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A Twentieth-Century Triangle Trade: Selling Black Beauty at Home and Abroad, 1945–1965

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This study examines the careers of African American beauty culturists as they worked in the United States, Europe, and Africa between 1945 and 1965. Facing push back at home, African American beauty entrepreneurs frequently sought out international venues that were hospitable and receptive to black Americans in the years following World War II. By strategically using European sites that white Americans regarded as the birthplace of Western fashion and beauty, African American entrepreneurs in the fields of modeling, fashion design, and hair care were able to win accolades and advance their careers. In gaining support abroad, particularly in Europe, these beauty culturists capitalized on their international success to establish, legitimize, and promote their business ventures in the United States. After importing a positive reputation for themselves from Europe to the United States, African American beauty entrepreneurs then exported an image of themselves as the world's premier authorities on black beauty to people of color around the globe as they sold their products and marketed their expertise on the African continent itself. This essay demonstrates the important role that these black female beauty culturists played, both as businesspeople and as race leaders, in their generation's struggle to gain greater respect and opportunity for African Americans both at home and abroad. In doing so it places African American beauty culturists within the framework of transatlantic trade networks, the Black Freedom Movement, Pan-Africanism, and America's Cold War struggle.

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Prior to World War II, popular American culture, including newspapers, radio, and cinema, regularly depicted beauty as necessarily white. Conversely, cinematic representations, mainstream magazines, advertisements, dolls, postcards, board games, and virtually every other form of visual media and material culture presented the black woman as either a hypersexual “Jezebel” or the unattractive house servant “Mammy.”¹ Faced with these distorted representations of their race, a number of enterprising African American business people in the field of beauty culture set out in the decades following World War II to change the stereotypical mass representation of black women not only in the United States but also around the globe.

The domestic connections between beauty culture, business, and social uplift in the African American community has received much scholarly attention in recent years. Indeed, historians including Tiffany Melissa Gill, Laila Haidarali, Susannah Walker, and Julie Willett have outlined many ways in which black beauty culturists navigated their way through often-unfriendly terrain in the twentieth-century United States. In their respective works, these scholars have discussed beauty culturists’ efforts to gain representation on state-licensing boards, to participate as active members of civil rights organizations, to politicize their female clients, to expose white-owned companies that posed as black-owned businesses, and to challenge white representations of black Americans.² Indeed the intensely political work that beauty culturists did between 1930 and 1960 has led Gill to refer to these entrepreneurs as “beauty activists.”³ In the following essay, I wish to suggest an additional method, no less significant, that black beauty culturists used to fight against their domestic marginalization: during the late 1940s, 1950s, and 1960s, black beauty entrepreneurs actively engaged markets outside of American borders.⁴

1. For a greater analysis of the origins and meanings of such imagery, see Bogle, *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies & Bucks*; Manring, *Slave in a Box*; and Gates, “The Troupe of the New Negro and the Reconstruction of the Image of the Black.” For an analysis of nineteenth-century black church women’s efforts to use clothing styles in order to make their bodies respectable, see Klassen, “The Robes of Womanhood.” For an analysis of beauty culture and the body among enslaved African Americans, see Camp, “The Pleasures of Resistance” and White, *Stylin*.

2. Gill, “‘I had My Own Business...So I Didn’t Have to Worry’”; Haidarali, “Polishing Brown Diamonds”; Walker, *Style & Status*; Willett, *Permanent Waves*.

3. *Ibid*; 169.

4. This work uses the word “beauty culturist” to include a number of professionals working in beauty-related fields. This term applies to fashion designers, hair dressers, modeling agency and cosmetology school owners, beauty product retailers, and members professional beauty culture associations.

In their bids to better their economic position in the United States and secure more business opportunities at home, African American beauty culturists found some of the answers to their domestic difficulties in the global marketplace after World War II. No longer happy with serving an exclusively “Negro market,” African American fashion designers, modeling agency and cosmetology school owners, beauty product retailers, and professional beauty culture associations actively sought out international venues that were hospitable and receptive to black Americans. Strategically using European sites that even white Americans regarded as the birthplace of Western fashion and beauty, African American beauty entrepreneurs fought to overcome their marginalization in the American market. After gaining support abroad, particularly in Europe, beauty culturists used their newfound international reputation to establish, legitimate, and promote their business ventures in the United States. By integrating their businesses into the larger world of fashion and beauty, these entrepreneurs successfully repositioned the black female body in a more favorable domestic light. In addition, as this essay will demonstrate, the international focus that black beauty entrepreneurs utilized was not limited to their pursuit of European attention and notoriety. While gaining publicity for their European accolades and establishing business ventures in the United States, African American beauty culturists also participated in business ventures that linked them to the larger African Diaspora and the United States’ larger Cold War agenda. Thus, after creating a name for themselves in Europe and importing this positive reputation back to the United States, African American beauty entrepreneurs also exported an image of themselves as the world’s premiere authorities on black beauty for women in Africa. Incorporating three continents of commerce into their business plan, African American beauty culturists thus crafted a transnational strategy aimed at representing the black body both at home and abroad in the mid-twentieth century.

The Domestic Agenda

The great migration of African Americans during the first quarter of the twentieth century brought over one million black citizens from the rural South to Northern industrial centers and was a turning point in African American economic, social, and cultural history. Here, a small but substantial black middle class was able to grow and in some cases prosper. However, even in this “promised land” of economic opportunity and greater social freedom, the experience of racism often precluded black entrepreneurs from true integration into the mainstream of American business and enterprise. While many African

American business people gained affluence by working for and serving the needs of the growing black communities of which they were a part, they often stood at the margins of the larger national economy. Such was the dilemma of Dorothy Earley, a Chicago clothing designer, who voiced her frustrations to the prominent race leader Mary McCloud Bethune in a 1949 letter. As Earley informed Bethune:

I received my degree in Dress Design from the Art Institute in June. I didn't realize that this field was such a difficult one for Negroes to break into. I'm tired of answering ads and being told the position has been filled.⁵

