

Introduction

An Exemplary American Woman

In 2015 on social media, a groundswell of voices within the feminist movement, primarily represented by the Women on 20s corporation, raised concern about the absence of a woman on U.S. currency. They emphasized the urgency of including a woman on the twenty-dollar bill to replace the image of President Andrew Jackson by the 2020 centennial anniversary of the Nineteenth Amendment, which granted women the right to vote, and they launched a petition to President Barack Obama to order the secretary of the treasury to update the currency “to reflect the remarkable accomplishments of an exemplary American woman who has helped shape our Nation’s great history.”¹ In several rounds that unfolded over five weeks in 2015, multiple black women—such as Shirley Chisholm, Sojourner Truth, Rosa Parks, Barbara Jordan, and Harriet Tubman—were among the finalists. Harriet Tubman was ultimately declared the winner.

The public campaign spearheaded by Women on 20s aimed to challenge male-centered patriarchal views of American history by framing the highlighting of exclusively men on monetary currency as a symptom of a national history that has systematically erased, marginalized, and ignored the contributions of women. The movement unsettles conventional narratives of American selfhood that center men. The group comments, “We believe this simple, symbolic and long-overdue change could be an important stepping stone for other initiatives promoting gender equality,” noting, “Our money does say something about us, about what we value.”²

That this movement to update the twenty-dollar bill unfolded as former First Lady, New York senator, and secretary of state Hillary Clinton was on the campaign trail in the effort to become the nation's first woman president, who made history by being selected as the first woman presidential nominee of a major political party, reinforces its resonances with historical struggles for equal rights and voting rights for women. It is all the more significant that the movement emerged against the backdrop of political movements for social justice such as #SayHerName, which is designed to confront the pervasive silence and invisibility in black communities related to black girls and women in narratives about police brutality focused on black boys and men, and to promote intersectional approaches to thinking about race, class, gender, and sexuality, clarifying ways in which the categories are intrinsically interlocked. Women on 20s suggested the value in intersectionality in the sense originated by critical race theorist Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw and advanced by scholars such as Patricia Hill Collins, which challenges conventional politics' exclusion of black women.³

To be sure, the racial and ethnic diversity of the initial finalists, which, in addition to nine white women, also includes five black women and an Asian woman, is noteworthy when considering perceptions of the feminist movement in the American mainstream as being white-centered, exclusionary, and indifferent to issues concerning black women and other women of color. This public campaign suggests how black women have shaped notions of American selfhood, notwithstanding their historical devaluation, marginality, and invisibility in the national context since antebellum slavery. That two black women, Tubman and Parks, symbols of freedom in the nation in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, garnered two-thirds of the votes to make the final list is quite remarkable for registering the influence of black women in shaping American identity. Tubman's selection in the popular vote as the woman of choice to appear on the new version of the twenty-dollar bill not only underlines the potential of black women to help represent and define the nation in this day and time, but also demonstrates their long-standing legacy as national emblems and the public voices they have established in the national arena, dating back to the antebellum era.⁴

Critics of this gesture, however, underscore the bitter irony of printing Tubman's face on American money considering she was once a slave classified as property, while leaving in place the prevailing capitalist economy and its profiteering imperatives, which originated in the modern slave trade. That Tubman was not awarded until her death the monthly pension of twenty

dollars to which she was entitled for her service in the Civil War is a concern for critics, along with the deeper implications given the spirit of her work as an abolitionist whose heroism freed many slaves via the Underground Railroad. In an era when paper currency is no longer used or circulated as widely in national and global financial markets, the political, social, economic, and cultural impact of the new bill featuring a woman, even while holding great symbolic significance, will be inherently limited.

As Salamishah Tillet points out in her landmark study *Sites of Slavery: Citizenship and Racial Democracy in the Post-Civil Rights Imagination*, blackness has been characterized by civic estrangement from the prevailing notions of citizenship and democracy that have been premised on black exclusion since slavery.⁵ Nobel laureate Toni Morrison's critical insights underscore that ideals of freedom and democracy, which fed the spirit of the American Revolution and were later foundational to the philosophy of the nation as a republic, stressing individual rights such as life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness, were informed by a visceral awareness of what slavery meant given the routine subordination and dehumanization of those categorized as black during the period. In the slave society of colonial America, blacks were regarded as other, inferior, and subhuman; were equated with slavery; and were fully dissociated from notions of freedom and citizenship in the emergent nation, though paradoxically, America would never have been developed without the labor black slaves provided. Morrison reminds us that the foundational definitions of the nation were intrinsically informed by the black condition during the Revolutionary War era.⁶ While the constitutive role of black subjects in helping to shape foundational notions of liberty and freedom in the nation has been evident from the time when the United States crystallized as a republic, the black influence on these principles has sometimes been repressed, denied, or downplayed.

Conventional patriarchal national narratives have typically focused on white men as the nation's "founding fathers," such as George Washington and John Adams for being patriots of the American Revolution and the nation's first and second presidents, along with Thomas Jefferson for being the third president and the principal author of the Declaration of Independence. This term implies that the new nation was symbolically a family and inherently patriarchal. In a critical sense, the pioneering scholarship of Dana D. Nelson has clarified how "national manhood" has been essentially linked to white male subjectivity and premised on the exclusion of racial and ethnic others outside the category "white" while prioritizing material property and wealth as terms

of inclusion. All women were by definition excluded from this ideal. The new nation established a hierarchy within its citizenry based on race, gender, class, and sexuality, with white male elites solidly positioned as the superior and legitimate subjects.⁷

Purist, nativist ideologies of American identity have failed to accord legibility to black women, including black queer and trans women, and other women of color. While no narratives of “founding mothers” figure as saliently in the national imagination as those related to the “founding fathers,” and white women have typically been marginalized and excluded in these patriarchal narratives, stories related to figures such as Betsy Ross, who by legend is reputed to have sewn the first American flag, have nevertheless been passed down frequently throughout American history. In the earliest years of the American republic, figures such as Ross and Dolley Madison emerged as national emblems of American patriotism. Black women, however, are far less likely to be linked to the prevailing national narratives or to the nation’s sense of selfhood and what it means to be a representative American woman. Blackness, like queerness, has been an inadmissible and unthinkable quality in defining universal or normative notions of American subjectivity and citizenship.⁸ I believe these factors make Tubman’s selection by Women on 20s quite significant.

This study explores ways in which black women leaders have unsettled the conventional white- and male-centered narratives of American selfhood through recurring scripts in the public sphere—in speeches and in writing, along with some of their most salient cultural representations—as nationally representative women and in relation to notions of national family, while using their platforms to challenge prevailing pathological images and narratives related to black motherhood and children. It clarifies how and why maternal motifs have so significantly inflected black women’s representations in the public sphere and scripts linking them to notions of national identity. The conditions for this phenomenon were established during antebellum slavery.

Beginning in the colonial era, black women were made synonymous with slavery, classified as property, and primarily associated with labor, including the process of birthing and reproducing the slave class in their children, who legally inherited status as slaves through their black mothers in light of the famous legal precedent in Virginia in 1662, *partus sequitur ventrem*, stipulating that the condition of the child should follow that of the mother. As scholars from history to literature have pointed out, the labor of black women was exploited and appropriated within this system in both work and reproduc-

tion, and their bodies were placed under forced and frequently violent subjection, including beatings, rape, and concubinage, as assaults on the black maternal body within modernity.⁹ This context of sexual exploitation, which frequently held black women as captives and hostages, mainly benefited white males, who dominated this inherently patriarchal slave system. The silencing and subjugation of black women, along with their sexual and physical abuse in servant roles, typified their condition within the domestic sphere, even as black women's labor was primarily consigned to fieldwork alongside men, where their bodies were also subjected to horrific and brutal forms of routinized physical and sexual violence and abuse.

As Hortense Spillers observes in her classic essay "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe," the assault on black flesh within the slave system led to an "ungendering" of people of African descent, so that masculine and feminine gender categories were unsettled under slavery's subjection, as the primacy of the maternal linkage for black children was established as a result of the uncertain paternal lineage that slavery inaugurated.¹⁰ C. Riley Snorton has related such conditions within the slave system to gender mutability, linking blackness and transness since the antebellum era, while linking the abusive experiments on black women's bodies of J. Marion Sims within nascent gynecology to the racial assault on blackness and its mutuality with transness.¹¹ Sexual pathologies linked to black women within the antebellum slave system were premised on the idea of black womanhood as being lascivious, seductive, and wanton to rationalize their rape and physical abuse by slave masters.

Such perceptions were typically internalized by black women's white slave mistresses, who were more likely to react with jealousy and blame toward them for such circumstances than to recognize their victimization. At the same time, the reigning ideology of the nineteenth century for white bourgeois women, the Cult of True Womanhood, exalted elite white women for embodying the ideals of purity, piety, submissiveness, and motherhood. These tenets by definition excluded poor women, along with black women, who were vulnerable to sexual abuse through their subordination within the slave system and its ongoing assault on black maternity, and because they were not permitted to marry legally as slaves given their categorization as property.

