

# Documenting the Struggles of African American Scholars in Higher Education

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Stephanie Y. Evans. *Black Women in the Ivory Tower, 1850–1954: An Intellectual History*. Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2008. 288 pp., \$24.95, ISBN 978-0813032689.

Melissa Kean. *Desegregating Private Higher Education in the South: Duke, Emory, Rice, Tulane, and Vanderbilt*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2008. 333 pp., \$55.00, ISBN 978-0807133583.

Deborah G. White, ed. *Telling Histories: Black Women Historians in the Ivory Tower*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2008. 304 pp., \$21.95, ISBN 978-0-8078-5881-3.

**T**hree female historians using different perspectives have produced well-written, well-researched, and well-edited publications that provide overlapping and intersecting conclusions on the subjects of race and higher education. In *Desegregating Private Higher Education in the South: Duke, Emory, Rice, Tulane and Vanderbilt*, Melissa Kean examines the presidents of the five private institutions named in the title and their challenges, struggles, and cre-

ativity in trying to sell desegregation to their decidedly opposed boards of trustees. Stephanie Y. Evans's *Black Women in the Ivory Tower, 1850–1954: An Intellectual History* and Deborah Gray White's *Telling Histories: Black Women Historians in the Ivory Tower* address the issues of black women in academia exclusively. The works of both White and Evans document the limitations that racism and sexism imposed on black women's access to higher education.

Kean has researched and written the less-examined history of the primarily southern white men who led the private southern institutions of higher learning after World War II and during the early civil rights movement of the 1950s. The story of white college presidents who understood that the tidal wave of approaching social protest would forever change their institutions provides a new layer to the history of postwar higher education. Kean's work focuses on the institutional leadership that was hampered by boards of trustees who could not or would not see the new social order on its way. The history of how Duke, Emory, Rice, Tulane, and Vanderbilt became nationally recognized elite institutions is informative. It adds another dimension to the southern civil rights narrative surrounding educational desegregation, which has heretofore centered on the crisis of secondary integration. It also explains the presidents' dilemma. Many were southern-born and understood the cultural and social bigotry of their boards but were also pragmatic enough to understand that the money, accreditation, prestige, and the national and international recognition they sought for their institutions would not come without desegregation. They faced the challenges of changing the minds of members of the boards of trustees and moving the institutions forward to integration

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while retaining their own positions. Kean notes that Duke's president, Hollis Eden, had perhaps the most difficult path to maneuver. Located in a state that became known for its African American college student activism, Duke was led by a cautious yet pragmatic president who held onto the concept of educational segregation while talking softly of those special African Americans who would be a credit to the school if allowed on campus. However, the board of trustees at Duke refused to engage in a conversation about integration. Kean deftly handles the rising racial temperatures in each of the five areas where the colleges are centered. Her depiction of African American communities in the 1950s and their slow movement toward orchestrated rejection of past social and legal injustices contrasts starkly with the institutions' refusal even to acknowledge that change is taking place.

Kean makes good use of the many documents available to reconstruct the story of the academic evolution and desegregation of southern, primarily white institutions of higher education. Interestingly, student reactions to desegregation on these campuses were often at odds with the views of the boards of trustees. For example, Kean explains that a survey of Rice students prior to the *Brown* decision found that students did not oppose admitting blacks. Many students, like those at Duke, were invested in changing the old social order and creating institutions where diversity, academic freedom, and intellectual growth were valued. They also wanted to be a part of a student-led movement and were not afraid to embrace change. Kean notes that, even as white institutions were angered by the 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* decision, it brought many white students the diversity they had sought. The unrelenting pressure from academic accrediting bodies and northern philanthropic organizations, combined with the threat of loss of federal funds and the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision, forced these institutions to abandon their policies of educational segregation. They reluctantly and sometimes creatively announced that they had done so without any coercion from outside forces. Kean's work details the difficult and deliberate maneuvers made by southern presidents of now-elite academic institutions to bring those colleges and universities to the reality that achieving national and international prominence came at the price of desegregation.

Evans's topic, black women in the academy, has been the subject of several scholarly publications. Most, such as Joanne Dowdy's *Ph.D. Stories: Conversations With My Sisters* (Hampton Press, 2008) and Lena Wright Myers's *A Broken Silence: Voices of African American Women in the Academy* (Bergin and Garvey, 2002), tell contemporary stories of persistent ivory-tower isolation, racism, and sexism. However, Evans's work presents a more complete picture of what educational attainment meant to black women from the pre-Civil War era until 1954. Evans presents an interpretive analysis of how succeeding waves of black women entering the academy became better prepared to handle the pressure of omnipresent racism and sexism. The author carefully uses primary sources and applies both qualitative and quantitative methodologies in documenting the number of degrees awarded to these trailblazers both before and after the Civil War.

