

Introduction

Honoring the Africa within Her

Well Mrs. Bethune was a person that everyone knew, and she had a deep sense of identification with her people. It's amusing to me to hear people talk today about black being beautiful, because Mrs. Bethune was one of the chief exponents of that idea, perhaps twenty-five or thirty years ago. I remember many of her speeches, in which she would stand up and say yes, I'm black and I'm beautiful. And I never sensed any disagreement on anybody's part, with Mrs. Bethune. She was a queenly woman in appearance and there were so many things about her life which showed her sense of identification.

—Clarence Mitchell

A proud descendant of Africans long before she gained the title First Lady of Negro America, Mary McLeod Bethune had a strong sense of where she came from and who she was.¹ She embraced her heritage, her dark skin, and the entirety of her story. She once wrote: "I have not let my color handicap me. Despite many crushing burdens and handicaps, I have risen from the cotton fields of South Carolina."² Rather than being ashamed of her illiterate parents, her rural upbringing, and her founding of a school with just \$1.50, Bethune found confidence in these aspects of her life, realizing that these were the things that shaped her identity.³ Her life was complex, with layers that have yet to be revealed. Throughout the course of her life she would work with presidents and world leaders, putting the issues of people of African descent at the forefront of her concerns, using her influence to address diversity in the military, decolonization, suffrage, and imperialism.

Often Bethune and many other women were not thought of as Pan-Africanist unless they associated themselves with organizations led by men. They were in the shadows of those men and validated primarily by their work with them.⁴ Women like Anna Julia Cooper and Fannie Barrier Williams are vaguely remembered as a part of the Pan-African struggle largely

because of their attendance at Henry Sylvester Williams's Pan African Conference (held in London in 1900).⁵ Amy Ashwood Garvey and Amy Jacques Garvey are largely known for their activism in the United Negro Improvement Association (UNIA), but their individual Pan-African activism is often overshadowed by their relationships with Marcus Garvey. Bethune neither attended the conferences nor was a member of UNIA, but she was, in fact, a Pan-Africanist. Mary McLeod Bethune was a Pan-Africanist who internationalized the scope of Black women's organizations to accomplish her agenda to create solidarity among Africans throughout the Diaspora.⁶ This is the first full-length book that frames Bethune as a Pan-Africanist. This examination of the life and legacy of this trailblazer takes into consideration her anticolonialist, sociopolitical leanings as well as her belief that Africans throughout the Diaspora have shared experiences of oppression.

Bethune once said: "For I am my mother's daughter, and the drums of Africa still beat in my heart. They will not let me rest while there is a single Negro boy or girl without a chance to prove his worth."⁷ For Bethune the drum, a powerful instrument among people of African descent, symbolized her connection with the continent as the daughter of a direct descendant of Africa. Her activism as a Pan-Africanist is seen through her efforts to bring liberation to Africa, create solidarity among Africans throughout the Diaspora, and bring attention to the plight of Africans outside of the United States. According to P. Olanwuche Esedebe's text *Pan-Africanism*: "Pan Africanism is a political and cultural phenomenon which regards Africa, Africans and African descendants abroad as a unit. It seeks to regenerate and unify Africa and promote a feeling of oneness among the people of the African world. It glorifies the African past and inculcates pride in African values."⁸ Esedebe's definition is the one I use in identifying Bethune as a Pan-Africanist.

Born in the rural South to formerly enslaved parents, she had none of the privileges that many of those around her at the height of her career enjoyed, but her faith and pride in knowing who she was kept her from seeing herself as being less than anyone. In fact, being born into a place where African heritage and traditions were celebrated and remembered and having a personal connection to Africa and Africans throughout the Diaspora are what influenced her to advocate for the rights of Black people throughout the world. Whether she was visiting Europe to meet with Lady Astor, writing in the *Chicago Defender*, or speaking at the founding of the United Nations, she used every opportunity to address issues impacting Africans throughout the Diaspora. She called for voting rights for Haitian women, criticized

America for neglecting the issue of decolonization, and persistently fought for the inclusion of Black women in World War II. Bethune saw herself as a voice of the oppressed.

Paul Robeson, W. E. B. Du Bois, Walter White, and Booker T. Washington were some of the well-known men whom Bethune worked with during the twentieth century. However, within their writings, they often disregard her significance. In fact, she is left out of the male-dominated conversations on Pan-Africanism although her actions and philosophies warrant acknowledgment within this space. For example, how is it that Du Bois's Pan-African congresses are recognized as having "established the idea of Pan-Africanism" and that he is often called the "Father of Pan-Africanism"?⁹ There is no doubt that congress meetings were significant spaces, but the women of the International Council of Women of the Darker Races (ICWDR), of which Bethune was a founding member, also brought women from Haiti, Liberia, Cuba, and India together to take a stance against the occupation of Haiti and to promote race pride, as an organization of women standing in solidarity from around the world. Although it was founded first, just a few years before ICWDR, the Congress tends to dominate the historical record. Alongside Du Bois at the San Francisco Conference, which led to the founding of the United Nations, Bethune took a bold stance against the colonization of Africa, yet she is often relegated to being only a national leader. Unlike her male contemporaries, she had to work within the confines of being a Black woman in a racist and sexist society. Carefully planning her steps and using her networks among women to build solidarity throughout the Diaspora, Bethune's Pan-Africanist work has been under the radar until now.

