emergent black left feminism, a politics that centers working-class women by combining Communist Party positions on race, gender, and class with black nationalism and black radical women's lived experiences, embedded in their writings and activism. Black left feminism paid special attention to the intersectional, transnational nature of African-American women's oppression and viewed them as key agents for transformative change. Committed to the Popular Front agenda of civil rights, trade unionism, anti-fascism, internationalism, and concern for women's equality, their work anticipating conclusions drawn by "second wave" black feminism decades later.<sup>3</sup>

The initial idea for the thesis stemmed from Cooper's observations as an undergraduate at Oberlin College of African-American women who cooked and cleaned the school's dormitories and then returned home late at night to a small ghetto in town. "They had little future and no union," Cooper Jackson recalled. Her interest in their plight was further bolstered during her years as a graduate student in the Masters program in Sociology at Fisk University in Nashville, Tennessee. Her graduate fellowship required her to work at a settlement house in a poor black neighborhood near Fisk's campus. The experience opened her eyes to black urban, southern poverty. Many of her impoverished clients were black women who worked back-breaking days in the homes of wealthy white people. She approached her advisor, white economist Dr. Addison Cutler, about writing a thesis on black women domestics, and he gave his enthusiastic support for the project. Dr. Charles Johnson,

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(footnote continued)

New York University, 2003); Mary Helen Washington, "Alice Childress, Lorraine Hansberry, and Claudia Jones: Black Women Write the Popular Front," in *Left of the Color Line: Race, Radicalism, and Twentieth Century Literature of the United States*, ed. Bill V. Mullen and James Smethurst (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003), 183–204; Kate Weigand, *Red Feminism: American Communism and the Making of Women's Liberation* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001), 97–113; Gerald Home, *Race Woman: The Lives of Shirley Graham Du Bois* (New York: New York University Press, 2000).

<sup>3</sup> The term "black left feminism" is borrowed from Washington, "Black Women Write the Popular Front," 185, 193–198.

Cooper was a child of the Popular Front. Her interest in trade unionism, civil rights, and global affairs, which set the stage for her decision to write her master's thesis on African-American women domestic workers, began while she attended Oberlin College and blossomed as a graduate student in sociology at Fisk University during the late 1930s. She attended school at one of the most dynamic moments in college protests in the U.S. prior to the 1960s. The Spanish Civil War, labor upheaval, and U.S. intervention in World War II generated passionate debates and vibrant student movements at Oberlin, capturing Cooper's attention and imagination. At Fisk, she quickly gravitated towards a group of left-wing professors, many of whom were white. They invited her to join a reading group held in what she described as an "Anne Frank-like room," introducing her to the writings of Marx and Lenin. It was at one of these meetings when one of her professors in the presence of her advisor signed her up in the Communist Party. McDuffie, "Long Journeys," 63–71, 284–294; Kelley, *Hammer and Hoe*, 205; Robert Cohen, *When the Old Left Was Young: Student Radicals and America's First Mass Student Movement, 1929–1941* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 207–208.

the prominent black sociologist and former head of the Urban League who was now on the faculty at Fisk, also strongly supported her thesis.<sup>4</sup>

The methodology of “The Negro Woman Domestic Worker” was distinguished by Cooper’s creative use of sources that brought to life the miserable conditions in which black women household laborers toiled and their agency in fighting for a better future. She cited U.S. Labor Department, CIO and AFL reports, census, and samples of union contracts that covered about 2,000 of the nearly 600,000 African-American women nationally who toiled as domestic workers. She used comparative data on domestic labor unions from Scandinavia, the Soviet Union, pre-fascist Italy, and other countries. Above all, she interviewed and spoke with dozens of black women household workers in New York, Newark, Chicago, and Washington, DC, giving them a voice and recognizing them as key agents in their fight for freedom, dignity, and respect.<sup>5</sup>

The thesis’ main argument contended “the problems faced by Negro women domestic workers are responsive to amelioration through trade union organizations.”<sup>6</sup> She rejected the mainstream American labor movement’s position that domestic and agricultural workers, and white-collar professionals were “unorganizable.” Such claims “have been proven false,” she argued, by the success in organizing household laborers in Western Europe and, above all, the Soviet Union. In stark contrast to the U.S., she pointed out that in the U.S.S.R. “the social standing of domestic workers is equal to any other worker.”<sup>7</sup> Clearly, Cooper saw advances made for household laborers in the Soviet Union as a model for improving the lives and status of laboring black women in particular and American workers generally.

The thesis detailed the highly exploitative nature of domestic labor. Cooper called attention to the “social stigma” of domestic work, noting that the relationship between employer and African-American female household workers “exhibited all the characteristics of the feudal relationship of master and serf.” Black women domestic workers “have been discriminated against and exploited with double harshness.” She cited long-hours, low wages, poor work conditions, lack of job security, mainstream labor’s neglect of domestic workers, absent job standards, the isolating nature of household labor, and the exemption of domestics from old age insurance and unemployment benefits under the 1935 Social Security Act as major obstacles that black women domestics encountered.<sup>8</sup>

Some of the thesis’ most insightful discussions concerned the ways in which race, gender, and class not only positioned black female domestic workers at the

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<sup>4</sup> McDuffie, 295–296.