Earley was interested in becoming a charter member of the National Association of Fashion and Accessory Designers (NAFAD), organized under Bethune's prominent civil rights umbrella organization, the National Council of Negro Women. Headquartered in the nation's capital, NAFAD assisted the entry of African American fashion designers, milliners, and accessory makers into the mainstream of the American fashion industry. NAFAD's 1949 founding documents stated that its primary goal was to "integrate Negroes into all phases of the fashion world and to present for them whenever needed—a UNITED FRONT."⁶ A 1953 NAFAD brochure similarly stated that the organization "seeks to focus the attention of the fashion world and the public on the 'untapped' reservoir of black talent through local and national fashion shows, special projects, conferences, traveling exhibits and its official publication *Fashion Cue*."⁷ Fourteen years after its incorporation NAFAD brochures still asserted that the purpose of organization was "to effect complete integration occupation-wise in the fashion industry; to inform members of jobs that are available in the fashion field and to encourage placement of qualified persons in these jobs."⁸

Unlike many other black professionals, African American seamstresses and tailors had long sold their products outside of their race. However, fashion designers' dealings with white clients had histor-

5. Dorothy Earley, Chicago to Mary McCloud Bethune, Washington, December 16, 1949, Records of the National Association of Fashion Designers (Box 1, Folder: Correspondence, 1949 May–Dec.) National Archives for Black Women's History Mary McLeod Bethune Council House, National Historic Site, Washington.

6. Flyer to NAFAD members, NAFA, Box 2, Folder: Convention 1949, April 22–23, New York.

7. NAFAD Brochure, NAFA, Folder, Series 5, Fashion Shows 1953.

8. NAFAD Brochure, NAFA, Series 6, Publications and Brochures folder.

ically been devalued as mere service work.⁹ In the mid-twentieth century, African American fashion designers actively marketed their talent, skill, and knowledge—not just their personal service—to the American public. Through their formal associations and informal networks, NAFAD members sought to establish themselves not as the servants of white patrons but rather as experienced professionals, innovators, and even industry leaders in an integrated business world.

Beauty culturists were not alone in their efforts to set up viable businesses that could compete both inside and outside of black markets during the middle decades of the twentieth century. Indeed, economic empowerment was an important goal of black activism during the first half of the twentieth century. In the wake of a great migration, many African Americans mobilized “Don’t Buy Where You Can’t Work” boycotts in the 1930s. Labor shortages during World War II provided African Americans yet another opportunity to secure jobs that had been previously closed off to black workers. By the end of hostilities in 1945, the movement for black economic enfranchisement was well underway. And as historian Lizbeth Cohen has argued, in an overwhelmingly consumerist postwar society, black efforts to find equality in the marketplace was a crucial component of the rising Civil Rights Movement.¹⁰ Black baseball fans, for instance, used the power of the purse to force the integration of the major leagues. Jackie Robinson’s 1947 debut with the Brooklyn Dodgers was as much a product of the ticket sales he could generate among urban blacks as it was the result of his supreme athletic prowess. The advertising industry stands as another example of African Americans’ postwar economic gains. For many years in the United States, white-owned companies had overlooked black consumers, regarding them as fickle and unprofitable. In spite of such beliefs, black marketing executives worked hard to convince white-owned companies that African Americans made informed and conscientious decisions about where they placed their money. Dubbed the “Jackie Robinsons of selling and marketing” by historian Jason Chambers, these executives persuaded companies such as Cadillac and Pepsi to purchase advertisement space in large-circulation black periodicals and newspapers. Not all approaches to black economic enfranchisement, however, succeeded in postwar America. Despite the efforts of African Americans veterans to reap their fair share of the G.I. Bill, few black soldiers ever received

9. For example, the African American shop owner Elizabeth Keckley served as the primary dressmaker for First Lady Mary Todd Lincoln. See Miller, *Threads of Time*, 5.

10. Cohen, *A Consumer's Republic*, 166.

financial assistance for college courses or secured small-business loans backed under the Serviceman's Readjustment Act. However, despite such setbacks, as historian Robert Weems makes clear in his text *Desegregating the Dollar*, the period from 1941 to 1960 witnessed gains for black consumers and producers that earlier generations would have found unimaginable.¹¹

Even in the field of fashion design African American's were making some inroads. Among NAFAD's most successful members of the mid-twentieth century was Anne Lowe, who specialized in couture gowns and evening wear. Lowe was trained at the S. L. Taylor School of Design in New York City, where she was segregated from the school's white students. After graduating and opening her own dress shop on Lexington Avenue in New York, Lowe's business grew and she went on to create original designs for debutantes in the Dupont, Rockefeller, Roosevelt, Vanderbilt, and other elite American families.¹² In 1953 Lowe's career reached an apex when she designed the wedding gown and bridesmaids dresses for the marriage of Jacqueline Bouvier to John F. Kennedy. However, despite such accomplishments Lowe received little public notice during much of her five-decade career. Even after the Kennedy wedding gown she designed appeared on the front page of newspapers across the globe, Lowe was barely known outside of the elite social circles that patronized her services. While Lowe had succeeded in becoming a recognized leader in her field, she had not received the mainstream public recognition that her white counterparts enjoyed. Indeed, a 1966 *Saturday Evening Post* article that chronicled her career named Lowe as "society's best-kept secret."¹³

While Lowe's reputation never reached the general American public, she nonetheless still personified the industry-wide success that NAFAD members and other black beauty culturists strived for in the mid-twentieth century. Indeed, Lowe could claim to have arrived in the fashion world when on one trip to Europe, the American socialite and heiress Marjorie Merriweather Post introduced Lowe to Christian Dior as "the head of the American House of Anne Lowe."¹⁴ Indeed, Lowe's story may have evolved differently had she been more rooted in European markets. In his comments to the *Saturday Evening Post* in 1966, Arthur Dages, Lowe's friend and high-end fabric importer, went as far as to suggest that her career directly suffered as a result of her race and geographical location. As he put it "if she had lived in

11. Weems, *Desegregating the Dollar*, 31.

12. Miller *Threads of Time*, 33.

13. Congdon, "Ann Lowe: Society's Best-Kept Secret" *Saturday Evening Post*, September 1966, pp. 74–6.

14. Miller, 37.

France, she'd have been as well known as Chanel or Dior. But people here told themselves that she was just another colored woman and they cheated her, they copied her designs."¹⁵ The story of Anne Lowe was not unique to the fashion design industry; indeed African Americans attempting to make a future for themselves in the modeling and cosmetology industries also fought for recognition within the United States while at the same time growing their businesses and reputations outside of U.S. borders. As the following discussion will demonstrate, with varying degrees of success, black beauty entrepreneurs in the fields of fashion design, modeling, and cosmetology found some of the answers to their domestic difficulties in the global marketplace during the decades following World War II.