From her early years Bethune learned about the glorious past of Africa, the place from which her ancestors descended, and she remembered her mother as being a beautiful dark woman who "came down from one of the great royalties of Africa."¹⁰ Bethune was born in a place that once included the largest port of entry of enslaved Africans into the United States and a coastal area where the Gullah people preserved African culture. It was also where Africans gathered and united on the banks of the Stono River to oppose slavery. Resistance to white supremacy and resistance to the erasure of African culture were part of the South Carolina experience, and Bethune's life embodied both. In her youth, as her family history was passed down to her, she came to understand that she was a part of the African Diaspora. Bethune declared that when she finally visited the continent in 1952, "I was thrilled to set foot in this soil of Africa which I have so long dreamed of

visiting—of returning to my homeland.”¹¹ The acknowledgment of Africa being home is significant to her understanding of her connectedness to the continent and its people, and it is a clear demonstration of Pan-African activity, which is defined as “attempts of some people in the diaspora to make contact with the ancestral homeland, either to return there to stay, to visit temporarily, to take back to it what they assume are some of the benefits they have secured.”¹² Bethune visited schools and met with women’s organizations during her trip to Liberia, to share her insight and knowledge as an educator and global leader. Noted Pan-Africanist Marcus Garvey called for people of African descent to return to Africa in the early twentieth century, but just a few decades later Bethune urged readers of the popular Black newspaper the *Chicago Defender* to consider making a home in Liberia.¹³ Following the visit, she encouraged her readers to seek out opportunities to aid Liberia by visiting or considering moving to the country, in the hope that they could bring innovative ideas to help advance the country.

At the age of twenty she attempted to go to Africa as a missionary, but it was not until she was seventy-six that she finally was able to go. In the five decades between, Bethune focused on unifying descendants of Africa through the leadership of women’s organizations, starting with the founding of her school. “Fostering solidarity between all Black people everywhere” is a distinct characteristic of Pan-Africanism, and Bethune understood the limitations that came with being a woman in a male-dominated society. For her, though, connecting with women was the access point.¹⁴ She welcomed women from Haiti, Liberia, the Bahamas, Cuba, and beyond to join her organization, and she traveled to their countries to hear their concerns and foster relationships. Bethune surrounded herself with globally minded individuals and organizations to gain insight into the issues she sought to understand. Sue Bailey Thurman, Mary Church Terrell, Madame Vijaya Pandit, Addie Hunton—these were all women with whom she connected. She didn’t necessarily need formal conferences and congresses as a way to demonstrate her Pan-African ideals because for her it was the foundation of the work that she did.

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I fell in love with Mrs. Bethune’s story when I was a graduate student at Howard University. I was encouraged to volunteer at the Mary McLeod Bethune Council House National Historic Site by my professor (now colleague) Dr. Elizabeth Clark-Lewis. It was there that I met Dr. Joy Kinard, and immediately I was intrigued. I wondered how Mrs. Bethune’s story

could be so overlooked when she was one of the most influential women of her time. She was, in fact, the Oprah of the 1940s and 1950s. As I listened to the stories of her life from Mrs. Margaret Miles and Ranger John Fowler, I realized how much of her story resonated with mine, with both of us being from a small Carolina town and understanding the power of education. The Council House itself was a powerful space that had welcomed people such as Madame Vijaya Pandit, Mary Church Terrell, Ralph Bunche, and Liberian ambassador Charles D. B. King.

The archives became my home away from home, and I was offered a position as an archives technician. The job never felt like work because every day I was there I learned more about Mrs. Bethune and the women whom she mentored and was mentored by. The National Archives for Black Women's History is the only archive in the United States dedicated solely to the preservation of Black women's history, and it was the starting point for my research.

After completing my doctoral degree, I was offered a job at Bethune-Cookman University to be the director of the Mary McLeod Bethune Foundation National Historic Site. In the five years that I was there running her home I learned so much about her life from the people I met in the community who knew her. My first book, *Mary McLeod Bethune in Florida*, was inspired by her grandson (who was also her legally adopted son) Mr. Albert McLeod Bethune Jr. The book features interviews with her student Mr. Harold Lucas, her former colleague Dr. Cleo Higgins, and her last secretary, Mrs. Senorita Locklear. In the Bethune-Cookman University archives I thumbed through documents that revealed the depth of her leadership abilities as a college president and a world leader. In Daytona I became engrossed in community work, leading projects including the placing of historical markers at Bethune Beach, the home of Dr. Howard Thurman, and the Harold V. Lucas Foundation. In the early years, when Florida was considering Mrs. Bethune for Statuary Hall, I was the only Bethune scholar to speak to the Ad Hoc Committee of Great Floridians, presenting a speech on the contributions that she made to the state throughout her five-decade residency. In 2022 she replaced Confederate general Edmund Kirby, making her the first African American to have a state-commissioned statue.

This book is the culmination of more a decade of research and my experience as the director of the Daytona home that she lived in for more than four decades, oral interviews with those who knew her, working in the Mary McLeod Bethune Council House and archives in Washington, DC, where she conducted the business of the National Council of Negro Women and