The particular forms of race- and gender-based abuse of black women within the slave system and the effects on black mothering were graphically highlighted by Harriet Jacobs, writing under the pseudonym Linda Brent, in *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, the first slave narrative written by a black woman, in 1861, and published in the weeks before the Civil War began.¹² In

fiction, Toni Morrison offers the most compelling and sustained literary examination of the assault of slavery on the black maternal body and its continuing trauma through her character Sethe in the novel *Beloved* (1987). It draws on the history of Margaret Garner, an escapee from slavery who took the life of her daughter to prevent her children's recapture by her former master.¹³ The exploitation of the black maternal body was further evident in black women's roles as "mammies," who tended and served as wet nurses for the children of the master class, a practice that obliged them to prioritize the suckling and nurturing of white infants as the nutritional needs of their own babies went unmet.

Slavery conditioned the groundwork for the salience of the black maternal body in constructing black femininity in the nation's public sphere, for the better in emblems like Truth, and for worse in stereotypes such as the mammy. These material conditions make it all the more remarkable and exceptional that the voices of black women emerged in the national context through writings and speeches within abolitionist and feminist discourses during the antebellum era. Black women have typically been cast as the quintessentially abject, subordinate, excluded, and "other" category within the prevailing national narratives in the United States. That the short list by *Women on 20s* includes Truth and Tubman, who had experienced the traumas of slavery firsthand, among nationally significant American women, along with Tubman's victory in the popular vote in social media, point to ways in which black women subjects have helped to shape notions of American selfhood since the era of slavery.¹⁴

As a scholar who now lives and works near Auburn, New York, which is where Harriet Tubman lived for the last half century of her life, I gained valuable knowledge by going on the annual tour of Harriet Tubman National Historical Park, led by historian Margaret Washington, a site that includes Tubman's residential home and the residence for seniors she managed. The project culminates an initiative that was more than twenty years in the making. Like the *Women on 20s* project, this public initiative demonstrates the continuing investment in Tubman as a national and global symbol.¹⁵

The symbolic constructions of Truth and Tubman have served different purposes at different times. Both women share common ground in having escaped to freedom, working prominently within the abolitionist movement during the antebellum era, and working within the movements for black citizenship and women's rights after slavery. Truth and Tubman used their public platforms as black women to advocate for freedom and women's rights, which informed the national narratives that coalesced around them as symbolic

American women and their emergence as national icons after Emancipation. In both instances, epistemologies on freedom and womanhood mediated the national narratives that coalesced around them, and they emerged as beacons in defining black womanhood and as symbolic American women by the era of Emancipation, while expanding early foundations in black feminist thought and black women's intellectual history.

In establishing public voices and gaining national recognition as black women, they joined their predecessors, such as Phillis Wheatley, the first person of African descent and second woman to publish a book in colonial America, and Maria Stewart, who was free and the first black woman to give a public speech to a racially integrated audience. Black women who made foundational and pioneering contributions in developing genres that constitute African American literary history established conditions for the emergence of black women's voices in the nation's public sphere and foundations for the development of black feminist thought in the African diaspora. Such early representations of black women in this nation made them, at the very least, foremothers in the African American context, who influenced the political landscape by establishing pioneering public voices in their speeches and writings during the antebellum era and in early epistemologies linking freedom and literacy to black feminine subjectivity. They established important foundations for the recurrent invocations of black women in constructions of American national identity that I am examining in this study, those who might be thought of as their "daughters" and heirs apparent in a symbolic sense, who were birthed as free women to a world no longer shadowed by slavery, in which black women and their children could be categorized as property.

This book considers how black women national leaders in the political arena since Emancipation have recurrently invoked images of the nation as a family and cited maternal motifs and children in their public speeches and writings to challenge the conventional exclusion of blackness from definitions of America. In the process, they have provided counternarratives to prevailing pathological narratives established during slavery of the black maternal body and black families. They reconfigure black family and the black maternal body in the public sphere and restore intimacy with black children. The dominant themes in these women's works and cultural representations are important to recognize and analyze in African American literary and cultural history, not only for their salience but also because they attest to the profound political legacy that black women have created in the nation, while underscoring its significance for literary studies.

Even so, such cultural models of black womanhood are limited to replicating the rhetoric of family associated with conventional national narratives, including motifs related to mothers and children, which reinscribe heteronormativity and the alienation of black trans and queer women from scripts of blackness and American selfhood, preconditioning their marginality and exclusion. Moreover, such erasures obscure how black queer and trans subjects have constituted black women's iconicity since the antebellum era and risk mirroring the material forms of violence and annihilation to which black queer and trans bodies have been routinely subjected. Roderick A. Ferguson is among scholars whose research underscores the indispensability of sexuality, including "queer of color" analysis, in thinking about discrimination.¹⁶ The legibility and inclusion of black queer and trans women is vital for reimagining the national body and actualizing a vision of the United States in which all black lives are visible, valued, and indeed truly matter.

The Shadow of Aunt Jemima

In 1892, when Anna Julia Cooper was a teacher and principal at M Street High School in the nation's capital, she boldly proclaimed in *A Voice from the South* that the status of blacks collectively in the nation was contingent on the inclusion of black women, famously stating: "Only the black woman can say 'when and where I enter, in the quiet, undisputed dignity of my womanhood, without violence and without suing or special patronage, then and there, the whole Negro race enters with me.'"¹⁷ Ironically, the image of black womanhood gaining the most public exposure in the national arena during this period was popularized because of her body size and national nostalgia for the southern mammy, and was premised on not having a voice at all. In 1889, Chris L. Rutt and Charles G. Underwood developed the Aunt Jemima logo for their ready-made pancake flour mix at the Pearl Milling Company, a logo inspired by Billy Kersands's minstrel song "Old Aunt Jemima."¹⁸ By the 1890s, Aunt Jemima emerged as the most prominent stereotypical symbol of black womanhood in the national arena.

The Aunt Jemima logo was grounded in the mammy myth that emerged in the antebellum era and was further consolidated after the Civil War through Old South plantation nostalgia and romance, which typically represented this figure as an eager servant and caretaker for her master's family, who loved and doted on his children. In visual representations, in keeping with the mammy

stereotype, Aunt Jemima is typically plump and asexual, wearing a bandanna headscarf.¹⁹ Nancy Green was the first of a series of black women to bring Aunt Jemima to life by portraying her flipping pancakes in an oversized flour barrel at the World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago, Illinois, in 1893. In effect, Aunt Jemima, in the context of this historic event, was scripted as a prominent national and global emblem of black femininity. This spectacle proved to be one of the most popular exhibits.²⁰

The irony could not have been more bitter considering that blacks, including political leaders who desired to represent a broader spectrum of black history and cultural contributions in exhibits they had developed, were excluded, an oversight that seemed like a slap in the face given the political repression blacks increasingly faced in the nation at the time. The antilynching crusader Ida B. Wells famously protested against this exclusion.²¹ During this reactionary period of growing political repression for African Americans in the years after Reconstruction, when lynchings were on the rise, along with white rioting, Wells stood at the forefront in mobilizing national organizations such as the black women's club movement to resist social, economic, and political repression against blacks.

Michael Borgstrom has recognized that among racial stereotypes represented in the black characters in Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852), including Aunt Chloe as the mammy figure and her husband, Uncle Tom, the queer subjectivity of the body servant Adolph has remained invisible and unacknowledged. Borgstrom's insights throw into relief the role of queerness in constituting the marginal legibility of characters such as Adolph in the novel.²² The mammy is not only inherently sexualized through her markings as asexual, but she has also been routinely sexualized through cross-dressing and cross-racial performances linked to queer practices, as witnessed in *Birth of a Nation* (1915).²³ Indeed, in the 1890s, Aunt Jemima heralded such queer cinematic visual embodiments of the mammy that were steeped in minstrelsy. When circulated as the Aunt Jemima trademark, the mammy was hyperembodied and popularized through invention and spectacted public performances before a white audience. To this day, her residual traces in matriarchal figures, from Martin Lawrence's Big Momma to Tyler Perry's Madea, are premised on embodying performative models of black trans womanhood that have gained widespread currency and iconicity in the nation's popular culture, even as black trans and queer women remain excluded from the prevailing national models of black womanhood, which are paradoxically premised on heterosexual identification. Queerness and transness have been foundational

in constituting the mammy, including manifestations as Aunt Jemima, and saliently inflect her ideological embodiments in the national context, while black queer and trans women have remained voiceless and invisible within national models of black womanhood.

The most significant and ubiquitous popular manifestation of the plantation ideal of black servants who knew and stayed in their place, Aunt Jemima was tacitly apolitical and a signpost of black complicity with the emerging Jim Crow social order. The Aunt Jemima figure began to appear prominently on a host of items circulated in American material culture, including paper and rag dolls, sheet music, needle books, recipe books, placemats, paper napkins, dinnerware, coloring books, aprons, posters, buttons, cigarette lighters, letter openers, and so on.²⁴ In *Ceramic Uncles and Celluloid Mammies*, the folklorist Patricia A. Turner examines the lingering fascination with items along these lines, which she classifies as “contemptible collectibles” for their grotesque, exaggerated imaging of the black body steeped in racist stereotypes.²⁵

In a compelling piece in the *Atlantic*, “The Mammy Washington Almost Had,” Tony Horwitz begins by making the link between Aunt Jemima pancake mix and the mammy as he discusses the famous campaign to erect a monument in the U.S. capital in honor of mammy and as a paean to the figure authorized by the U.S. Senate in 1923 “in memory of the faithful slave mammies of the South.”²⁶ The campaign was largely spearheaded by the United Daughters of the Confederacy and was grounded in myths of the Old South that romanticized the work of slave women on southern plantations, including their relationships to the white children for whom they cared, while extolling their devotion and subservience to white masters and mistresses. The goal was to locate the monument blocks away from the newly dedicated Lincoln Memorial. The initiative sparked intense outcry and protests from blacks, including black women leaders at the national level, such as Mary Church Terrell of the black women’s club movement in the National Association of Colored Women (NACW), and was never completed. Significantly, Horwitz frames the opposition to the monument as a precursor to civil rights activism later in the twentieth century.

