



Bio: Brittney Cooper is Assistant Professor of Women’s and Gender Studies and Africana Studies at Rutgers University. She is a Black feminist theorist who specializes in the study of Black women’s intellectual history, Hip Hop generation feminism, and race and gender representation in popular culture. Her forthcoming book *Race Women: Gender and the Making of a Black Public Intellectual Tradition* (University of Illinois Press) examines the long history of Black women’s thought leadership in the U.S., with a view toward reinvigorating contemporary scholarly and popular conversations about Black feminism.

Dr. Cooper is also a sought after public speaker and commentator. In addition to a weekly column on race and gender politics at Salon.com, her work and words have appeared at the New York Times, the Washington Post, Cosmo.com, TV Guide, the Los Angeles Times, Ebony.com, The Root.com, MSNBC’s *Melissa Harris-Perry Show*, *All In With Chris Hayes*,

Disrupt with Karen Finney, and Third Rail on Al-Jazeera America, among many others. She is also a co-founder of the [Crunk Feminist Collective](#), a popular feminist blog. In 2013 and 2014, she was named to the Root.com’s Root 100, an annual list of Top Black Influencers.

Dr. Brittney Cooper is a proud alumna of Howard University (class of 2002) and proud native of North Louisiana.

An Interview with Brittney Cooper

Conducted by IWL Leadership Scholars Meera Murti and Bhupali Kulkarni, Class of 2017

Edited by Alexandra DeMatos

Meera Murti and Bhupali Kulkarni: Can you talk to us about your work and explain what it’s like day to day?

Brittney Cooper: My primary job is as Assistant Professor of Women’s and Gender Studies and Africana Studies here at Rutgers. I am a black feminist theorist and I do a couple of different things. I just finished a book titled *Race Women: Gender and the Making of a Black Public Intellectual Tradition*. It’s about how black women come to be knowledge producers and intellectuals. It tracks the history of black women intellectuals beginning in the 1890s and moving forward to the 1970s. I’m figuring out how black women came to be public thinkers on major questions affecting black people, particularly, when they didn’t have access to college education. I also do a lot of work in hip hop and popular culture. I think quite a bit about black women’s lived experiences, and cultural representations of black girlhood and womanhood in the late 20th century and early 21st century, in relation to hip hop. I call myself the “hip hop generation feminist.” About 6 years ago, a group of professors, activists and I started a hip hop feminist blog site, *The Crunk Feminist Collective*, which riffs on crunk music, a type of hip hop

that you typically hear in the south. Those are the areas that I work on; all of them are connected because they are all very invested in the ways black women produce knowledge, what it means to be a black women in different moments in history, and the places that black women do that type of work. For instance, in the 19th and 20th century they were doing it a lot in autobiography and organizational work. In the late 20th and 21st century we do it a lot through blogs, television, and music among other things. I also do a lot of writing for popular venues.

MM & BK: What are some of the challenges that you face as a women in your field? What have been some of your successes?

BC: I've always wanted to be a teacher. The one year that I was out of school between undergrad and graduate school I taught 7th grade and that's not the type of teacher that I wanted to be, because teaching 7th graders is a calling and not mine. I like working with young adults who are on the cusp of figuring out who they're going to be in the world and being able to play a role in shaping that, at least at an intellectual level and maybe politically. I was the first in my family to graduate from college and go on and get a graduate degree. Since then, my mom has gone to get her graduate degree, and two of my cousins have their master's degrees. I claim inspiring my family as an accomplishment. I'm thankful to be able to work at Rutgers and have awesome students, but I'm also always cognizant that I come from a working class background and that lots of folks that look like me and come from where I'm from don't get the opportunity to work in really prestigious institutions such as this one and do the work that we do here. I consider it an accomplishment to be here and work with students every day and do what I feel really passionate about doing. I decided when I was 23 that my dream job would be getting paid to read, write, and say provocative things and get people thinking and talking –and that's the job that I have! There are challenges that come with that, and certainly a professor's work is really hard. A lot of times I don't think folks agree with that. They think we have a lot of extra time. But we're thinking of things that we can say in class, we're grading papers, trying to make sure that these institutions remain places where good solid education happens and that everyone has a great experience beyond the classroom as well. All that work happens with good professors who are invested in the life of the institution. I face a lot of challenges because I'm a public writer. I just got a piece of fan mail. I get all kinds of mail here, but sometimes the police have to come and collect my mail, because it's often not fan mail. I get a lot of hate mail because I write a lot about recent gender politics and popular culture. Those are tough topics. Also, some folks have a general idea what a professor is, usually they think old white man, gray haired, very distinguished looking –they don't think young black woman. So there's this question about authority...that you always have to establish authority. If you're young, if you're a woman, if you're black, or if you have a disability, it challenges your authority. I want to talk to working class folks about feminism, but academics may not consider that serious scholarship. Then you

