Mary McLeod Bethune’s “My Last Will and Testament” and Her National Legacy

This African American woman from rural South Carolina developed into a leader who brought race and gender issues to the national agenda. . . . Her visibility, and her confident and dignified demeanor, contradicted notions of black inferiority. An important symbolic presence in national and international affairs, Bethune was one of the few members of her race and sex among the higher echelons of power and influence in the United States during the last decades of de jure segregation. She played a pivotal role in promoting and representing African American interests at the federal level and in establishing and enhancing black institutions. —AUDREY THOMAS MCCLUSKEY and ELAINE M. SMITH, *Mary McLeod Bethune: Building a Better World*

In Rex Barnett’s 1996 short biographical film *Mary McLeod Bethune: The Spirit of a Champion*, the historian Francine King of DeKalb College (now Perimeter College at Georgia State University) describes Bethune as a woman born with “three strikes” against her: she was a woman, black, and poor in the segregated Reconstruction South; but she was never defeated by any of her disadvantages, which emphasizes the intersectionality of gender, race, and class in Bethune’s formation. The film, which begins with a voice-over of Bethune stressing the importance of having faith in God and faith in oneself, establishes a linear timeline of her life, beginning with her birth on July 10, 1875, as the fifteenth of seventeen children born to poor, illiterate sharecroppers who were ex-slaves in South Carolina, to her death in Daytona Beach on May 18, 1955.¹
The film frames the famous story of Bethune accompanying her mother, a laundress, to the home of wealthy whites, being invited into their daughter’s playhouse, and having a book taken from her by the child because of the perception that blacks could not read, as Bethune’s early impetus to learn and to commit to education. This experience, which might be interpreted as a primal moment in Bethune’s racial awakening, aligns with and revises motifs in African American literary history, such as “the trope of the talking book,” which situates a failed primal encounter with reading as the catalyst for a black (and typically masculine slave) subject to begin the quest for literacy, which has also been linked inextricably to freedom.\(^2\)

This film’s narrative structure focuses on her birth in the years after slavery, links her to the continuing struggle for black freedom in the post-Emancipation era, and is useful to the extent that it describes the material conditions that shaped Bethune early in life, from economics to education, by acknowledging her experiences of picking cotton, making clear how education delivered her from a lifetime of fieldwork and opened the door to vast possibilities. Through a series of black and white photographs and videos, it visualizes the difficult work conditions for blacks within the southern agrarian economy in the years after slavery, along with horrors such as lynching. It pinpoints the geographic trajectory that Bethune followed early in life, beginning in 1882 with her experience as a small child of walking five miles there and back daily to attend school at Emma Jane Wilson’s Maysville (the spellings of the school and town are different; there is no “e” in the spelling of the school) Educational and Industrial Institute in Mayesville, South Carolina; her subsequent enrollment for seven years at Scotia Seminary in Concord, North Carolina; and her journey on to Chicago, Illinois, on a scholarship she won to attend Moody Bible Institute, where she was the only black among more than a thousand students, and did volunteering on the city’s South Side.\(^3\)

The film then moves on to an overview of Bethune’s earliest teaching experiences in the late 1890s, including appointments at Lucy Laney’s Haines Normal and Industrial Institute in Augusta, Georgia; work at the Haines Institute in Atlanta; and jobs at Kindell Institute in Atlanta and the Presbyterian Mission school in Palatka, Florida, before opening the Daytona Educational and Industrial Training School for Girls. King points out that Bethune felt compelled to bring black women’s plight to the forefront of public attention and focused on educating them to vanquish persisting stereotypes of black womanhood, such as being immoral, and in light of the belief that “if you educate a woman, you educate a generation.” The film underscores that Bethune

MARY McLEOD BETHUNE  41
established her school in the “worst section” of the segregated city, where most blacks lived, because of her yearning to educate girls. Furthermore, the film makes clear that Bethune’s early work in Daytona, such as lobbying wealthy white philanthropists for funding as she developed the school, including sewing machine company founder Thomas H. White and steel magnate Andrew Carnegie, was the foundation for cultivating alliances with powerful figures in national politics like President Franklin Delano Roosevelt.

These linkages illustrate how her experiences working as an educator in the U.S. South provided background that proved useful in her later work at the national level. The emphasis on these experiences for the first portion of the film, and an ending that emphasizes Bethune’s return to Florida and a visual of her obituary in Daytona Beach, where she spent the final year of her life, embed a circular narrative that poignantly registers the U.S. South as the primary foundation for Bethune’s later experiences and frames the region as her initial mission field, which helped season her for service at the national level. It compellingly illustrates how much her southern roots lay at the foundation in building her national legacy and in her development as a black woman who became a national leader. The story of Bethune’s birth in the rural South and perseverance despite the poverty into which she was born is not the conventional individual American success story, akin to Horatio Alger narratives of “pulling oneself up by one’s own bootstraps,” but a testament to how much the nation gained through her tireless work as a black woman who embodied the motto of the black women’s club movement, “Lifting as We Climb,” by using her platform to advocate on behalf of black Americans and struggle to end their oppression.

In 1895, the death of Frederick Douglass, the best-known black abolitionist of the nineteenth century, marked the end of an era in which he had emerged as a representative black man and a reigning black leader in this nation, whom, as Paul Laurence Dunbar mused in poetry, “all the country heard” “with amaze,” and who was dearly missed among black Americans, “For thy strong arm to guide the shivering bark.” Booker T. Washington was a former slave and founder of Tuskegee Institute who promoted the benefits of industrial education and who was favored by white philanthropists. W. E. B. Du Bois, the first African American to earn a doctorate from Harvard and a prolific scholar at Atlanta University, who eventually helped to establish the NAACP and edited its magazine, the Crisis, like Washington emerged as a primary black leader in the years after Douglass’s passing. Bethune’s central and profoundly significant role in African American national leadership has tended to be eclipsed by the emphasis on her black male contemporaries, such
as Washington and Du Bois, whose philosophies on education and strategies for dealing with race issues famously conflicted with each other and got more national exposure and recognition than her visionary model of educational leadership in Florida.

Mary McLeod Bethune’s establishment of the Daytona Educational and Industrial Training School for Girls in 1904 and Bethune-Cookman College in 1923; her leadership in the NACW and the National Council of Negro Women (NCNW), an organization that she also founded in 1935; and work as director of Negro Affairs within the National Youth Administration (NYA) established her reputation as one of the most persistent, hard-working, and effective ambassadors for black social and political advancement during the twentieth century. Bethune used her influence, especially during the interwar years and the Great Depression, to help hold the government accountable for developing opportunities for African Americans in areas such as employment and education. Her status as a national leader in the African American context was fully consolidated through her friendships with President Franklin D. Roosevelt and his wife, First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt.

In the words of historian Joyce A. Hanson, “The Roosevelts and other government officials seriously considered Bethune’s informed opinions.” Moreover, Bethune was a pivotal member of and the only woman on Roosevelt’s famous Black Cabinet, or the Federal Council of Negro Affairs, a group that advised the president informally on public policy. Paula Giddings aptly sums up Bethune’s contribution and her profound national influence in *When and Where I Enter: The Impact of Black Women on Race and Sex in America*, noting that “the contributions of Mary McLeod Bethune in the Roosevelt era are undeniable. And her unflagging concern for Black women achieved an earlier goal: Because of her efforts, women were counted among the new groups with legitimate demands that had to be considered on the national agenda. As a result, Blacks, both men and women, were better prepared to go beyond ‘separate but equal’ to demand integration in the nation’s mainstream, a demand that would be pressed as the nation entered upon a second world war.”

As co-editors of the collection of Bethune’s writings *Building a Better World* (1999), Audrey Thomas McCluskey and Elaine M. Smith similarly acknowledge Bethune’s significant and transformative influence:

This African American woman from rural South Carolina developed into a leader who brought race and gender issues to the national agenda. Through her tireless activism, she challenged the popular assumptions of most white
American, who maligned and stigmatized black women as “immoral scourges.” Her visibility, and her confident and dignified demeanor, contradicted notions of black inferiority. An important symbolic presence in national and international affairs, Bethune was one of the few members of her race and sex among the higher echelons of power and influence in the United States during the last decades of de jure segregation. She played a pivotal role in promoting and representing African American interests at the federal level and in establishing and enhancing black institutions. One national black women’s organization expanded under her leadership, while another launched an international agenda, promoting dialogue among women of African descent, and seeking to maximize black women’s political and economic clout. 

This assessment, like the film, acknowledges the path that Bethune journeyed in life from her birth in the rural South to her role as a leader and representative of black women at the national level. It highlights her agency in helping to unsettle the conventional stereotypical racist representations of black women through her self-fashioning in the public sphere and dignified and proud persona. It affirms the effect she had on black women’s lives, specifically through her commitment to promoting black agendas at the national level and to using her platform to advance issues affecting black women. Furthermore, McCluskey and Smith acknowledge Bethune’s status as a black woman national leader whose work and activism profoundly shaped the nation to the point that she became a symbol. Bethune was a vanguard leader in advancing the mission to make Washington, DC, a more democratic city, a mission that began with black women from the late nineteenth to the early twentieth century, a phenomenon examined by Treva Lindsey.

Bethune’s confrontation of conventional perceptions of black women by presenting a more empowering image of black womanhood was a central factor in her iconicity and in establishing foundations for her status as a model of national femininity in the African American cultural imagination, beginning during the Depression and continuing during her decades of public work, particularly once she became the only woman member of President Roosevelt’s legendary Black Cabinet, assembled in 1935 to provide advice on policies related to the African American population, whose members referred to her as Ma Bethune. Her contributions set foundations for the esteem in which she has been held in the decades thereafter. They were the foundations of her cultural authority to speak to African Americans at large and to frame them as a family.
Bethune’s “My Last Will and Testament,” published in Ebony magazine in August 1955, cemented her legacy in leadership and established foundations for the national monuments later erected in her honor. The elegiac tone that inflects Barnett’s film biopic from its beginning mirrors the mood that Bethune establishes in her final and perhaps most memorable piece of writing in the months before her death, framed to address an African American audience. In it, the weight of her mortality is palpable as she reflects on her legacy as a national leader and outlines “principles and policies” that she has cultivated through her “life’s work” and that she aims to leave behind for blacks. Bethune presents this essay as a prelude to “my autobiography which will record my life-journey in detail, together with the innumerable side trips which have carried me abroad, into every corner of our country into homes both lowly and luxurious, and even into the White House to confer with Presidents.”\textsuperscript{11} But this essay was to be the final significant piece of writing that she ever published.

While Bethune wrote prolifically and produced a body of writings that included multiple speeches, essays, statements, and letters in areas related to education, women, politics, and autobiography, this piece produced at the end of her life is the best-known work by her and has been most central in sustaining her legacy.\textsuperscript{12} It is a document that enshrined and immortalized Bethune as a national leader as it established foundations on which her legacy has continued to be reflected on and promoted. It cemented her reputation at this level more poignantly than any other piece of writing she ever produced, while establishing the groundwork for her lasting cultural influence. The essay is premised on Bethune’s national iconicity as a black woman and would have been inconceivable without it.

I find it compelling because of its literariness in addressing African Americans as a collective to reflect on their struggle for equality and also as the final capstone of the journey toward literacy that she had begun early in life. This penultimate work is all the more important because discussions of Bethune’s writing, including her autobiographical pieces, have primarily been limited to fields such as black women’s history, and its valuable implications for African American literary history have not been adequately acknowledged. In this chapter, I reflect on this document in its configurations as a literary and cultural text. I am primarily interested in how saliently it challenges conventional black and patriarchal, male-centered leadership models and positions a woman such as Bethune speaking to black Americans, though such
prominent platforms and high cultural capital were typically elusive for black queer women of the time, outside the world of popular culture and entertainment. Beginning with its title, the document draws on legal language. In constituting Bethune as a representative black subject in the African American context, it frames African Americans as a symbolic family while acknowledging the persisting exclusion of “the Negro” from the privileges of American democracy and underscores the importance of black youth to the project of black liberation, which accords with recurring strategies of black women’s representations as national leaders.