The enthusiastic campaigns to erect this monument to mammy, like the infamous Aunt Jemima display at the World’s Columbian Exposition, dramatize long-standing and highly racialized conventional scripts of black femininity that have figured black women as abject, subordinate, and alien within the national imagination. The outcry against this monument also spoke to long-standing contestations and conflicts over national representations of black

women. At the same time, this controversy over mammy anticipated later contestations and challenges that have emerged related to memorializing and monumentalizing black women linked to national politics.

The Quaker Oats Company, which had purchased and established the Aunt Jemima logo as a trademark in 1925, advertised its products through promotions such as painted hard plastic salt shakers, a syrup container, spice containers, and a sugar bowl and creamer featuring Aunt Jemima, along with a fictive husband named Uncle Mose, produced by the F&F Mold and Die Works in Dayton, Ohio, from the 1930s to the 1950s (figure I.1). Archival materials related to Aunt Jemima and the Quaker Oats Company, which I examined at Duke University's David M. Rubenstein Rare Book and Manuscript Library, reveal a concerted effort in advertising from decade to decade to adapt the trademark to a changing nation in terms of both gender and race, along with more racially inclusive representations of family. For example, Aunt Jemima advertisements of the 1950s mirrored the popular television images of the era, which romanticized domesticity by prominently featuring white nuclear families, idealizing white womanhood in relation to the home and promoting domestic ideals in the years after masses of American women had entered industries to work during World War II. Such idealizations were also evident in ads of the early 1960s proclaiming, "The lovin'est moms make Aunt Jemimas!" and "The huggin'est moms make Aunt Jemimas!," which visually decenter and erase her body and rely on recollecting her iconic image and voice.²⁷

The advertisements seemed premised on southern nostalgia, depicting images of white families sitting at the breakfast table juxtaposed with pancake boxes featuring Aunt Jemima, alluding to the labor of black women as servants, even as white women were taking on their own domestic work and the ranks of black women as domestic laborers were shrinking statistically. Such contradictions reveal the continuing role of the black maternal body in mediating anxieties related to race, gender, and sexuality in this nation after World War II. These materials reveal that during the 1960s, the Aunt Jemima advertising campaigns became more inclusive, as black nuclear families were featured in some advertisements, a trend that mirrored cultural shifts toward racial integration during the civil rights era. The records indicate not only a shifting and expanding discourse on national family but also the fantasy of a more inclusive one. Such archives are important, too, when recognizing how easily Aunt Jemima is written out of histories of advertising that center whiteness when discussing the significance of women, despite her longevity as a logo and trademark.



FIGURE 1.1 Aunt Jemima kitchen items by F&F Mold and Die Works. Photograph by Dave Burbank.

The salience of the Aunt Jemima in the final years of the nineteenth century established foundations for her ubiquity in stereotyping black women throughout the decades that followed. Rebecca Sharpless points out in *Cooking in Other Women's Kitchens: Domestic Workers in the South, 1865–1960* that the romance of the Aunt Jemima stereotype obscured the material conditions under which black women worked as domestics and cooks after Emancipation. It ironically romanticized work that black women in reality were thankful to have escaped once slavery ended, even as it continued to shadow their lives as paid laborers over the next decades. Sharpless observes, “Between emancipation in 1865 and the civil rights movement in the 1950s and 1960s, African American women did domestic work, including cooking, to earn wages and support their families, biding their time until better opportunities opened,” which acknowledges how profoundly this work continued to define the material conditions of black women after slavery.²⁸ In 2014, Kara Walker’s provocative installation at the Domino Sugar factory in Brooklyn, New York, *A Subtlety, or the Marvelous Sugar Baby*, had a large sphinx-like sculpture of a mammy figure as its centerpiece and pondered the roots of this mammy stereotype in slavery. Significantly, it confronts asexual depictions by highlighting the mammy’s sexual erotics, also hinting at her queer performances,

through the breasts and buttocks prominently displayed in its sphinx-like positioning, pondering its continuing cultural impact. This interactive sculpture resembled earlier images of Aunt Jemima donning a scarf and confronted its audiences with internalized racism and oppression related to such images.

Yet as critics such as Lauren Berlant have stressed, the size and ubiquity of the mammy figure on the marquee as hyperembodied and circulated as a commodity through fictive national brands, such as Aunt Delilah in the 1934 film *Imitation of Life*, while bearing the trace of Aunt Jemima, came with no power.²⁹ It paradoxically underscored her subordination and abjection because of her race, gender, and sexuality, including her lack of voice and agency.³⁰ Specularity at this level has foreclosed voice and power to the extent that disembodiment has been the prerogative of liberal individualism from the age of Enlightenment, as quintessentially embodied in white male subjects who were elite and propertied and who epitomized rationality, a narrative fueled by scripts linking blackness to slavery, dehumanization, and notions of intellectual inferiority.³¹

Despite Aunt Jemima's visual iconicity as a spectacle in advertising and her hyperembodiment, a raced and gendered stereotype such as the Aunt Jemima image registers the powerlessness, marginality, and silencing of black women and lack of legitimacy in representing the national body, given that her popularity and currency are premised on a spectacted body and visual iconicity as a national fantasy in the vein of mammy as a holdover from slavery, a time when the black woman's role as a servant who knew her "place" was idealized. These qualities signal a lack of subjectivity, linking the Aunt Jemima figure to what Karen Shimakawa theorizes as "national abjection."³² The relegation of blackness to subhumanity within evolutionary biology of the nineteenth century, which analogized women to children in intelligence, coupled with an emerging eugenics by the end of that century, added to contexts for Aunt Jemima's abjection in the public mind. Indeed, in some ways, it was ironic that the iconicity of Aunt Jemima crystallized in a period during which domestic practices such as cooking were being regimented through discourses of math and science, though her appeal and expertise were correlated with folk wisdom rather than intellectual ingenuity.³³

In this study, I examine what happens when black women are able to gain voice and legibility at the national level and assert their subjectivity, to the point that they challenge conventional stereotypes of black womanhood like Aunt Jemima, while expanding definitions of womanhood, motherhood, and American identity. I began my investigation of the lingering repercussions of

raced and gendered stereotypes established in the antebellum South, including their role in creating race and gender formations at the national level, in my first book, *Black Masculinity and the U.S. South: From Uncle Tom to Gangsta* (2007), which explores how the discourses of Uncle Tom have frequently been nationalized and invoked to pathologize black masculinities both within and beyond the U.S. South; black masculinity is frequently associated with an urban ideal.³⁴ Similarly, Aunt Jemima has been legible as one of the most nefarious images of the black female body, and as one of the longest-running trademarks in American advertising history, a history that I have long studied and have previously discussed in published work such as my 2003 essay “Southern Turns,” which draws on this Aunt Jemima image as a historical context for pondering the phenomenon of Miss Cleo, a black Florida woman promoted by two white male entrepreneurs to masquerade as a Caribbean psychic in the 1990s.

On June 17, 2015, a young white supremacist male, Dylann Roof, who heavily identified with racist and fascist symbols, attended a Bible study at the historic Mother Emanuel AME Church in Charleston, South Carolina, and took the lives of eight African American congregants and the minister, South Carolina state senator Rev. Clementa Pinckney. Confederate flags and related merchandise have been widely regarded as symbols of racism and hate by many African Americans and as a primary aspect of southern heritage and culture linked to Civil War ancestors among many white southerners. The emblems were the subject of widespread public discussion in the immediate aftermath of this tragedy and were rapidly removed from commercial circulation by many top companies. Public pressure also led to their removal from some federal and state buildings. In a bold act of civil disobedience, the Black Lives Matter activist Bree Newsome bravely climbed the flagpole and removed the Confederate flag from public display on the property of the South Carolina state house ten days after this tragedy.

In the days thereafter, I was invited to write an opinion piece for the *New York Times* on what other problematic symbols need to go besides the flag. My op-ed piece, “Can We Please, Finally, Get Rid of Aunt Jemima?” addresses the linkages between Aunt Jemima, the mammy figure of the Old South, lingering Confederate nostalgia, and southern racism. It raises questions about what is at stake in the lingering visibility of this antebellum stereotype for advertising pancakes, syrup, and other breakfast foods in the twenty-first century. It provided a media platform for me to engage some of my research concerns at the national level in the context of an urgent public debate.³⁵

On May 25, 2020, George Floyd died in Minneapolis, Minnesota, at the hands of four police officers, including the white officer Derrick Chauvin, who used the controversial knee-on-neck method to restrain Floyd for nearly nine minutes while ignoring Floyd's pain and pleas of "I can't breathe." This horrific incident was the tipping point igniting Black Lives Matter protests across all fifty states and around the world. These protests, which were on a broader scale and more diverse than any in recent history, called for an end to such violence and for radical changes in policing. The public dialogue about symbols and monuments linked to racism also resurfaced, including concerns about the Confederate flag, leading organizations such as NASCAR to ban it from public display at their events and the Mississippi legislature to take a historic vote to remove it from the state flag.

