

Mary McLeod Bethune's Research Agenda: Thought Translated to Work

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Abstract

This article presents Mary McLeod Bethune's educational philosophy and demonstrates the significance of historic ideas to contemporary research agendas. Bethune is usually recognized as an administrator or political figure; in this article, the author situates her as a scholar with clear and applicable ideas about educational research. Bethune's work suggests that scholars should produce research with four tenants in mind: cultural heritage, Christian morality, democratic civil rights, and advancement of graduate and professional training for community leadership. The author argues that Bethune's research agenda for higher education can guide contemporary academics toward much needed practical applications for longstanding social justice issues, contrasting black women's academic tradition with the historic white male approach to scholarship, which has been marked by social domination rather than moral leadership and publication for prestige at the expense of public service. Although the limitations in Bethune's scholarship are highlighted, it is clear that her educational ideas are complex and useful.

Introduction

History affords abundant evidence that civilization has advanced in direct ratio to the efficacy with which the thought of the thinkers has been translated into the language of the workers. Where are the interpreters...to translate [scholarship] into the language of the street?

Mary McLeod Bethune, Hampton University, 1934

Research, teaching and service are the core of higher education. Each area raises vital questions about scholarly agenda, pedagogical practice, and responsibility to the community. Though black women's access to formal education at graduate levels has been historically limited, their scholarship has been woven into America's fabric as early as the 1700s. Black women's historic contributions to civilization, as Bethune affirmed in the preceding quote, have effectively linked thought to action (Hine, 1998; Bethune, 1934/2002, p. 110).

Mary McLeod Bethune's ideas of research, knowledge creation, and meaning making were very much informed by her cultural identity, and she engaged in rigorous study for both personal and collective growth. She is widely regarded as a talented administrator and politico, but this paper focuses on how Bethune's collected written works enrich definitions of research in ways relevant to contemporary academics (Flemming, 1995; Hanson, 2003). First, a brief biography of Bethune is provided; second, her mandates for research are outlined; next, Bethune's perception of academic research is contrasted with the historic development of research in top-ranked institutions; and fourth, the limitations and strengths of Bethune's approach to scholarly research are explored.

Scholarship has consistently grown since the mid-1980s, yet there is shamefully little published about the intellectual history of black women, especially of Mary McLeod Bethune. While a May 2007 guided keyword search of the Library of Congress holdings yielded 494 references to Booker T. Washington and 870 to W. E. B. DuBois, the search yielded a scant 103 references for Mary McLeod Bethune.

Though not duly recognized in mainstream scholarship, attitudes like that of Nannie Helen Burroughs', "we specialize in the wholly impossible" (Taylor, 2002), have been prevalent in black women's articulation of community and have advanced education for racial minorities in the United States. Dr. Bethune provides a

vital example of ways historic scholarship can assist researchers in defining problems and identifying resources to address contemporary issues, especially those stemming from historic roots of racial and gender oppression.

Mary McLeod Bethune (1875-1955): A Brief Biosketch

Mary Jane McLeod, the 15th of 17 children and the first free of enslavement, was born on July 10, 1875, in Mayesville, South Carolina. She died in May 1955 at her “Retreat” on the Bethune-Cookman College campus in Daytona, Florida. Like most during Reconstruction, she labored in the cotton and cornfields to help keep the family afloat. In 1882, Mary attended Mayesville Industrial Institute at Trinity Presbyterian Church, graduating at 12 years old. She began Scotia Seminary (now Barber-Scotia College) in Concord, North Carolina, from which she graduated in 1894. In July of that year she moved to Chicago to study at Moody Bible Institute (McCluskey & Smith, 2002; Hanson, 2003).

After graduation from Moody in 1895 and an unsuccessful effort to become a missionary in Africa, Bethune returned to Mayesville. In 1896 she moved to Haines Institute in Augusta, Georgia, to teach eighth grade. Lucy Laney, a graduate of Atlanta University, founded Haines, and Bethune wrote of the powerful influence Laney had on her own life, career of teaching, and institution building. After Haines, Mary McLeod moved to South Carolina where she married Albertus Bethune in 1898 and had a son, Albertus Jr, the following year. At twenty-three, Bethune accepted a position in Palatka, Florida then moved to Daytona in 1904 to found what is now Bethune-Cookman College (McCluskey & Smith, 2002; Hanson, 2003).