I build on this analysis to consider the will’s iteration and inscription of its content on the Mary McLeod Bethune Memorial, which visually and verbally draws on the performative dimensions of the original document and stages the main aspect of its core message related to young people in a public space in the nation’s capital. Bethune’s voice in the will and her visualization on the monument both reflect her leadership at the national level and the iconicity that she had attained in her lifetime, to the point of being regarded as a mother figure. While this script of Bethune, primarily circulated in the African American context, provided a radical counternarrative to stereotypes of black womanhood such as the mammy, its sacralizing of the maternal was no less premised on asexuality; she revises but does not fully unsettle the matriarch and was limited in sanctioning a heterosexist model of black family. I contrast my analysis in these two sections with a final one that draws on documents from House and Senate hearings held in 1982 and 1985 to examine the heated debates related to establishing the Bethune Council House as a national historic site and administering it under the auspices of the National Park Service (NPS), which threw into relief questions related to race, gender, and national identity, including Bethune’s legitimacy as a representative American woman. This archive is significant not only because of the testimonies it offers related to Bethune’s legacy, but also because it reveals the legal bureaucracy that the NCNW effectively navigated over a multiyear period in developing Council House as a national historic site and in struggling to secure federal support for the project, which built on earlier struggles to establish the Bethune monument. An examination of these earlier public monuments and tributes to Bethune is useful, too, at this point, considering the new statue in her honor scheduled to replace the statue of Confederate general Edmund Kirby Smith representing Florida in Statuary Hall in the U.S. Capitol.
“The Greatest of My Dreams”

In 1939, the concerted opposition of the Daughters of the American Revolution to the performance of the distinguished contralto Marian Anderson before a racially integrated audience at Constitution Hall illustrated the reach of Jim Crow to the nation’s capital. Their protest was symptomatic of a purist, nativist, racially exclusive view of American identity premised on whiteness and the otherness of the black body within narratives of the nation’s founding, including the racially exclusive fantasy of American family and notions of American selfhood, which they implied to be wholly incompatible with black women’s subjectivity. The intervention that President Roosevelt and First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt made to address this situation by staging a national platform for Anderson to perform before a racially integrated audience at the Lincoln Memorial challenged such exclusionary scripts, was a gesture that bespoke new possibilities for blacks to achieve full citizenship during the first years of Bethune’s work in Roosevelt’s Black Cabinet, and was a step toward the modern movement for civil rights.

On May 17, 1954, the Supreme Court’s ruling in *Brown v. Board of Education* legally ended segregation in public education and provided the most decisive challenge to the doctrine of Jim Crow, which had been institutionalized more than half a century earlier through the *Plessy v. Ferguson* decision in 1896. The “doll experiments” undertaken by psychologists Kenneth B. Clark and Mamie Clark, his wife, which revealed the detrimental consequences of segregated classrooms in undermining the self-esteem of black children, who consistently expressed a preference for white dolls and identified with and associated positive qualities with whiteness while associating negative qualities with the black dolls, played a vital role in influencing a decision that Thurgood Marshall, who was later appointed by Lyndon B. Johnson as the nation’s first black Supreme Court justice, had helped shape. This landmark ruling posed the most assertive challenge to Jim Crow that Bethune witnessed in her lifetime and suggested that an end to racial oppression was possible.13 This historical context makes it all the more noteworthy that Bethune’s “My Last Will and Testament” reminds blacks of their responsibility to “our children” and emphasizes the vital role that black youth will play in the world in the future. Published just over a year after this landmark ruling, it positioned her as one of this movement’s precursors and reinforced her status as a linchpin between the first generation of black Americans who had been born into freedom in the post-Emancipation South and witnessed the rise of Jim Crow and future
generations of blacks who would continue the struggle against it after her death. In this compelling essay, she passes the torch to those who will remain behind to continue the fight for freedom. This document’s publication at a time when the panic about communism remained acute was also significant for underscoring Bethune’s deep commitment to American democracy, countering unfounded allegations against her and an attack on her public image by the House Committee on Un-American Activities.

The publication of Bethune’s piece in Ebony magazine, whose audience was primarily African American, gave it a national platform and reinforced its development for a black readership. Ebony was founded by John H. Johnson in 1945 and had been circulating for nearly a decade by the time Bethune’s piece was published. The magazine was developed on the heels of Negro Digest, the first periodical publication that Johnson had introduced, in 1942, which was designed in the vein of Reader’s Digest, the compact American magazine that compiled and circulated condensed versions of stories from popular magazines for its audience. Negro Digest, however, featured stories related to African Americans and did not condense its features. Both enterprises were launched under the auspices of Johnson Publishing, which Johnson founded in Chicago in 1942, an enterprise that became the nation’s largest African American publishing company and the most successful manifestation of the black press in the twentieth century. A few years later, in 1951, Johnson introduced Jet, a weekly digest also aimed primarily at a black readership.

Ebony’s design and content recalled that of Life magazine, which was originally established in 1883 with an emphasis on humor and stories pitched to the American mainstream. In content, Ebony showcased cover stories related to black celebrities, athletes, and politicians and emphasized black achievement and success while featuring black businesses and black models in its advertising. One of Johnson’s main goals was to challenge media norms, which tended to portray blacks in relation to crime, by featuring stories and advertisements emphasizing representations of blacks as successful, upwardly mobile people who, as he explains in his autobiography, Succeeding against the Odds: The Autobiography of a Great American Businessman, “also raised children and gave debutante balls and watched baseball and football games.” “We wanted to show Negroes—we were Negroes then—and Whites the Negroes nobody knew.”

Johnson describes the first decade of Ebony’s publication as a “golden decade,” during which breakthroughs to integrate the military and schools, as well as advancements in black voting rights, had made the idea of attaining
full equality conceivable among many of his generation. In 1954, the year before Bethune’s “My Last Will and Testament” appeared, a period of national recession had led to a drop-off in subscriptions to *Ebony* by 100,000, but the magazine continued to reign as the premier black publication. During that period, *Ebony* was the primary organ for black America, covering stories about African Americans that were often ignored in the mainstream press. At heart, Johnson Publishing was a family business run by Johnson and his wife, Eunice W. Johnson, whose publications were also heavily invested in promoting a positive image of the black family. In this sense, it was also an ideal forum in which to advance a narrative such as Bethune’s that imagined blacks as a symbolic family in the nation.

In the post–World War II period, as wartime images of masses of American women working in factories supporting the war effort abroad were displaced by media emphasis on traditional white nuclear families, framing women primarily in relation to domesticity, representations largely excluded blacks or, at worst, idealized black women’s work as maids and relegated them to the kitchen. *Ebony* provided Bethune with a prominent public platform that emphasized her leadership before a predominantly black audience. It vitally made up a black public sphere in the nation whose representations starkly contrasted with prevailing stereotypical images of black women.  

Her essay challenged prevailing mainstream media scripts that excluded black families or portrayed them as being marginal to American life.

The background of Johnson as a black man born into poverty in the South, who became a self-made millionaire through his business enterprises, and who was consulted by presidents for decades because of his intimate knowledge of the black world gained through the production of his publications, mirrored aspects of Bethune’s story. They had another connection that bound them more tightly than that. As a youth, John H. Johnson had worked for the NYA that Bethune headed and had gained training on its magazine. Johnson valued her and consulted her as an adviser. As he explains in his autobiography, “Mrs. Bethune, who was another one of the most unforgettable characters I’ve known, was short and black as polished ebony. She was not what the world considers beautiful, but she had so much soul force and authority that when she walked into a room all eyes were pulled to her, as if to a magnet. I was a graduate of her NYA program, and she considered me one of her boys. It was only natural for me to turn to her when the difficulties mounted.”  

Not only had Johnson been mentored by Bethune, but his life as a young man had also been concretely affected by one of the policies she supported at the national
level, an opportunity that helped him and his family get off welfare, “a necessary first step that let us keep our hope and dignity until the private economy could provide alternatives.”

His portrait speaks to the charisma for which Bethune was well known and widely admired. It is most serendipitous that he published her final essay and provided the public platform through which her voice as a black national leader was fully consolidated and through which she has since been immortalized.

Since the date of the piece’s original publication, *Ebony* has reprinted it several times through the years. A look into the *Ebony* archives at its original printing in 1955 reveals editorial notes acknowledging that it was written “exclusively” for the magazine and falls within the “literary” genre, while promising to become “one of the great historical documents of our times.”

Because Bethune passed away before its scheduled printing, it was published posthumously and simultaneously registers as a memorial tribute and retrospective on her life and achievements. The third-person subtitle, “As life draws to a close, black America’s First Negro Lady prepared for her people a legacy of love,” contrasts with the possessive noun and first-person voice of the main title and emphasizes Bethune’s symbolic significance as a representative black woman in the nation. Furthermore, this framing recasts Bethune’s references to herself in the third person. The invocation of the term First Lady posits her as the equivalent of the nation’s First Lady, Eleanor Roosevelt, in the black cultural imaginary, and significantly, a photograph positioned alongside the subtitle, of Bethune and Roosevelt standing side by side, joining hands with the famed talk show host Ed Sullivan, further reinforces this analogy, which is grounded in Bethune’s friendship with Roosevelt. The subtitle points to Bethune’s ubiquity in the African American context as a representative woman and as the reigning leader. This narrative is iterated and revised across versions of the document that *Ebony* subsequently released in 1963, 1973, 1975, 1982, 1990, and 2002.

The language of the title recalls the Du Boisian “double consciousness” that blacks in the nation feel, being simultaneously African and American, and frames Bethune as the foremost woman leader in this nation within a nation. More broadly, it symbolically scripts her in a way that acknowledges her renowned role as an intermediary between the nation’s president and First Lady and the black community. Photographs that feature Bethune with figures such as First Lady Mamie Eisenhower iterate the narrative positing Bethune as a premier woman leadership model in the African American context and frame her as the most legible and influential black woman in the nation. Photograph
captions that describe Bethune as a “Grand Old Lady” and that acknowledge her selection as “One of the 50 greatest women America has produced” reinforce this narrative of Bethune as an ideal national model of black femininity in the African American context as well as influencing the nation more broadly.

McCluskey has examined how strategically and consistently Bethune used the press, beginning with the unique platform that newspapers provided, to get her message across to both black and white audiences in a segregated society, along with the unique role that the black press played in projecting her voice and agendas at the national level. In describing her use of black newspapers, McCluskey notes, “Bethune seized that forum in an effort to present herself as the emblematic leader of black hope; to champion black progress, and to dislodge rampantly negative perceptions of black women and men in the American mind.” Such contexts are indispensable for thinking about the unique and exceptional platform for Bethune to speak provided by *Ebony*, which by that time had picked up the mission of “race vindication” that had inflected the work of black journalists, as V. P. Franklin and Bettye Collier-Thomas analyze in their history of black intellectualism and journalism.

As Beverly C. Johnson-Miller has observed, Bethune’s position as the only black person invited to participate in White House conferences on child welfare during the terms of presidents Calvin Coolidge and Herbert Hoover positioned her to shape dialogues related to youth, as did her role as the leader of the NYA Division of Negro Affairs, appointed by President Franklin D. Roosevelt, the most prominent national appointment of an African American woman. According to Johnson-Miller, “Holding a key position in the New Deal’s National Youth Administration, and serving as the director of the NYA Division of Negro Affairs, she successfully influenced national policies causing public attention and substantial funding of employment programs for black youth.” Similarly, McCluskey notes, “Beginning in 1936 her growing clout as director of the NYA in charge of distributing funds for education and jobs for blacks, also added to her national stature and role as race representative.” McCluskey credits Bethune’s work in the NYA with reinforcing her “national stature” and notes her “emblematic persona.” Perhaps more than any other aspect of her life’s work, Bethune’s role in the NYA underscored her investments in advancing the interests of young people at the national level and provided her the best opportunity to affect the lives of black youth in particular, notwithstanding the program’s limitations. In 1937, the White House conference “Problems of Negros and Negro Youth,” spearheaded by Bethune
As an NYA leader, provided her with a national platform to advocate for issues related to children.