In the midst of the protests and after the singer Kirby's TikTok video criticizing the Aunt Jemima brand went viral, PepsiCo, the owner of the Quaker Oats Company, revisited the trademark and announced the decision to retire it. In light of my 2015 op-ed, NBC Universal interviewed me on the issue of Aunt Jemima and featured my commentary linking the symbol to racism and notions of black inferiority on programs such as the *Today Show* and the *Nightly News*; that interview led to others that ultimately reached an audience of more than 1.5 billion people.³⁶ Within the long history of critiques of Aunt Jemima among scholars and artists, I am thankful to have had the opportunity to contribute to this public conversation and to have been among the most recent voices advocating for this symbol's removal.

Since the nineteenth century, gender ideologies of southern origins, from the black male as a rapist and the black female as mammy to the white male as a southern gentleman and the white female as the southern lady and southern belle, have helped to constitute heteronormative national discourses on masculinity and femininity. Manhood and masculinity have been topics of increasing interest in studies of the U.S. South in recent years, to the point that numerous monographs and anthologies have been published in the field. The critical and theoretical work on masculinity and manhood that emerged in the 1990s, energized by developments in women's studies; queer, gay, and lesbian studies; cultural studies; critical theory; and critical race theory, fed the development of gender studies while advancing this field toward institutionalization. The U.S. South, even in our time, constitutes some of the prevailing representations of femininity in the cultural imagination, which also needs to be increasingly studied.

In this book, I am invested in examining the region's typically unacknowledged role in constituting black feminine models that have gained national iconicity in political contexts. The critical contributions that I am making in the current project continue my work to help expand the understanding of geography in shaping race and gender categories in this nation, with an emphasis on femininity. It adds to the growing body of scholarship on intersections between gender and region as related to women that has developed in fields such as southern history and southern literature and that has often been grounded in feminist frameworks.³⁷ This book also contributes to the growing critical enterprise focused on the U.S. South, gender, and sexuality. It adds to these conversations through its focus on femininity within a national framework. Dislodging femininity from any essentialist definitions, I frame it as a social construct and as performative. By examining questions related to the influence of black femininity on the national body, and acknowledging the marginalization of black and trans women in shaping them, this new study builds on my research project on black masculinity in the effort to expand epistemologies related to the effects of the U.S. South on processes of race, gender, and sexuality formation in the nation.

Because of its reliance on slave labor to sustain its primarily agricultural economy, the U.S. South was the region positioned at the forefront in developing and advancing slavery as a legalized and socially sanctioned institution in the nation during the antebellum era. The institution of slavery has also accorded the U.S. South a salient role in engendering, articulating, and legally defining black women as raced and gendered subjects. The mammy and her manifestations in figures such as Aunt Jemima, like Uncle Tom, is an ideological byproduct of the culture of plantation slavery in the antebellum South. Aunt Jemima epitomizes the fashioning of black women's subjectivity as an abject emblem of the national body. It is important to recognize this image, one of the most long-standing and familiar stereotypes of black femininity in the United States, as part of the ongoing pathologization of the black maternal body within the history of slavery and modernity and as one of its most accessible, salient, and ubiquitous public embodiments in American material cultural, beginning in the last decade of the nineteenth century and persisting to the present day. Aunt Jemima's serviceability and familiarity as one of the most egregious and grotesque emblems of the black feminine body was reinforced throughout the twentieth century by a range of other representations steeped in pathological invocations of the black maternal body in the nation's public sphere.

The Aunt Jemima stereotype is just one of the earliest illustrations of how the mammy figure established foundations for recurring citations of pathological images of the black maternal body throughout the twentieth century. These images have been central in mediating public dialogues about black women, to the point of affecting political policymaking, as evidenced in the Senate's endorsement of the initiative of the United Daughters of the Confederacy to enshrine a monument to mammy in 1923 in the nation's capital to celebrate her legacy of servitude spanning back to slavery. New twists on pathological representations of the black maternal body that built on this ubiquitous mammy stereotype were propagated roughly every generation. By the 1950s, amid the Great Migration to the urban North and growing poverty and crime in black communities resulting from deindustrialization, the matriarch emerged as an outgrowth of the mammy stereotype as the reigning pathological emblem of the black maternal body.

Patricia Hill Collins classifies the mammy and the matriarch among the primary "controlling images" of black women that proliferated in twentieth-century cinema designed to pathologize black motherhood. As she points out, "While the mammy typifies the Black mother in white homes, the matriarch symbolizes the mother figure in Black homes. Just as the mammy represents the 'good' Black mother, the matriarch symbolizes the 'bad' Black mother. The modern Black matriarchy thesis contends that African American women fail to fulfill their traditional 'womanly' duties."³⁸ Playwright Lorraine Hansberry offers what is perhaps the most redemptive portrait of the matriarch in her characterization of the long-suffering Lena Younger in her critically acclaimed 1959 play *A Raisin in the Sun*.

In 1965, Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan famously framed the matriarch, in light of the proliferation of women-headed households, as the reason for the emasculation of black men, the delinquency of black children, and the dissolution of the black family in urban contexts, along with its dysfunction, revealing the salience of this stereotype in shaping national dialogues and public policy related to black families and its ubiquity in pathologizing black womanhood. In the 1980s, continuing investments in pathologizing black mothers at the national level were evident when the neoconservative Republican right wing popularized references to young black women on forms of government assistance, such as Aid for Families with Dependent Children, as "welfare queens," correlating the pervasiveness of out-of-wedlock births among black mothers and the absence of fathers in the home with an increase in crime and violence among black youth.

In Wahneema Lubiano's compelling essay "Black Ladies, Welfare Queens, and State Minstrels," she elaborates on how this reactionary ideological climate, animated by raced and gendered black stereotypes, affected constructions of law professor Anita Hill and Clarence Thomas during their testimony at the Senate Judiciary hearings in 1991, held after Thomas's nomination to the Supreme Court, regarding her allegations against him for sexual harassment. Lubiano emphasizes that the U.S. public sphere has most often been volatile and precarious for black female subjects and a context in which the notion of the "black lady" embodied by Hill was unfamiliar and unintelligible.³⁹ In the early 2000s, references to the "baby mama" in the political mainstream, which appropriate black slang among some black men to refer to the mothers of their children to whom they are not married, have been invoked by political reactionaries to emphasize the decline of marriage in black communities and to critique and pathologize black single mothers and fathers, along with their children. Most famously, when Barack Obama was on the campaign trail for president in 2008, Fox News invoked this term to refer to his wife, Michelle Obama, as a strategy for linking them to the stereotypes of black relationships as being noncommittal and common law and of black families, including black mothers and fathers, as being dysfunctional and inherently pathological. Such newer representations of black women as "welfare queens" and "baby mamas" accord with Collins's description of "controlling images" of black motherhood "portraying black women as stereotypical mammies, matriarchs, welfare recipients and hot mommas."⁴⁰ Terrion L. Williamson affirms the value of exploring these images within black feminist practice.⁴¹

Black women entering public life are inevitably shadowed by this history and challenged to create alternative and more agential scripts of the black woman subject. While Aunt Jemima is a familiar example of the conventional stereotypical imaging of black women in the national context, this book examines the role of black feminine models across multiple Souths that have posed a challenge to conventional exclusionary national narratives premised on white identity, including white femininity. The pathological representations of black womanhood elaborated here provide vital contexts and foundations for analyzing how the South in the broadest conceptual sense has functioned as a primary backdrop for black women's repetitive significations in relation to the national body, building on and extending cultural motifs that were established during the antebellum era by black women abolitionists such as Truth and Tubman. Aunt Jemima emerged by the end of the nineteenth century as a national brand and became the most ubiquitous and visible symbol of

an abject and subordinate black womanhood in the national imaginary. Her glaring specularly was an ironic signpost and a harbinger of a more inclusive and complex representational politics of black womanhood, which increasingly defined this category in the modern national arena but was nevertheless premised on black queer and trans women's exclusion, as well as limiting the legibility of such subjects.

Black National Femininities

Precursors such as Truth and Tubman under the banners of suffragist and abolitionist movements provide valuable foundations for thinking about the litany of black women who have emerged as national icons in the twentieth century and into the new millennium of the twenty-first. The black female body has conventionally been ascribed low symbolic capital and has been marked as undesirable in defining and representing the national body, or else has been circulated as a primary marker of abjection and subjection, as we have seen in Aunt Jemima, along with related pathological images that distort black maternity. As Melissa Harris-Perry points out in her poignant study *Sister Citizen: Shame, Stereotypes, and Black Women in America*, the status of black womanhood in the United States has been continually associated with marginality, devaluation, and exclusion.⁴² It is also important to examine ways in which black women leaders have developed counternarratives to abject constructions of black female identities premised on the subjection of the black maternal body. Monolithic, homogenizing, and reductive scripts of the black feminine as being always already nationally abject, outside, and othered obscure the ways in which black women have consistently challenged, unsettled, and ruptured conventional notions of national femininity and the national body. Familiar ideological images such as Aunt Jemima have functioned as the obverse of the representations that I examine in this study, in which I highlight black women as representative emblems of the national body.

