

# Priscilla Hancock Cooper's *Call Me Black Woman*

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COOPER, PRISCILLA HANCOCK. *Call Me Black Woman* (Louisville: Doris Publications, 1993). 51 pp.; \$6.95 paper.

In her first published volume of poetry, *Call Me Black Woman*, Priscilla Hancock Cooper, local Birmingham educator, consultant on multiculturalism, performer, and poet, offers a rich potpourri of African-American experience. With distinctly black feminist vision, Cooper celebrates black poets, black language, black romance, black sexuality, black ancestry, black music, and black creative possibilities. Just as passionately, Cooper attacks pop generation's droopy-pants revolutionary wannabees ("Ode to a Would-Be Revolutionary") while trying to understand how today's black youths' senseless involvement in gang warfare might grow logically out of America's age-old attraction to violence as a social determinant ("American Legacy: There Is Blood in the Soil").

Using a style of minimal punctuation that also emphasizes the visual appearance of words on the typed page to accentuate meaning, *Call Me Black Woman*, with its twenty-nine poems and artwork by Alan Mosley, aligns itself thematically and aesthetically with the poetic visions and expressions of black revolutionary poets of the 1960s and 1970s such as Sonji Sanchez, Nikki Giovanni, Amiri Baraka, and Ntozake Shange. Cooper also turns back to African history as a way of celebrating modern African-American identity in a racist society conspiring to negate black experience or to deny African-Americans a range of complex and human responses to being alive.

Cooper orders her volume into three thematic sections: I. Call Me Black Woman, II. African Genesis, and III. Love Songs. While

each section articulates particular African-American experiences, each of the three sections is centrally rendered from Cooper's stringent black feminist perspective.

Section I, with its seven poems, opens appropriately with a kind of acknowledgments to leaders of modern African-American poetic tradition. In "Poet's Dream," Cooper pays homage to Baraka, Sanchez, Gwendolyn Brooks, and Carol Rodgers, who dared to articulate and expand creative possibilities and vision for black poets, for black people. "Blues Song" is a black woman's realization that the blues is not always someone else's song of trouble and heartache. This woman, thinking herself removed from a "lowly" world of problems and pains, feels insulated by her education and economic status. In a matter of moments, her world changes without her control and she too learns to sing the blues, assuming her rightful place among those who have loved and lost and survived. While other poems in this section deal with failed romance and subsequent individual recovery ("Change of Seasons"), or a black woman's desire to have a relationship with a man who perceives her as a woman and as a complex human being, "not as a challenge / to be overcome / or a sex object / to be taken / or a mistake / to be justified" ("Conversation"), perhaps the most poignant in this section is one that expresses a woman's confusion before, during, and after an abortion. Debunking pro-life myths about the sacredness of children's lives in our society, the poem reminds us that as a nation we are not committed to protecting, nurturing, feeding, and sheltering unwanted children. As this female persona observes national apathy toward children's rights to a quality standard of life, she moves from confusion to affirmation that she has chosen what is right for herself and her unborn. Such a poem invariably affirms a woman's right to control her own body, to control her own life.

The eight poems that comprise Section II offer and urge for a conscious return to Africa—its history, its culture, its spirituality, its cultural and aesthetic rhythms—as a bridge to understanding African-American identity in the present. Such a return to Africa—"the mother of all life" and "the birthplace of humankind" ("African Genesis I")—aesthetically and spiritually affords a beauty and a richness that sustains African-Americans in their struggles against American racism and its varied manifestations. To return to Africa and Afrocentrism is, according to Cooper, to recognize