A year after the NYA conference convened to foreground issues related to black youth, Bethune led another major White House conference for the NCNW, for her concomitant agenda was devoted to empowering women, which she pursued not only through her sustained commitment to educating girls but also through her work in founding and leading the council. As McCluskey points out, this meeting actualized Bethune’s goal of foregrounding black women at the national level and drew widespread media coverage. As Johnson-Miller points out, Bethune spent her fourteen years leading the NCNW advocating for African Americans with an emphasis on advancing the interests of women and improving their circumstances in the nation, noting the role of this unprecedented conference in engaging black women with the planning of social programs sponsored by the federal government. Like Bethune’s founding of a school for girls and her ongoing commitment to education, her advocacy in these organizations during her prime years as a national leader highlights how much agendas related to women and children were her primary concern throughout her life. At the same time, these dimensions of Bethune’s legacy are more familiar than the “hidden histories” of black queer women during the period, including civil rights and women’s rights advocate Pauli Murray, who had authored *States’ Laws on Race and Color* in 1950, and emerging writer and activist Lorraine Hansberry.

By the time Bethune wrote her “Last Will,” she had long been separated from her husband, Albertus Bethune, who had passed away in 1918, leaving behind Mary and their son, Albert Sr., along with her adopted grandson, Albert Jr. As McCluskey notes, Bethune was “called the female Booker T. Washington, and enjoyed widespread popular support among the black masses, many of whom dubbed her ‘Mother Bethune.”’ Of Bethune, McCluskey goes on to observe, “To her own race, she was a fount of black pride—a caring mother-figure who dispensed inspirational leadership that attracted wide coverage in a black press committed to ending racial segregation. These combined attributes incited recognition and acceptance on both sides of the color line and legitimized her role as race representative.” The maternal meanings related to Bethune in the African American cultural imaginary soundly negated and defied the racist mammy stereotype, an image that Bethune’s dignified bearing contested as vigilantly as did her famous rebuff of the Auntie stereotype—when a white male Pullman car conductor (or elevator operator at the White House) used it to refer to her, she kindly asked him, “Now, which of my sister’s
sons are you?” At the same time, her representation in this sense challenged emerging pathological images within urban sociology of black women as matriarchs who dominated black families, emasculated black men, and fomented poverty and crime in the lives of children. Contrarily, Bethune prided herself on claiming “pure African stock” and traced her mother to a lineage of royal African matriarchs. Yet even as the discourse on Bethune in the black public sphere affirmed the notion of fictive kin, it had inherent limitations, mainly according legibility to heterosexual models of mothering and family and refiguring the matriarch.

The reigning image and widespread embrace of Bethune as a mother figure in the African American context were a primary foundation on which she constituted African Americans as a symbolic family in her “My Last Will and Testament.” In this document, Bethune marshals her status from her national platform to directly address the African American population as a collective. The view of her among many African Americans as a symbolic mother figure and the esteem with which she was held as a leader authorized her to speak at this level. Moreover, this status was the foundation on which she framed blacks as a family based on shared racial identity and oppressed status. Even the title implies that she is addressing a family with whom she shares a special and intimate relationship. It establishes intimacy and connection based on race and is premised on the notion that blacks are a nation within a nation through largely imagined connections. Her implied audience is the blacks throughout the nation, whom she embraces as a distinct group within the national body; black populations in Africa and its diaspora are also a part of the community that she imagines in this document, along with humanity more broadly.

In the essay’s title, Bethune invokes the “will” as the traditional legal document that outlines instructions for administering one’s estate after death, including money, property, and personal belongings, a document that typically prioritizes and provides for one’s closest family members, including one’s children. The assets she leaves to black people once she is gone, however, are not the material or financial assets typically bequeathed in wills but more abstract provisions and wishes, beginning with love and hope. Whereas the contents of wills are typically kept private until a person’s death, her original goal was to publish this document and share it widely with the public prior to passing away. It not only builds on her weekly columns published by the Pittsburgh Courier and the Chicago Defender but also recalls the famous fireside chats of President Roosevelt, delivered on the radio from 1933 to 1944, in which he addressed policy issues for a mass audience.

Mary McLeod Bethune 53
The reflective tone of the piece and the singular voice it establishes are heightened by the conditions under which Bethune produced it, as a leader who had retreated from prominent public life in the nation’s capital and returned to her home in Daytona Beach to retire in a quieter, less fast-paced atmosphere, where she continued her work in relative solitude, albeit at a slower pace. The weight of her mortality is palpable as she feels her strength waning and as she assesses the impact of her life’s work and legacy. Her recurring invocation of the word “work” across the document’s first three paragraphs emphasizes what a priority work has been in her life and underscores it as a central aspect of what she has contributed and whose fruits have advanced the interests of her people. The will is one of the most visible indicators that this work continues in the present moment, even in the literal labor of the document’s production. The document is autobiographical in tone, mentioning national and global contexts she has encountered in her life even as she points to her goal of writing an autobiography. That she mentions deeding her home for the purposes of establishing the Mary McLeod Bethune Foundation is another act, like the will itself, that anticipates her death and is designed to continue her work and carry on her legacy. It directly literalizes the legality of the bequest that the title anticipates.

Yet the document stresses that the wealth she might surrender is not in her limited material possessions as much as in the deeper lessons she has learned from the work throughout her life. As she muses, “Perhaps in them there is something of value. So, as my life draws to a close, I will pass them on to Negroes everywhere in the hope that an old woman’s philosophy may give them inspiration.”

This aspect of the narrative reinforces the notion of blacks as a national family. Bethune’s invocation of the triumvirate of faith, hope, and love as attributes that she wishes to pass on draws on the New Testament, 1 Corinthians 13:13. In further mirroring this scripture by identifying love as the greatest commandment and placing it highest on her list, Bethune suggests that it holds potential to transform human relationships and the world itself by breaking down barriers to racial, religious, and transnational unity. Indeed, that love is the last word in this document underscores its significance all the more. Her narrative related to black racial empowerment and her constitution of this group as a family is reinforced in her definition of “the Negro” as a category defined primarily by its past slave experience and by her mention of a “new Negro” in the future no longer limited by racial subordination, echoing the title of Alain Locke’s famous 1925 volume from the Harlem Renaissance of a modern black subject no longer defined by subservient roles within the
southern slave system. This dimension invoking Locke, who had passed away the year before, should further remind us of the silence, invisibility, and marginality surrounding black queerness and the distinct challenges and battles they fought while negotiating nonnormative sexual identities during the era of Jim Crow. In the document, the capitalization of all the attributes she is bequeathing emphasizes them and draws the focus of the audience to her remarks surrounding each point.

Bethune’s framing of a collective black identity and her solidarity with its members is most assertive in her bequest of racial dignity: “I want Negroes to maintain their human dignity at all costs. We, as Negroes, must recognize that we are the custodians as well as the heirs of a great civilization. We have given something to the world as a race and for this we are proud and fully conscious of our place in the total picture of mankind’s development.” This empowering view of blackness runs wholly counter to the narrative that excluded people of African descent from world history during the Enlightenment. Bethune also draws on the black sermonic tradition in framing herself as a voice for this collective. Its ultimate framing in this treatise is global, highlighting its contribution to world history and exhorting all blacks not to lose sight of their humanity and important contributions to the world in a society that defines them primarily in terms of the color of their skin, invoking herself as an example of a woman who has taken pride in her color but not allowed it to define or limit her: “Despite many crushing burdens and handicaps, I have risen from the cotton fields of South Carolina to found a college, administer it during the years of growth, become a public servant in the government of our country and a leader of women.” In this narrative, Bethune frames her color as a source of empowerment and as an asset greater than wealth for enabling her to achieve more than a birth with white privilege might have incentivized. This assertion is also her basis for framing the plight of “American Negroes” in all the nation’s regions in relation to problems affecting populations of color globally, while aspiring to live in harmony with the nation’s white population.

Bethune’s prioritization of agendas related to youth alongside women in much of her public work makes it unsurprising that her will culminates by underscoring the black population’s collective “Responsibility to Our Young People.” This is the point up to which all its other bequests build. Bethune suggests that “our children” are the most enthusiastic dreamers for a better future and will play the most decisive role in building that future. She stresses that it is incumbent on the black population to prioritize young people and, in doing so, suggests that they will advance the interests of blacks collectively because
youth will shape and lead the world in the future. They are the possessors and inheritors of “the world around us.” She suggests that they are poised to pick up the mantle of leadership that she is in the act of passing on. She emphasizes that the hope for black people in the future lies with young people.

It is significant that she accentuates the importance of youth, recognizing the barriers that the majority of blacks continue to face in persisting deprivation, inadequate housing, poverty, and discrimination, challenging them to help bring about changes. She argues that it will be essential to move beyond outmoded ideas to help ensure that they achieve their greatest potential. Bethune explicitly links the black struggle to the long history since slavery in mentioning that “The Freedom Gates are half-ajar,” emphasizing that full equality has yet to be achieved. She has witnessed the dark past as a woman born during Reconstruction who experienced the rise of Jim Crow, and she charges young people with paving the way to a brighter future in which blacks will experience full equality in the nation.

The document compellingly culminates her lifelong agenda of advancing the interests of children within the struggle for racial justice. While they are listed last in the structural schema of the document, she underscores that they are a priority and are the beacons for all African Americans. This organization also evokes biblical scriptures such as Isaiah 11:6, “a little child shall lead them,” and Luke 13:13, “the last shall be first and the first shall be last.” Children and youth function as interchangeable terms in the document. As the Barnett film points out, for Bethune, the drive to learn and lead began during childhood. In Bethune’s “My Last Will and Testament,” repetition of the phrase “the greatest of my dreams” for the Negro and mentioning her vision for black children in the future anticipate some of the themes evident in Dr. Martin Luther King Jr’s famous “I Have a Dream” speech, delivered before the Lincoln Memorial in Washington, DC, on August 23, 1963, including his use of the dream metaphor and emphasis on his “four little children” being judged not “by the color of their skin, but by the content of their character.” In this sense, Bethune was a forerunner in rhetorically invoking children in civil rights discourses in the nation’s public sphere.

Bethune’s will is a foundational work in the literature of civil rights, which lies in the continuum with King’s “Letter from a Birmingham Jail.” Bethune’s invocation of “dreams” alludes to the notion of the American dream from which blacks have been alienated because of their race. In African American literary history, the poetic musings on dreams that Langston Hughes established in his 1951 poem “Harlem,” in reflecting on notions of “dreams deferred,”
would have been a likely point of reference for Bethune, alongside works such as his poem “I, Too” (1926), which describes America as a family from which blacks are excluded, a dynamic that his speaker describes in a figurative sense through their relegation to the kitchen when company comes.  

Elaine Smith has offered what is arguably the most poignant and compelling analysis of “My Last Will and Testament” to date in reading its provisions against the backdrop of Bethune’s biography to illustrate the relation of its nine bequests to Bethune’s “richly textured life” in “Mary McLeod Bethune’s ‘Last Will and Testament’: A Legacy for Race Vindication,” which mentions Bethune’s status as a “national heroine.” Smith describes the Black Cabinet, of which Bethune was a part in the Roosevelt administration, as the first significant black voice in national politics that had emerged since Reconstruction, an observation that positions Bethune as a vital linchpin between that era and the politics of the Great Depression.  