Bethune acquired philanthropic support from James Gamble (of Proctor and Gamble) and John Rockefeller, among others, to support the college. The curriculum was patterned after Booker T. Washington’s Tuskegee Institute and in 1908 Washington, whom Bethune admired, visited her school; that same year the school

admitted male students for the first time (Flemming, 1995). In 1923, the school merged with Cookman Institute (founded in Jacksonville in 1872). Bethune remained president of the college until January 1943. She devoted her life to community and public service by serving the homeless, counseling poor people, teaching migrant workers, serving on national and local boards, and participating in the black women’s club movement of the early twentieth century. Examples of her involvement include serving as president of the Florida Federation of Colored Women, president of the National Association of Colored Women (NACW), and founding the National Council of Negro Women (NCNW), an umbrella organization for black women’s clubs nationwide, for which she served as president for more than a decade (Flemming, 1995; McCluskey & Smith, 2002; Hanson, 2003).

Bethune was politically astute. She worked for youth rights in three presidential administrations: Calvin Coolidge, Herbert Hoover, and Franklin Delano Roosevelt. In 1936, she was appointed director of the National Youth Administration’s Division of Negro Affairs, becoming the first black woman to head a federal agency. Four years later, she became the vice president of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). In 1951, President Harry Truman appointed her to the Committee of Twelve for National Defense. A highly decorated woman, Bethune was awarded the Order of Honor and Merit, Haiti’s highest honor (1949) and eleven honorary degrees. In 1985 she was honored with a U.S. postage stamp (Flemming, 1995; McCluskey & Smith, 2002; Hanson, 2003).

Though Bethune did not publish a single-authored manuscript, she contributed to texts such as *What the Negro Wants* (Logan, 1944), gave many public addresses that were published in *Opportunity*, *Crisis*, and *Ebony* magazines, and wrote hundreds of journal articles and editorials for publications ranging from the *Daytona Morning Journal* to the *Chicago Defender* (McCluskey & Smith, 2002). In *Building a Better World* (2002), an invaluable edited volume of Bethune’s writing, McCluskey and Smith critiqued earlier

work on Bethune by stating that most work has not been of scholarly quality and failed to access relevant primary sources (McCluskey & Smith, 2002); in this article, the author engages Bethune's writing to provide a scholarly analysis of this under-researched educator.

Bethune – Investigation, Interpretation, and Inspiration

During the Jim Crow era, most whites thought that educating black people was folly. From her personal experience, Bethune was conscious of the losses that a lack of education created. Reflecting on her denied access to education as a child, she wrote: "I could feel in my soul and my mind the realization of the dense darkness and ignorance that I found in myself – when I did find myself – with the seeming absence of remedy" (Bethune, 1940/2002). She lamented that one result of social repression was that black children often lost their sense of aspiration. Education, she argued, must be widely available at all levels and must be a tool of encouragement, particularly for those historically denied admittance to formal training.

Bethune asserted that a university has three responsibilities: investigation, interpretation, and inspiration. In her life and work, she was aware of the complex and central role that cultural identity played in one's educational attainment. She highlighted four themes in her writing: pride in one's heritage, Christian morality, democracy, and advanced study (Bethune, 1902-1955).

The first major theme in Bethune's writing is her belief that black Americans must cultivate knowledge of their own heritage. In her 1938 presidential address to the Association for the Study of Negro Life and History (ASALH), Bethune continued Carter G. Woodson's mission to "scientifically" study black history and present the facts for assessment in the arena of all cultures (McCluskey & Smith, 2002). After outlining the statistics and accomplishments of blacks in education, she emphasized the imperative for researchers to investigate black history:

Through accurate research and investigation, we serve so to supplement, correct, re-orient and annotate the story of world progress as to enhance the standing of our group in the eyes of all men... We must tell the story with continually accruing detail from the cradle to the grave... through the technical journals, studies and bulletins of the Association—through newspaper, storybook and pictures.... From this history, our youth will gain confidence, self-reliance and courage.... And as we look about us today, we know that they must have this courage and self-reliance. We are beset on every side with heart-rending and fearsome difficulties. (Bethune, 1938/2002, p. 213-15)