Several fundamental questions energize this study: What happens in moments when the script is flipped, and black women emerge as central and even primary representatives of the national body? What happens when black female subjects move to front and center in shaping significations of America at the national level, to the point of transforming, expanding, deconstructing, and rescripting conventional narratives of American selfhood? What is

the potential for subversion in moments when black women gain access to national platforms? How radically might we reconceptualize notions of the national body and expand its familiar definitions by scrutinizing the interstitial and compressed spaces where black women emerge within America's scripts of national femininity, renewing, realigning, and revising them? How might we identify models of black female subjectivity that potentially intrude on or disrupt the conventional national narratives that repress and exclude black women and privilege whiteness, by recognizing black women's historical symbolic impact in shaping them? What are the limitations in iconic models of black womanhood that have infiltrated national politics, come to voice, and been most visible? What potential do black queer and trans women hold to further unsettle and disrupt white- and male-centered representations by engendering a more radical, subversive, and inclusive model of black female subjectivity in the public sphere, and to make American scripts more democratic, beyond heteronormativity?

Emancipation's Daughters illustrates how consistently black women have challenged scripts of American identity premised on notions of black otherness through black women's framing as representatives of the national body. *National body* is one of those terms invoked frequently but seldom defined. For my purposes in this study, I define the national body as the collective U.S. citizenry in all its diverse contours as shaped, for example, by race, class, gender, nationality, region, and sexuality, whose human rights are invoked in the abstract and legally protected by the Constitution while being linked to the definition of democracy, even as subjects who contradict its tacitly white and masculine prerogatives are often classified and perceived as noncitizens, systemically alienated from the reigning national ideals, and work to deconstruct the premises underlying them. At the same time, the term affirms the agency of those who are legally excluded from or invisible within notions of American citizenship. The national body is often magnified and epitomized by prominent representatives of the collective citizenry and emblemized in the form of their literal bodies. It consists of citizens who are unseen and invisible, to the point of disembodiment altogether, as much as it is conceivably emblemized, and indeed, epitomized, through such ubiquitous and abstracted iconic figurings.

Concomitantly, this study challenges scripts of representative raced and gendered groups within the category black as male, highlighting the primacy of black women's voices and their salience to definitions of blackness. This study throws into relief ways in which black women leaders have consistently

invoked black families, including black mothers and children, to frame blacks as being representative Americans and, in the process, have related them to notions of national family in their political speeches and writings. Such alternative scripts of the black mother unsettle the mammy myth. In the shadow of the Aunt Jemima stereotype and later ideological images such as the matriarch, which informed and mediated black women's representations in the public sphere, I consider alternative scripts and counternarratives of black womanhood that have linked blackness to notions of national family and framed black women as representative women while variously invoking them as national mothers. They are compelling from my perspective as a literary scholar and cultural critic to the extent that they envision more inclusive narratives of American selfhood and challenge ones that are premised on black exclusion, otherness, and pathology.

I examine how black women leaders in their speeches and writings, alongside many of their cultural representations, have consistently scripted black women as emblems of the national body not only in the realm of politics. At the same time, this motif is also important to recognize and think about in relation to African American literary and cultural history. I consider the manifestations of this motif as it has played out in a range of periods since Emancipation and within what some scholars frame as the long history of slavery, including the eras of the Depression, civil rights, post-civil rights within neoconservatism, and the early twenty-first century, dominated by notions of postblackness and the postracial. In these moments, Mary McLeod Bethune, Rosa Parks, Condoleezza Rice, and Michelle Obama, in differing ways, have all magnified contestations about black womanhood in relation to the national body and national family. Moreover, it is intriguing that rhetoric of the maternal is a common thread despite divergent political positionings associated with black women at the national level, which all challenge and unsettle pathologies of the black maternal body.

Just as the women's movement, beginning in the antebellum era, established the groundwork for constituting black women ex-slaves such as Truth and Tubman as national icons by the postbellum era, national black women's organizations, beginning with the black women's club movement, provided the earliest and most salient platforms on which black women became visible in the national political arena in the era after Emancipation. Black women's organizations were also pivotal in helping to challenge stereotypical representations by expanding the visibility of black women at the national level, beyond stereotypes sanctioned in contexts such as advertising, through the

emphasis in organizations such as the National Council of Negro Women on establishing a voice in politics. Moreover, black women whom I examine in this study have primarily emerged as the most striking embodiments of U.S. identity in the public sphere and have been constituted in relation to major historical moments, including the New Deal of the Depression era, the civil rights era, neoconservatism, and the Obama era.

An outgrowth of the NACW, the National Council of Negro Women played a vital role in the national legibility of Mary McLeod Bethune, who emerged as a premier black woman leader during the Depression and was at the forefront in representing the voices of black women politically in the years leading up to the beginning of the modern civil rights era, which was inaugurated with the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision in 1954. Rosa Parks was articulated as a national icon of femininity during the civil rights era that followed. This terrain for black feminine subjects to signify in this sense was expanded through major legislative and legal hurdles such as the *Brown v. Board of Education* case in 1954, the Civil Rights Act of 1964, and the Voting Rights Act of 1965. By the post-civil rights era, the rise of second-wave feminism and the increasing cultural influence of black feminism measurably expanded this space. Rice gained prominence as a black woman at the national level through the right-wing conservatism of the early millennium. Michelle Obama has been its most salient signifier since the age of Obama began with her husband's election as president. In all instances, black women's national iconicity has been mediated by epistemologies related to freedom and civil rights. The growth of mass communications from the modern period, including television and video, expanded the space for disseminating and proliferating iconic narratives linking black women to national femininity, just as the rise of the internet and social media in more recent years has expanded the space for disseminating such representations exponentially and pluralizing notions of the public sphere.

I believe that we need to grapple with the significant body of work produced by these black women in speeches and writings. I regard them as cultural texts, all the more important to examine given that they have typically been overlooked within and excluded from dialogues in African American literature and have not been legible within its conventional canons. Increasingly, scholarship on race and class within areas such as black women's history and black women's literature and criticism has established foundations for my discussion in this study. Indeed, my work would be inconceivable without the pioneering contributions made by writers and critics within the black

women's literary renaissance of the 1970s, women who prioritized the teaching and study of black women's literary history and explored black women's texts across multiple genres, while challenging exclusionary politics of mainstream feminism by grounding their work in black feminist methodologies, which emphasized interlocking variables that shaped black women's oppression in addition to gender, such as race, class, sexuality, and nationality.⁴³

The discourses related to these figures have contested the reigning ideological images of black womanhood and black maternity that have been dominant in the nation's public sphere, including the mammy, matriarch, welfare queen, and "baby mama," which have emerged over the past century. This study throws this highly exceptional, seldom remarked on, and relatively invisible if consistent economy of black feminine representation into relief through a sustained critical discussion of figures that I consider across its chapters. Such black feminine representations have been serviceable across the liberal and conservative political spectrum, from Democratic to Republican, which is one reason that I consider in some cases, such as Condoleezza Rice's, both the liberatory and highly reactionary purposes they have variously served, along with the varied critiques and responses they have engendered.

My longtime studies of transnational feminism, nationalism, and nations have been indispensable as I have developed this project and established the conceptual groundwork for my critical reflections related to national identity, national femininity, and national family. This journey began with anthologies such as Chandra Talpade Mohanty, Ann Russo, and Lourdes Torres's *Third World Women and the Politics of Feminism* and Inderpal Grewal and Caren Kaplan's *Scattered Hegemonies: Postmodernity and Transnational Feminist Practices*.⁴⁴ Women who have become models of what I am describing as *national femininity* have typically made a profound social, cultural, and political impact at the national level through their leadership and pioneering contributions and, in some instances, have been linked to political movements and activism that helped to bring about social change. It is significant that the civil rights movement, public offices, and work in presidential administrations are primary contexts in which the symbolic capital of the women under investigation has been registered, affirmed, and acknowledged in national politics.

