



The Black Intellectual Tradition and the Great Conversation with Dr. Anika Prather

Lesson 15: Black Classical Educators: Anna Julia Cooper, Nannie Helen Burroughs, Mary McLeod Bethune and Others

Outline:

Black Classical Educators and Other Forms of Chariots

- Classical education carried their minds to freedom. Their minds were set free, transported from this dark world. They were transported out of the veil of darkness and oppression to this magical space where there was no color line (Du Bois).
- Our world is so scarred by racism. It is so pervasive even in our schools. The classics transport you out of this world where color defines who you are into a world where character, truth, and beauty defines humanity.

Why was classical education so important for the newly freed people?

- There are stories of slaves stealing a book from their masters.
- They would also “steal” classical education through the master’s children. George Moses Horton was a slave who exchanged poetry for the slave master’s children’s books. He became a great poet.
- Enslaved people were taking in classical education.
- How do we prepare these people (many of whom were illiterate) to live in society?
 - Abraham Lincoln joined together with Freedman’s Bureau and some churches to set up schools for the newly freed people.
 - Some people think they were just teaching freed people to assimilate.
 - There may have been people who used it to assimilate. Many were just trying to learn to read and count their own money so they could take care of themselves.
 - These schools were rooted in the classical tradition. That’s why so many of our early civil rights leaders have a classical influence in the way they fight for liberation.

Ann Julia Cooper

- She felt that classic texts held the stories that black people can learn from, that we could glean something from these texts.



- Her philosophy of education was totally classically inspired.
- Anna Julia Cooper longed to learn Greek, Latin, and to read Aristotle.
- She wanted to take the gentleman's course. She became so good at it, that they used her as a junior teacher, to teach other newly freed people.
- She went on to Oberlin University to get a B.A. and a Master's in math.
 - They separated men and women at Oberlin too. She begged again to be allowed to take the gentleman's course. This time she took the gentleman's course and she invited other women to join her.
 - She was a Latin scholar and teacher who believed in reading the classic texts in order to learn the culture, philosophy, and language necessary to progress blacks in America.

Du Bois and Booker T. Washington

- Du Bois thought that our progress was rooted in our minds, the exercise of the intellect. He wanted black people to obtain scholarly jobs in academia.
- He felt the pursuit of black people should be higher education through classical studies.
- Marry classical studies with civil rights.
- Booker T. Washington thought that black people should work in trades.
- Du Bois thought the knowledge of the classics should be used to fight for civil rights.
 - There were those who learned it to have a tool to fight for liberation.
 - There were those who learned it to distance themselves from their people and look down on their people (Du Bois was sometimes accused of this).

Nannie Helen Burroughs

- She was a student of Anna Julia Cooper.
- She started the Harriet Beecher Stowe society devoted to studying literary works and the works of the canon.
- She became a teacher after college. She founded the Nannie Helen Burrough's school. There was a museum to Nannie Helen Burroughs in the middle of the school, and Latin was on the list of courses the students had to take.
- Why did they feel that Latin was so important? Latin is not about embracing Western civilization, it is about getting the tools necessary to define the words of the English language. Nannie Helen Burroughs wanted her students to be able to read and write to work toward the liberation and civil rights of the African American people.

Howard University

- Oliver Howard was the head of the Freedman's Bureau.
- Howard was founded in 1867 with a classics department.



- Thurgood Marshall graduated from Howard, he was the first black man to serve on the Supreme Court. He won Brown vs. Board of Education and ended segregation.
- Studying classically was a part of embracing more of who we are, rather than assimilation.
- Phillis Wheatley's classical study brought her to the stories of Ancient Africa. We lost sight of who we were when the classics were taken away from us.
- Studying those texts were a sweet chariot, they carried our minds away from inferiority and oppression to a place where there is no color line.