European Launching Pad

In 1938 when the African American model Ophelia DeVore began her career at the age of sixteen, the modeling industry in the United States required black women to "pass" as white in order to gain employment. DeVore, a woman whose physical appearance made it hard to categorize her racially, had herself received professional training from the Vogue School of Modeling under the assumption that she was a white American. DeVore reported that when white Americans found out that she was in fact an African American, they frequently responded: "But you don't look like a Negro!" It was this misguided perception that inspired DeVore to start her own modeling agency and through it to challenge the mass representation of black women in the United States and elsewhere.¹⁶ Indeed, DeVore's ultimate goal was to popularize a dignified image of black womanhood that people around the world would respect. In her own words, DeVore wished to create "an internationally acceptable person of color."¹⁷

DeVore thus crafted an international strategy whereby she promoted many of her models first in Europe and from that position began to build their careers in the United States. In the late 1940s when DeVore began hiring out African American models through her agency Grace Del Marco Models, the average black model was billed out at \$7.50

15. Congdon, 76.

16. This was not the first time that an African American woman used beauty and fashion to force a reconceptualization of her body by others. For an analysis of nineteenth-century black church women's efforts to use clothing styles in order to make their bodies respectable, see Klassen, "The Robes of Womanhood." For an analysis of beauty culture and the body among enslaved African Americans, see Camp, "The Pleasures of Resistance" and White, *Stylin*.

17. DeVore Promotional Literature, Ophelia DeVore Collection, Personal holding of James Carter, Ophelia DeVore Associates, Inc., New York.

per hour, half of what the average white model was making.¹⁸ In order to improve this situation, DeVore strategically selected European settings that even white Americans regarded as the birthplace of Western fashion and beauty to reposition her models in a more favorable domestic light. DeVore frequently used France as the launching pad for her black models' careers. It was there in 1959 that DeVore landed a photo shoot for Helen Williams with the renowned French fashion designer Christian Dior, after which time the model's U.S. job prospects improved. By 1961, Helen Williams' hourly rate was \$50 to \$100 and DeVore could bill even inexperienced black models out at the rate of \$15 to \$30 dollars an hour.¹⁹ It was also in France in 1959 that DeVore helped her model Cecilia Cooper win the "Miss Festival" title at the International Cannes Film Festival. Cooper was the first American of any color to win the prestigious title. Relating the significance of the trip, DeVore noted, "When Cecelia and I left New York, there were no reporters in sight...when we returned from Paris, they were all around us."²⁰ The international press coverage that Cooper received encouraged DeVore to return to Cannes the following year with a second African American model, LeJeune Hundley, who also took the pageant's top prize and then, again, the following year with model Emily Yancy.

DeVore's models were of course not the first black American women to gain notoriety in Europe. The French people had similarly embraced the internationally renowned African American singer and dancer Josephine Baker in the 1920s, referring to the star by the simple honorific title "La Baker." However, unlike Josephine Baker who fully embraced a French lifestyle and permanently left the United States to become a French citizen, DeVore's models remained rooted in their American identity. Ironically, it was in Europe that African American models were able to take on an Americanized public persona, as opposed to one that focused exclusively on their racial otherness. Reflecting on her time in Europe, Helen Williams observed, "in France I was called '*la belle américaine*,' and I loved it."²¹ Europe thus offered Ophelia DeVore's African American models the opportunity to craft a singularly American identity, which, DeVore hoped, her models could transport back to the United States.

Laying out her strategy years later, DeVore was quoted as saying: "I went to Europe and got acceptance. Then when I came back to America I had it made."²² Having, as she termed it, "pre-sold" her models in

18. *Life*. October 17, 1969, vol. 67, no. 16, p. 36.

19. *Jet*. March 30, 1961, p. 26.

20. Wilson, 99.

21. Summers, *Skin Deep*, 33.

22. Barbara Summers, *Black and Beautiful: How Women of Color Changed the Fashion Industry* (New York: Amistad Press, 2001), p. 27.

Europe, DeVore was able to find modeling jobs for them with major domestic companies such as, Johnson & Johnson, Pepsi-Cola, and Revlon. DeVore was not alone in her quest to bring black models more prominence in the United States by introducing them to the larger fashion world. Indeed, DeVore's New York City competitor, modeling school director Barbara Watson, also used European sites to court American attention. From her post as the director of Bradford Models, Barbara Watson also created an international presence for African American models as early as 1948 when she arranged for a group of black women to go on a fashion tour of Sweden. During their trip Watson's models received heavy coverage and positive reviews in the foreign press and upon their return to the United States, Watson noted that she planned to adapt Swedish fashions to the clothing needs of black American women.²³ Like DeVore, Watson was committed to changing public perception that the black female body was an aberration from the white ideal. In 1953 Watson took full control of Bradford Models and renamed it Barbara Watson Models. From that position Watson supervised more than 200 professional models of color, and over the course of her career she secured contracts for her models with a wide variety of retail goods, including Beech-Nut Gum, Ipana Tooth Paste, Colgate Dental Crème, Remington Rand, Tetley Tea, Noxema, Lucky Strike, and Lysol.

Among the most famous black models to work in Europe during the 1950s was Dorothea Towles, a Texas native who was the first African American to attend the Dorothy Farrier Charm and Modeling School in Los Angeles. Much like DeVore and Watson, Towles used her career to change the way in which mainstream society viewed black women. Reflecting back on her role models growing up, Towles recalled that "I wanted to do something like [the race leader] Mary Church Terrell or [the black activist] Mary McLeod Bethune, but I didn't know how. I didn't have their kind of skills, but I grew up reading about them and knowing about them."²⁴ Choosing modeling as her route to social change, Towles left the United States for Paris in 1948. In France, she found work first with Christian Dior, who hired Towles on the spot while one of his regular models was on vacation. Towles later worked for the French designer Elsa Schiaparelli and as a house model for the influential postwar haute couture designers Jacques Fath and Pierre Balmain before moving back to the United States and signing with DeVore's Grace Del Marco modeling agency.²⁵

23. Press Clippings, Folder 12: European Trip 1948. Barbara M. Watson Papers, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, New York, NY; hereafter, Watson Papers, SCRBC.

