

Champions of Freedom

*Black Women in the Ivory Tower,
1850–1954: An Intellectual History*

by Stephanie Y. Evans

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REVIEWED BY: MARYBETH GASMAN

In this carefully written book, Stephanie Y. Evans put forth two main arguments. First, that “black women’s educational history complicates ideas of what an academic should do or be” and second, “black women’s intellectual history can outline a more democratic approach to higher education” (2). She explores both the intellectual and activist contributions of the women featured in her book. Evans’s depictions of life in the academy for Black women, beginning long before the Civil War and extending to the current day, are vivid and at times gut wrenching. She cares deeply about these women, crafting engaging interpretations of their philosophies, struggles, and causes.

The book is divided into two parts. Part I is a reinterpretation of educational history in which Evans attempts to put Black women front and center. She is successful most of the time, but because of the lack of sources available, this is a difficult task. Evans draws from every source she can find, and in her words, “acts as a cartographer, creating a qualitative and quantitative map of Black women’s higher education” (3). In effect, she does what so many previous historians have not — she captures the difficult path toward enrollment, the experiences of these women once enrolled, and their successes both as students and out in the community as

Marybeth Gasman, Ph.D. is assistant professor of higher education in the Graduate School of Education at the University of Pennsylvania. Her research pertains to African American higher education, including *Historically Black Colleges and Universities* and African American leadership, philanthropy, and fundraising. She is the author of *Envisioning Black Colleges: A History of the United Negro College Fund* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 2007).

graduates. In particular, she delves deeply into the lives of six women: Fanny Jackson Coppin, Mary Church Terrell, Zora Neale Hurston, Lena Beatrice Moore, Rose Butler Browne, and Pauli Murray.

Although much of the book's focus is on Black women at historically White institutions, Evans does discuss the roles and experiences of Black women on Black college campuses. Relying mainly on secondary sources for the Black college sections and for the most part on Elizabeth Ihle's anthology *Black Women in Higher Education* for primary sources, Evans illuminates the mixed experiences of Black women.¹ She provides discussion on the Black female students at Spelman and Bennett Colleges, but of greater interest, given the scarcity of research, is her depiction of Black women at coeducational Black colleges. According to Evans, "for black coeducational colleges admitting women, administrative efforts to match student populations with course offerings were tumultuous at best (46)." In fact, when coeducational schools, such as North Carolina A&T University, had to make decisions that pitted the interests of Black male and female students against each other, the institutions would decide in favor of the males. In the minds of many Black male administrators, according to Evans, Black females were "expendable" and a distraction to male students (46). These gender-based tensions at Black colleges are rarely discussed in the history of Black higher education.

In Part II, Evans presents the philosophies of Anna Julia Cooper and Mary McLeod Bethune. As a guide to the understanding of these philosophies, she relies on Cooper's *A Voice from the South: By a Black Woman of the South* (1892) and Bethune's "Last Will and Testament" written in 1955. Evans is particularly interested in the ways these African American women used their voices to make changes in the United States. According to Evans, Cooper and Bethune are essential characters in the story of Black women in higher education because they both headed postsecondary institutions and promulgated educational theory. These women's ideas were in many ways prescient. For example, in discussing quantitative measures as the only indication of student achievement, Anna Julia Cooper argued that "standardized 'objective' testing as the primary means of assessing student learning" was flawed. In particular, she scoffed: "I wonder that a robot has not been invented to make the assignments, give the objective tests, mark the scores and—chloroform all teachers who dared to bring original thought to the specific problems and needs of their pupils (163)." It seems that the same comment could be made about the current government administration's views on teaching at the primary and secondary level. Likewise, Bethune championed the idea that community service and social responsibility were "core tenets of higher education" long before civic engagement became fashionable on our college campuses. Specifically, she believed that everyone, especially those affiliated with higher education, had a "communal responsibility" to "uplift the underprivileged and disenfranchised (184)." Of interest is the way in which Evans juxtaposes Cooper and Bethune's philosophies alongside those of other Progressive

Era thinkers such as John Dewey and W.E.B. Du Bois, noting that although Cooper and Bethune's ideas were more practical and useful, they did not command the academic respect of their male counterparts.

In the final chapter of the book, Evans examines the contributions of Black female academics in the post-*Brown* Era through the present. She highlights the "explosion" of scholarly books about Black women and also those theorizing the Black female experience both inside and out of the academy (207). Unlike most historical studies, Evans' book demonstrates the impact of the early African American female academics on the current research, pointing to the legacies of these great women. Interestingly, Evans is extremely honest in her depiction, stating that these women should not be looked upon as "genius-saints." Whatever their shortcomings may have been, Evans argues that these women's ideas and lives may hold the key to alleviating inequality, providing more culturally sensitive teaching, and creating opportunities for more informed service-learning (216). *Black Women in the Ivory Tower* is a compelling book crafted in innovative and unique ways. A welcome addition to any history course on American higher education or American history, it helps to complete the story of one of our nation's richest resources. 

ENDNOTE

- ¹ Elizabeth L. Ihle, *Black Women in Higher Education: An Anthology of Essays, Studies, and Documents* (New York: Garland, 1992).