In invoking the term *national femininity*, I refer to how the national influence of such distinguished public and political women establishes conditions for their abstraction, in their singularity, as representatives and emblems of the national body in the public sphere, a representation that also sometimes extends to popular contexts. The term describes women who have gained the

highest level of iconicity and visibility in politics, along with the highest degree of symbolic capital, which enables them to become legible to the collective citizenry as emblems of the nation itself, while being imagined and idealized as representatives of the national body and correlated with prevailing democratic ideals. In some instances, such significations have crystallized in the national imaginary for a brief period, but they also hold the potential to endure and to be reconstituted and sustained over time. Individual bodies of such women sometimes become emblems and symbolic representatives of the larger national body. They at times achieve salience in the political arena to the point that it even becomes possible to fantasize the face of such a woman as the face of nation. The diverse slate of candidates set forth by the Women on 20s movement provides prime examples of women who have made landmark contributions that have affected the nation so profoundly that all of them are thought worthy of representation once the currency is updated to include women in the future.⁴⁵

As Benedict Anderson famously argued, the nation is an “imagined political community.”⁴⁶ The idea of the nation has often been imagined as feminine and referred to with pronouns such as *her*, or adjectivally linked to the maternal. The feminine has been both romanticized and prioritized in embodying the nation as a formation, in keeping with typical representations of nationhood. This has been the norm in the United States even as women have been definitionally excluded from top leadership roles and primarily linked to the private sphere rather than the realm of public affairs. Such conventional national narratives that center women in this nation’s definitions are typically premised on women’s subjection rather than their empowerment. Postcolonial theory has raised questions about what is at stake in metaphors of the nation that link femininity to the land, which are premised on colonial and imperial perceptions of women as sites of conquest, subordination, and domination.⁴⁷

In *Diana and Beyond: White Femininity, National Identity, and Contemporary Media Culture*, Raka Shome provides valuable critical insights on the salience of white femininity in authenticating national identity by examining the role of whiteness in the iconicity of Princess Diana of Wales and fueling the public fascination with her in national and global contexts, noting that women who are not white and Western and who are immigrant are unlikely to be idealized in the vein of the princess as a royal. Shome’s study is indispensable for its sustained comparative critique of the role of white femininity in constructing national identity in the contemporary era in contexts such as

Britain and the United States. As she points out, “White femininity is a nationalized category that is always already imbricated in the production of various borders and boundaries—of gender, race, sexuality, class, globality—in the staging of a nation’s sense of the modern.”⁴⁸

Shome is quite right in underscoring “the primacy of white womanhood in national scripts.”⁴⁹ In advancing these claims, however, she fails to recognize black women’s capacity to embody national identity in the United States on their own terms and in ways that do not simply mirror and reflect white women’s subjectivity to account for the moments when women of color gain legibility at the national level, notwithstanding her study’s significant critical contribution to areas such as feminist studies, transnational feminism, and whiteness studies. That is to say, Shome frames all “black female icons” who gain legibility at the national level, including Michelle Obama, as a manifestation of how “neoliberal logics of race today often articulate privileged black women through scripts of privileged white femininity.”⁵⁰ Shome’s reading reduces black women’s iconic legibility in the national arena to the capacity to mimic behaviors, values, and aesthetics associated with white womanhood, which elides black women’s specificity and casts them as appendages of whiteness delinked from larger, more complex histories and more nuanced and intricate cultural politics. The logic recalls the notion of “colonial mimicry” described by Homi Bhabha.⁵¹ Moreover, it is a perspective that fails to consider the concerted ways in which black women have challenged and expanded exclusionary definitions of American subjectivity.

I find the reductive premise that only whiteness has the capacity to define the national body to be as limited as the presumption that black women are constrained to the space of the abjected other in the cultural imagination. This study rejects both sets of assumptions. My study departs from such logic in providing a sustained discussion of ways in which black women have repeatedly unsettled conventional significations of national identity in the United States and become legible within such national definitions *on their own terms*.

In acknowledging how constructions of the nation have been inherently raced and gendered with an emphasis on white femininity, it is also important to frame the prioritization of white womanhood in constituting national identity within larger dynamics of colonialism and imperialism in relation to idealizations of southern femininity in the U.S. national imaginary. I refer to the purist ideology of American identity and white femininity that is anchored in white supremacy and notions of black women’s racial inferiority and otherness. In early Hollywood cinema, southern womanhood was also repeatedly

invoked as a national ideal, as illustrated in the portrayal of Lillian Gish in *Birth of a Nation*. Significantly, this film frames the North and South as symbolic brothers through its primary male heroic figures, who were separated by the tragedy of the Civil War, along with their contestations over blacks, who had divided the union, a national family to which blacks did not belong and in which they had no place except one of inferiority. This narrative of white womanhood continues to be evident in contemporary cinematic scripts of white southern actresses such as Julia Roberts, Reese Witherspoon, and Jessica Simpson as “America’s sweetheart.”⁵² Yet they are also tied to naturalized representations of southern femininity as abject and in relation to notions of the southern landscape. The U.S. South’s historical racist ideology of white supremacy typically exalted white southern womanhood as a symbol of the region’s purity, premised on an essentialist and naturalized view of southern women as an extension of the region’s landscape, in some cases drawing on the pastoral.⁵³

Conventional notions of national femininity that conflate whiteness and womanhood have been premised on the debasement and subjection of black women through race, class, gender, and sexuality. Such narratives that foreground black women as nationally representative subjects have reconfigured and expanded conventional notions of the national body that prioritize whiteness and masculinity, or that at best imply that only white women can be legitimate national symbols. In the process, what I call *black national femininities* emerge and rupture prevailing white-centered notions of American identity, yielding a postwhite narrative of the national body and national femininity, creating an epistemology of national selfhood through a black and feminine lens, disrupting the conventional raced, classed, sexed, and gendered notions of the national body, embodying the black female subject as the quintessential national, hemispheric, and global subject.

Recurrent scripts of black female subjectivity in relation to the national body, including scripts of black women as representative subjects within the nation’s prevailing discourses of national femininity, provide vital contexts and foundations for analyzing how the South has functioned as a primary backdrop for black women’s repetitive significations in the U.S. public sphere. This is the backdrop against which it is necessary to consider how and why the region has been interpolated saliently and recurrently in the nationalization of black feminine subjects in the United States, who also frequently become global icons. The phenomenon I am describing is traceable from the twentieth century into the new millennium and has had a profound if seldom recog-

nized influence in unsettling and critiquing the prevailing notions of national femininity in the United States, including notions of national family. Because black queer and trans women have been left out of these iconic narratives of black femininity, which have typically been premised on heterosexist motifs, including their prevailing tropes of family, these subjects reveal the limitations in these scripts and hold potential to fully radicalize and disrupt national narratives premised on whiteness and maleness.

In *On Racial Icons: Blackness and the Public Imagination*, Nicole Fleetwood examines “how we—as a broad American public—fixate on certain images of race and nation, specifically the black icon,” explaining “the significance of the racial icon to public life.”⁵⁴ She is invested in considering “public images that are normative to our understanding of race in the United States; these are images that have a commonsense meaning to them in terms of the national imaginary and a broad public’s familiarity with them,” and ways in which black bodies are visualized in processes of “narrating the nation.”⁵⁵ Her work is significant for my purposes in affirming the agency of black subjects in narrating and representing the nation. It is subversive when black women, conventionally denied visibility and voice in the nation’s public sphere, emerge as subjects in the political arena and act and frame themselves as nationally representative citizens. Discourses related to them provide a counternarrative to notions of black women’s abjection and expand opportunities to advance civil rights and more expansive, inclusive, and visionary notions of freedom, democracy, and human rights. During the 1990s, cultural offerings from films like Jennie Livingston’s *Paris Is Burning* (1990), which showcased black urban drag balls in Harlem, to the rise of RuPaul underscored the salience of black queer and trans women in constituting and expanding the iconicity of black femininity in the national arena through their performance practices. The contemporary public appeal of black lesbian women such as Robin Roberts and Wanda Sykes, along with trans women such as Janet Mock and Laverne Cox, affirms their influence in shaping the national narrative and complicates conventional representations of black womanhood. This is another reason that their status is essential to acknowledge in constituting black women’s iconicity in the nation, along with black and queer women’s invisibility within models of national femininity.

The foregrounding of platforms and policies advocating for children by national models of black femininity hold potential to restore intimacies shattered within slavery and help make them visible in the public arena. They challenge and provide a counternarrative to notions of “infantile citizenship”

within the reactionary politics that Lauren Berlant discusses in *The Queen of America Goes to Washington City: Essays on Sex and Citizenship*.⁵⁶ The insights that she offers in this study, including her collaborative dialogue with Elizabeth Freeman on the Queer Nation political movement, also importantly shapes my perspective on envisioning black queer and trans women as subjects who hold potential to fully revolutionize articulations of American selfhood. Such critical contexts help clarify how productively and subversively the recurring motifs invoking the maternal, along with children and family, have mediated black women's public voices within civil rights and political discourses designed to redress the benign neglect and abuse of populations of children, including black youth, who have been and remain some of the most vulnerable and marginal citizens under the purview of the state. At the same time, they help distinguish such platforms from those within the dominant culture that weaponize narratives sacralizing childhood to reinforce and recast the heteronormativity within conventional national narratives and advance reactionary political agendas. Similarly, black queer and trans identities throw into relief limitations in foregrounding the feminine, including the maternal, in fashioning notions of national identity.

In general, my goal is not to offer a comprehensive or historical overview of all black women who conceivably affected national femininity over the past century. I also believe that it is important to raise questions about what is at stake in embodiments of national femininity through black female subjectivity that have materialized in the public sphere precisely during an era of neoliberalism, when multinational corporate conglomerates hold shares of economic power that rival those of conventional nation-states, and the United States, in the midst of globalization, no longer as singly signifies power within this geopolitics. How does national femininity manifest and remain relevant at all, even, at a time when the idea of the nation-state has been increasingly deterritorialized and destabilized, to the point of becoming an obsolete formation less relevant in shaping identity and mediating cultural flows and exchanges?