Smith goes on to observe, “Bethune’s caretaker declaration for the young meant, in essence, nurturing youth. This constituted her single greatest imperative traversing all aspects of life.” Smith frames the passages on youth in this document as a manifestation and extension of the loving and maternal role that Bethune played among the young people she mentored as an educational leader. For my purposes, Smith’s analysis is useful for attesting to the organic impact of Bethune’s long-standing commitment to youth in education and in her public work, as well as to the point of prioritizing them as she weighed in on national policy agendas, as a basis for structuring her litany of bequests.  

The document tacitly equates children with love as it enshrines Bethune’s message in the public sphere for future generations. As a category, children represent the greatest of her dreams. In her affirmation of African Americans as a family in which she is a symbolic mother, Bethune emphasizes the importance of children to the triumph in the struggle against racism, as well as to the survival of African Americans in the future. She leaves youth with a challenge to help remedy the ills that impede black people. In it, she contests notions of African American otherness by placing them front and center in the struggle to actualize the nation’s democratic ideals, which are blemished by the continuation of Jim Crow. Beyond the medium of print and several reprints in the decades after her essay’s original publication, it is fascinating that this will’s message was enacted, more saliently iterated, and permanently materialized for an even broader national audience, including future generations, through its circulation on the monument to Bethune in the nation’s capital.
“Let Her Works Praise Her”

The bronze monument developed by the NCNW under the leadership of the organization’s president, Dorothy Height, and unveiled in Washington’s Lincoln Park before an audience of eighteen thousand people on July 10, 1974, Bethune’s ninety-ninth birthday, was the first public monument ever dedicated in the nation’s capital in honor of an African American and a woman (figure 1.1). The Mary McLeod Bethune Memorial statue was sculpted by Robert Berks, originally approved by Congress in 1959, and designed to mark the centenary of the Emancipation Proclamation, invoking her origins in the post-Emancipation era. In the end, the project cost four hundred thousand dollars and unfolded as a multiyear endeavor because of challenges related to fundraising.

Aspects of its composition, such as the bronze material, abstract features such as her ebony skin and pompadour hairstyle, and the upright posture of the figure recast personal qualities such as the dignity and pride for which she was known during her lifetime. The statue features Bethune standing in the dignified pose that typified her demeanor, gripping a walking cane in her right hand. After FDR died in 1945, former First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt sent to Bethune the president’s monogrammed walking cane, which had been a gift from his uncle Theodore Roosevelt. Bethune had begun to collect walking canes years earlier, in 1927, on her first trip to Europe, where she began the practice of donning them as a fashion statement. She treasured Roosevelt’s walking cane and carried it with her for the rest of her life as a tribute to her long-standing friendship with the president and his wife. The most powerful testament to how much Bethune cherished the president’s walking cane and to how much it came to be associated with her identity is the cane’s enshrinement in the Mary McLeod Bethune Memorial statue.

That an image of President Roosevelt’s cane is positioned physically supporting the body of Bethune on the statue suggests the levels to which he served as a resource for support by appointing her to high-profile positions at the national level, such as director of Negro Affairs in the NYA, even if some of his decisions and aspects of his policymaking that affected the African American population proved to be disappointing at times. President Roosevelt is known for giving ear as well as deep respect to her voice. The positioning of Roosevelt’s walking cane in Bethune’s hand inscribes on the monument her close alliance with him during her lifetime and suggests how definitional her association with him became to her reputation. At the same time, the weight
of her hand on the walking cane speaks to the power of her influence on the president. Like the Mary McLeod Bethune Memorial’s juxtaposition with the Freedman’s Memorial, depicting President Lincoln and erected in 1876, this image of Bethune holding Roosevelt’s walking cane inscribes and mirrors Bethune’s association with Roosevelt as a U.S. president on the landscape at Lincoln Park, which is significantly located in the nation’s capital. By extension, it pays tribute to her salience in the nation’s public sphere, where she influenced a host of agendas related to African American politics, including policymaking. It also invites the public to meditate on her influence on a series of other U.S. presidents through her other prominent appointments, by Calvin Coolidge, Herbert Hoover, and Harry S. Truman.43

The figure of Bethune stands near two children, a girl and a boy, to whom she passes on her legacy, as emblematized by the scroll she holds in her left hand. The figures of Bethune and the children stand in a triangulated formation; the boy steps forward reaching for the scroll with both arms extended as the girl holds up her hands. Height explains in her memoir *Open Wide the
Freedom Gates that Berks, who had won the design competition sponsored by NCNW, used a methodology that entailed visiting schools and doing hundreds of sketches of black children. While he produced a composite image of a boy, as the prototype for the girl he used Shari Belafonte, the daughter of the popular singer and activist Harry Belafonte, who was also known and admired for civil rights activism.44

The monument, which is made of bronze with a concrete base, stands ten feet tall atop a six-foot base. A bronze plate in front of the statue and positioned at its base is inscribed with the words “Mary McLeod Bethune, 1875–1955, Let her works praise her.”45 It draws on Proverbs 31:31, relating Bethune to the ideal model of godly womanhood invoked in the scripture while associating her life’s work with the achievement of a larger spiritual mission and purpose and her legacy with meaningful works in life. At the same time, it recollects Bethune’s status as a woman of Christian faith.

Significantly, the words that run in a line on brass plaques around its pedestal are taken from Bethune’s “My Last Will and Testament,” which accentuates their continuing cultural influence and importance in sustaining her legacy.46 A bronze plaque extending around the base spotlights each of the bequests that the will outlines: “I leave you love. I leave you hope. I leave you the challenge of developing confidence in one another. I leave you a thirst for education. I leave you a respect for the use of power. I leave you faith. I leave you racial dignity. I leave you a desire to live harmoniously with your fellow men. I leave you finally, a responsibility to our young people.” Their capitalization reproduces the format of the original will, mirroring them on the monument. It includes Bethune's signature in cursive writing, which points to her authorship of the document, evokes her voice, and makes the iconicity from which the monument draws all the more visceral and dynamic. These words are positioned to almost fully embrace and nearly surround the figures on the pedestal. Their citation on the monument points to their centrality in defining her life’s work and legacy.

Prior to the Bethune monument’s erection, the landscape had to be lowered to ensure that it would not be taller than the Freedman’s Memorial to Abraham Lincoln; the latter was turned away from a view of the Capitol so that it would face the monument featuring Bethune.47 Lincoln Park, the largest park on Capitol Hill, is located east of the Capitol Building and was designed for public use. In 1867, when Congress named the park Lincoln Square, it became the first place named for the president after his assassination. Erected in 1876 and unveiled
at a ceremony at which the speakers included Frederick Douglass, Freedman’s Memorial was the first national memorial to the martyred president.\textsuperscript{48}

The statue figures Lincoln reading the Emancipation Proclamation, which freed black slaves in the South and was delivered in 1863, during the Civil War, as he reaches his hand over a former slave, whose wrists are shackled with broken chains. The juxtaposition of an image of Bethune with a statue of Lincoln that emphasizes his role in the antislavery movement and his reputation as the Great Emancipator situates her legacy as a leader on the continuum with the struggles against slavery in the nineteenth century, as an African American leader born to ex-slaves during Reconstruction, who served as a primary advocate for African Americans in the national arena until the dawn of the civil rights movement in the twentieth century. The spatial distance between these monuments symbolically marks the time from slavery to freedom, as the two children depicted on the Bethune monument also hearken to the future.

The juxtaposition of the public monument honoring Bethune with a public monument that had been developed in the late nineteenth century, after the Civil War, as a tribute to President Lincoln frames her as a central agent in the long (and, as some scholars argue, \textit{unfinished}) historical struggle for black emancipation in the United States. In embodying a woman such as Bethune as a black national leader in the public space of Lincoln Park, the monument unsettles the conventional marginalization of black women within narratives of African American liberation, which typically foreground black male subjectivity. Through the figure of Bethune, the monument frames discourses of Emancipation in relation to black women’s subjectivity and cites her as a representative leader and black women as agents, which is significant given what Robyn Wiegman has described as black women’s silencing and exclusion as raced and gendered subjects within emancipationist discourses.\textsuperscript{49}

This monument to Lincoln has recently become the object of intense public scrutiny. In the midst of the protests that erupted after George Floyd’s death at the hands of Minneapolis police officer Derrick Chauvin on May 25, 2020, and activists’ demands for the removal of monuments around the nation dedicated to Confederate heroes and other racist figures in American history, Freedman’s Memorial faced public criticism for its depiction of a slave kneeling subordinately beside the figure of Lincoln, and protesters attempted to tear it down. Recent calls for the removal of this statue echo long-standing concerns about this subservient image; the ex-slaves who financed the monument had no say in selecting the final design. District of Columbia representative Eleanor Holmes Norton, who has criticized this monument in the past,
announced that she would introduce legislation to the House of Representatives urging its removal.  

The geographic positioning of the monument on the nation’s capital pays tribute to Bethune as a national figure while invoking the legacy of her work in the capital as president of the NCNW and as a figure in national politics. The monument’s positioning in the capital links her legacy to the primary platform on which her influence unfolded. The permanent paean to Bethune in a public park in the capital city, which is geographically located south of the Mason Dixon Line, is all the more significant when considering the long-standing policies of segregating such spaces in the U.S. South and prohibiting African Americans from entering them. It hearkens to Bethune’s trajectory of influence, which emerged in the rural South, reached the nation’s capital, and eventually affected national and global affairs. The Mary McLeod Bethune Memorial emblematizes the central role of visual art in honoring and memorializing Bethune in the capital.

Dorothy Height, whose name also appears on the monument as the organization’s president, documents the NCNW’s process in developing it and its determination to “get Ma on the park.” In *Open Wide the Freedom Gates*, Height acknowledges those who helped to conceive the project and lend support from its earliest stages. Her compelling and detailed firsthand chronicle documents the background of the monument, including how the idea originated and legislative hurdles that had to be cleared even before the NCNW undertook a multiyear fundraising campaign to make the monument materialize. Height, who led the NCNW for forty years, from 1957 to 1997, and was a champion of women’s rights, civil rights, and gay rights, goes on to acknowledge the bill’s signing into law by President Dwight Eisenhower, which was “the first joint resolution passed by the Eighty-second Congress, authorizing the NCNW to erect a memorial statue on public land in Washington, D.C.” The perspective she offers is helpful for explaining the vision behind the monument and the role of the NCNW in drafting the original congressional resolution, further elaborating the logic of linking it to the tribute to President Lincoln, while framing it as a symbol for African American experience from the post-Emancipation period on to future generations. Furthermore, it acknowledges the role of a former slave in developing the tribute to Lincoln, which also depicts a slave marking the moment of Emancipation, as the representation of Bethune looks well beyond.

In the legal prioritization of family as a primary category of inheritance in the will as a legal document, it is significant that the inscription of phrases from Bethune’s famous “My Last Will and Testament” around the base of
the Mary McLeod Bethune monument, along with the children the monument features, construct African Americans as a symbolic family to whom she makes her bequest to promote the betterment of the large, diverse national family of Americans. The monument’s portrait of Bethune builds on the symbolic capital invested in her as both a leader and a maternal figure in the African American context and further abstracts it at a national level. The two children who accompany the image of her on the pedestal reinforce this imaging of her as a leader and figurative mother, and they stand in for the collective body of young people whom she invokes in this document.

The law plays a constitutive role in shaping performative speech acts in the classic sense delineated by J. L. Austin and is concomitantly linked to the deconstruction of gender and sexual identity categories by Judith Butler in her classic theorization of performativity.53 Bethune tropes the legality of the will in the title of “My Last Will and Testament” and in aspects of its content. Her repeated invocation of the phrase “I leave” as she lists each of her nine bequests are readable as performative speech acts that confer these items to her posterity as she mentions them and affirms her agency in this process. Over time, its message has been iterated for newer publics every time the essay has been republished in Ebony, and it is permanently enshrined and nationally abstracted as writ in bronze on the monument’s base.