Bethune echoed pride in being black; she articulated a powerful denunciation of whiteness as a scholarly ideal by reminding educators they must foster African American intellectual achievement. According to Bethune, black history and culture were of central importance to the missions of universities. She advocated researching and teaching African American history in addition to European history by giving specific examples of culturally appropriate curricula:

When they learn the fairy tales of mythical king and queen and princess, we must let them hear, too, of the Pharaohs and African kings and brilliant pageantry of the Valley of the Nile; when they learn of Caesar and his legions, we must teach them of Hannibal and his Africans; when they learn of Shakespeare and Goethe, we must teach them of Pushkin and Dumas. When they read of Columbus, we must introduce the Africans who touched the shores of America before Europeans emerged from savagery; when they are thrilled by Nathan Hale, baring his breast and crying: "I have but one life to give for my country," we must make their hearts leap to see Crispus Attucks stand and fall for liberty on Boston Common with the red

blood of freedom streaming down his breast. With the Tragic Era we give them Black Reconstruction; with Edison, we give them Jan Matzeliger; with John Dewey, we place Booker T. Washington; above the folk-music of the cowboy and the hill-billy, we place the spiritual and the “blues.”...Whatever man has done, we have done—and often better (Bethune, 1938/2002, p. 213-15).

Though Bethune was an effective diplomat, she was also a woman unafraid to speak her truth about the necessary centrality of race in scholarship. The second theme in Bethune’s articulation of research was that learning was linked to God. She gained strength and determination from her mother’s spirituality and integrated meditation in her learning processes. She built her school on faith and seeded religious training into the soil of the campus. Her teaching addressed the whole person and did not compartmentalize learning as disciplinary approaches tended to do. Though “character education” evolved in meaning and fueled major pedagogical debates between the late seventeenth and mid-twentieth century, Bethune saw liberal arts, vocational training, and religious instruction as inherently intertwined (McCluskey & Smith, 2002).

For her, it was only by grounding teaching in Christian religion that one could ensure moral outcomes in education. Bethune pointed to the horrors brought on by the atomic age and argued that by adhering to principles such as the Golden Rule, world citizens could correct monstrosities like nuclear bombs that worldly education had created. For her, the origin and outcome of education should be centered on biblical lessons. In her work, she explained the difference between knowing and understanding: one could know the technicalities of a subject but, without moral training, not understand the global implications or moral significance of that subject. One must have both theoretical and practical training, but morality and social justice were the evaluative measures (McCluskey & Smith, 2002).

Third, democracy and civil rights were central tenants for Bethune. In her organizational addresses of the 1930s and 1940s, Bethune argued that education was a key component in fulfilling democratic promises, particularly for African Americans. In Logan’s edited volume, *What the Negro Wants* (1944), Bethune wrote a chapter titled “In Pursuit of Unalienable Rights,” in which she brainstormed with leading black politicians and demanded equity in nine areas: (1) government leadership to build favorable public opinion; (2) the victory of democracy over dictatorship; (3) democracy in the armed forces; (4) protection of civil rights and an end to lynching; (5) the free ballot; (6) equal access to employment opportunities; (7) extension of federal programs in public housing, health, social security, education and relief; (8) elimination of racial barriers in labor unions; and (9) realistic interracial cooperation (Logan, 1944).

Bethune understood that without equality in all these areas, college attendance for blacks would be impossible. Though she addressed many areas of civil rights, higher education was the main focus of her work. A final theme of Bethune’s educational treatises was that she identified graduate and professional school as an area in much need of development for African Americans. Not only did she establish her school for girls in Daytona, she consistently increased the quality and level of study until it gained full accreditation and an “A” rating as a college. Higher education as a means to political and economic access had top priority even before Bethune-Cookman was a full-fledged college. For Mary McLeod, this was her clear intent all along: to develop college level and graduate study for civil, professional, and scholarly leadership. Bethune’s doctorates were honorary, but she combined her administrative savvy with cutting edge research to find and fund the most viable graduate programs. In 2007, Bethune-Cookman College finally achieved university status.

