

THE CONJURE WOMAN'S STORYBOOK: Scientific Tales of Divine Duties

Stephanie Y. Evans, PhD

www.professorevans.com

A "3-D NIA Statement for THE NIA STATEMENT OF PURPOSE PROJECT

www.NIASTATEMENT.net

Respectfully dedicated to my grandmothers, Mary Edmonds and Venella Byrd.

Every blade of grass has its Angel that bends over it and whispers, "Grow, grow."

The Talmud

Quoted in Sapphire's *PUSH: A Novel*

Part: I Haiku

Black women's ideas

Can help solve global problems

At least...they solved mine

Part II: Essay (abbreviated)

Activating the Functions of History and

Divining the Four Inspirational Elements of Black Women's Legacy

In a 1939 editorial titled "Functional History of Education," Columbia University Teacher's College Dean Carter V. Good called for an applied history of education. He wrote, "The 'seamless web' of history should be more than an almanac or chronicle of the unique events of the past; it has obligations for functional use by way of applying its data to current issues and problems." My work as an educational historian grounded in African American Studies and Women's Studies advances Good's philosophy of functionalism. I bring insights of historic Black women's experiences to bear on the current educational problems of college preparedness, institutional access, and curricular representation, problems which amount to a lack of voice or, as sociologist Charles Green argues, manufactured powerlessness.

The historical data I have chosen to collect is the history of African American women's quest for higher education between 1850 (when the first known Black woman's college degree was awarded to Lucy Stanton Sessions at Oberlin College) and 1954 (the *Brown v. Board of Education* ruling which overturned segregation laws). This history of attainment and the narratives of Black women's experiences can be applied to discussions about cultural identity, knowledge production, and democratic ideals. Specifically, I use this history to tell stories that will contribute to youth empowerment in individual, social, national, institutional, and international realms. For the past decade, I have taught mentoring classes designed to strengthen the pipeline between high school, college, graduate school, and the professorate. Mary McLeod Bethune said inspiration is an integral core of higher education. My students have inspired me beyond measure.

My work is a treatise of "functional inspiration": creative education as an alternative to violence and genocide. The following poem--intended as spoken word--offers an outline of my entry as a first-generation college student, experiences in the last 15 years in higher education, and the meaning I have derived from my presence in university life. The "3-D" structure (Haiku, spoken word, and essay) are the foundation of the *NIA Project*, my new online effort to mentor students nationally and internationally to develop a creative, and inspired, educational statement of purpose. I am in the process of writing a bibliographical essay to reference the contributing scholarship, but main sources are provided in an outline following the poem/essay.

Part III: A Spoken Word

THE CONJURE WOMAN'S STORY BOOK

Scientific Tales of Divine Duties, or a Parable about Right and Worthy Schooling

I am a storyteller. I tell stories of freedom and justice. My favorite stories are about school. In my life, school has been my salvation. In most countries school is a central path to freedom, so for any society to call itself just, I believe access to education is both a human right and civil right. But access without preparation can be a downright disservice. And preparation without personal fortitude is just a damn shame. Anymore, too many children are poked in the eyes by fingers pointed in blame. Regardless of whether it is the fault of parents, teachers, school boards, classmates, the kids themselves or bigger fish like bankers and politicians, too few kids can see school for the freedom key that it is. So I try to tell stories that will catch and keep the young folks attention and that will remind the older folks of their responsibility to guide the up-and-comings. Dang! Folks act like it's a monumental effort to open a book and an terrible inconvenience for someone to ask you to share a coherent idea. But despite all this, for me, school stories can be the most fun, funny, and beautiful stories about life.

I tell stories of the past in order to influence the future. I work to call a better world into being, so I have come to define my storytelling as conjure. 'Must be from all the time I've spent in Florida. As a conjure woman, I step mindfully between alchemy and divination. To a greater or lesser extent, both alchemy and divination engage physical, mental, and spiritual elements and *that balance* just may impact how well we understand these things called spirituality and human ecology: it seems to me (as James Baldwin used to say) that balancing head, heart, and hand are essential to growing a healthier society. So my voice is somewhere between the Yoruba Goddess Aida-Wedo and the chemist Professor Swallow Richards. Black women's educational history offers inspirational paradigms in the struggle to more effectively stabilize the interplay of autonomy, community, and order...or what Professor Williams calls law. Now *that* is a story worth conjuring. And, frankly, I think it is important to speak in defense of my conjuring name because a lot of stone-cold crazy imposters have tried to pass themselves off as conjurers. Those who know better, know better than to believe a story without proper citation--attribution, in this case, belonging to Black women. Like alchemy, conjuring is not meant for fools. With all due respect to St. John's trivium, I have my own rhetoric and I'll tell my story myself thank you. You see, it hurts too much to have other people's voices shoved down my throat.

I conjure stories of equality and equity. Black women, like many groups, have faced epic challenges in the struggle to secure education, so our stories have direct bearing on how folks truly understand freedom and justice...like how, precisely, the fact that all men were "created equal" inalienably binds our hands to treat them so. *Here, it is important to note that there is a difference between wisdom and education. Frankly, some educated storytellers who had never been on the wrong side of opportunity--or those now have the luxury of conveniently forgetting that they have been--talk a good game, but have not or do not do anything to bring about justice for all. Them is what we call educated fools. But for those who seek out ancient texts from different rainbows of people and who are willing to be wrong sometimes and withstand the arduous journey of dialogue instead of monologue, stories can guide the way to good schooling--"good schooling" being that which lit the fire for educational freedom in my enslaved ancestors bellies though they never, themselves, got the chance to read a book.* So, most importantly, Black women's narratives of

educational attainment offer a legacy of inspiration and instruction on how to simultaneously bolster personal accountability while also recognizing social responsibility.

