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Book Review: Black Women in the Ivory Tower, 1850-1954. An Intellectual History

Kathleen Sterling

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Black Women in the Ivory Tower, 1850-1954. An Intellectual History. Stephanie Y. Evans. 2007. Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida. 275 pp. (+xiv, notes, index). Illustrated, with photographs and maps. \$59.95 (Hardcover).

Reviewed by Kathleen Sterling¹

In *Black Women in the Ivory Tower*, Stephanie Evans attempts to draw common threads between Black women's experiences in higher education over a roughly hundred-year period. The dates 1850-1954 may seem a bit strange; however, they mark two landmark events in Black women's education: 1850 is the date that Lucy Stanton was awarded her diploma from Oberlin College, and 1954 is the date of *Brown v. Board of Education*. This range of dates is the focus of the volume, but Evans also provides some history outside of them.

After the Introduction, the book is divided into two sections, "Educational Attainment" and "Intellectual Legacy." The first section accounts for slightly more than half the book, and is relatively straightforward history, though with particular emphasis on a few extraordinary women. The second section is thematic, with chapters addressing "Research," "Teaching," and "Service," and a last chapter on "Living Legacies" which briefly addresses post-*Brown* higher education for Black women and provides the bulk of the analysis for the book.

In the Introduction, Evans describes the organization and orientation of her work. Her intent is to follow the directive for universities as stated by Mary McLeod Bethune, founder of a historically-Black college (Bethune-Cookman College): "investigation, interpretation, and inspiration" (2). This she combines with elements of Patricia Hill Collins' outline for feminist epistemology, particularly the use of lived experience and of dialogue, and an ethic of personal accountability and caring. She also stresses Collins' description of Black feminist thought, which emphasizes resisting the intersections of oppression to which Black women are subject. Lastly, she adapts John Hope Franklin's observations about how Black history has been written in the United States into a model of "waves of attainment" of access to higher education by Black women. These waves overlap somewhat and correspond to the antebellum period, the period between the Civil War and World War I, World War I to the *Brown* decision, and *Brown* until today.

Evans begins with the antebellum period, with particular focus on Oberlin College and a few of its graduates. Oberlin was the only college that educated a significant number of Black women before the Civil War, although at first the women were confined to less rigorous literary courses of study that did not confer Bachelor's degrees. Evans offers brief biographies of some of the earliest Black women graduates of Oberlin and their lives after college. Most of these women became educators themselves, primarily of black children. The next wave saw the rise of HBCUs (Historically-Black Colleges and Universities), and a general expansion of educational opportunity for blacks, both in these institutions as well as in what Evans calls Predominantly White Institutions (PWI). In brief but fascinating anecdotes, we also see how black women reproduced and reified the class structures that were working against them. This is one of the rare instances in this

¹ Kathleen Sterling is a Provost's Academic Diversity Postdoctoral Associate at Cornell University, in the Archaeology Program and the Department of Anthropology.

book where the women featured are not portrayed in an overwhelmingly glowing light, yet Evans does not judge these women negatively either. Evans offers six profiles of women from different waves, each using their own words as much as possible. Most of these women are not as well-known as they deserve to be; one who is quite well-known, Zora Neale Hurston, is portrayed in a nuanced manner that includes both her achievements beyond *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, as well as her failures. The last part of the first section of the book specifically addresses the attainment of doctoral degrees.

In the second part of the book, drawing across the waves to address themes, Evans uses the same women's words and histories as examples. It is in "Research" that Evans first writes about the strong role that Christian faith played in the academic and social work of many of these women, and where we see the first clear evidence of the racial pride that many of them espoused. In "Teaching" the most obvious lesson is that from a very early time Black women educators were espousing educational theories of engagement with students rather than the "banking" model and the importance of the student's entire educational environment. These views have gained a lot of currency lately, without any credit or reference given to these women. Lastly, in "Service" Evans looks both to women who became educators and those who did not, but who felt the duty to give back by fighting for social justice.

Evans success in achieving her stated goals is mixed. She does quite well with "investigation" and "inspiration," but interpretation falls a bit short. I would have liked to see more analysis, particularly to contextualize these women. Why did these women succeed while others did not? There are a few clues here and there—economic class and parents' educational status seem to be key—and many of these women belonged to sororities and social clubs that undoubtedly provided support for those women of the right economic and social class to join. The role of families, beyond these women's parents, is hardly addressed at all. We learn that most of them married within their educational class and had children, but the support or lack thereof provided by partners, siblings, and children is not addressed.

Also, the roles that black sexism and Northern and feminist racism played in undermining black women's opportunities in all walks of life are not well-known outside of the academic circles that address these issues. The surprise and anger many people showed when Brown University revealed the results of their research into how Brown profited from the slave trade is a good example of this. We may also ask ourselves if this type of research (on Brown and the slave trade) would have occurred, had the president of Brown not been a black woman. Evans does address these issues, but again, I would have liked to see more attention paid to these areas. This would be an ideal place to investigate the intersections of oppression that Collins has identified as central to black feminist thought.

The introduction and the concluding chapter are the strongest parts of this book, and could have been expanded. For instance, Evans does not always define her terms or explain certain circumstances when she first uses them, and the introduction would have been a good place to do that. There is a lengthy section about the overall development of higher education in the United States, and this would have been a good opportunity to explain such terms as "normal schools," especially since black women had more access to these schools early on than to colleges and universities. Most terms are described

somewhere in the text, but in some cases very late in the book; in a few instances, the final chapter provides the first full definition of certain terms. On a relatively minor note, the maps that interpret statistical data from other works were often unclear and the same information could have been presented much more clearly as a table.

As a Black feminist reader, I think I drew most of the conclusions Evans intended for her readers, but this might not be the case for readers who are not familiar with Collins' work in particular, or Black feminism in general. There are also many times when Evans drops very interesting hints to which I wished she had devoted more time. The most important of these hints is the way in which differences among black women are important to understanding who gained higher education and why. I have the impression that economics was the most important of these differences, but this does not account for how a woman born enslaved was able to rise so high. Skin color and "passing" are only briefly touched upon, but this could have been a good subject to problematize the ideas of racial pride versus the desire to pull away from the Black masses, and is yet another instance of the intersection of oppression for Black women. Also, many of the women Evans profiles obtained their degrees abroad, made possible only through certain factors including the economic wherewithal to live abroad and facility in another language, and which resulted in the qualifier of "American" being attached to their identities.

Evans' book is not proscriptive, but there are abundant lessons that can be drawn from it as we are reevaluating the roles of standardized testing, affirmative action, and poverty in education today. The time span this book covers, which in some cases may seem so long ago, is really the beginning of an unbroken history in which we are now living. In this sense, I can see this volume being of great interest in Education courses. The Introduction and final chapter could be very relevant in many courses with a Black feminist orientation, and the individual histories are very interesting. Evans' writing style is clear and accessible, and for the most part, the chapters of this volume can be read separately, facilitating their use in coursework.