Selling Black Beauty: African American Modeling Agencies and Charm Schools in Postwar America

Malia McAndrew
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Prior to World War II, popular American culture, including newspapers, radio, and cinema, regularly depicted beauty as necessarily white. Conversely, mainstream magazines, board games, postcards, dolls, and virtually every form of visual media presented the black woman as either a hypersexual “jezebel” or an unattractive house servant “Mammy.” Faced with these distorted representations of their race, a number of enterprising businesswomen set out in the decades after WWII to change the stereotypical mass representation of black women. African American modeling and charm school owners such as New York City’s Ophelia DeVore and Barbara Watson applied their ventures in beauty and business toward changing the ways in which popular culture depicted black women. In part because of their hard work, mainstream cultural outlets began to portray women of color as attractive, poised, and professional.

To be sure, despite their courageous challenges to some cultural standards, DeVore, Watson, and their fellow beauty entrepreneurs accepted many mainstream norms that later pioneers have since rejected. Thus, while attempting to change the image of black women, who were overwhelmingly working-class, their businesses reinforced, rather than challenged, prevailing middle class–based codes of proper social behavior. Moreover, they uncritically accepted popular thinking that tied women’s social worth to their physical appearance. And their notions of black beauty often mirrored white aesthetic standards. Nonetheless, without question, African American modeling and charm school owners used their for-profit business enterprises as a means to re-present the black female body before the American public and thereby participate in their generation’s struggle to gain greater respect and opportunity for African Americans (1).

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Surveys have shown that over 85% of all job dismissals are due to personality difficulties and grooming rather than a lack of skills. Don’t let this happen to you.

It’s time to call! Ophelia DeVore 212-629-9400

This ad for Ophelia DeVore Enterprises went on to describe African American modeling executive and charm school founder DeVore as a “pioneer architect of self-development.” It featured an impressive roster of African American celebrity DeVore graduates, who included Diahann Carroll, Cicely Tyson and Richard Roundtree. But the ad’s primary appeal was to working women who could become “model people.” (Courtesy of Ophelia DeVore Enterprises)

Pioneer Ophelia DeVore

Ophelia DeVore was a pioneer in the field of modeling for African American women. In 1946 DeVore opened Grace Del Marco Models, an agency that uniquely promoted models of color. Over the next three decades, DeVore groomed and promoted models who appeared in print advertisements for major American companies, including Johnson & Johnson, Pepsi-Cola, Schick, Anheuser-Bush, Clairel, and Revlon. Prior to this time, the fashion industry in the United States required black women to "pass" as white in order to gain training or employment. Indeed, Ophelia DeVore, a woman whose physical appearance made it hard to categorize her racially, received professional training from the Vogue School of Modeling under the assumption that she was white. 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 sort of reception that inspired DeVore to work towards challenging the dominant perception of black women in America. Recounting the initial motivation for her work, DeVore stated, “I wanted to change the popular image of women of color...Media and entertainment industries stigmatized us. Almost nothing was positive” (2). DeVore thus used her modeling agency as a training ground for African American models, actresses, and TV personalities who could challenge dominant stereotypes about black women.

This goal, however, was not without its own set of dilemmas and contradictions. Like DeVore herself, many of the models she gained employment for were persons whose bodies mirrored traditional white aesthetic norms of beauty more than they challenged them. Light-skinned with long straight hair, America’s first African Ameri-
can models did not reflect the diversity of the community they were touted to represent. While it is significant that DeVore openly marketed her models as black women, instead of passing them off as white as she herself had to, she did so in a way that did little to challenge hegemonic white definitions of what looked good.

In addition to promoting professional models, DeVore also sold her services to the ordinary black woman. In 1948 DeVore opened the Ophelia DeVore School of Modeling and Charm, which functioned as a sister institution to her modeling agency. The goal of this newly designed firm was to train young women not only to work as professional models, but also to serve as what she called “model people.” A popular 1960 advertisement for her charm school in Ebony magazine asserted that in addition to entertainers and models, “business women, housewives, career girls, and teenagers” could also benefit from her instruction in hair styling, makeup, dress selection, “weight management,” and “figure control” (3).

Social uplift

DeVore felt that one of the barriers that constrained black women was that many had internalized the racist characterizations of African Americans promoted by the larger society. Stressing the need for her charm classes among ordinary black women, DeVore explained, “Prejudice has damaged her so much that she often behaves like the low-comedy stereotype of her. We want to help her throw off these old habits and realize her own natural beauty and charm” (4). By suggesting that it was in part their mannerisms that held black people back, DeVore’s charm school continued the tradition begun by middle-class African American social workers, teachers, nurses, and librarians in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (5). Through their “social uplift” campaigns and mottoes such as “lifting as we climb,” middle-class black women had a long history of “teaching” poor blacks about social graces, personal initiative, and communal responsibility. Promising to prepare her clients for success, DeVore continued in this class-based tradition of “schooling” ordinary black citizens in what she felt they “needed” to learn for their “betterment.”