While the representations I examine in this study accord black female subjectivity more legibility and centrality and recurrently invoke black women in relation to notions of national motherhood beyond the realm of conventional stereotypes such as the mammy, it is noteworthy that in their varied articulations and manifestations, they are also consistently premised and centered on the black feminine body's hypervisibility and iconicity in the national arena. This phenomenon becomes more understandable when considering Karla FC Holloway's observation that within the nation's "body politic," "black women's

bodies metaphorically represent the conflicted presence of gender and race within America's cultural history."⁵⁷ This work is grounded in and reflects my own intellectual investments and training in the fields of literary studies and cultural studies and aims to scrutinize the common ground within the discourses of these women on narratives that all of them have produced related to the maternal tacit in their own writing and speeches and also concomitantly in some of their most prominent constructions in cultural contexts.

Hemispheric Souths/Africana Souths

The new southern studies, an interdisciplinary critical movement, was initially defined by Houston A. Baker Jr. and Dana D. Nelson in 2001.⁵⁸ It challenges and unsettles the conventional approaches in southern studies, including binaries associated with the region, such as North and South, while expanding its archives for study and research in areas such as literature and culture. A cornerstone of the interdisciplinary field of the new southern studies, one of the research areas in which I have primarily worked, has been a move away from conventional geographies and temporalities for defining the South in the United States.⁵⁹

I believe that methods of the field provide a toolbox of perspectives that are all the more important, indispensable, and relevant to draw on to grapple with the region's historical legacies, along with ways in which reactionary southern agendas continue to influence the national political arena, including regressive policy agendas, and in some instances, help promote white supremacy and white nationalism. As the 2015 Charleston tragedy and its underlying causes of racism and hate reveal, the U.S. South will continue to be a salient point of reference in grappling with intersectional identities of African Americans and other members of the black diaspora, as well as a crucial terrain for advancing activist movements, from Black Lives Matter to #SayHerName, as we saw in the heroic protest of Bree Newsome. Indeed, not recognizing such vital connections risks reinscribing ideologies of the postracial and postblackness premised on colorblindness, while obscuring black intellectual and protest histories, including aspects of black radical thought that have informed such scholarship and political movements, rather than views of southern literature and history that romanticize and whitewash the region.

After the coronavirus pandemic that broke out in late 2019 and led to widespread infections and deaths around the globe, President Donald Trump

tacitly invoked the ideology of states' rights in allowing U.S. governors to make decisions about approaches to the crisis rather than leveraging his authority to marshal federal emergency resources. The slowness of governors in the South to mandate the social distancing measures and lockdowns that could slow the spread of the virus and protect public health—along with premature plans to lift these measures to revive the economy even as the poor, African Americans, and other people of color experienced disproportionately high rates of infection and death—was also a clear and troubling manifestation of this ideology. These issues doubly illustrate why we can ill afford to deny the realness of southern identity and its connections to such struggles in this day and time or to dismiss identity concerns for minorities in the region. Reimagining southern identities as now obsolete or nonexistent fails to acknowledge such material conditions and is steeped in political escapism.

While Baker's legendary contributions in black studies and African American literary studies are well known, including ways in which he has helped to position African American literature more centrally within American literary studies, his pivotal contributions in areas such as southern literary studies are also significant. He has truly been a top beacon for numerous scholars, demonstrating possibilities for bridging areas such as black studies and southern studies, and African American literature and southern literature, a method that challenges conventional presumptions within the field, which marginalize and alienate black texts and black bodies (to echo Barbara Christian), while emphasizing the indispensability of African American literature and the black text specifically in southern literature and in southern studies more generally. In the process, Baker's intellectual project also broadened the space for critique and reflection in areas such as black southern literature and the black South. It built on interventions by John Oliver Killens and Jerry Ward.

I have valued and learned from the work of a new generation of scholars who study such South(s) from a critical and cultural standpoint, including Regina Bradley, Sharita Johnson, Jarvis McInnis, Julius Fleming Jr., Zandria Robinson, Delia Steverson, Maurice Hobson, and Brittney Cooper, along with the foundational contributions of scholars such as bell hooks, Trudier Harris, Thadious Davis, Hortense Spillers, Imani Perry, Farah Jasmine Griffin, Robin D. G. Kelley, and Tera Hunter, among others. Moreover, I have valued the work of scholars in the field, such as E. Patrick Johnson, Sharon Holland, and Zandria Robinson, who have stood at the forefront in advancing critical dialogues on black southerners and queerness.

In more recent years, studies of the Global South have emphasized political, social, and economic conditions linked to populations in the Southern Hemisphere, including African, Caribbean, Latin American, and Asian contexts. This critical work addresses the intensified flows of capital and culture in an era of globalization, eschews the prioritization of a nation-state such as the United States as a term of analysis, and grapples with the poverty of populations that are indigenous and predominantly located in the Southern Hemisphere, from Asia to Africa and the Americas, that have been inordinately affected by the West's hegemonic hoarding of wealth and resources. Comparative and interdisciplinary approaches and methodologies informed by areas such as postcolonial American studies and new world studies have enabled scholars in the new southern studies to take up the challenge that discourses on the Global South pose to move away from the essentialist borders that have conventionally circumscribed the South and North in the United States. At the same time, such critical approaches recognize the historical influence of these larger global geographies in constituting the U.S. South and examine continuities in development across these regions, making legible how the U.S. South's history of occupation in the United States in the years after the Civil War establishes the region as a postcolonial landscape. The U.S. South emerges within transnational and diasporic frameworks as just one conceivable Global South within a continuum of many others in the Americas, Africa, Asia, and Europe.

Dialogues on the Global South have also provided foundations for critical work on the hemispheric South, which acknowledges the influence of multiple Souths in shaping the Western Hemisphere while resisting colonialist and imperialist narratives premised on the singularity and ubiquity of the United States in defining this region. According to Carl Gutiérrez-Jones, "While the concept of the Hemispheric South suggests a move away from the nation-state as a primary unit of critical analysis, it also intends to foreground the manner in which imperial, colonial, and nationalist projects, along with predatory forms of capitalism, have shaped definitions of hemispheric 'Southernness' in terms of unique poverty (including constructions of indigeneity and the rural), wealth (including natural resources, beauty), and culture (including ideas of authenticity)."⁶⁰ Furthermore, Gutiérrez-Jones points out that this body of critical thought examines "the multiple realities, knowledge systems, migrations, and intellectual border crossings associated with 'southernness' in the Americas, especially as these dynamics contribute to articulations of

the Americas as part of the 'Global South.'"⁶¹ Discourses on the hemispheric South help us to recognize the magnitude of southern slavery's impact on modernity and to think about the effects of the plantation complex in the Western Hemisphere with more depth and complexity.

As Global South discourses have developed within the new southern studies, they have looked at the plantation as a context endemic to the materialist development and dispersal of the transatlantic slave system and foundational to how its labor economy has proliferated throughout the Western Hemisphere over several centuries. Global South discourses facilitate the comparative study of the plantation's dispersals in the U.S. South and throughout other sites in the Caribbean and Central and South America, along with the Canadian context. This work has also helped to expand the theoretical understanding of the influence of geography on identity, including the effects on race, gender, and sexuality formations. These dynamics have been understood far better in recent years as the region has been increasingly examined within transnational and diasporic frameworks as just one historical Global South within a dialectic of many others in the Americas, Africa, Asia, and Europe. The expansive plantation complex iterated across the Western Hemisphere within the temporalities and spatialities of modernity was concentrated on the landscapes of the U.S. South and was synonymously associated with the slave system and its various forms of labor, from forced work to the forced sexual reproduction of the subjected slave class.

As a term, the *plantation complex* literally refers to the physical environment, which consisted of areas from the main home to slave quarters, farmland, and animal pens, but as invoked in a critical sense, it also references the dominant labor infrastructure that was iterated for several centuries throughout the Western Hemisphere, and that emerged as the primary site within modernity for containing, disciplining, reproducing, abusing, and annihilating the black body.⁶² The southern plantation was the primary site for perpetuating and replicating the system of American slavery, the driving force behind capitalism, colonialism, and imperialism in the nation during the antebellum era. The slave system of the U.S. South classified black women as subordinate as it scripted their children as illegitimate. The complex of plantation slavery that grounded the southern economy and the larger system of American capitalism is the backdrop against which these mechanisms unfolded.

The institution of slavery has also accorded the U.S. South a prominent role in engendering, articulating, and legally defining black women as raced, sexed, and gendered subjects.⁶³ Moreover, the U.S. South has had a long-

standing role in shaping national identity, and it has, again, been instrumental in constructing notions of national femininity that have most typically exalted and prioritized white feminine subjectivity. These dialectics have played a role in processes of constructing black feminine icons in contexts such as the U.S. public sphere.

To be sure, the nationalization, and even in some instances globalization, of models of black femininity in relation to the U.S. South have been recurrent motifs that even the space and geography of the South Side of Chicago linked to Michelle Obama reflects and clarifies. One premise of this study is that the U.S. South continues, even in our time, to constitute a range of raced, classed, sexed, and gendered formations, including some of the prevailing conceptions and representations of national femininity in the cultural imagination. With the new southern studies' embrace of cultural studies, it challenges conventional geographic essentialisms about what counts as a relevant and appropriate object for study, an approach that limited the outlook of southern literature and southern studies as conventional fields. To the contrary, the new southern studies field has not prioritized factors such as a southern birthplace in its objects of study and has approached them with more openness. My examination of Chicagoan Michelle Obama by analyzing the South Side metaphors routinely related to her, as well as her family roots traceable to slavery on plantations in Georgia and South Carolina, epitomizes this approach in this study. Furthermore, I also draw on Jacqueline Jones's concept of *southern diasporas* as a term for framing black southern identities in the United States located far beyond the conventional sites situated below the Mason-Dixon Line in the national imagination, locating them in urban zones in light of histories such as the Great Migration.⁶⁴ Despite the popularity and currency of *black South*, I use the term *Africana South* as an alternative to acknowledge the diasporic cultural flows that constitute black southern identities.