<sup>5</sup> Cooper, 99; McDuffie, 296–297.

<sup>6</sup> For discussions of the gendered implications of and the exclusion of domestics, migrant farm laborers, and other occupations from receiving benefits and protections under the 1935 Social Security Act, see Linda Gordon, *Pitied But Not Entitled: Single Mothers and the History of Welfare* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1994), 4–6, 253–263, 293–297; Michael B. Katz, *In the Shadow of the Poorhouse: A Social History of Welfare in America*, rev. ed. (New York: Basic Books, 1996), 242–252.

<sup>7</sup> Cooper, 27, 29, 30.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 3, 6.

bottom of the economic ladder but provided white women with some freedom from performing tedious, back-breaking household work. She singled out the infamous Bronx “slave market,” street corners in the borough where black women stood waiting to be hired for day labor by white housewives, as “[o]ne of the worst types of human exploitation . . . found in New York City, and one of its ugliest aspects is the way in which girls are shipped up in car loads from the South to stand on corners waiting for work at 25 to 35 cents per hour.” She wrote: “Housewives, knowing they can get domestic workers at almost starvation wages have played employee against employee.”<sup>9</sup> By calling attention to the Bronx slave market, Cooper illustrated the ways in which white and black women were divided along race and class lines. She in effect rejected the notion that “woman” was a universal, ahistorical category, directly challenging ideas posited by some white Communist women theoreticians at this time that women were equally oppressed by patriarchy.<sup>10</sup>

Despite these obstacles in organizing black women domestic workers, Cooper was still optimistic about their future. She cited Section 7a of the 1933 National Industrial Recovery Act and the 1935 National Labor Relations Act as important new opportunities for allowing organized labor to expand its ranks. She praised the African-American women-led Domestic Workers Union for its trailblazing work in unionizing black women household workers and lauded the CIO for its “conviction . . . that unionization is possible for domestic workers.”<sup>11</sup> In this respect, the CIO and domestic worker unions signified immense possibilities for not only improving the lot of African-American female wage-earners but in bringing them into the heart of the American labor movement. In doing so, her argument implicitly suggested that the unionization of black female domestics would benefit the entire American labor movement.<sup>12</sup>

Cooper’s “The Negro Woman Domestic Worker” was a part of a larger discussion in politically progressive black women’s circles and in the African-American community generally about the plight of female household workers. Black periodicals during these years were filled with probing articles on the subject.<sup>13</sup>

The most famous was the 1938 muck-raking exposé, “The Bronx Slave Market,” published in the *Crisis* magazine by Ella Baker and Marvel Cooke. The article discussed the humiliating, exploitative realities encountered daily by black women desperately in search of work and income. “Rain or shine, cold or hot,” they wrote, “you will find them there—Negro women, old and young—sometimes bedraggled sometimes neatly dressed—but with the invariable paper bundle, waiting expectantly for Bronx housewives to buy their strength and energy for an hour, two hours, or even for a day at the munificent rate of fifteen,

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 98.

<sup>10</sup> Margaret Cowl, *Women and Equality* (New York: Workers Library, 1935), 3; McDuffie, 256.

<sup>11</sup> Cooper, 104, 31–97.

<sup>12</sup> McDuffie, 300–301; Cooper, 98–105.

<sup>13</sup> Mary Anderson, “The Plight of Negro Domestic Labor,” *The Journal of Negro Education* 5 (January 1936): 66–72; *Amsterdam News*, 16 October 1937, 13, 19; Cooper, v–x.



FIG. 1. Domestic workers on strike, New York City, 1942. *Daily Worker* photography morgue, reproduced with permission of the Communist Party USA.

twenty, or, if luck be with them, thirty cents an hour.” Both Baker and Cooke had ties to the Left. The former associated with an eclectic crowd of Harlem and downtown radicals while the latter joined the Communist Party but kept her membership in it private.<sup>14</sup>

Louise Thompson’s important 1936 essay, “Toward a Brighter Dawn,” published in the CPUSA-affiliated *Woman Today* magazine, posited groundbreaking analysis about the plight of African-American women domestics that anticipated modern black feminism. Like Cooper, Thompson paid special attention to the Bronx “slave market,” declaring that it represented “a graphic monument to this most exploited section of the American working class population—the Negro Woman. Over the whole land, Negro women meet this triple exploitation—as workers, as women, and as Negroes.” They constituted, therefore, “the most exploited group in America.” Similar to Cooper’s thesis, Thompson vocally supported the unionization of household workers, and she credited the National Negro Congress for its support of these campaigns.<sup>15</sup> It was this call coupled with their left-wing sympathies for more radical approaches to addressing racial inequalities, economic disparities, and the marginal status of black women that distinguished the writings of Esther

<sup>14</sup> Ella Baker and Marvel Cooke, “The Bronx Slave Market,” *Crisis* 42 (November 1935): 330–331, 340; Marvel Cooke, interview with author, 1 April 1998, 11 June 1998, New York, NY; Barbara J. Ransby, *Ella Baker and the Black Freedom Movement: A Radical Democratic Vision* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003), 76–78, 79; Rodger Streitmatter and Barbara Diggs-Brown, “Marvel Cooke: An African-American Woman Journalist Who Agitated for Racial Reform,” *Afro-Americans in New York Life and History* 16 (July 1992), 57–58; *Philadelphia Inquirer*, 22 February 1998, H1, H8.