24. *Ibid.*; 198.

25. *Ebony*. November 1960, pp. 22 and 24.

Throughout her career Towles used her talent as a professional model to push the boundaries of what was possible for black women on the global stage. "People used to call me the first black model," Towles recalled in an interview late in her life, "[but,] I consider myself the first black international model."²⁶

Breaking racial barriers while at the same time sporting platinum-blond hair for much of the 1950s, Towles' career aptly represents the often-conflicting dynamics that black women in the beauty industries navigated through during the mid-twentieth century. Instead of attempting to overthrow Anglo-centric definitions of aesthetic desirability, mid-century beauty culturists argued that black women's bodies could be constructed to fall within predominant beauty standards. Promoting a definition of beauty such as the one that a later generation would herald as Afro-centric would not have allowed mid-twentieth-century African American beauty entrepreneurs to use Europe as a venue through which they gained notoriety or fame. In addition, such an approach would have prevented them from marketing their products, services, and expertise to mixed-race gatherings in the United States and would have taken away some of the authority through which they later cultivated themselves as beauty experts on the African continent. Thus, before the more radical calls that "black *is* beautiful" were made in the 1970s, African American beauty culturists in the late 1940s, 1950s, and early 1960s asserted that black *could be* beautiful and worked through international cultural channels and business networks to demonstrate this assertion on a global stage.

This delicate racial balancing act was possibly even more pronounced for black hair care professionals than it was for African American entrepreneurs in the modeling industry. Indeed, African American cosmetologists had long received criticism from those within the black community for encouraging black women to chemically straighten and style their hair in ways that reflected white cultural norms and standards of beauty. Unlike the black modeling and fashion design industries, African American entrepreneurs had made altering the texture of black women's hair big business in the United States and, even parts of the Caribbean, prior to World War II.

In the early twentieth century black female entrepreneurs such as Annie Turnbo Malone, Sarah Spencer Washington, and Sarah Breedlove Walker (Madame C.J. Walker) each amassed fortunes and created a number of jobs for African American women in the field of

26. Summers, *Skin Deep: Inside the World of Black Fashion Models* (New York: Amistad Press, 1998), p. 203.

African American cosmetology.²⁷ In 1918 alone the Madame C. J. Walker Manufacturing Company grossed over a quarter of a million dollars with Walker herself personally making over \$1,000 a week by the end of her career in 1919.²⁸ After creating her own line of hair products and styling techniques, Walker's business model solicited black women from across the United States and Caribbean to sell her goods as independent Walker business agents in their individual communities. Her achievements as an entrepreneur are especially impressive considering she received little outside support from black or white institutions. This success, however, stirred controversy, and at times Walker was criticized by those in the black community for the aesthetic preferences her business was built upon.

One such critic was the prominent race leader Booker T. Washington. According to biographer A'Lelia Bundles, when Washington declined Walker's multiple requests to speak at his 1912 National Negro Business League conference, she chose to seize the podium without introduction. There Walker proclaimed "Surely you are not going to shut the door in my face...I feel that I am in a business that is a credit to the womanhood of our race....I went into a business that is despised, that is criticized and talked about by everybody." She further made known "I am a woman that came from the cotton fields of the South. I was promoted from there to the wash-tub....then I was promoted to the kitchen, and from there I promoted myself into the business of manufacturing hair goods and preparations."²⁹ Walker thus answered criticism of her lucrative international hair business by positing her story as that of someone who had made it in life through hard work and personal dedication—a mode of economic advancement that Booker T. Washington himself had promoted for poor blacks.

Following this golden age of business expansion for the black-owned hair care industry in the early twentieth century, its profitability waned during the interwar years. During the 1920s and 1930s large white-owned companies made inroads into the black hair care market, sometimes by pretending to be black-owned businesses themselves. Compounding the effects of the Great Depression on black business, the growth of drug stores and grocery chains that sold hair care products made it harder for black-owned beauty product retailers to appeal for business in their communities.³⁰ Meanwhile government safety reg-

27. For more on the lives of these early-twentieth-century black entrepreneurs, see Blackwelder, *Styling Jim Crow* and Rooks, *Hair Raising*. Shorter analyses are also available in Laird, *Pull* and Peiss, *Hope in a Jar*.

28. Rooks, *Hair Raising*, 91; Bundles, *On Her Own Ground*, 248.

29. Bundles, 135.

30. Walker, *Style & Status*, 85.

ulations and a growing call for professionalism within the beauty industry cracked down on small neighborhood operators who ran their beauty shops out of basements and front porches, making it even more difficult for entrepreneurs to start a career.³¹

It was not until the postwar economic boom of the late 1940s, 1950s, and 1960s that African American hair care professionals had a new opportunity to expand their business interests in the United States and abroad. During this time Marjorie Stewart Joyner, the leading African American hair care professional of 1950s and 1960s, saw integration into the American mainstream as an avenue for industry-wide growth. Historically the black hair care industry had depended upon segregated markets for its success. However with the movement of large white-owned firms into the black hair care industry, African American entrepreneurs were forced to reconceptualize the scope of their business practices. Like her contemporaries in other beauty culture fields, Joyner received her own beauty training from a white institution that did not readily welcome blacks. In 1916 she enrolled in the Molar Beauty School in Chicago, where she felt unwelcomed. As Joyner recalled in an oral interview, "Right out in class one day they said if you were black [than] you couldn't be an American."³² Initially acquiescing to this segregated reality, Joyner built her career as the director of beauty schools for the Madame C. J. Walker Company. However, it was from her position as the president of the United Beauty School Owners and Teachers Association (UBSOTA), a black organization for black cosmetology school owners, that Joyner helped to craft a new integrationist and internationalist plan for black-owned hair care businesses. By creating transatlantic partnerships for black American beauty culturists, Joyner found a way for UBSOTA members to practice their craft alongside whites without upsetting racial sensibilities in the United States.

Like their sisters in the fields of modeling and fashion design, African American hair care professionals used Europe as a place to gain legitimacy and respect in the mid-twentieth century. Officers and some general members of UBSOTA made several educational trips to Europe during the 1950s and 1960s. In publicizing their 1961 voyage, UBSOTA's press releases touted that its traveling members would gain the unique opportunity to watch masters in the field of cosmetology perform their work. On that trip the UBSOTA delegation met for training sessions with Myriam Carange, a leading French beautician, and "Antoine," the Parisian dubbed "Dean of French Hair

31. Willett, *Permanent Waves*, 9.

32. Joyner Papers, "Interview with Marjorie Stewart Joyner" Box 36.

Stylists” who commemorated the African American delegation’s visit by designing a coiffure for Josephine Baker.³³ Through associations with internationally renowned European innovators in fashion and cosmetology, African American beauty culturists sought to establish their credentials abroad in order to attract new clients, black and white, at home.

