

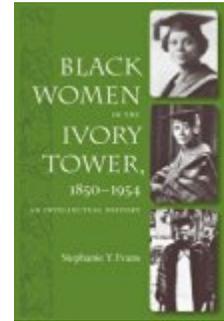
H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Stephanie Y. Evans. *Black Women in the Ivory Tower, 1850-1954: An Intellectual History*. Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2007. xiv + 275 pp. \$59.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8130-3031-9; \$24.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8130-3268-9.

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How Black Women Shaped Higher Education

The lives and educational philosophies of Anna Julia Cooper and Mary McLeod Bethune are anchors for Stephanie Y. Evans's study of black women in higher education from 1850 to the dawn of the civil rights era. Evans views the very different lives of these pillars of black womanhood as a key to understanding the first generations of black college women and their impact on academe.

Cooper, an intellectual who founded a school for adult learners in her own home, was an Oberlin College graduate with an earned doctorate from the Sorbonne, although she spent much of her career teaching high school. Her book *A Voice from the South* (1892) is touted by some scholars as the first black feminist text. On the other hand, Bethune founded a school for black girls that she grew into the co-educational Bethune-Cookman College, even though she never attended college herself. Bethune was a pragmatist who, like Booker T. Washington, often used a ghost writer for her speeches. She also borrowed educational ideas extensively from her mentor, Haines Institute founder Lucy Laney, and adopted the "head, heart, and hand" philosophy she absorbed while attending Scotia Seminary for Black Girls in North Carolina.

Choosing women with such divergent life paths would be problematic for a simplistic narrative of race uplift. Thus, the difficult task that Evans sets for herself is one of reconciling the disparate ingredients of black

women's academic work into a cohesive scholarly treatise.

Evans begins by stating that one of her primary goals in writing the book is "to challenge today's institutional leaders to increase educational opportunity" (p. 11). However, linking that worthy, but prosaic, objective to the purported first study that has "adequately traced black women's attendance in higher education" runs the risk of understating the intrinsic value of scholarship on black women's lives (p. 3). That said, there are many previously revealed fundamental truths in this book that are brought together and restated to good effect. They include confirmation of the awkward social position that black women scholars have continued to experience in both the black community and white academe, and the tension between these women's activism and their intellectual pursuits.

Sometimes Evans aims low, such as when she states a wish to show that black women have "contributed to human thought" (p. 193). Other times she has the higher motive of aligning her work with the "reclamation" agenda within black women's social thought (p. 66). Such a project, although proclaimed but not explained in detail here, is tied to the widely summoned "politics of respectability" that sought to restore the historically sullied name of black womanhood (p. 64).

The two parts of the book are divided into sections aptly entitled "Educational Attainment" and "Intellectual

Legacy.” Evans is interested in presenting individual stories as well as collective experience, and she moves between these two poles with relative ease. Using highlights from the autobiographical writings of women such as Fanny Jackson Coppin, Lena Beatrice Morton, and Pauli Murray confirms a central thesis in the book: that morality and an ethics of care for the community have been central to black women’s academic ambitions. Their writings reveal their elation and elevation as the “first” of their race and gender to prevail in formerly all-white academic spaces, as well as some of the personal travails they experienced, including rejection and ridicule.

African American women were often separated into less rigorous academic tracks. For example, at Oberlin College in Ohio, the only institution to graduate a number of blacks in the antebellum period, black women were initially confined to the “Literary Track” instead of the more rigorous “Gentleman’s Course.” While progressive in that day, the first black woman to graduate from Oberlin did so nearly twenty-five years after the first white woman graduated in 1841. Evans reports that at black institutions more gender-neutral admission policies prevailed and community-minded service was emphasized. Particularly in the South, that service orientation within a rigid Jim Crow social strata combined to frustrate the ambitions of many black collegiate women who aspired to enter fields other than teaching.

The conceptual framework of the book is an amalgam of several theoretical approaches that draw upon Jean-Jaques Rousseau’s *The Social Contract and Discourse on*

the Origin and Foundation of Inequality among Mankind (1762) via a synthesis of Charles Mills’s *Racial Contract* (1997) and Carol Pateman’s *Sexual Contract* (1988). The “standpoint social contract” that Evans cobbles into existence for her project has several contributors, not the least of which is Patricia Hill Collins’s pioneering *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* (1991). In establishing such a framework, Evans parses the definition of “scholar” and seems to use it interchangeably with “educator.” This dilemma is created, I expect, by the desire to expand the standard notion of intellectual activity, which has often neglected or discounted the productive work of black women in the academy.

Although more declarative than analytical at times, a lasting value of this multi-themed study is its digest of factual information about the long struggle for access to higher education and the quest for representation by black women. While contemporary discussions of black women in the academy tend to focus on their numerical advantage compared to black men, Evans reminds us that black women on average were thirty years behind black men and white women in earning degrees.

Black Women in the Ivory Tower has many such revelations about the hard road that black women have traveled in academia. It also opens the door a bit wider to the treasure trove of promising research that remains to be done in black women’s educational history. These opportunities await future enterprising and motivated scholars like Stephanie Evans.

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