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Black Women in the Ivory Tower, 1850-1954: An Intellectual History by Stefanie Y. Evans

Review by: Felicia W. Mack

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## BOOK/MEDIA REVIEWS

*Black Women in the Ivory Tower, 1850-1954: An Intellectual History*, by Stefanie Y. Evans.  
Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 2007, 275 pp., \$59.95, hardback.

**Reviewed by** Felicia W. Mack, *Berea College*.

Until now, there has not been a work that unifies the educational experiences of Black female collegiate pioneers. In *Black Women in the Ivory Tower, 1850-1954: An Intellectual History*, Stefanie Y. Evans accomplishes this as she chronicles the struggle of Black women who fought and won their battles for higher educational attainment within the White, elitist atmosphere of European-inspired intellectual and educational superiority. Drawing on her expertise in the fields of African American and women's studies, Evans uses social contract theory with intersections of race and gender to provide readers with a holistic understanding of what it meant for Black women seeking educational, political, and social equality from the dawn of the Civil War to the landmark decision in *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka* (1954). Additionally, the author offers comprehensive profiles of Black women such as Anna Julia Cooper, a former slave who graduated from Oberlin College in Ohio with both a bachelor's and master's degree, who later completed her doctoral degree requirements from the Sorbonne in Paris. Evans also chronicles Mary McLeod Bethune, founder of Bethune-Cookman College. Overall, this far sweeping narrative does not just examine their individual plights as unique occurrences specific to individuals but rather within the context of a contemporary lens, wherein similar issues of the past still plague women of color today.

The book is divided into two main sections. Evans sets the stage in her introduction with an overview of the significance and scope of her research. In the first section, she explores the educational attainment of Black women in academia through the use of both qualitative and quantitative data. The author's judicious use of maps and illustrations provides visual, geographic data on educational enrollment of Black women at institutions across the nation from 1850 to 1954. The book also contains a wealth of information from primary sources. Evans references the personal papers of her subjects found in collections scattered around the country in chapters such as, "Reminiscences of School Life: Six College Memoirs" and "I Make Myself Heard." In addition, she melds Jane Martin's *Reclaiming a Conversation: The Ideal of Educated Woman* (1985) with Stephanie Shaw's *What a Woman Ought to Be and to Do: Black Professional Women Workers during the Jim Crow Era* (1996) along with other seminal studies to validate her theoretical framework and premise that pioneer Black women scholars struggled both internally and externally to fully participate in the academic world. Her discussion on Mary Church Terrell reveals that before she graduated from Oberlin College and became the first female, Washington, D.C. school superintendent and co-founding member of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, she experienced sexism. For example, Evans discloses Terrell's reminiscing of how college friends tried to discourage her from taking Greek because it was "hard," and "unwomanly," and that men did not want to marry "women who knew too much." Evans points out experiences similar to these faced by many female college graduates.

The next half of the book is dedicated to exploring the educational ideologies and theories of Cooper and Bethune, since they served as presidents of Frelinghuysen University and Bethune-Cookman College, respectively. As educational theorists, they stimulated intellectual discourse and advanced research in the area of Black women's roles in society and at postsecondary institutions. Evans broadens the scope of her work with a discussion of the limitations of Cooper's and Bethune's theories. She, then, concludes her study by offering suggestions for degree attainment and faculty appointment of collegiate Black women at both predominantly White and historically Black colleges and universities. The author's endnotes give further insight on the

relevancy of the topic while the bibliography is divided into various subheadings that offer those interested in the topic facility to the research that contributed to the work.

*Black Women in the Ivory Tower* has minimal shortcomings. The last chapter offers a contemporary social criticism of the plight of Black women in higher education following the Brown decision. The author could have expanded on her views to include others. For example, she only offers sketches of prominent activists such as Septima Clark, Mary Fair Burks, and Jo Ann Robinson's academic careers. However, Evans does an excellent job weaving her subjects within the historical context of the times and relating the relevancy of their conflicts and achievements to contemporary issues faced by those who are socially, politically, and educationally marginalized.

Overall, *Black Women in the Ivory Tower* is a complete work that will appeal to those interested in the educational odyssey of African American women and those who study gender and race issues in education. The author insightfully reveals the obstacles and challenges African American women faced in over a century of struggles in their quests to acquire an education and advance intellectual thought. She also effectively compares and contrasts concerns between women of color from the past and present in their efforts to equalize educational opportunities both in degree attainment and faculty appointments.

## REFERENCES

Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas, 347 U.S. 483 (1954).

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*Closing the African American Achievement Gap in Higher Education*. by A. P. Rovai, L. B. Gallien Jr., & H. R. Stiff-Williams (Eds). New York: Teachers College Press, 2007, 212 pp., \$49.00, hardback.

**Reviewed by** Nancy Savenko, *Regent University*.

Alfred P. Rovai, Louis B. Gallien Jr. and Helen R. Stiff-Williams's edited book, *Closing the African American Achievement Gap in Higher Education*, persuasively outlines the theoretical basis for the gap in higher education institutional factors that help perpetuate it, and research-based strategies to resolve it. This book provides a fresh look at both the research and best practices regarding the learning characteristics of contemporary adult African American college students and the strategies that most effectively meet their instructional needs. Given the growing diversity of the multicultural base and the need for an educated workforce, American institutions of higher education, whether they are traditional face-to-face or on-line, must accept responsibility for and ensure the academic success of all students. Only by seeking awareness of relevant cultural issues can those in a position to influence student achievement minimize the multiple challenges that African American students face.

Rovai, Gallien, and Stiff-Williams, are all professors of education, and as a group, authored or co-authored several chapters. Collectively, they bring a multiplicity of knowledge, research, publications, and experience to issues pertaining to African Americans. Additionally, they have provided the readers with a wealth of information by inviting a number of African American scholars to contribute their insights, perspectives, and resulting solutions to this book. The author group is diverse and includes higher education faculty from historically Black, as well as, predominately White institutions, both public and private. For example, one chapter author is president of Langston University, a historically Black university. The author of another chapter is a professor who teaches courses in educational technology and distance education at the masters and doctorate levels and does research in the area of designing and teaching online courses.