NAFAD, the professional fashion design organization of which Ann Lowe was a member, took similar steps during this era. African American fashion designers actively courted an international identity to bolster their reputation in the United States and build their business connections abroad. In 1950, NAFAD invited “Madame Henri Bonet,” a milliner by trade and wife of the French Ambassador to the United States, to speak at its annual meeting, where she delivered a speech entitled “Fashion in the Forward March of World Democracy.” NAFAD members then used such connections to embark on international travel to promote their work abroad. In the 1950s NAFAD members went on fashion tours of Europe and touted their international credentials in the United States. For example, in 1954 Bonet helped to coordinate a NAFAD delegation visit to Christian Dior’s salon in Paris. Additionally, NAFAD members met other noted European fashion designers in London and Rome.

After returning to the states in 1961, UBSOTA’s domestic press releases lauded their members’ international credentials and ability to teach advanced European and American methods of hair styling, cutting, tinting, bleaching, conditioning, make-up application, and manicuring.³⁴ Indeed, following its trip abroad, the organization selected seventy-five of its members to serve as instructors at its “International Institute of the United Beauty School Owners and Teachers Association.” Noting that each of the instructors was a member of the United International Advanced Hairstylist and Makeup Guild, the group proclaimed that its cosmetology instructors were “without peer or equal” and nicknamed them the “Incomparable 75.”³⁵ Like modeling and fashion design professionals, UBSOTA members hoped they could, in part, combat their marginalization in the U.S. market by establishing themselves in foreign venues that all Americans recognized as world class.

In forging ties with foreign hair care professionals, UBSOTA members also built upon their connections with U.S. government officials. Prior to their 1961 voyage, President John F. Kennedy personally

33. Booklet, *History of United Beauty School Owners and Teachers Association*, 3rd Edition, no date. JOYN.

34. UBSOTA Press Release, JOYN.

35. UBSOTA Convention Booklet, April 18–22, 1960, JOYN.

wished the UBSOTA delegation bon voyage at a party in the quarters of Commodore Anderson aboard the ocean liner the *SS United States*. While on their trip, the UBSOTA delegation first visited the American Embassy in London to meet with Ambassador John Hay Whitney. Likewise, while in Rome, the group met with Ambassador James Zellerbach, the U.S. Ambassador to Italy. In addition, they convened with Amory Houghton, the U.S. Ambassador to France, whom the group had previously met during their 1954 trip. In securing their second audience with Ambassador Houghton, Marjorie Stewart Joyner explained the purpose of the UBSOTA's voyage. "We are classed as small business people," she wrote, "and this is our means of raising our standards, educating our group, and learning foreign techniques that perhaps can be adopted to improve our businesses... any courtesies extended to us in helping to make our trip a successful one, will be greatly appreciated." As this letter suggests, UBSOTA's international travels were carefully crafted voyages that served to raise the group's international reputation and prestige by working through proper government channels. Such interactions also served the interests of the U.S. government. As historian Mary Dudziak has explained, the U.S. government took a concerted interest in the travels of African Americans during the Cold War.³⁶ African Americans, such as those in the UBSOTA delegation, offered the United States the chance to inform foreign audiences about prosperous and upwardly mobile members of its black citizenry. Because domestic race relations had long tarnished America's image abroad, accounts of traveling African American business people in the foreign press held the potential to help rehabilitate America's image abroad or at least temporarily distract foreign attention away from headlines that chronicled civil rights abuses on American soil. While this was certainly the case in Europe, nowhere was this interest more pronounced than on the African continent.

Selling in Black Beauty in Africa

The foreign interactions of African American beauty culturists were not limited to their pursuit of European attention and knowledge. In addition to touring France, Italy, and England, the members of UBSOTA also traveled to Ghana, Liberia, Haiti, and other black nations during the late 1950s and 1960s. Throughout this period they attempted to align themselves with economically and politically empowered African leaders. Thus, in addition to visiting diplomats in Europe

36. Dudziak, *Cold War Civil Rights*, 61.

during their extensive trips abroad, the members of UBSOTA also met the Liberian President William V.S. Tubman in 1965 when they were invited to a reception honoring the President of Israel held at Tubman's executive mansion. As historian James H. Meriwether has argued, during the late 1940s and 1950s, although most African Americans were both physically and psychologically disconnected from Africa, the end of colonial regimes on that continent and, in particular, the formation of Ghana as an independent nation in 1957 pushed African Americans to reorient their worldview.³⁷ As the leader of a nation free from white colonial oppression, Ghana's first head of state Kwame Nkrumah offered African Americans a vision of what realized black power and political enfranchisement might look like. Acting in the late 1950s and 1960s, beauty culturists were among the first wave of American business people to develop connections between black Americans and the peoples of independent African nations. Africa thus played into black American beauty culturists' larger global strategy in crucial ways. In addition to importing a positive reputation for themselves from Europe to the United States, African American beauty culturists also sought to export an image of themselves as the world's premier authorities on black beauty and the modern lifestyle to people of color around the globe. They also brought a greater knowledge of and respect for modern Africa to black people in the United States. As such, African American beauty culturists could appeal to pan-African sensibilities while simultaneously positioning themselves as global ambassadors for American consumer capitalism.