Indeed, the Mary McLeod Bethune Memorial statue is also inherently performative in its dynamic enactment of the final bequest of the will, focused on youth, in staging the figure of Bethune holding a scroll, implicitly the will, as children, symbolizing the future, reach for it. It represents her in action instilling her message in young people, who will stand at the vanguard in the struggles for black liberation and equality in the United States. The statue draws primarily on this document in its composition and embodies its penultimate bequest, “A responsibility to young people,” three-dimensionally, by staging the figure of Bethune modeling an illustration of this message, which also recollects her devotion to children in her life’s work. The sculpture enacts a performance through the figures embodied on the pedestal. To explore its layered texts, including the extract from the will, the viewer must circumnavigate the monument to read its message, an aspect of its composition that further invites the viewer into a dynamic and thoughtful engagement and to view the three figures atop the pedestal from multiple angles, making the encounter with it inherently interactive.

David J. Getsy’s essay “Acts of Stillness: Statues, Performativity, and Passive Resistance,” which focuses its analysis on life-size and freestanding statues,
argues that such statues are performative in their stillness and act on viewers through motionlessness. Getsy moves beyond conventional presuppositions that statues are simply passive and subordinate in relation to their viewers, critics, and sculptors. In his words, “Rather than see a lack of motility, I want to uphold the statue’s refusal to move. Its immobility is an act—a performative act—that affects those who would approach it.” “I propose that acknowledging statues’ performativity and viewers’ consequent desires to control it offer a means of better articulating a theory of the sculptural encounter in all of its variety. Our encounter with statues is always an encounter with other bodies that share our space, wait for us, and defiantly remain unresponsive. Consequently, a different way of characterizing the discourse of the statue is to see it as a history of its acts of passive resistance to the motile viewer or artist’s attempts to assert control.” As he points out, “The performativity of the act of stillness makes the statue—despite its monochromy, its immotility, its heaviness, its unresponsiveness—into something like a defiant agent.”

Furthermore, Getsy observes that the viewer’s perceived power in motion as compared to the stillness of the monument obscures the latter’s “critical passivity,” or “enactment of passive resistance,” which he describes by drawing on discourses of nonviolent resistance: “As we have learned from the history of nonviolent resistance as a tactic of civil disobedience, the refusal to move or to respond can be a powerful act that exposes the dispensation of power and the ethics of those who wield it.”

When the Bethune statue was erected, it embodied the dimensions of nonviolent resistance philosophy in modern sculpture and linked them to civil rights discourses. By drawing on Barbara Johnson’s discussion of muteness as a condition for idealizing the feminine in Western poetry to examine stillness in sculpture, Getsy provides rich critical foundations on which to think about Bethune’s representation on the Mary McLeod Bethune Memorial. It is all the more subversive when considering how it resists and unsettles the subalternity intimately associated with the feminine body in this genre through the multilayered texts that it voices in relation to this figure in sculptural form.

Notably, Height’s powerful testimony on July 2, 1982, before the U.S. Senate in the hearings concerning bill S. 2436, which proposed to designate the Mary McLeod Bethune Council House in Washington, DC, as a national historic site, also invokes the Mary McLeod Bethune monument and underscores Bethune’s status as a representative African American, along with the leader’s national and global significance for a diverse range of people:
Mary McLeod Bethune was chosen as the symbol because she was the undisputed person of this century who represented what all could agree upon was our contribution and we wanted that to be there, not only for the present but for future generations.

In that whole process there was a lot that we learned about Mrs. Bethune, but I think most of all we found that there was a coming together of people of every race, of every class, of every nationality with some from other parts of the world joining hands so that the Bethune Memorial in Lincoln Park became something which we were proud of.56

This pioneering project drew on Bethune’s legacy of welcoming and bringing diverse people together through her leadership approach. It established groundwork for several later projects in the capital and beyond that have also been developed to honor Bethune, including the new national monument in Statuary Hall in the making.

As the Bethune legacy powerfully illustrates, the paternal and maternal motifs that have been foundational to conventional white-centered American national narratives have often been expanded, mirrored, and repeated with a distinct difference in the African American context. Yet they have remained limited because they have been preconditioned on (hetero)normative formulations of gender and sexuality. Visionary civil rights narratives within the modern civil rights movement that have invoked mothers, fathers, children, and family, including Bethune’s, are distinct from citations of these categories within neoconservativism later in the twentieth century and into the new millennium. This latter movement’s shameless and egregious appropriations of civil rights symbols, however, suggest the importance of ensuring that civil rights discourses vigilantly resist such reactionary mechanisms and formulate broader and far more inclusive definitions and advocacy agendas for family and children than ones that have typically been envisioned and sanctioned by the right wing. This is particularly vital given that right-wing rhetoric now serves as a springboard for mobilizing white supremacists and white nationalists; is routinely invoked in exclusionary scripts of American identity based on race, ethnicity, and sexuality; and is often weaponized in ways that undermine democracy and inclusive citizenship. Its reach has exponentially expanded under the leadership of Donald Trump in the contemporary political climate, fomenting misogynistic, antiblack, anti-immigrant, and antigay policies and propaganda.
The efforts to memorialize Bethune's work and legacy began toward the end of her life with the establishment of the Mary McLeod Bethune Foundation. The main effort after the monument, the Bethune Council House, also serves as a primary repository for archives related to black women, first opened in 1979 and was officially established as a national historic site in 1982 by Public Law 97-329. Yet ironically, the very idea of Bethune as a representative figure of national womanhood was challenged during the 1985 congressional hearings held to amend the original act of October 15, 1982, which officially designated the Mary McLeod Bethune Council House as a national historic site. That is to say, some aspects of the dialogues related to questions regarding funding for this landmark institution in honor of Bethune were inflected by raced and gendered contestations of the highest order concerning the legitimacy of her status as a representative American and woman. It is noteworthy, for example, that some arguments questioning the institution's historical merit were premised on an implicit view of whiteness as being normative in constructing a universal and representative American identity, along with woman as a category, a binary framework that obscured sexuality altogether.

The initiative was partly spearheaded by the NCNW because the Bethune Council House was where Bethune both lived and worked during her years in the capital and lay in the continuum with these earlier projects to memorialize her. The public documents related to these hearings are important and worthy of revisiting analytically in their multilayered and multivocal textuality, with testimonies related to Bethune's national significance and public work, in part because they underscore her continuing significance. Because they were not widely discussed in the media, and they unfolded over a span of several years, the cultural implications of these historic hearings and the body of public records related to them have not been sufficiently recognized or examined. They are revealing not only for the attestations they provide related to her national contributions and continuing investments in youth as articulated in the “Last Will,” but also because the dialogues on Bethune throw into relief reactionary resistances to black womanhood's embodiments of American national identity.

The contestations about Bethune's representativeness as an American woman that emerged during these hearings demonstrate how notions of national femininity have been tacitly defined by white subjectivity and have constituted essentialist and exclusionary definitions of nationality, gender,
and race premised on heterosexuality. This aspect of the proceedings seems intensely ironic considering how Bethune disrupted and expanded prevailing notions of national femininity that marginalized and excluded black women in her lifetime through her striking record of public work and her legacy of representing the interests of black women on a national and global platform. It is also revealing to analyze how the strategies for framing Bethune within the rhetoric of the testimonies shifts and evolves over the course of the hearings, so that an emphasis on the national implications of her legacy and representativeness as an American woman is later substituted for a primary emphasis on her work on behalf of black women and children by advocates for the development of the Bethune Council House as a national historic site. During the hearings, the equally intriguing questions that emerged about the feasibility and appropriateness of publicly funding the museum in Bethune's honor were steeped in doubts by NPS representatives about her suitability as a persona for educating the general public about history.

The hearings related to the Bethune Council House were among the most salient national dialogues related to a black woman in the U.S. public sphere prior to the infamous Anita Hill–Clarence Thomas hearings before the Senate Judiciary Committee in 1991. They occurred at a moment of heightened debates in black and other feminist of color discourses over white-centered definitions of woman that obscured women of color. During the testimony, rationales about the importance of dedicating a national historic site in Bethune's honor on the nation's capital were weighed against the existing museum and archives at her home in Daytona Beach, Florida, which were argued to be too peripheral to highlight her national significance. Such arguments demonstrate the geographic contestations that emerged in constructing this national historic site, foreground dialectics of nation and region in Bethune's public construction, and illustrate the role of geographic location in shaping perceptions of national identity. 57

Bethune emerges as a quintessential example in the twentieth century of how the U.S. South has inflected the nationalization and globalization of black and feminine subjects and grounded their iconic representation in the U.S. public sphere, a phenomenon I am tracing across the chapters of this study by studying signal examples from postslavery/Reconstruction to this new millennial era. Moreover, the salience of sites in this dialogue, such as Council House as an architecture, reflects the pronounced effects of space and geography in the African American context. The processes of monumentalizing and memorializing Bethune in the nation's capital hold weighty implications for the role
of black female subjectivity in shaping discourses on national femininity, as well as registering the dynamic role that Bethune played in shaping discourses of national femininity during her lifetime and well beyond. The journey from establishing the Bethune Council House as a national historic site in 1982, and the legislative campaign to administer the institution under the NPS, which was finally achieved in 1994, was long and challenging. Studying key steps in this process is useful in light of what it reveals about discourses of nation, race, gender, and sexuality, as well as for what it can add to our understanding of Bethune’s legacy. Dialogues on Bethune that unfolded during the hearings have added value in raising questions about the status of black women within areas such as black history, American history, and women’s history, as well as adding to insights on her in areas from black feminism to law, including critical race feminism.

The Bethune Council House in Washington, DC, is an elegant three-story brick home replete with a raised basement, one-story bay window, and carriage house. It was built in 1876 in the Second Empire style and is located at 1318 Vermont Avenue. It was established as the headquarters for the NCNW in 1944 during Bethune’s tenure as the organization’s founding president and was a project that she spearheaded. Bethune resided there from 1943 until 1949, and it served as her base in the capital until she died in 1955. Dissatisfaction with the vision of the NACW, which had focused mainly on domestic concerns related to women instead of political affairs, along with the need that she perceived for a national organization to give more visibility and voice to black women’s organizations in policy-related issues at the national level, drove Bethune to propose the development of the NCNW in 1935. As Joyce Hanson notes, “She envisioned her council as a vehicle for constructing a wider scope for African American women’s organizations and promoting black women’s participation within the new political climate created by the New Deal. During her tenure in the Roosevelt administration, Bethune attempted to expand black women’s roles in the New Deal program, yet whenever she tried to get black women patronage positions, white administrators often wanted to know what organization she represented.”58

The organization that Bethune envisioned promised to ground black women’s activism during an era when interest groups were widespread, and she needed an organizational anchor as one of the nation’s foremost black leaders.59 Bethune suggested that the headquarters of the organization be located in Washington, DC. She soon secured the row house on Vermont Avenue and raised the five-hundred-dollar down payment for the residence from
friends. With a generous donation of ten thousand dollars from Marshall Field, facilitated by First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt, Bethune paid off most of the balance on the fifteen-thousand-dollar property.

The project was endorsed on December 18, 1943, by the NCNW’s board of directors, which included a regionally diverse cohort of twenty-four women. The council financed repairs and upgraded the facilities of the residence. Furnishing the rooms in the residence of the Council House was a collective effort. Businessman Abe Lichtman took responsibility for the front parlor and the board room, whose lavish mahogany conference tables and chairs were provided by Chicago congressman William L. Dawson. The remaining rooms were furnished by council members, including national sororities such as Alpha Kappa Alpha and Delta Sigma Theta, as well as individuals such as Emma Kelly, founder of the Daughter Elks. The Council House was dedicated October 12–15, 1944, in several ceremonies, including a service attended by distinguished guests, such as First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt. Flags from nations around the world were on display in a flag stand on the mantle, visible as guests entered the elaborate parlor.60

The Council House served multiple purposes, including as Bethune’s office in Washington, DC, and as her primary residence in the capital for several years. Its primary purpose was for NCNW business, including committee meetings, as well as social engagements that the organization hosted. From its earliest years, publications such as the NCNW’s newsletter Telefact were assembled and distributed from Council House. It was the site of an Open House in 1945 on the occasion of the fourth inauguration of President Roosevelt. Female visitors boarded frequently in the residence’s uppermost room, which made it a refuge during an era when hotels were routinely segregated.