After her 1936 appointment to President Franklin D. Roosevelt's administration, she reflected:

When I went into my office in Washington, we had very few students in our graduate schools. We tried to get the authorities to see the importance of giving special opportunities to Negroes in the upper tiers of training in order that we might get the master's degrees and doctors' degrees necessary for persons to give leadership...in the upper tiers—lawyers, doctors, social workers, ministers (Bethune, 1940/2002, p. 223).

In the first year of the Roosevelt administration, Bethune was in a position to allocate resources as the director of the National Youth Administration. She requested \$100,000 to direct toward graduate training and received it. From those funds she immediately wrote checks for \$20,000 to Howard and \$16,000-\$18,000 to Atlanta University, funded graduate education at Fisk and advanced study at Tuskegee. It is well known that Bethune supported access to education at the primary and secondary levels, but a close look at her research and policy shows that she fervently advocated for increased access to college and graduate research training for collegiate, professional, and civic leadership.

Black history, Christian morality, civil rights, and access to advanced studies, essential to Bethune's educational philosophies, were not unknown to mainstream education in the white dominant culture; however, for black women these ideas were imperatives for justice too often denied. Bethune's thoughts on research and her educational agenda championed intellectual recognition for black scholars; however, the larger system of American higher education generated drastically different ideals (Bethune, 1940/2002).

Ascendance of Research in U.S. Academic Institutions

From the first decade of the twentieth century, research and academic study at predominantly white institutions grew increasingly divorced from working toward the common good and became more wedded to rationalizing and perpetuating unequal social conditions. The professor became an expert, rather than a public servant. As Rudolph noted, "The University of Chicago first popularized the primacy of research over teaching and soon many institutions would grant promotion based on publication." (Rudolph, 1990). Publishing—raw production—trumped teaching and became an important means by which privileged white Americans maintained dominance.

Whereas business, law, and politics were centers of power in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the American university became the nineteenth- and twentieth-century locale where these networks developed. Though power remained in the hands of lawyers, businessmen and politicians, increasingly these groups were college-educated. Thus, academic research became a means to justify the accumulation and concentration of power and to deny access to marginalized populations (Rudolph, 1990).

In the battle for primacy, universities sought to distinguish themselves by membership in the Ivy League or by imitating institutions considered to be in that elite network. Like big business ventures, public funds provided elite schools with subsidies from which private parties profited, despite the public labor that produced the wealth. Some institutions, like Brown University, were enriched by blood money from the African slave trade or centuries of unpaid black labor (Rudolph, 1990).

Within institutions, departmental specialization created professional organizations, which then established stylized guidelines for publication. The American Philological Association was the first such modern organization, founded in 1869, followed by others like the Modern Language Association (1883), the American Historical Association (1884), and the American Economic Association (1885).

Each disciplinary faction sought to “prove” its academic worth when placed against other fields, but all fields subscribed to the myth of black inferiority. Racists in the humanities claimed superiority based on dichotomies of “civilization” and “primitiveness” and concluded that African Americans were not cultured enough to understand, interpret, or produce great art. The incorporation of statistical and other quantitative methods used “science” to make race calculable and to make claims of white supremacy numerically and “logically.” While “publish or perish” became the measure of academic worth, the ability to publish was strictly regulated by what the insiders of the racist, sexist, and classist organizations deemed worthy to print (Rudolph, 1990).

African American women educators produced valuable ideas about education, but because they were barred from the upper echelons of higher education, membership in professional societies, and publishing houses, their ideas were not widely utilized. Even when mainstream academics acknowledged black women’s ideas as interesting, their work failed the “rigor” test of objectivity, and they were seen mainly as “teachers,” which was lesser in value than “researchers.” Teachers instructed, researchers published. For, as Rudolph explained:

...publication, indeed, became a guiding interest of the new academician. Each book, each article, was a notch pegged on the way to promotion.... This de-emphasis of the teaching role of the American professor...made it clear who was to be promoted, when, and why (Rudolph, 1990).