Most significantly, Evans documents and interprets the intellectual history of African American women in the academy. She has produced a unique work that details not only their struggles but also their educational philosophies, scholarship, and research. These women's scholarship challenges the preconceived notion of the academy that black women were not capable of producing such works.

The educational philosophies of Anna Julia Cooper and Mary McLeod Bethune, two of the most highly regarded educators of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, are given the most attention. Both women felt that quality research and scholarship was of no use if not directed toward enhancing, improving, and advancing the conditions of people who were in need of improvement and uplift. Their philosophies allowed space for digestion, discussion, and debate. Evans notes that this depth counters the academy's refusal to acknowledge that black women scholars could or did produce research and scholarship worthy of review. Such belittling of their academic prowess did not deter Cooper or Bethune, who confidently believed that they could and did produce substantive work. They also did what their educational philosophies directed and applied their scholarship and research for the good of the community.

Evans's work contextualizes the struggle of African American female scholars as they struggled to survive and make a place for themselves in a hostile environment. She explores and mines their reflections on the racism, sexism, and ageism they encountered. However, this is not a work of victims railing against the unfairness of their situation. Her subjects are straightforward in telling about the challenges they encountered because of societal prejudices. At the same time, they are also clearly aware of their obligations as educated black women to promote social transformation.

White has solicited personal testimonies of African American women who have sought and obtained doctorates in a discipline long dominated by and regarded as the realm of white men. In *Telling Histories: Black Women Historians in the Ivory Tower*, the author has edited essays from historians who earned their degrees and entered the historical profession in the 1960s and later. These women would probably be considered the fifth wave of Evans's ivory-tower black women. Their presence is not uniformly seen as an aberration. They entered the pool of academia and the discipline of history without wearing the label of "the only," and they have been able to establish, albeit sometimes with great effort, a community of scholars to offer support. Their ability to place themselves in institutions and acquire appointments that their academic elders could only have imagined shows the change in the reception of black women in the ivory tower. Despite all of the changes, the unifying themes of White's and Evans's publications are the scholars' articulation of the isolation and the invisibility, both academically and socially, experienced in the academy. These stories share other similarities, as they depict late- and postmodern civil rights scholars' struggle to have their research taken seriously, obtain tenure, and receive promotions for which they are well-qualified.

Service was still the engine that drove educational attainment for African American women seeking doctorates. That

they chose a long-closed and highly territorial discipline assured that they would face difficulty in academic acceptance. However, unlike their predecessors in the discipline, their numbers were larger. Additionally, because of the fearlessness of Mary Church Terrell, Anna Julia Cooper, Mary McLeod Bethune and Frances Jackson Coppin, these later scholars were brave enough to become active historians.

However, in the discipline of history where these scholars, including the authors, teach, research, and publish, the establishment of their research interests has been difficult. This compelling work provides space for first-hand testimony about the building of African American women's history and the struggle to make it a legitimate field of study. The late 1960s saw a change in the way black students viewed their curricula, and history was attacked for its limited recognition of the contributions of African Americans, women, and other minority populations. The writers of these essays were or became activists as they sought to bring the experiences of African Americans, especially African American women, into the academic arena. Struggling to find room and respect for these new fields in the history discipline was not easy. Many scholars, especially but not exclusively those in

primarily white institutions, were counseled to become involved in legitimate historical research. The idea of specific fields of study for African Americans and African American women was not warmly received by history departments. The question of legitimacy was a continuing refrain and was joined by a chorus declaring the impossibility of finding primary sources, artifacts, or documents that would provide a foundation for conducting research. No longer new, these fields of study are now granted that hard-won, previously elusive room and respect in the history departments of major institutions.

Together, these publications play an important role in chronicling the struggle of African Americans for higher education. They expose the strategy of southern institutions to restrict the ability of African American men and women to secure higher education. They also document African Americans' determination and persistence to achieve educational attainment, as well as their belief and practice that higher education should be used to transform individuals and communities. Most important, they present and support Cooper and Bethune's argument that higher education is both a human and a civil right that must not be denied to any who seek it.

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