In 1960 the trade publication, *Beauty Trade: The Magazine for Negro Beauticians*, reported that a group of African American entrepreneurs had opened the Hollywood Beauty Culture Centre in Accra, Ghana. This enterprise trained Ghanaians as cosmetic salespersons, cosmeticians, hair stylists, and teachers of cosmetology. By teaching West African women U.S. hair styling techniques, African American entrepreneurs drew profits, asserted themselves as broad-based beauty industry leaders, and connected themselves to black leaders and businesspeople in other nations. In 1961 the Hollywood Beauty Culture Centre hosted its first "Coiffure and Fashion Extravaganza" at Accra's Ambassador Hotel to show off its students' work. The event took place under the patronage of Ghana's first lady, Madame Fathia Nkrumah, with all proceeds from the extravaganza benefiting the local Young Women's Christian Association. During the hair show, Ghanaian and European models from the African American-run

37. Meriwether, *Proudly We Can Be Africans*, 179.

Femina School of Deportment modeled styles created by students at the Hollywood Beauty Culture Centre.³⁸ A report on the event in *Beauty Trade* noted that several of the Ghanaian students' hair designs were inspired by the "Jacqueline Coif," a bouffant hairdo modeled after the style worn by Jacqueline Kennedy, the new first lady of the United States. At its first commencement ceremony, Ruth Batsio, wife of Ghana's minister of Agriculture, awarded diplomas to the thirteen Ghanaian women who made up the school's 1961 graduating class. Following graduation, students became eligible for employment in one of the institution's two Accra salons.³⁹ With the success of its Ghanaian business enterprises, the Hollywood Beauty Culture Centre built a third salon in Nigeria the following year.

In addition to the rewards it reaped for beauty culturists and their clients, African American economic development in Africa also played into the U.S. Government's Cold War strategy. The U.S. government had been somewhat unprepared for the growth of African nationalism and the emergence of independent African states in the 1950s. During the first half of the 1950s, American intelligence authorities had erroneously calculated that European colonial powers would solidify their position in Africa by making further concessions and accommodations to African peoples.⁴⁰ When Sudan, Ghana, Nigeria, Egypt, and other independent African nations emerged, the United States scrambled to develop a new foreign policy strategy for the region. Supporting the interests of black American business people in Africa offered the U.S. government a crafty way to help prevent the spread of communist influence in the region without seeming like neo-colonialists themselves. Following this line of reasoning, the spread of private business ownership would serve as a deterrent to Soviet expansionism. As more individuals reaped the benefits of private entrepreneurship, more would be interested in seeing capitalism grow on the African continent. Furthermore, the work of black business people, albeit Americans, spoke to the psychological needs of independent African states in ways that groups of white American business people simply could not.

Evidence of this strategy can be found in the records of a 1961 U.S. Department of Commerce conference that focused on the "problems and opportunities confronting Negroes in the field of business."⁴¹ Before 1961, the U.S. government had been woefully inactive in its efforts

38. "A Hair Fashion Show in Ghana" *Beauty Trade* (October 1961): 22.

39. "Ghana School Turns Out 13 Graduates in First Graduation" and "A Hair Fashion Show in Ghana" *Beauty Trade* (October 1964).

40. Meriwether, *Proudly We Can be Africans*, 161.

41. Thanks to Professor Robert Weems for pointing out this important source to me.

to help small black businesses. As historian Jonathan J. Bean relates, because racism had barred many black business people from prominent trade organizations, they often lacked access to channels that would help them establish themselves in the business world.⁴² Because the government was one of the few places from which African American entrepreneurs could seek financial and managerial assistance for their enterprises, speakers at the 1961 conference called on both the U.S. Commerce Department and the Small Business Administration to make government programs known to black Americans. In his welcoming remarks to the group, Charles C. Diggs, Jr., a U.S. Congressman from Michigan and the general chairman of the conference, noted that the development of black business interests was of serious concern to the United States not only for the “well being of the Negro citizens” but also for the “for the strength of American business enterprise at home and abroad, and for the cause of American democracy itself.”⁴³ Even more explicit than Diggs’ remarks, the U.S. Secretary of Commerce Luther H. Hodges warned the conferees of what he witnessed during a 1950 trip to the Soviet Union. Hodges stated “the Communists don’t have to worry about costs when they decide to go into a market. They can put any price they want to on the goods they offer in Africa or Latin America.”⁴⁴ Under Hodges’s reasoning, the United States needed to enter those markets before their Soviet rivals in order to spread a capitalist ethos among the people in Africa and Latin America and thereby guard against the development of communist-supporting regimes. Seeing no room for the existence of both capitalism and communism on the global stage, Hodges warned that the fate of the “free world” was tied to U.S. efforts to industrialize countries in Africa and Latin America. Otherwise, Hodges forecasted, “they won’t last long as free countries.”⁴⁵

Should they chose to participate, black American businesspeople were thus offered an important role to play in U.S. Cold War interests. Because of their race and historic ties to Africa, black Americans were seen by many as ideal persons to bring U.S. commercial interests to the postcolonial continent. Also in attendance at the Commerce Department conference, LeRoy W. Jeffries, Vice-President of the Johnson Publishing Company, stressed the need for black investment in Africa. As the publisher of the first mass-circulation black magazines *Ebony* and *Jet*, the Johnson Publishing Company had historically helped to support the careers of several black models, fashion designers, and

42. Bean, *Big Government and Affirmative Action*, 45.

43. Fitzhugh, ed., *Problems and Opportunities Confronting Negroes in the Field of Business*, 16.

44. *Ibid*; 12.

45. *Ibid*; 13.

other beauty culturists in the United States. In his remarks before the Department of Commerce Conference, LeRoy W. Jeffries stated further avenues for black American advancement in Africa:

Our Federal Government is actively cooperating with the new independent African nations in trade and development. As Negro businessmen with a vested interest in America, we should make every possible financial effort to profitably aid in the development of these nations. After all, who can be a better sales man of democracy in Africa than an American Negro businessman with some worthwhile product or service to offer?⁴⁶

Reiterating Jefferies' point about black Americans aptitude for representing America in Africa, Stanley Sumlin, an Economist for the Federal Reserve Bank of New York, similarly suggested the unique position black business people could benefit from when he stated, "American Negroes should enjoy some extra advantages in this setting. Not only are there ethnic affinities between American and African Negroes; there is also no stigma of colonialism attached to these Western brothers." Sumlin then offered specific industries and regions where investment opportunities were available to black Americans. In addition to meat processing in Nigeria, TV network programming in Morocco, and other possibilities, Sumlin suggested that a chain of cosmetic stores might profitably operate in Ghana.⁴⁷ Beauty culture in Ghana was then not only of significance to the black entrepreneurs who set up the Hollywood School of Beauty Culture in Accra in 1961 but was also seen as an area of business expansion on the minds of those who were shaping America's anticommunist economic strategy at the U.S. Department of Commerce that same year.