have to do additional work to prove that you're both a serious scholar and one that cares about people outside of institutions. So I feel like I'm always trying to negotiate those challenges.

MM & BK: What kind of leader would you consider yourself to be or what is your leadership style?

BC: I'm a collaborative leader. I get a lot of my notions of leadership in what's happening in the current Black Lives Matter movement where we say "Look, we're not a leader of this movement; we're a leader for movement." I think that all people can lead. I think that all folks have something to say. We lead based upon our gifts, talents, and skills. In my life, when I've had opportunities to "be a leader," I like doing it with other people. I like rolling around with powerhouse women. That really makes me happy. I see leadership as rolling with a crew of people who work together and work in collaboration. I'm not interested in leadership as a way to grab power or gain power. I am interested in influence. I think influence is a thing that you earn by doing good work that's beneficial to people. I don't believe in top down leadership. I definitely believe in bottom up leadership and leadership *with* people rather than *for* people or *of* people. In the age of Twitter, people think that they're leaders because they have lots of followers and I don't think that. I don't want followers, it's too much pressure. I'm interested in working with people who are also trying to figure it out. We have some shared principles around social justice, being against patriarchy, around being antiracist, for instance. I'm interested in the notion that ideas have changed the world and that what I owe to folks, is to do my work and to help create ideas that are useful and liberatory. I think that that's a kind of leadership, but I'm not interested in leading organizations. I think leaders should serve people. I think that what leaders get to do is to zoom out and have a perspective about what people need and get the opportunity to strategize how to give people the things that they need to live their full lives and full selves. I think that some leaders think that it's like "oh, I get to tell people what to do and I enjoy that," and I don't like people telling me what to do, so I don't tell other people what to do. Instead I think, what I want to offer to people are things that can be useful for the things that matter to them. For me, that kind of model, a feminist collaborative process driven by a democracy – it's a way that we get to critique patriarchy in a hierarchal system to build superstars.

MM & BK: How was the Crunk Women Feminist Collective formed, and what needs had to be filled?

BC: We were a group of friends who started calling ourselves the Crunk Feminist Collective when we were in grad school. We were students of color; black, Latino, and South Asian. We were going to class and folks were saying really inappropriate things. We would give the side eye to people, and then we would leave class and go have dinner parties with each other. This was happening at the same time as we were all taking these feminist classes and claiming feminism and also going to the club in Atlanta during the height of the ‘Crunk era’ in hip-hop and we were like “we’re not going to give up our hip-hop just because we’re feminist because we’re both!” It was a way for us to think about the cultural resources we had. And we had a critique of hip-hop and its sexism and misogyny but we also got great joy from it too. We wanted to retain that and also retain a particular kind of justice politics. So one night at a party, we were like “oh, we’re crunk, we’re feminist!” So we started calling ourselves the Crunk Feminist Collective and then several years after that point when we all had graduated and were professors, Susana Morris and I (Susana teaches at Auburn University) called me and said “let’s get the CFC going again.” We started a blog because it’s a way for us to have that same perspective and be a support system for each other. At the time, we were a collective of about 15 people; it’s not as large now. We were a collective of black, Latina, and South Asian folks, writing and talking together about issues in popular culture or issues in our personal lives and policy matters. It allowed us to really have a set of conversations with folks that weren’t overly academic. We could just talk like how you talk to somebody when they come over to your house and y’all are just hanging out as opposed to a formal classroom of feminists.

MM & BK: What do you feel the relationship is between grassroots organizing and academia? How do you make your writing accessible to everybody who is interested in it?