the reality that African-Americans' "yesterday today is tomorrow / tomorrow today will be yesterday / [African-Americans'] present is inseparable from [African-Americans'] past ("African Genesis III: A Plant Is Only as Strong as Its Roots"). In a move to connect contemporary African-American music and popular culture with past African history, Cooper, in "Hannibal's Rap," offers a brief history lesson à la Rapper's Delight. Cooper urges that Hannibal—"Prince of Africa / Conqueror of Rome / [and] Protector of Carthage [247-183 B.C.]"—assume his rightful place along side of "Napoleon and [other] geniuses of war." Connected also with this conscious cultural move to legitimize rap as an artistic form is Cooper's attack on reefer-smoking, crotch-grabbing, black-female bashing and exploiting, violence-thirsty, black male rappers who think themselves today's black revolutionaries ("Ode to a Would-Be Revolutionary"). Amiri Baraka's "SOS" seems a model for Cooper's "Calling Black People," a poem that warns blacks against the political, personal, and cultural dangers of economic gain and assimilation that conspire to drain the black community of its life source. Cooper maintains that material success and career climbing can threaten political and cultural awareness necessary in recognizing and combatting racism. Additionally, "Hey Negro!" recalls June Jordan's "Okay 'Negroes'"; both are wake-up calls for blacks to empower themselves economically and politically. Cooper's poem goes beyond that call to warn against capitalist greed when a national war is on to destroy black community and African-American identity.

Section III, with its thirteen poems, is a black woman's feelings about loving, being loved, and being in love. Cooper here basks in the often neglected and often stereotyped sensuality and sexuality of black people. As does Paul Laurence Dunbar in the 1800s when he legitimizes black people in love ("A Negro Love Song"), Cooper brings black sexuality and sensuality into a public forum not for debate but for affirmation and the debunking of racist myths. In this section, Cooper shows the depth and complexity of those who learn the lessons of love, particularly a woman who finds a satisfying and sustaining relationship with a man, a relationship based on mutual understanding, mutual tenderness, mutual hip-grinding and caressing, mutual respect—mutual loving ("Thank You"). An interesting dimension of loving is presented in "Love Poem II," which expresses the anxieties of losing a love that is so

all-consuming and satisfying, a love that seems too good to be true. In a celebration of black sisterhood, Cooper, in "Dear Sistuh," addresses another black woman who has loved and lost. The persona's advice to this woman is to become her own warrior, one who is not totally dependent upon love or a man for self-validation. A clever piece, "Gone and Found Me an Angel," answers Aretha Franklin's Motown hit, "Angel," with details of a black woman's finding in her black man an angel, one with "nappy black hair, / a matching moustache and beard / . . . warm, smooth tan skin / and a pair of the deepest, darkest most loving brown eyes / i have ever looked into." Other poems affirm sexuality as a vital part of a satisfying and sustaining romance ("Kinda Funny" and "Love Songs"). This section includes the heartache and desperation of a woman whose garden of romance refuses to grow no matter what she does to cultivate it ("Love's Garden"). And while romance is central to this part of the volume, Cooper does acknowledge that a woman's selfhood need not and cannot be solely defined in the context of being involved in a romance. Only through personal feelings of wholeness can any partner contribute fully and unselfishly to a whole relationship that satisfies beyond the moment ("Spaces"). And Cooper does not abandon a black male's perspective in her revelations on black womanhood and romance; she includes a poem, "Greetings My Love," written by a deceased fellow black male poet and friend, Vernon E. Douglas. Douglas luxuriates in the rhythms, the passion, and the beauty "of two together / [black] individual hearts merged / into / a mellow movement / of smooth colors / soft touches." In a poem dedicated to this friend, "To Vernon," Cooper remembers the closeness of their connection artistically and spiritually, a closeness that neither time nor death will diminish.

In "Call Me Black Woman," the title poem, Cooper accentuates the diversity—physical and spiritual—that is black womanhood. With lines and sentiments that recall Ntozake Shange's choreopoem, *for colored girls who have considered suicide / when the rainbow is enuf*, Maya Angelou's "Phenomenal Woman," Mari Evans's "I Am a Black Woman," and Langston Hughes's "Harlem Sweeties," this poem and this volume give voice to black female experience, affirming complexity, selfhood, love, sexuality—affirming life. Cooper proves that her personal experiences as a black woman can be as particular and/or as universal (i.e., women's experiences, women's

experiences with men) as she allows. She also shows that a black woman can calmly and emphatically articulate her experiences with black men without antagonism and condescension. Ultimately, Cooper demonstrates in her first published volume that the complexity of human experience can be accessible to those both inside and outside that experience.