<sup>15</sup> Louise Thompson, “Toward a Brighter Future,” *The Woman Today* (April 1936): 14, 30.

Cooper, Marvel Cooke, Ella Baker, and Louise Thompson from more politically mainstream discussions of household laborers.

Cooper completed her thesis in the spring of 1940, and it caught the attention of renowned sociologist Robert Park, who offered her a fellowship to work on her Ph.D. under his direction at the University of Chicago. Cooper, however, turned it down and opted instead to work for the Southern Negro Youth Congress in Birmingham. She intended to complete her graduate studies one day but she got “busy organizing in the south.” The chance to organize in the South and to materialize her commitment to racial justice and democracy was for Cooper just too good an opportunity to pass up. To be sure, Cooper never abandoned her interest in writing and intellectual analysis as best evidenced in co-founding and serving as editor of *Freedomways* magazine that creatively bridged politics, culture, and activism for a quarter century. In this light, her thesis stands as an important early development in the making of a black radical activist intellectual who helped usher in the modern Civil Rights Movement.<sup>16</sup>

In addition, Cooper’s thesis along with the writing and activism of black women on the Left foreshadowed arguments made by black Communist leader, theoretician Claudia Jones after World War II that black laboring women constituted the most exploited segment in the African-American community and in the U.S. working-class. Black women, not industrial white workers therefore represented the vanguard of the working-class. This argument in effect turned orthodox Marxism and traditional approaches to labor organizing on their heads, suggesting radically new ways in which to theorize race, gender, class, and politics and to promote social change—ideas that were further developed after the late 1960s by the Third World Women’s Alliance, Combahee River Collective, Angela Davis, and bell hooks, amongst others.<sup>17</sup>

Finally, many of the observations and conclusions drawn in “The Negro Woman Domestic Worker” are as relevant today as they were 60 years ago. African-American women are still arguably the most exploited group in the U.S. and disproportionately located in low-paying, low-status, non-unionized service industries. Black women earn 68.4 cents to every dollar earned by a white man. Nearly one-quarter of all African-American women live below the

<sup>16</sup> Della Scott, “An Interview with Esther Jackson,” *Abafazi: The Simmons College Journal of Women of African Descent* 9, 1 (Fall/Winter 1998), 4; Kelley, 205.

<sup>17</sup> Claudia Jones, “An End to the Neglect of the Problems of the Negro Woman!” *Political Affairs* 28, 6 (June 1949): 51–67; McDuffie; Washington, 183–204; Barbara J. Ransby, *Ella J. Baker and the Black Freedom Movement: A Radical Democratic Vision* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003); Daniel Horowitz, *Betty Friedan and the Making of The Feminine Mystique: The American Left, the Cold War, and Modern Feminism* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1998); Kimberly Springer, *Living for the Revolution: Black Feminist Organizations, 1968–1980* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005); Stephen Ward, “The Third World Women’s Alliance: Black Feminist Radicalism and Black Power Politics,” in *The Black Power Movement: Rethinking the Civil Rights – Black Power Era*, ed. Peniel E. Joseph (New York: Routledge, 2006), 119–144; Benita Roth, *Separate Roads to Feminism: Black, Chicana, and White Feminist Movements in America’s Second Wave* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004); Premilla Nadasen, *Welfare Warriors: The Welfare Rights Movement in the United States* (New York: Routledge, 2005).

poverty line. The unemployment rate of black women is 9.5%, almost double the national average and nearly 60% higher than that of white women. And African-American women make up one of the fastest growing populations in the prison industrial complex.<sup>18</sup>

Many of the challenges in unionizing black women today are also the same ones that confronted organizers in the 1930s. At the same time, there are new realities in this era of neo-liberalism and corporate globalization, increased migrations of African-descended people from the Caribbean and Africa, and anxiety generated by the “war on terror” for those committed to expansive visions of democracy. “The Negro Woman Domestic Worker,” therefore, can help put these present-day struggles into a broader historical perspective.

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<sup>18</sup> Amy Caiazza, April Shaw, and Misha Werchkul, “The Status of Women in the States, Women’s Economic Status in the States: Wide Disparities by Race, Ethnicity, and Religion,” Institute for Women’s Policy Research, [www.iwpr.org](http://www.iwpr.org), 27; <http://www.dol.gov/wb/factsheets/Of-ESWM05.htm>; Joy James, ed., *The Angela Davis Reader* (Maiden, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 1998), 60–107.

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