BC: We don’t have Women’s and Gender Studies and Africana Studies, which are the two departments that I’ve always had academic jobs. We don’t have those departments in universities outside of a culture of activism; those are departments that exist in the university because people picket it and boycott it and demand that institutions create spaces for us to have those conversations. That’s true of American Studies and it’s true of Ethnic Studies. These are departments and disciplines that were born out of politics and cultures of protest; I don’t understand my life in the institution outside of a demand for the right to be here. So because of that, I am committed to staying in the streets as much as I can. I do this work because I think feminism can change people’s lives. Being antiracist can change and save people’s lives. I see myself as a scholar activist; these things are connected. I think that when I step into a classroom, that’s a kind of intellectual activism. It’s affirming the right of students to be there, the fact that the experiences of women of color are worthy of academic study. When I’m in the streets, I’m saying that there’s power in protest and in standing in solidarity with folks who are willing to put their bodies on the line, so that the police treat us with dignity. It doesn’t matter if I have a fancy

job and a bunch of degrees if I can't walk down the street safely and be assured that an encounter with a police officer won't end up in a really tragic scenario. That kind of work happens in the streets, so I think these things go together. We get to co-create knowledge with folks in the streets, that's liberating for people. The other reason I try to stay connected to life outside of the academy is because it's just healthier. Kind of what we do here is odd, and staying connected to folks who are less cerebral and not as invested in being cerebral is important, just to stay grounded and balanced. But also because I don't want to lose touch with where I'm from and I want to make sure that the work that I'm doing is useful to people. As a writer, I'm really concerned about accessibility. Every single thing I write is not accessible for general public; I write more traditional, academic articles when I have something to say. If my cousins or family members happen upon something I've written academically, they're like "I had to pull out my dictionary but it was really good." Part of what it means to be a scholar is that I'm in communication with other scholars who've done particular kinds of work. There's a base of knowledge from which we communicate with each other and I'm happy to do that. But a lot of times I just want to have general conversation. The thing that I've learned about writing accessibly is unfortunately people assume that means that you "dumb it down." To be a public writer and scholar is to have great respect for audiences. I respect people and I respect that folks want to be intellectually engaged and that if you are respectful of folks' desire for a substantive exchange, then you can find a way to talk to all kinds of people and then the big words that we use are not necessarily the things that we need to say. A lot of times we adorn language because we want to perform a particular kind of intellectual prowess. You don't always have to do that to get your point across. I think that the mark of a good writer is someone who gets their ideas across clearly so I try to stay mindful of those things.

MM & BK: You were on a panel called "Moment or Movement: Activism and Social Justice in the Digital Age," and you talked about the significance of digital activism. Have you seen a change in the way that organizing happens with the prevalence of social media in your career or your lifetime?

BC: Yes! Absolutely; I would say that digital organizing allows things to happen much faster because ideas circulate more. It's wonderful and a challenge; it's wonderful because it doesn't take us as long to make certain things happen as it used to. If we need to have a protest or if we need to have a quick response then we can just say "show up here!" at whatever time and people show up because massive amounts of people have access. The difference is digital tools help us to mobilize people very quickly. They're not necessarily the best tools for helping us to organize people because organizing is a different process. Organizing is a process of building relationships and getting investments from communities to stay with particular fights for the long haul. Organizing is a longer and more sustained, slower process. The folks who criticize this

don't recognize that the ability to mobilize groups of people is huge in terms of moving politics forward. For example, in 2013 the Texas State Senate tried to pass the massive anti-abortion law, and it was because of social media that they weren't able to do this. This law was unable to go forward because of this massive connection between people on the ground and people on social media. Mobilizing raises consciousness and gives support. It allows these things to have visibility. We see it especially right now in Black Lives Matter. We know what happened to Michael Brown because of Twitter, not because it was on the news. Some people may get discouraged believing that people are not fully engaged through social media, but I think it means something. Most mass movements don't have thousands of people in them. Usually they are just the work of a committed few. That is especially true for civil rights. I know it may not look it on TV but keep in mind that the March on Washington was a mass mobilization effort. All of those people didn't go back home and get involved in organizations. So we have both the same old problems and some newer issues. I am largely heartened by what I see on social media, I think young folks deserve lots of credit for basically making Twitter a medium of revolution when that's not particularly what it is for.

MM & BK: Where are you in the process of your book?