On top of the new southern studies, this study is poised at the intersection of fields such as American and African American literary studies, black feminism and gender studies, black queer and trans studies, and black/Africana studies. In American literature and American studies, Cathy N. Davidson, Lauren Berlant, Priscilla Wald, Dana D. Nelson, Amy Kaplan, and Robyn Wiegman have produced brilliant studies of American selfhood, citizenship, and identity that have influenced and inspired me. From my days of graduate study at Duke University, discussions with Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, along with reading her body of writings, profoundly shaped my understanding and knowledge of queer studies as a field and established foundations for my continuing study.

Similarly, my thinking on trans studies has been foundationally shaped by scholars such as Jack Halberstam, C. Riley Snorton, and Janet Mock.

Africana studies, an interdisciplinary (indeed, transdisciplinary) and comparative field that originated in my home department at Cornell University, has been increasingly embraced and universalized in departments across the nation. It has been adopted as a banner of identification for departments and programs to signal approaches to Africa and its diasporas that are grounded in geography and that are at once transnational, interdisciplinary, and comparative. In its conception and design, it facilitates critical inquiry and academic exchange throughout Africa and its transnational diasporas in the United States, the Caribbean, Central and South America, Europe, Asia, and Britain.⁶⁵

Africana studies' complex and global circuits of investigation and critical engagement, like those in studies of the Global South, are a reminder of the centrality of geography in shaping identity and culture. The exciting education I have received in my home department in this critical discourse has reshaped my perspective as a thinker and theorist and deeply enriched this book while helping me to think toward new directions in Africana studies as a teaching and research field. Indeed, my study is energized by what I think of as the new Africana studies, which looks toward new *afrofutures* and encompasses the innovative philosophical, theoretical, and pedagogical horizons toward which the field has been moving in recent years. Like this project's investments in black feminism, its investments in Africana studies recognize and affirm the value in linking academic work and forms of activism to help make a difference in the social and political world through community engagement.

Across four chapters, *Emancipation's Daughters* methodologically examines a diverse body of materials, including political speeches, art images, photographs, legal transcripts, national monuments and memorials, film and video, and literary works such as novels, poems, autobiographies, and biographies. The book is primarily grounded in literary and cultural studies. My training as a scholar in these areas primarily shapes the range of texts I explore, along with the archive of materials on which I draw and my methods of critical argumentation and investigation. Theoretically and critically, my study draws on areas such as transnational feminism, black feminism, black girlhood, childhood studies, black queer and trans studies, and more broadly, black and Africana studies, including Afrofuturism, and American studies. It is also grounded in southern studies, including the Global and hemispheric South.

Chapter 1, “Mary McLeod Bethune’s ‘Last Will and Testament’ and Her National Legacy,” revisits the role of Mary McLeod Bethune as a key black female model in the nation’s public sphere, with organic linkages to the U.S. South, who purposefully organized and mediated a national and global black agenda during the Depression that provided vital foundations for civil and human rights activism later in the twentieth century, culminating in the publication of her “My Last Will and Testament,” discussed in this chapter. Her “Last Will and Testament” was premised on her status as a national mother in black America, which revised the matriarch. This chapter continues with an analysis of the Mary McLeod Bethune Memorial statue in Washington, DC, in Lincoln Park, sculpted by Robert Berks, a monument whose development was spearheaded for several decades by the National Council of Negro Women and its president Dorothy Height. The final section of this chapter draws on Senate and House hearings to examine contestations that emerged amid the struggle to establish the Mary McLeod Bethune Council House as a national historic site under the auspices of the National Park Service, to consider ways in which the congressional debates raised questions about Bethune’s national significance and relevance to areas such as American and women’s history. These dialogues boldly threw into relief contestations over national femininity, along with gross misapprehensions and lapses in cultural memory in the post–civil rights era about the import of Bethune’s legacy.

In chapter 2, “From Rosa Parks’s *Quiet Strength* to Memorializing a National Mother,” I consider Rosa Parks, who emerged as a model of national femininity when her choice to remain seated on a bus in Montgomery played a central role in the crystallization of the civil rights movement, including its nationalization and globalization. I acknowledge the intersectionality of race, gender, and sexuality in constituting Parks as a model of national motherhood and emphasize the value in focusing on her voice and writings to examine the relationship she had with young people throughout her life, and her strategic uses of the mothering narrative that belie its reactionary appropriations in politics, as well as its dismissive critiques in some political and popular contexts. I examine Rosa Parks’s *Quiet Strength* and *Dear Mrs. Parks: A Dialogue with Today’s Youth* to consider how her dialogue with youth builds on her public construction as a symbolic mother. I go on to discuss how this metaphor was reinforced through the Afrofuturistic narratives that shape the Rosa Parks Children’s Museum in Montgomery. I end this chapter by examining her postmortem mourning in the U.S. capital.

Chapter 3, “America’s Chief Diplomat: The Politics of Condoleezza Rice from Autobiography to Art and Fashion,” begins with a reading of the first installment of Rice’s two-part memoir, *Extraordinary, Ordinary People: A Memoir of Family*, which reflects on her narrative of the tragic bombing at 16th Street Baptist Church, framing of her family as nationally representative, and the exclusion of blacks from notions of American democracy. I examine how Rice invoked such scripts in relation to foreign policy, including the war on terror, and their role in helping make her legible as a national leader and model of national femininity. I go on to look at representations of Rice in comedy in “Condi Comes to Harlem” skits by *Mad TV*, which draw on blaxploitation film techniques, science fiction, and Afrofuturism to revise and critique the public images of Rice that link her to Bush and the right wing by grounding her in Harlem as a geography and constructing her as a politically progressive and nationally representative black woman leader who primarily serves and advances the interests of black communities. I go on to examine representations that deconstruct her relation to iconicity and notions of national femininity in visual artworks by Terry Lloyd, Ayanah Moor, Luc Tuymans, Enrique Chagoya, and Amy Vangsgard. A brief dialogue on the role of fashion in shaping her iconicity concludes this chapter.

Chapter 4, “First Lady and ‘Mom-in-Chief’: The Voice and Vision of Michelle Obama in the Video *South Side Girl* and in *American Grown*,” begins by exploring biographical scripts that invoke Michelle Obama in relation to plantation history and southern diasporas through narratives of the Great Migration. Furthermore, I consider Michelle Obama’s recurrent self-descriptions in speeches in relation to the South Side of Chicago and, particularly, the video *South Side Girl*, which introduced her at the 2008 Democratic National Convention in Denver, Colorado. I argue that its raced and gendered geographic motifs unsettle masculinist constructions of this area and link it to a black woman’s self-fashioning in the national arena, while staging her own African American family as a *representative* American family and constructing her as a representative American woman. Here, I also build on my readings of Bethune and Parks in earlier chapters to acknowledge that Michelle Obama’s self-fashioning as “Mom-in-Chief” in relation to her daughters, Malia and Sasha, frames her as a mother figure in the nation and holds vital implications for the discourses on national femininity. I culminate this chapter with a discussion of the First Lady’s first book, *American Grown: The Story of the White House Kitchen Garden and Gardens across America*, and an examination of her Let’s

Move! project, focused on the nation's children, including her collaborative project with Beyoncé designed to mobilize young people into fitness.

The conclusion, “Beyoncé’s South and the Birth of a ‘Formation’ Nation,” briefly considers how the iconic Texas-born singer, whose career was launched in the popular female singing group Destiny’s Child and who has gone on to achieve major success as a solo musical artist, actress, and entrepreneur, was further enshrined in the national arena as an icon through her romantic serenade of Barack and Michelle Obama with the Etta James classic song “At Last” during their first dance as president and First Lady. As Beyoncé has explained, this moment held a lot of symbolic import for her family given that her parents, Mathew Knowles and Tina Knowles, were born in the segregated South. This family story has been extended in her more recent projects, such as “Formation” and the album *Lemonade*, which invokes histories of slavery and oppression in the South. This study frames these cultural “texts” as important and relevant for registering the profound significance of the most salient and influential black woman’s voice in the popular arena and its influence on contemporary political discourses in ways that build on Beyoncé’s aforementioned collaboration with Michelle Obama through solidarity with movements from Black Lives Matter and #SayHerName to #TakeAKnee, movements whose messages have been amplified and mainstreamed all the more through the George Floyd protests. Through her national and global iconicity and increasing political visibility and influence, Beyoncé illustrates the role of popular culture in shaping national femininity. Analysis in Beyoncé studies, from Janet Mock’s feminist insights about the superstar to reflections on Beyoncé’s influence on black trans and queer women who promote her iconicity, also link her to some of the best possibilities for helping actualize more inclusive models of blackness and national femininity.