The promotion of black capitalism in Africa was one part of America's larger Cold War agenda, and in the minds of American government officials African American entrepreneurs had an important role to play in helping to realize this goal. Historian Penny Von Eschen has shown how, during the same time period, black American jazz musicians such as Louis Armstrong, Dizzy Gillespie, and Duke Ellington served as cultural ambassadors of the America lifestyle to foreign audiences.⁴⁸ Sponsored and financed by the U.S. Department of State, the travels of these jazz masters to places such as Cairo, Accra, Leningrad, and Tehran were part of the U.S. government's efforts at soft diplomacy. That is, they attempted to engender an affinity for

46. Ibid; 89.

47. Ibid; 58 and 60–61.

48. Von Eschen, *Satchmo Blows Up the World*.

the United States by spreading American culture around the globe. Similar to the use of musicians, the U.S. Department of Commerce viewed the development of black American-owned businesses, including those started by beauty culturists, of primary interest to America's Cold War foreign policy.

While U.S. government officials tied black American investment in Africa to America's Cold War agenda, Black Americans who took up this call were more likely to emphasize their work as part of a Pan-Africanist agenda, albeit one that privileged African Americans, than as a component of the U.S. strategy against the U.S.S.R. In 1962, Maye H. Grant, who had accompanied her husband Joseph Grant, a Foreign Service officer, on a UNESCO tour of duty to Nigeria, wrote a personal letter directly to the editor of *Beauty Trade*, UBSOTA's president Marjorie Stewart Joyner, and two other noted African American beauty culturists. In her lengthy letter, Grant boasted that her local Nigerian beautician, "Ms. Ogun," was the best in Lagos. She went on to ask if the African American professionals might correspond with Ogun to help improve the cosmetologist's knowledge of hair relaxation, tinting, and styling. Ogun, Grant informed her readers, had received professional training in England but now preferred to follow "American Negro techniques" and did this by reading *Beauty Trade* and associating with African Americans. Reflecting on the larger impact that African American beauty culture was having on a global scale, Grant wrote:

For the first time since leaving home...I was made aware of how important the Negro's achievements have been to the African. It is here that I have been so impressed with the particular contributions of the American Negro Beautician. I have since concluded that the American Negro Beauticians have contributed greatest to the world's recognition of beauty in women of African blood. It may be that this is the only area that the American Negro can claim undisputed and exclusive leadership for women of African blood on every continent and hemisphere. I am very proud of this as an American, as a Negro and as a woman.⁴⁹

Grant's words clearly suggest the possibility that Africa held in the minds of some African Americans as well as the role that black business people could hold in the emerging global marketplace. While the U.S. government stressed African American investment in Africa for Cold War purposes, black business people saw the growth of pan-Africanist movements as an opportunity to spread their reputation

49. Maye H. Grant, Lagos, Nigeria to Marjorie Stewart Joyner, Chicago, October 1, 1962, Joyner Papers, VHRC.

and their goods throughout the black world. The growth of transnational black business partnerships did indeed hold out the possibility of uniting peoples of African descent from around the globe. Ironically, however, for those in the field of beauty culture this was true even while the actual products and practices that African American entrepreneurs promoted were based upon beauty standards historically defined by whites.

In addition to foreign travel, African American beauty culturists' trade magazines facilitated business partnerships with peoples of African descent in the mid-twentieth century. Black-oriented beauty publications such as *Beauty Trade*, *Beauticians Journal & Guide*, and *Woman's Guide Digest* helped both to generate interest in Africa about African American beauty culture and to solidify black Americans' role as leaders in the transatlantic beauty trade. Beginning in 1954, before black participation in Africa had been popularized, the monthly publication *Beauty Trade* drew attention to African American cosmetologists as it circulated in Ghana, Nigeria, Trinidad, and elsewhere. In 1961, Teresa Branker, a beauty shop owner in British Guiana, informed the editor of the publication: "I eagerly look forward to your exciting issues each month. To me, every new edition published, brings me closer in mastering the many styles and on the whole, news in general." Thus through their publications, African American beauty culturists were able to establish themselves as broad-based industry leaders among black peoples, who quite possibly had never even met an African American.

In forming their reputation in Africa, black American beauty culturists capitalized on what had been seen as a disability domestically, namely the fact that they were African American, and then marketed this identity in two ways in Africa and its diaspora. First, they branded themselves as "American." Associated with the glamor of film and affluent living, the cachet of being American in Africa gave African American beauty entrepreneurs added respect abroad. With names such as the Hollywood Beauty Culture Centre, African American beauty entrepreneurs positioned themselves as cosmopolitan and world-class business people who were at the forefront of bringing top-flight beauty training, products, and expertise to persons of color around the world. Secondly, in addition to selling themselves as "American," beauty culturists also sold themselves as "black" and thus as authentic retailers to African peoples. By noting that they were themselves persons of African descent, African American beauty culturists used racial solidarity to their advantage in ways that had historically allowed black businesses to develop segregated markets in the United States.

This racist appeal, however, was not without dilemmas and contradictions. As the scholar W.E.B. Du Bois poignantly observed at the start of the twentieth century, simultaneously living as black and as American often proved a difficult identity to balance. Indeed by 1962 Du Bois had renounced his U.S. citizenship and moved to Ghana, where he lived the remainder of this life. Even though African American beauty entrepreneurs sold their products and services to black women in Africa under the auspices of racial solidarity, they often gained their legitimacy through their associations with white persons, white-owned institutions, and Anglo-centric ideals of beauty. As Maye Grant, the African American living in Nigeria, wrote in her letter to the four prominent African American beauty culturists: "If Europe, as you have said, is the source of beauty culture, then America is the source of [the] adaptation of this culture to the needs of Africans and African descendants."⁵⁰ Thus, while a handful of African Americans had become successful in selling black American beauty culture to women of color in Africa, the actual aesthetics they retailed heavily relied upon a foundation of white-dominated western sensibilities.