The successful collaboration of Dorothy Height, Dolphin Thompson, and Elise Austin with Ohio representative Frances Bolton in drafting the congressional resolution to establish a monument to Bethune in Lincoln Park set a precedent and served as a vital point of reference for efforts to establish national sites in tribute to Bethune in the Washington, DC, area. The initiative to honor Bethune by establishing Council House as a national historic site, spearheaded primarily by the NCNW, also had to clear major legislative hurdles to be implemented. On July 2, 1982, during the hearings related to the bill to designate the Mary McLeod Bethune Council House in Washington, DC, as a national historic site, and for other purposes, the statements on the floor recurrently emphasized Bethune’s national significance as a leader. John W. Warner, a Virginia senator who presided over the hearing before the
Subcommittee on Public Lands and Reserved Water (of the Committee on Energy and Natural Resources), describes Bethune in his opening statement as “an example of spirit and hope upon which America was founded.” Similarly, Oregon senator Mark O. Hatfield describes Bethune as “the most influential black woman of her generation” and frames the Council House as “not only a very important segment of black history, but as it relates to the total history of this Nation, which is such a fundamental composite of many ethnic groups and I think over the years we have tended to neglect the vital part played by every facet of the history by the blacks.” Hatfield’s commentary underscores Bethune’s role as an international adviser on issues related to human rights and maps the Council House as a site visited not only by important figures in black history, from Charles Drew to Mary Church Terrell, but also by national and international figures such as Eleanor Roosevelt and William S. Tubman. Hatfield’s implicit rationale is that the Council House merits recognition as a national historic site for its relevance to American history in and beyond the African American context, as well as to leaders of national and international significance who had visited the site at some point.

In 1970, the Afro-American Institute for Historic Preservation and Community Development began to survey the nation’s land planning and noticed the paucity of national historic sites focused on African Americans. Because only three of fifteen hundred sites had been designed to highlight the role of African Americans in the nation’s development, the organization began to work with the NPS to assess sites for possible development with the idea of incorporating them into the national park system. As the final stages for installing the Mary McLeod Bethune Memorial were unfolding, the institute began a dialogue with the NCPW about the possibilities for spotlighting the Council House during the upcoming bicentennial celebration. The idea for the initiative to establish the Council House as a national historic site notably crystallized on the road to commemorating the nation’s 1976 bicentennial, a point that Height mentions in her statement during the 1982 hearings.

Sue Bailey Thurmond, whose statement was presented by Bettye Collier-Thomas, the director of historic programs at the NCPW, maps the Council House as an epicenter for a range of civic and diplomatic projects during both the war and postwar eras. Such comments reinforce and extend Hatfield’s earlier framing of the Council House as a site regularly visited by numerous figures of national and international significance, framing it as an energetic scene where decisions were made frequently that had bearing on various states. They call to mind a vivid image of the Council House as the
architectural locus in the capital from which Bethune journeyed to other parts of the nation as an ambassador for the NCNW and to help advance various national initiatives. If the White House is where governmental affairs unfolded in the capital and where many crucial national policy decisions related to the African American population were made, then the Bethune Council House lay in its shadows as an architecture where decisions with national relevance to blacks were also made. It anchored the spokes that reached out to black women’s organizations in states across the nation and launched the trips to them. Furthermore, it even functioned as a veritable think tank for brainstorming and developing agendas related to black women. Thurmond’s use of the word *beehive* evokes the Council House as a site trafficked by a host of dignitaries, as a building animated by constant activity, and as a symbolic home for black women in the nation, implicitly with Bethune as the queen bee.

The recurring commentaries during the 1982 hearings about Bethune’s national and international significance, notwithstanding her legacy of prolific work and leadership legacy at the national level, reflect an understanding of the prevailing exclusion of African Americans, particularly African American women, from national narratives. Furthermore, they reflect awareness of the connection of this problematic to long-standing views of blacks as being inferior and perceptions of them as being irrelevant to world history. They reveal an awareness of tensions between her race and gender that her status as a black woman throws into relief given purist perceptions of American identity as being deracialized and detached from black subjectivity during a period when black feminism was challenging such politics of exclusion based on race, gender, and sexuality.

The cooperative agreement reserving the rights of the NCNW to help processes of preservation and interpretation at the Council House and that give the secretary of the interior, under the auspices of the NPS, access to public sections on the premises was initially acknowledged during these groundbreaking proceedings. The agreement made alterations contingent on mutual agreement and an annual report from the NCNW to enable oversight of activities and expenditures supported by governmental funding. As the cooperative agreement continued to develop in subsequent years, the NCNW also notably pledged to raise funding to supplement its proposed governmental support, demonstrating the self-help strategy that had been apparent during the years of work to bring the Mary McLeod Bethune Memorial project to fruition in Lincoln Park.
The NCNW had long been responsible for the perseverance of the Bethune Council House since its establishment in 1943 as the organization’s national headquarters, a purpose the institution served until 1966. The building could not have ever survived over several decades and into the 1980s without the organization’s sustained and ongoing fiscal support and commitment. The urging during the 1982 hearings that the organization seek out private donations to sustain the institution, as if this were some novel idea that the leaders had neglected to attempt up to the point of the hearings, underscored that the NPS had been entirely oblivious to the NCNW’s history of ongoing and tireless work over several decades to sustain the institution, along with the NCNW’s ongoing efforts to make the institution itself a private funding source. The NCNW simply sought to establish stability and continuity for the Bethune Council House in its public funding, maintenance, and administration, which the NPS was best designed to facilitate. At the same time, the proposed cooperative agreement provided a vehicle for the organization to continue to contribute financially to the livelihood of Council House.

The statement of Joseph Burstein, a lawyer at Fried, Frank, Harris, Shriver, and Kampelman, whose relationship with the NCNW was established through his past work with Housing and Urban Development, provides the most significant endorsement and rationale for the cooperative agreement during the course of the 1982 hearings. His testimony relates it to a Mississippi project funded by the Ford Foundation in which the NCNW participated, wherein an agreement was made to help residents gain equity in, and eventually ownership of, the homes they rented to highlight the organization’s belief in financial self-help and principles such as cooperation and collaboration. He emphasizes that “the National Council as you have heard otherwise this morning is not looking for Government handouts. They are prepared not only on behalf of themselves but on behalf of the people they are trying to help to get the people to do so on the basis of helping themselves and providing a place of dignity for their families.”65 In his testimony, Burstein affirms the cooperative agreement as the best arrangement for operating the Council House in the future.

Moreover, his wording suggests his awareness of stereotypes of black codependency on the government, which were proliferating within reactionary Republican ideology, that cast young black single mothers as “welfare queens” who were lazy and unwilling to work, leeching off the government by relying on public assistance and exploiting the tax dollars of hard-working Americans. Yet the NCNW’s sustained and autonomous work in developing the Council House for years, as well as the proposition to remain involved in the institution's
financing to supplement its prospective federal funding, made the project a model self-help initiative spearheaded by black women during the first years of the Reagan era. In Burstein’s statement, he also points out, “Black women’s history, of course, is black history in this country,” echoing the points that had already been made to emphasize the national significance of Bethune and national relevance of the Council House’s archives related to black women’s history.66

Ira J. Hutchinson, deputy director of the NPS, advocates in his statement for a study “to determine the national significance” to help the organization in making a recommendation on the Council House’s eligibility for national historic site designation and points out that no such study had yet been conducted. He also acknowledges the body of scholarly material that addresses the issue in the wake of the prior hearing before the House. The presiding senator, John Warner, notes the presence of those in the audience who had literally devoted their lives to the study of Bethune and points out the work that had been accomplished in assessing her legacy during the bicentennial celebration. Hutchinson also expresses concern about committing federal involvement to a property not federally owned and hence reservations about the cooperative agreement and a preference for sole federal oversight of the Council House. In Hutchinson’s words, “In this time of austerity and fiscal constraints, we are in a posture at this point and time where at best we would see in our relationships with owners of non-Federal property a limitation of funding basically to technical assistance and consultation and other activities in that area.”67 The insistence on a study was ironic considering that the NPS had refused to do one when the Council House was initially proposed as a national historic site.68

Dimensions of the hearings in both 1982 and 1985 are revealing for demonstrating how race and gender shape perceptions of the national body and for illustrating ways in which normative notions of American identity and the category woman have been routinely dissociated from black female subjectivity. These national dialogues are further significant and useful to study because they unfolded at a time when black feminists and other feminists of color were increasingly deconstructing essentialist scripts of the category woman as white and advocating for the recognition of terms of identity, such as race, class, and gender, as interlocking variables in shaping oppression. While the Council House was successfully established as a national historic site, such issues as Hutchinson voiced would resurface assertively in the 1985 hearings and reveal the lingering concerns that persisted within the administrative
ranks of the NPS about the financial feasibility of continuing to provide federal funding for this museum, as well as questions about the historical significance and national representativeness of Bethune herself. Much of the testimony from advocates of the project seemed to anticipate these concerns and gross misapprehensions related to Bethune’s national significance, even appearing designed to address them forthrightly.

The raced and gendered contestations related to Bethune’s national significance and historical relevance fully erupted during the 1985 congressional hearings, chaired by Bill Vento, which addressed H.R. 1391, proposing the designation of the Mary McLeod Bethune Council House as a national historic site and for other uses. Mary Lou Grier, the deputy director of the NPS, went on the record opposing the measure. She acknowledged the original authorization of $200,000 annually to the council in grants and assistance, which included a proviso that the council contribute $100,000 in matching funds, and she itemized the disbursement of the funding to the council annually from the time that the original historic site was established in 1982 until 1985. Grier explains that the new bill was designed to amend the original 1982 legislation in two ways, including changing all references in the act from National Council of Negro Women to the Mary McLeod Bethune Archives and designating $200,000 annually to carry out the act, along with additional grants of $500,000 that would be matched by the museum in money or services. She then argues against H.R. 1391 primarily on the grounds that supporting the measure would go beyond the original intention to merely help establish the institution and would authorize the subvention of its operating needs indefinitely.

Her implication is that the original goals of the measure had been redefined and extended in the interim years since the historic site had been established in ways that well exceeded its original intent. In Grier’s words, “As we understand the initial legislation, Mr. Chairman, it was to authorize funds to assist in the marking, interpretation, and restoration of the site which was designated as a national historic site in that legislation. We did not understand the intent of Congress to be that the act was a vehicle for funding the annual operating costs of the museum, and we believe those costs should be met from private sources. For that reason, we do not support an indefinite annual authorization of $200,000 or the $500,000 matching grant provision.”69 Despite the NCNW’s initiative in providing the requisite matching funding annually and demonstrated commitment in following through in fulfilling this obligation, Grier suggests that the organization assume full responsibility for funding
the operation and maintenance of the site dedicated to Bethune without the benefit of any further public financial support and underscores a private funding source as the best option.

At play here is fundamentally a question related to the role that the state should play in supporting an institution designated primarily to preserving the history and archives related to an African American woman, as well as the question of whether it has any responsibility at all. Grier’s imposition of a rigid public/private binary is grounded in either/or logic that devalues the middle ground that the original bill’s cooperative agreement had effectively achieved. The dichotomy implied in Grier’s logic recasts the conventional ideology of “separate spheres,” which primarily associates male subjectivity with “public” contexts while relegating female subjects to the “private” and domestic spaces. The logic is all the more ironic considering Bethune’s long-standing commitment to work in the nation’s public sphere, not to mention how generously and tirelessly she worked throughout her life in raising funds, along with various organizations, to support education.