BC: My book will be out sometime in the next academic year. It's based on my doctoral dissertation. In the book, I'm really interested in a couple of things. One is understanding the process by which black women became intellectuals. Black women have always been public scholars, but we only know the names of the black male scholars. We know names like W.B. Dubois, Booker T. Washington, Frederick Douglass, and Martin Luther King. There were women in all those different eras that were doing work as well. Part of it was literally a work of recovering these black women, and it's not that we just didn't know their names, we do – we have books about some of them, but we weren't talking about them as intellectuals. We were referring to them as activists, as organizers, and so I'm really trying to think about what it means to grant that black women are serious thinkers. Those women felt like they had to make a case as to why they were serious thinkers. If you read the things that they wrote they said, "We're serious thinkers on race issues, and people don't think we have things to say." I thought that was interesting and I wanted to think through that process. I think black women have rich histories of ideas that we've contributed to conversations that don't get taken up in black feminist theoretical conversations. A lot of black feminist theory is about current stuff happening in social justice, or are you intersectional, or do you have a radical social justice politic, and I think that matters and I'm down for that, but these women who didn't speak in that type of jargon were also saying "How can we make sure women are safe from rape and street harassment?" "How do we make sure that women can raise healthy families on their own terms?" "How can we make sure that black women can go to work, be safe and get a good wage?" Black women had a lot of things to

say about those topics, a lot of unique and innovative things. So my book looks at women like Mary Church Terrell, Anna Julia Cooper, Ida B. Wells and Pauli Murray, among others. The thing that I want folks to take away from it is being able to name Mary Church Terrell and then say, “Oh yeah! She gave us this notion of dignified agitation,” which is the way to think about doing protests. She would protest in her fur coat. She was very dignified, but also like “You need to desegregate these stores!” So that’s the name that she gave to what she did. I want folks to know these women and know these concepts that they created. I want folks to be able to associate black women with the ideas that they put forward and not just with the wonderful accomplishments they had.

MM & BK: Can you think of any important decision making moments in your life?

BC: Every day, we make choices about what kind of people we’re going to be and what our politics are going to be. If I’m any kind of leader at all, and again, by that I mean *influencer*, then I make choices about being willing to tell the truth. It’s risk to tell people the truth about the ways that they are colluding with power structures that are problematic. I have made a choice, that as it relates to the kind of person I want to be, the kind of scholar that I want to be, I’m going to tell the truth even when it makes people uncomfortable. Even if it risks me some of the things that I might want. When we tell the truth at institutions, they might not invite us back. And we offend people sometimes. Sometimes, we mess up relationships that matter to us when we tell the truth. So I think that’s a choice that I make frequently – that I’m going to say the things that might upset folks.

MM & BK: What was college like for you? Can you give us advice on how to do college right?

BC: I went to Howard University, an HBCU in Washington DC. College was where I found my crew. This is a very important moment to do that. It’s a time to figure out what you’re passionate about, and what kind of life you envision for yourself. But for me, the things that I remember most professionally and academically, is that I learned to be a good writer in college. Being a good writer can get you access to all kinds of things, that aren’t just about being in English or in the Humanities. Being a good writer and a good communicator is important. I learned that to be a good writer, you had to read a lot. College and grad school gave me the opportunity to do that. The biggest thing I learned is to trust your own process. Be patient with your own process of growth, development, and with your ideas. You don’t have to have everything figured out

already. Be patient, gracious and kind with yourself. Shit is hard! A lot of the things that you want to happen are going to happen much more slowly than you want but that's because there's a process of becoming so that you can handle things when you get there. The other thing I would tell you too is making sure that the career that you're choosing is really the one that you want because a lot of students, particularly students of color, get pressured to be doctors and lawyers. We have lots of folks who are miserable in the path that they've chosen. And I just think that life is too hard to be miserable at your work. Just know that everything you want to do, if you're working hard, if you're putting in the work to be good at it, you have the right to be there. You're good enough. I think women, particularly women of color, sometimes struggle with "Am I really good enough for this?" And have lots of, what we call, "Imposter Syndrome." And they feel like "Other people are better than me. And I don't know if I can..." There's all this confidence stuff, so I'm a big proponent of knowing that you are good enough. And knowing that, even if you don't know everything, no one knows everything! It's just another opportunity to learn.

MM & BK: Thank you so much.

BC: You're welcome, it was a pleasure.