In my work as a professor, I profess the centrality of four essential elements which emerge from historic Black women's articulations of educational struggle in our variant communities: 1) self-possession, 2) resilience, 3) structural empowerment, and 4) mobility.

- **Self-possession is like AIR.** For those formerly enslaved, self-ownership is no trifling matter. My power and my voice come from demanding space and time to *breathe*.
- **Resilience is like FIRE.** Like when Troy Polamalu makes a hit--he gives his heart in every play. Or like how the Black women who converged on MIT in 1994 came full force to punch Clarence Thomas dead in his chest and smack down the Congressmen who pulled the okey-doke with the circus hearings. My power and voice come from facing adversity and *nonsense* and still coming back full force with all of my heart--every time.
- **Structural empowerment is like EARTH.** It is not enough to be free by yourself. My power and my voice are grounded in the essential nature of community empowerment and I make full claim to rights of institutional power. I don't only consume knowledge, I *create* it.
- **And mobility, of course mobility is like WATER.** Having moved in Washington D.C., New Mexico, California, Germany, Illinois, Arizona, Nevada, Brazil, France, Italy, and Tanzania, I know the value of sipping water and wine in mixed company. Water seems to be the most relevant element; it is far more precious than Gold, but unfortunately, those who have the most gold, have the best water. But hopefully those with the most power will wise up and recall that water is no good if it is stagnant. We've all got to keep it movin'. My power and my voice come from knowing when, to sip, when to gulp, when to share, when to move, and when to be satisfied with simply staying still and deep.

These elements are my paraphernalia of conjure--micro, meso, macro, and global. The four layers of alchemic substance that I mix in my cauldron, carry in my bag, that I cook in my pot, and write in my books to cast spells. With these simple essentials I can ward off vampires, haints, bad luck, lazy students, gamblers, false prophets, psuedo-scientists, arrogant colleagues, and (most deadly of all) television pundits.

I study the chemistry of these four elements and conjure meaning to converse with saints and philosophers old and new. Although important for practical reasons, the *asiento* that I have just been granted from my institutional deans, means less than my ability to stand favorable when weighed and measured by the deans of old. Fortunately, historic Black women in the ivory tower have supplied skeleton keys (often hidden in dissertations) with which to approach ontology (being), epistemology (knowing) and axiology (juding/doing). No, I don't conjure stories of freedom and justice in isolation...good stories are best swapped. In fact, quiet as it's kept, I spend more time listenin' than I do tellin'. Any storyteller who pays attention knows that's how Miss Baker got all them SNCC kids to listen to her: she listened to *them*. Like the *Fundi* herself, I conjure with equal parts conviction (a dedication to speak), and humility (a dedication to hear). After all, rigorous scientific study requires both...and Zora wouldn't have it any other way. Speaking of Zora, I must point out that I am not 'tragically colored.' Like Dr. Franklin reminds us, Black history is not simply a tellin' of sorrow songs; I think it's best to tell all parts of the story--the good, the bad, and the ugly...even in those times when we've been the ugly ones. Sure, I have seen all five of the evil faces of oppression, and I know all too well that my culture has been dissembled. But, yet and still, my *main* aim is for my stories to inspire us all to be better, to be artists in all we do, no matter how serious the science gets. That's what Dr. Bethune said ...she's

the one who taught me to tell the truth to shame *any* devil who says that our best days are behind us. I am not romanticizing history. After all, Makeda was a wise woman and ruler of East Africa and she had great wealth and sought Solomon to question his worthiness. She was a lover of wisdom, but she also murdered her first husband...some people like leave that part out. History is inspirational, but one of the most inspirational aspects is the complexity of its characters.

So, I conjure Black women's educational and intellectual history around four elemental themes to provide balanced, functional models of education for sustainable teaching and learning. Miss Dunham, the high priestess of Vodon herself, wrote that holistic teaching requires that we teach people how to be humans, to teach societies to be social, and to teach professionals to be excellent. This is what it will take to get--and keep--a job in the global age: learning about self, communication, tasks, and innovation through every phase of your life. 'Diploma don't always mean you know something worth knowing. What I know is studying history gave me my power and my voice to conjure stories about coalesced physical resistance, stubborn intellectual growth, and grounded spiritual vibrancy. These stories are the living legacy of thousands of little-known educators of the Jazz Age who hitched their wagon to a star long before Black Power became a rallying cry to so gallantly decolonize the Ivy Leagues. These historic women, like the teacher named Blue Rain in Sapphire's novel *PUSH*, can help us all learn more about this thing called "higher" education.

I am a storyteller. I conjure stories of freedom and justice. My power and my voice function to tell beautiful stories. My favorite stories--sometimes the most artistically political and scientifically conclusive--are about school.

January 2010
SYE

Part III: Outline of Main Points

What? Functional History of Education: History can solve social problems
Problem: Powerlessness = lack of educational voice (access, preparedness, curriculum) [Carter V. Good; Charles Green]

So What? Holistic teaching & learning: Holistic education can give voice
Balance excellence & ethics

- *Excellence:* Provide structure for rigorous education (ecology, questions, competence) [Ellen Swallow Richards, Benjamin Bloom, Frederick Evers, et. al]
- *Ethics:* explore aspects of social justice education (humanization, socialization, professionalization)[Katherine Dunham]

Now What? Manufacturing Empowerment Inspirational models of empowerment
Black women's legacy provides example of gaining voice for self and others; (Self-possession, resilience, community empowerment, & mobility) Black women's educational and intellectual history gives example of gaining personal, social, institutional, and international voice and "manufacturing empowerment" [Anna Julia Cooper, Mary McLeod Bethune, and [Black Women in the Ivory Tower](#)]