In the implied advocacy for a reliance on philanthropy, Grier in effect obscures how the appropriations committee had reduced the funding the year before, how much the Council House had already been sustained by private funding, and the challenge such a process might entail, particularly amid the economic downturn of the 1980s. In general, the drastic budget cuts of Ronald Reagan’s presidential administration, which eliminated or severely reduced forms of public assistance that had been a lifeline to poor blacks and other minorities, registered for many as a sound reversal of Roosevelt’s New Deal, which had offered so many hopes and possibilities to blacks in the 1930s. Furthermore, Grier’s logic reflects the policymaking trajectory within right-wing political agendas, which favored corporate privatization and a retreat from any forms of government intervention (i.e., to discourage “big government”), that would increasingly be propagated within the discourse of neoconservatism. These factors also make it imperative to weigh her arguments in light of her Republican Party affiliation.

A native Texan, Mary Lou Grier’s career in the Republican Party began in 1957 in the Bexar County Republican Party, of which she was vice chair from 1961 to 1965. Because of her pioneering achievements at the state level, in 1971, the Texas Federation of Republican Women named her as the Outstanding Republican Woman of Texas in 1971. In 1972, she served as a delegate to the Republican National Convention. Grier then served as deputy director and acting director of the Bureau of Outdoor Recreation in the Department of the

MARY McLEOD BETHUNE 75
Interior from 1976 to 1977. She was also deputy director and acting director of the NPS from 1982 to 1986, an administrative term that aligned with the period during which the major congressional hearings related to the Bethune Council House unfolded at the national level.\textsuperscript{71}

The strategic spatial juxtaposition of the Mary McLeod Bethune Memorial and Freedman’s Memorial visualizes African Americans as a racial category through Bethune as a figure. In the public space of Lincoln Park, the monument to her stands as visual embodiment of black racial progress. She not only emerges as a representative black and female subject, but also as a representative American. As a precedent, this national monument and the significations attached to it are useful to recall when weighing how Grier’s commentary tacitly dislodges Bethune as a representative of the national body because of her race and gender. Grier’s opposition to increasing public funding for the Bethune museum as a historic site frames and in a sense veils larger concerns that surface as the hearings progress about whether history related to Bethune is truly relevant to the diverse body of American citizens who might conceivably visit a historic site, or universal in a sense that would merit such a substantial and sustained investment of public funding.

Significantly, the remarks of Ohio representative Mary Rose Oakar, immediately following Grier’s testimony, begin by indicating that Oakar will submit a formal statement for the record and go on to emphasize the white-centeredness of history books and how history has ignored black women’s contributions. Oakar notes black women’s contributions to a range of areas, highlighting Shirley Chisholm, Barbara Jordan, Harriet Tubman, and Rosa Parks.\textsuperscript{72}

For Oakar, questions related to funding the museum in honor of Bethune become the backdrop for discussing the history of black women’s marginal representation in Congress. Her comments situate Bethune’s legacy as a black leader in the continuum with the first black woman elected to Congress, Shirley Chisholm, and to Chisholm’s pioneering run for the presidency. Oakar’s statement overviews the history of black women’s leadership and radical activism, from slavery to the civil rights era, culminating in a mention of Rosa Parks, spotlighting black women who have made the most profound national impact.

Contrary to Grier’s argument that the financial investment proposed in the revised bill is exorbitant and excessive, Oakar insists that the sum is relatively small. She makes the case for funding the Bethune museum and for its very existence by acknowledging it as an archive that will draw black women, and all women, along with their families, to the nation’s capital. Oakar links the
ignorance about black women’s achievements to the lack of knowledge related to her own ethnic background as a person of Jewish descent. Furthermore, drawing on her experience as a community college teacher as the field of black studies emerged, Oakar mentions her observation of the routine exclusion of black women in black history as a further rationale for funding the museum and archiving and preserving black women’s history. In her comments, Oakar posits Bethune as another model and representative black woman as she frames the Bethune museum as an exceptional institution for documenting the history of black women. The formal written statement reinforces and builds on the main points of this oral testimony. Oakar dialectically links the erasure of black women in U.S. history to the invisibility of women in American history and acknowledges the unique challenges in preserving research on black women.

After Oakar’s testimony during the hearings, Bill Vento, the chair, notes the overall congressional support for the museum as a historic site, and he presses Grier to explain the grounds on which she is opposing it: “Since we have demonstrated the strong support in Congress, . . . your testimony does not reflect that—that the Administration did support the initial measure in 1982. Here we have started something in terms of the Mary McLeod Bethune program, the legislation establishing it. Why the change [of] that support at this particular point? We seemed like we were on to something where there was a commonality of a goal. I’m sure that you don’t disagree necessarily with the necessity of the archives. Why?”

Grier mentions the Park Service’s opposition to the 1982 bill based on questions about the museum’s historical significance and argues that the standard procedure of exhaustive professional historical investigation when Congress designates a national historic site was not used in researching Bethune. Furthermore, she notes that the Park Service is recognizing black women’s contributions within its Women’s Rights National Historical Park, an institution “not specifically targeted in one case just to black women.” She mentions the dedication of Maggie Walker’s home in Richmond, Virginia, by the NPS, and the exhaustive research into her background prior to authorizing the project as a case in point. Vento concludes that though the NPS had approved the site in 1982, Grier nevertheless seemed to be raising questions about the appropriateness of designating the museum as a historic site.

For Grier, Bethune’s status as a black woman seems to be the primary factor that implicitly informs the sense that Bethune’s legacy is too narrow to be representative for all Americans, including all women. Grier implies that
the cultural memory related to Bethune is too distant or irrelevant for recollection, while obscuring and dismissing it during the hearings. In invoking women, Grier’s logic associates the category primarily with a white feminine subjectivity implied to be normative and representative.

The urge for private funding for the museum articulated during the 1985 congressional hearings unfolded during the Reagan era, as federal fiscal retrenchments and cutbacks held dire consequences for the African American population. Indeed, while the council primarily consisted of middle-class black women, the raced and gendered logic of Grier’s commentary and the staunch resistances she outlines in her platform opposing continued public funding for the Bethune museum and questioning Bethune’s historical significance mirror and recast the public debate that the right wing was spearheading about welfare, dialogues that pathologized black women as single mothers and caricatured them.

The testimony of Bettye Collier-Thomas, the director of the Bethune Council House national historic site, adds valuable perspective to the congressional hearings by making a distinction between the “house museum” that Grier mentioned and the museum site dedicated to Bethune: “As a museum which does changing exhibitions and develops various educational materials and which utilizes manuscripts and artifacts to develop key themes in black women’s history, the requirements for interpretation of the Bethune Council House are very different from those of a house-museum.” Collier-Thomas underscores that a professional and credentialed staff trained in research is necessary to hire at the site to fulfill its mission and its rigorous programming and exhibitions, which are unlike typical house-museums where displays remain static and do not require staffing at this level.

In her comments, Collier-Thomas also challenges Grier’s claim that the Women’s Rights National Historical Park adequately represents black women by explaining that this institution, despite its efforts to include black women, remains primarily focused on white women in American history:

Also, Ms. Grier mentioned that they do black women’s history as a part of their interpretation at other sites. She mentioned the National Women’s Park. As a professional historian who has expertise in women’s history, I am very familiar with the National Women’s Park and indeed served as a consultant to that and the National Women’s Hall of Fame when they were originally developing this. They do not do any in-depth interpretation on black women. They are dealing with, in particular, documentation on the
1848 Seneca Falls Women’s Conference and suffrage, and they spotlight Elizabeth Katy [sic] Stanton, Lucy Stone, and the many other renowned figures who were part of that earlier movement.\textsuperscript{77}

Collier-Thomas addresses the aspect of Grier’s testimony that questions Bethune’s historical significance by pointing out, “The Mary McLeod Bethune Council House, designated in 1982 by Congress as a national historic site, serves to interpret the life and legacy [of] one of the greatest Americans to ever live.”\textsuperscript{78} Finally, Collier-Thomas asserts that the development of the museum was also in keeping with Bethune’s own vision and wishes for the Council House, that it would serve as a national site for archiving and preserving black women’s history, built on Bethune’s tireless work doing the same.

Lindy Boggs from Louisiana, during her testimony, comments, “I support this legislation because I believe the museum and archives are a valuable national resource and that the Council House and its history are a part of the fabric of our national heritage.”\textsuperscript{79} Moreover, Boggs emphasizes the glaring disparity between the \$618.68 million in federal appropriations for the year to maintain national historic sites and the mere \$2 million spent to maintain the eight black historic sites, which constituted less than 5 percent of the nation’s nearly two hundred historic sites. This sobering observation makes Grier’s concerns about continuing funding of the Bethune Council House seem petty, unfounded, and hypocritical. The acknowledgment of these facts and figures, like the testimony about the paucity of national historic sites devoted to commemorating black history, mentioned during the Senate hearings in 1982, throws into relief the persisting devaluation, marginalization, and exclusion of black people on national agendas. It speaks to their negligible and even pitiable share in the federal funding of such public institutions, and the unapologetic designation of the lion’s share of such funding to support projects in keeping with the history related to the dominant white culture, notwithstanding the contributions of black taxpayers and other minorities. This reluctance to invest in the development of national historic sites related to black history mirrored, for example, the underfunding of predominantly black schools during the post–civil rights era.

Grier’s stated opposition to designating the Bethune Council House as a national historic site emerged as a referendum on Bethune’s credibility as a representative American and woman precisely because of her identification as an African American and black woman and the lack of universalism perceived in both categories, belying Bethune’s veritable iconicity and prolific
historical contributions and those related to the Council House itself. The ideological dislodging of Bethune from notions of U.S. national identity in Grier’s rhetoric invokes commonplace ideologies of difference and otherness in relation to black women. Grier’s questioning of Bethune’s representativeness as an American was also intensely ironic in light of how Bethune had been targeted, beginning in 1943, by the House Un-American Activities Committee and accused of being a communist. This charge, however baseless, also resurfaced in the early 1950s, during the McCarthy era, when Bethune was denied a public speech before the board of education in Englewood, New Jersey, because of the accusation that she had communist affiliations. In effect, Grier’s logic obscures and attempts to displace Bethune’s genuine role in shaping and even transforming notions of national femininity through her ubiquitous presence in the U.S. public sphere for several decades and her influence in the capital, from the era of the Great Depression until the time of her death. Yet Bethune’s “My Last Will and Testament” affirms her view of her own legacy as being simultaneously national and global and acknowledges the potential of African Americans as a collective to transform and better the entire nation.

H.R. 5084, which authorized the NPS to gain proprietorship over the Mary Bethune Council House national historic site, under the auspices of the secretary of the interior, passed in the House of Representatives by a voice vote on July 30, 1990; was addressed by a subcommittee hearing on September 20, 1990; and was endorsed without amendment at the business meeting of the Senate Committee on Energy and Natural Resources on September 26, 1990. The accompanying report, submitted by J. Bennett Johnson Jr., begins with a background section that names Bethune as “a distinguished African American educator, political activist and leader who devoted her life to championing the causes of African American women.” H.R. 5084 stipulates that the property be managed by the NPS under the supervision of an advisory group with fifteen members, which would include various organizations affiliated with the Council House. It authorized cooperative agreements with private organizations to do interpretive work and administer archives. The language here primarily highlights Bethune’s contributions to black women’s history without acknowledging her broader contributions to U.S. history, in effect deviating from the narrative about Bethune that prior hearings in 1982 and 1985 had established.

Despite the endorsement of H.R. 5084 by the two major legislative branches of government, the statement from Denis Calvin, NPS associate director for planning and development, opposed the measure. As Calvin’s statement avers,
“Mr. Chairman, we oppose the enactment of H.R. 5084 and request that you defer action on this bill until the National Park Service completes a Suitability-Feasibility study to analyze alternatives for addressing several issues related to the Council House site.”