White males published large bodies of work because they had the time, resources, institutional support, and professional reputations to do so. Though many black women, including Bethune, wrote and independently published educational theories and research findings long before scholars like John Dewey, W.E.B. Du Bois, and Booker T. Washington, they remained largely obscure because they lacked institutional access and social support.

Interpretation of Black Women’s Intellectual History

Mary McLeod Bethune and her contemporaries like Anna Cooper (1998), Fanny Coppin, and Septima Clark among thousands of others, articulated educational philosophies that had four central themes: demand for applied learning; recognition of the importance of social standpoint and cultural identity; a critical epistemology that both supported and resisted mainstream American ideals; and moral existentialism grounded in a sense of communal responsibility. Though most historic black women taught at elementary and secondary levels, these insights definitely apply to postsecondary education (Evans, 2007).

First, historic black women insisted that learning be applied and that, in evaluating truth claims, experience should count heavily. As Bethune witnessed, learning often provided a means to resist oppression, and the applied nature of black women’s knowledge claims asserted their right to speak out based on their own lived experience. Too often, they witnessed political ideologues and celebrated intellectuals like Thomas Jefferson, graduate of William and Mary College and founder of the University of Virginia, espouse ideals of democracy and equality but fail to put the ideals into practice for all people. Consequently, these women insisted that the meaning-making process be tied to real-world situations and that ideals be matched with policy implementation (Evans, 2007). As Bethune noted in her 1934 address to Hampton University, one must be right in thought and action (Bethune, 2002). According to Bethune’s criteria, if research findings do not result in a more equal society, and researchers themselves do not actively work toward that equality, then academic degrees, journal publications, book manuscripts, and professional acclaim simply are not of any real value, scholarly or otherwise.

Second, black women educators kept their social standpoint and cultural identity at the fore of their treatises. Bethune’s organizational involvement shows that black women used dialogue rather than monologue as part of the educational process. To test truth

claims, they conversed with their communities and brought their identities to bear on the discussion. Instead of placing a premium on “objectivity,” they explicitly placed subjective and collective knowledge at the center of understanding. Black women’s voices reflected their cultural standpoint, which was an intersection of race and gender in a white and male world (Evans, 2007).

Third, historic black women researchers held themselves and others accountable for knowledge claims. The critical nature of their research was complex. On one hand, they sought to challenge assertions of race inferiority; on the other hand, they upheld the rhetoric of democracy, equality, and freedom espoused by mainstream America. They produced qualitative and quantitative research to disprove falsehoods claimed by those they considered to be educated fools, but also held themselves accountable for producing results in their communities (Evans, 2007).

Lastly, black women academics voiced and demonstrated an ethic of caring. Their ideas were based on an assumption of moral existentialism: social justice and civic responsibility were at the heart of all education, both in thought and in practice. For black women scholars, the standard of evaluation for the worth or validity of their research was not simply that it was published or cited, but that their ideas were implemented toward the greater good (Evans, 2007). Bethune and many others contributed ideas on research, teaching, and service that support Patricia Hill Collins’s argument for a “black feminist epistemology.” In *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* (2000), Collins identified four dimensions of black feminist knowledge production: (1) lived experience as criterion of meaning; (2) use of dialogue; (3) ethic of personal accountability; and (4) ethic of caring. Black women’s educational philosophies, like those of Bethune, provide a disciplinary portfolio that addresses these aspects of social thought (Collins, 2000).

Historically, African American women highlighted the importance of cultural identity in their research. Their teaching

supported a dedication to lifelong learning and demonstrated the necessary awareness of learners’ social and historical context. Both their research and teaching were designed to serve their communities.

Limitations of Black Women’s Thought

Despite these strengths, I have identified four points of contention in historic black women’s thought that contemporary educators must consider. In *Deromanticizing Black History* (1991), Walker argued that researchers must look critically at their subjects, especially those we hold in high regard. He stated that historians often paint a rosy picture of black experiences to counterbalance the pervasive portrayal of black life as deviant. This approach overlooks real shortcomings in black communities, like child abuse, self-hatred, homophobia, and violence against women. Romantic approaches to educational research have often ignored destructive practices of some selfish, egocentric, and triflin’ black educators in Academe. Thus, I offer brief observations about the shortcomings of black women’s educational ideas to avoid romanticizing their practices and to acknowledge philosophical limitations of all scholarship.