The career of Bettie Ester Parham, owner of the National Beauty Supply Company, personifies this reality. In the late 1940s, Parham became the first black retail owner on 125th Street in Harlem by selling black beauty goods. By 1960 Parham had amassed a net worth of nearly \$180,000.⁵¹ Growing her business through international markets Parham's cosmetics, hair preparations, and beauty supplies were sold domestically as well as in Africa, Latin America, and the Caribbean during this time. In her sales pitch, Parham urged African women to buy her products specifically because of their shared race. Indeed an advertisement for her Esther Beauty Aids brand directly instructed prospective purchasers that: "A wise old owl would advise the woman of color to BUY HAIR PRODUCTS THAT ARE CREATED FOR HER BY A WOMAN OF COLOR."⁵² However, while Parham sold products to black women in several countries under the mantra of racial solidarity, the actual products that she retailed heavily relied upon an Anglo-centric look, giving credence to the perceived inadequacy of black women's unprocessed hair. For example, in the mid-1950s, "Esther's Chemical [Hair] Straightener" was Parham's leading product in Brazil, the most populous nation with a majority of black citizens on the

50. Ibid.

51. "National Beauty Supply Co.: A Proprietorship, 31 December 1960" Stanley Berkowitz, Certified Public Accountant, New York. Bettie Esther Parham Collection, 1945–1981, Folder 1, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, New York; hereafter, Parham Collection, SCRBC.

52. Esther Beauty Aids Advertisement, Parham Collection, SCRBC, folder 1.

globe.⁵³ Similarly, the authentic hair wigs that Parham's company sold were not comprised of African hair. Rather, the "French Refined Oriental Hair Wigs," that Parham priced from \$39 for a "feather bob" to \$165 dollars for an "all hand-ventilated wig," were actually made of a mixture of Chinese and Italian hair.

Parham's use of these two "qualities of hair" in her wigs prompted a 1945 Federal Trade Commission investigation of her advertising claims. A letter Parham received from Web Woodfill, the Chief Trial Examiner for the Federal Trade Commission (FTC) in Washington, District of Columbia, specifically questioned Parham's assertion that she sold only the "best quality" hair products. Woodfill argued that this claim was false and that Parham's own correspondence with him contradicted her advertising claims. The FTC investigator pointed out that Parham had herself admitted to him that "only European hair is classified by the trade as first or best quality, Chinese hair being known as second quality because of its coarser texture."⁵⁴ By incorporating Chinese hair into her wigs, Woodfill asserted, Parham diluted the value of her wigs and could not claim them to be of first quality. Writing back to the FTC investigator, Parham gave in; she stated that her catalog had been changed, and that in the future more information would be given to customers regarding the specific origins of the hair in the wigs she retailed.

The fact that Parham sold black women in Africa and the Americas "first" and "second" quality hair from Europe and Asia, tacitly placed African hair, even by her own assessment, as at best third-tier in its desirability. Such estimations of European, Asian, and African hair were not solely the opinion of Bettie Esther Parham or the women who purchased her products. Rather, such rankings of ethnic hair types were beauty industry standards. Thus, while Parham marketed her business as a company made by a black woman for black women, she earned money by selling her clients an aesthetic that gained its authority, legitimacy, and direction from a white-dominated beauty industry. In this way black beauty culturists such as Parham achieved their success by navigating through, not against, the dominant aesthetic preferences of their time. As business people their actions reflected an understanding of what services and products were wanted by their market.

Women such as beauty product retailer Bettie Esther Parham, modeling agency owner Ophelia DeVore, hair care professional Marjorie Stewart Joyner, and other African American beauty entrepreneurs

53. *Beauty Trade* (October, 1954): 8.

54. Web Woodfill, Chief Trial Examiner for the Federal Trade Commission to Elizabeth Ester Parham, Washington, August 30, 1945, Parham Collection, SCRCB.

did not see any contradiction between their claim to be “race women” and their promotion of a black female body beautified in accordance with Anglo-centric standards of beauty. As commonly understood by those in the black American community, a “race woman” was a female who actively promoted the black political agenda for economic, social, or political empowerment. Clearly, black beauty culturists envisioned themselves as progressive agents of these kinds of social change. Indeed, they conceptualized their efforts to beautify black women’s bodies as part of a larger mission to improve the lives of women to whom they sold their products, as well as enrich and empower themselves, and thereby uplift their race. At the same time, however, black entrepreneurs’ definitions of what constituted beauty remained primarily Anglo-centric. In this way beauty entrepreneurs utilized conservative measures to achieve otherwise liberal goals. In contrast to traditional portrayals of black women as low-skilled homely domestic workers in the mold of “Aunt Jemima” or as “savage African natives,” black beauty culturists promoted an image of black women in America, Europe, and Africa, as sophisticated connoisseurs of modern fashions. When beauty culturists’ efforts succeeded, they generated positive effects for black women—the inclusion of images of black bodies into a global mainstream beauty culture—albeit through conservative methods that did not fundamentally challenge the hegemony of the “white is right” aesthetic.

A Twentieth-Century Triangle Trade

It is well known that the movement of ideas, concepts, and commodities across the Atlantic Ocean has long impacted the lives of persons of African descent. Indeed, research centered on the Atlantic world has come to dominate scholarship on the black experience during the seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth centuries, a period when Africans were the goods transported across the Atlantic. Despite the centrality of the Atlantic world to accounts of the first half of African American history, this locus of historical investigation has been much less prominent in accounts of the more recent black past. Works such as Penny Von Eschen’s *Satchmo Blows up the World* and James H. Meriwether’s *Proudly We Can be Africans* have begun to take the study of African American history outside of U.S. borders and investigate the role of African Americans in the modern world. This essay has sought to extend this work by analyzing the actions of black business people in the field of beauty culture from 1945 to 1965. As this paper has as shown, long after Africans stopped serving as commod-

ities in the slave trade, they continued to be active participants in the commercial activities of the Atlantic world.

Indeed as the history of black beauty culturists presented here shows, the twentieth century witnessed the birth of a new kind of triangle trade between the Americas, Europe, and Africa. In this trade, a select group of black business people served not as goods but as the primary agents of exchange. African American entrepreneurs in the fields of fashion, modeling, and cosmetology were important directors in the formation of transatlantic partnerships between persons in Africa, Europe, and the Americas during the mid-twentieth century. They went first to Europe to garner a portion of its prestige and publicity in an attempt to change the ways in which their fellow Americans viewed them and generate business at home. From there, beauty culturists traveled to Africa and other parts of the black world where they hoped to recruit new customers, establish themselves as world-class leaders in the black beauty trade, and increase their market share. Thus, by transcending the American context and taking their local ventures overseas, this group of African American business people created multi-sited foreign networks that both enriched them financially and reshaped popular conceptions of the black body around the globe.

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