For the NPS, even at this point, as was the case in 1982, the primary reservation about taking on supervision of the Bethune Council House continued to be the lack of a study, which it was then working to complete. As Calvin’s report indicated, further concerns related to how much H.R. 5084 promised to expand the archives of the Council House, along with its scope: “H.R. 5084 significantly expands the existing scope of the Council House and the archives: Under H.R. 5084 the site would preserve and interpret the life and work of Mary McLeod Bethune, the history, lives and contributions of African-American women, and the struggle for civil rights in the United States. This expanded scope could significantly affect the operation, operating budget of the Council House, and the archives.”

The suggestion at this point is that the implementation of the legislation be suspended until the completion of the typically requisite suitability-feasibility study. Here, the contestations are not as ostensibly ideological as they were in Grier’s testimony, which in effect questioned Bethune’s historical relevance to the larger public as an African American woman. At this juncture, the lack of the study’s completion notably continues to serve as the main rationale for NPS’s hesitation to take on the management of the Council House. The Congressional Budget Office had projected that federal expenditures for enacting the legislation would be $1 million initially and $0.8 million annually thereafter for maintenance and operations. While the feasibility of federally financing the maintenance of the institution annually is not the major point of contestation here, as it had been in 1985, other concerns had to do with the implications of expanding the archive for the available budget. Yet it is intriguing that the two major reservations about pursuing the project, which were originally related to the absence of the study and questions of financial feasibility, when all is said and done here, fundamentally remained the same. Notwithstanding the Council House’s establishment as a national historic site in 1982, it is sobering that almost a decade later, it had failed to be embraced fully as a project for supervision by the NPS, the national organization primarily responsible for managing such facilities. Inevitably, the persistence of this line of argumentation throws into relief continuing resistances to Bethune’s status as a nationally representative black woman in the sense that the broad scope and range of the Council House archives devoted to her legacy of public work effectively demonstrated she was.
Subsequently, civil rights leader John R. Lewis from Georgia presented H.R. 609 in the House of Representatives on January 29, 1991, with the goal of authorizing the NPS to acquire and manage the Mary McLeod Bethune Council House national historic site, and for other purposes; the Interior and Insular Affairs Committee referred it for passage with several amendments. On March 7, 1991, the Subcommittee on National Parks and Public Lands held a hearing on H.R. 690; the amended bill was reported to the full committee on March 21, 1991, and passed on April 24 that year. According to the report summarizing the final round of debates, the background comments on Bethune began with an emphasis on her southern roots and linkages to the legacy of slavery. Furthermore, they also emphasize her connections to the Roosevelts and work in support of civil rights. In overviewing the activities of what was now called the Bethune Museum and Archives, the background comments primarily stress the significance of her work for black women and the relevance of the archives to black women’s history. The bill was referred to the Senate, and after more modifications, it passed on October 24, 1991, and became public law on December 11.

The committee recommended donation of the National Archives for Black Women’s History in light of past federal funding, a proposition that also held critical financial implications for the NCNW, given the organization’s longstanding initiative to help provide administrative support for the Bethune Council House and its primary role in carrying on the museum’s work. The 1991 act ended the cooperative agreement established on October 15, 1982, instead authorizing the NPS exclusively, because of its expertise, to supervise the management and administration of the site, along with its interpretation and preservation. Nonetheless, it allows the secretary of the interior the option of establishing cooperative agreements with nonprofit organizations to support the processes of interpretation and preservation, as well as to administer the archives. As this long journey culminates, the linkages of Bethune to the Roosevelts and her rural southern background are among the primary lenses through which she is made legible during this historic series of public hearings.

The discourses related to Bethune have not only unsettled white-centered notions of national femininity but have also helped decenter whiteness within notions of American identity. Public monuments from the Mary McLeod Bethune Memorial to the Bethune Council House in the nation’s capital reinforce the significations of national femininity associated with her and in effect extend them, so that memorializing and enshrining Bethune in the nation’s capitol has also helped to expand the definition of national femininity.
It is most significant and ironic that legal debates related to Bethune provided one of the most decisive challenges to exclusionary narratives of American identity, including notions of American womanhood, during the late twentieth century. The very contestations about her universality that emerged demonstrate persisting resistances to black women as representational models of womanhood in the nation. Aspects of the battle continue.

“The Long and Brutal Fight”

If mother-and-child motifs mediated Bethune’s accessibility to advance causes related to women and children, such a platform was possibly more complicated for Pauli Murray to access because of her transness. Murray was also engaged more ambivalently and cautiously by the NAACP than leaders like Bethune, a 1935 recipient of the Spingarn Medal, for failing to conform to its protocols and standards for respectability in several instances. A cofounder of the National Organization for Women (NOW), Murray eventually left the organization because it adhered to a narrow, white-centered definition of woman in the sense that shadowed these hearings.

At the time these hearings were unfolding, during the 1980s, the reactionary discourses of “colorblindness” and “reverse discrimination,” primarily designed to unsettle the gains of the civil rights era, expanded exponentially and have been serviceable in helping to propagate deracialized narratives of American identity, as white subjectivity stands in as its primary deracialized and unmarked signifier. This problematic has only become more pervasive in the contemporary millennial political climate, where notions of the “postracial” and “postblackness” have gained rhetorical currency. The successful establishment of Council House as a national historic site and its eventual administration under the auspices of the NPS easily stands to obscure the formidable hurdles that had to be cleared to actualize such remarkable milestones, along with some of the initial and obviously ideological resistances to funding this project federally. The debate itself valuably adds to our understanding of how politics of race, class, gender, and sexuality ideologically played out in the political realm within the emergent neoconservative era of the 1980s. The Bethune Council House was finally purchased by the NPS in 1994.

Contestations resurfaced in 2014, however, over the decision to relocate the National Archives for Black Women’s History (NABWH), which had
been housed on the site, to the Museum Resource Center (MRC) in Landover, Maryland. Bettye Collier-Thomas issued a press release urging that the order to shut down the collection at Council House be rescinded, that the Federal Advisory Commission ordered by Congress be reintroduced, and that budgetary funds appropriated by Congress be restored, along with a plan to purchase additional property that would facilitate expanding the collection. Moreover, she included a sample letter and urged the public to contact Sally Jewell, secretary of the Department of the Interior, and Jonathan Jarvis, director of the NPS, to register their concern about the decision. Peniel Joseph describes Collier-Thomas’s framing of these recent concerns within the “long and brutal fight . . . that led to the congressional designation of Mary McLeod Bethune’s last residence on the nation’s capital as National Historic Site.” In the February 22, 2014, edition of the Washington Post, Colbert I. King discusses the implications of the move proposed by the NPS in a piece entitled “Dishonoring Bethune’s Legacy,” while acknowledging the irony of announcing the plan during Black History Month: “In a letter to supporters of the Bethune site, Timothy Jenkins, the former vice chairman of the original Bethune Museum and Archives Board, calls the park service’s decision a ‘travesty’ that ‘must not stand.’”

The NPS issued a statement designed to address “inaccurate” information, and emphasized that a 2013 review by the museum program found that “the carriage house does not meet the basic museum collection storage requirements” outlined in their handbook, a conclusion that an additional inspection of the site on January 10, 2014, had confirmed. The statement contradicted the claims of Council House supporters, who noted that the 108th Congress did not enact a bill introduced to expand Council House by purchasing the property adjacent to it, and that in the wake of a 2007 NPS appraisal of the adjacent property valuing it at $2 million, legislative proposals to allocate $2 million to purchase it were submitted but not approved by either the 111th Congress or the 112th in 2010. The NPS statement explained that the materials would once again be made available to the public once the three-week process of the move was completed. It pointed out that the collection would be available digitally at the Mary McLeod Bethune Council House National Historic Site, which would remain open to the public, and that Council House advisory commission would be restored.

The public dialogues and debates that have resurged in recent times suggest that the long-standing concerns about the Bethune Council House have not disappeared; that on some levels, the genuine investments of the NPS in
the legacy of Bethune and in black women in the United States continue to be questioned; and that the future of the archives at Bethune Council House, even in this day and time, remains uncertain and continues to be hotly contested. These newer debates are particularly crucial to consider given the elisions of black women’s historical relevance and postures of indifference to their subject category in the national context, both linked to NPS officials during the 1980s, along with their seeming devaluation of Bethune’s legacy. When considering the routine exclusion by tourist agencies of the Mary McLeod Bethune Council House and the Mary McLeod Bethune Memorial in Lincoln Park on tours of the capital, the relocation of the collection to a suburban location makes it even less likely the public will be able to readily access the primary public tributes to Bethune and to be led to reflect on the vital contributions she made to this nation’s history. Furthermore, the relocation of the collection to suburban Maryland, a site mainly accessible by bus, obscures the symbolic and political significance of locating the materials in the nation’s capital. The new debates also build on previous arguments advanced by Timothy Jenkins, who emphasized the importance of locating the memorial to Bethune in the nation’s capital to honor her national legacy.91

The Bethune memorial was a prototype and forerunner of various other civil rights monuments that have been erected to black national leaders in public parks and museums, while establishing groundwork for all its successors in much the same sense that Bethune helped to establish foundations for the modern civil rights movement. Significantly, the lynching of fourteen-year-old Chicago teen Emmett Till while visiting his relatives in Money, Mississippi, in the weeks after Bethune’s death horrifically dramatized the vulnerability of black children in the struggle against racism and their transformative influence on the civil rights struggle. After Bethune’s “Last Will,” the choice to publish an image of Till’s mutilated body in repose in Johnson Publishing’s weekly Jet magazine helped fully ignite the modern movement for civil rights. Bethune’s essay established groundwork for themes that emerged in later speeches and writing associated with the civil rights movement, but it also deserves recognition and study as a literary work. I value it for study in terms of its formal structure and thematic content, which culminates with a pronounced reiteration of the youth-related agenda that inflected the heart of Bethune’s public work. An examination of its performative dimensions not only heightens the understanding of the legalese invoked in its scripting but also provides frameworks for thinking through its continuing circulation in published form, as well as its embodiments in the form of a public artwork like
the Mary McLeod Bethune Memorial statue. The voice of Bethune that resonates in this document was both exceptional and ubiquitous at a time when few black women in politics had a similar platform. Bethune's piece, because of its publication in *Ebony* and her high profile as a leader, garnered an audience far broader than what was accessible to black women writers at the time of its publication, and this reflective piece holds significant implications in juxtaposition with the reigning genre of protest literature that proliferated at the time.

In 1989, *Ebony* highlighted her among the “50 Most Important Figures in Black U.S. History” and in 1999 included her among the “100 Most Fascinating Black Women of the 20th Century,” revisiting her legacy on the cusp of a new millennium for a new generation. The decline of *Ebony* in recent years makes the “Last Will” and other parts of its vast archive all the more important to study and treasure. With Bethune's birth in the years after slavery and her death in 1955, she has often been described as a leader who served as the linchpin between Reconstruction and the civil rights movement. Just a few months after Bethune's death, Rosa Parks made history by refusing to give up her seat on a public bus in Montgomery, Alabama.

Parks's choice catalyzed an international freedom movement for civil and human rights and, in effect, led to her emergence as an international icon. In many ways, during the latter half of the twentieth century, her work continued the project of civil rights activism that Bethune's had begun. While in Bethune's case, the maternal motif, which had been more legible in black communities, was more distant in national memory in the mainstream by the time of these hearings, through Rosa Parks, it was more thoroughly nationalized and even globalized in relation to black womanhood during her lifetime and consolidated further in the wake of her death. Like Bethune, Parks is useful for examining invocations of mothers and children in the work of black women political leaders, along with the limitations of such scripts. In general, the legacies of Bethune and Parks are useful to consider comparatively to the extent that they provide an epistemology on how the U.S. South has helped to constitute iconic models of black femininity that have also in effect unsettled and helped to revise and expand the prevailing discourse of national femininity in the United States. The fruitfulness in comparative approaches to black women's history in examining eras from slavery to freedom is one factor that suggests the utility of considering the legacies of Bethune and Parks side by side, and emphasizing their fascinating and seldom acknowledged interconnections.