First, race issues are not simple binaries of black and white; discussions must go beyond “us” and “them.” Due to dire conditions created by slavery and Jim Crow, most historic black women argued from a stagnant, dichotomous racial position. In “margin to center” arguments by black women scholars, multiple categories of “Others” (especially ethnicity, ability, sexuality, and religion) were often obscured. Race is paramount, but it is not the only factor involved in discrimination. Further, race certainly has historical significance with contemporary ramifications; however, it is a social construct and must be treated as such.

Second, extreme selflessness can be as harmful as extreme selfishness. Black women educators’ sense of self developed in the “we” of community. Their work and philosophies defied the solitary preoccupation of Jung’s individuation or Descartes’ declaration

of thought-being. Black women became real, whole, conscious and present through collective action. Bethune was indicative of the “black superwoman” archetype of the educator-activist. In this historic narrative, stress was made normative, which robbed many black women of balance, health, and wellness. Some became martyrs, insisting on dying for the black race instead of living life with measured, balanced enjoyment (Wallace, 1999).

Third, African American women advocated Christian education. They argued that moral, spiritual, and other metaphysical or religious concepts were essential to formal teaching and learning. Their arguments are convincing because their results were impressive. Yet, institutionalizing religion in higher education, just as in government, brings inevitable problems. Advocating for universal Christian religion in all colleges and universities would be self-righteous, xenophobic, essentialist, exclusive, and arrogant in similar ways to the institutionalism of race-based oppression. Nevertheless, Christianity and interfaith dialogue are central to black Americans’ history, culture, and thought. Black women’s faith in Christian education revisits age-old debates of separation of church and state.

A fourth limitation of this history is that it reifies “middle-class” values, which marginalize citizens without property, training, or pedigree. Black women educators engaged in uplift; too often their liberal efforts supported participation in an educational hierarchy that ignored structural inadequacies and racist assumptions of the American academy and the cut-throat capitalist society in which it developed. Middle-class notions of social progress were often patronizing and downplayed the efficacy of poor people’s activism on their own behalf. Like appeals to nationalism, middle-class values and DuBoisian “talented-tenth” aims in higher education are too narrow a platform from which to address human rights (Boris, 2002).

Conclusion

Despite these limitations, black women’s research agendas must be more widely studied and incorporated into today’s academy. Beyond Collins’ work, bell hooks convincingly argues that, despite the barriers African American women academics have faced, our presence in the Ivory Tower is essential. In her essay, “Black Women Intellectuals,” hooks (hooks & West, 1991) argues that through perseverance and solidarity, “the predicament of the black intellectual need not be grim and dismal” (p. 163-64). She charges that black women naming themselves “intellectual” is a necessary act of activism within the academy and, like Bethune, recognizes that thought connected to action is transformative for individuals, institutions, and societies. She writes, “When intellectual work emerges from a concern with radical social and political change, when that work is directed to the needs of the people, it brings us into greater solidarity and community. It is fundamentally life-enhancing.” (p. 163-64). Dr. Bethune, like Dr. hooks, recognizes the legacy of black women’s contributions in guiding research agendas that are sustainable, life-affirming, and justice oriented rather than competitive, destructive, and dehumanizing or publications that only seek to increase one’s page count in the narrow halls of the “publish or perish” Ivory Tower (hooks, 1991, p. 163-64).

Bethune’s research agenda is an essential tool for a critical reevaluation of today’s African American research perspectives. A close look at her research regarding cultural identity, religion, democracy, and graduate study can help researchers advance higher education in the United States and abroad. Most importantly, as demonstrated with the undying debate around school access and Affirmative Action, Bethune’s scholarship can inform current policy (Yates & Mills, 2004).

Bethune’s approach to academic research challenges contemporary academics to make research more socially responsible and demonstrates a need to balance autonomy and public accountability. National inequalities are still pervasive, and African

American research, when historically grounded, can be a vital part of much-needed solutions.

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