In 1965 a writer for FLARE: The Alumni Chic Magazine of the Ophelia DeVore School Alumni Association reported on commencement exercises held by members of Les Filles Charmantes Club of Brooklyn. Taking its name from a French phrase meaning “the charming girls,” the club was led by DeVore graduate KaKay Grey and offered free membership to low-income black teenagers living in the Bedford-Stuyvesant neighborhood of Brooklyn. The FLARE writer noted that the club was intended “not to promote a great overall change, but to stimulate an interest in the teenager for herself.” After attending twelve weeks of charm classes at the Bedford YMCA, the newly transformed club members took part in a joint graduation ceremony and fashion show, an event to which they wore white debutante-style gowns. “Once she considers herself necessary and useful,” ran this report on graduates, “each young woman will learn she has ‘something of value’ to grow on and to give to the future as an individual” (6). In this way, club members promoted that idea that, with the proper train-

ing and “cultural refinements,” economically disenfranchised blacks could secure a better future for themselves.

Carefully schooling her clients in such “refinements,” DeVore trained them to be ambassadors of black womanhood to the larger white society. Indeed, she believed that white Americans would be compelled to alter their perception of the black woman after encountering her students. As DeVore noted, “White people had an image of women in Harlem—that we weren’t refined, that black women in Harlem were prostitutes and whores. That was not true to start with. But I wanted to do something about the image of my people—to teach women about the social graces, how to dress for every occasion. A lady has to carry herself in a style to gain respect” (7). Further positioning her work as crucial for black advancement in the American marketplace, DeVore added, “That’s important—the image one projects matters. I’ve always believed that the African Americans were talented and equal in every way to any other group. But image is critical for any line of work one wants to pursue” (8).

Diahann Carroll, a DeVore charm school graduate at the age of fifteen, embodied the vision of black womanhood DeVore sought to cultivate among black women and promote in the mainstream media. In 1954 Carroll won her big break as a member of the Carmen Jones ensemble, a film with an all-black cast based on the George Bizet opera Carmen. In 1968 Carroll gained mainstream attention after NBC producers cast her as the lead actress in the television show Julia, where she played an attractive African American nurse and caring mother. For four decades, Diahann Carroll has continued to project a poised and glamorous image. In 2006 Carroll accepted a recurring guest role on the ABC television show Grey’s Anatomy, where she played the sophisticated mother of an African American surgeon. Diahann Carroll’s long career has exemplified the success story for which DeVore prided her clients. In addition to Carroll, DeVore schooled other black women who went on to earn similar national prominence, including recording artist Faith Evans, film actress Cicely Tyson, and Essence magazine editor Susan Taylor.

European launching pad

In addition to promoting African American women in the United States, DeVore also used an international stage to re-present her vision of black womanhood to the world. Particularly with her models, DeVore used European venues to showcase and build their careers. 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 an hour, half the rate charged for the average white model (9). 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
the model’s U.S. job prospects improved. By 1961, Helen Williams’s hourly rate was $50 to $100, and DeVore could bill even inexperienced black models out at the rate of $15–30 an hour (10).

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 black model of any color to win the prestigious title. Relating the significance of the trip, DeVore noted, “When Cecilia and I left New York, there were no reporters in sight... when we returned from Paris, they were all around us” (11). 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. Laying out her strategy years later, DeVore explained: “I went to Europe and got acceptance. Then when I came back to America I had it made” (12). Having, as she termed it, “pre-sold” her models in Europe, DeVore was able to find modeling jobs for them with major domestic companies.

Dorothea Towles

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 Farrower Charm and Modeling School in Los Angeles. Much like DeVore, Towles used her career to change the way in which mainstream society viewed black women. Reflecting back on her early role models, 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” (13). 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 to work 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 (14). Like DeVore, Towles applied her talents as a professional model to push the boundaries of what was possible for black women. “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” (15). Breaking racial barriers while at the same time sporting platinum-blonde hair for much of the 1950s, Towles aptly represented the often conflicting dynamics that black women in the beauty industries navigated through during the mid-twentieth century.

Brandford Models

Although no market had existed for them prior to World War II, by the late 1940s, several black-owned agencies for African American models had emerged. In New York City alone, Sara Moorhead opened the Sepia Arts Modeling Agency, Mattie Bailey began the Bailey Modeling Agency, and Lois Bell started the Gwyn-Lo Modeling Agency.

Ophelia DeVore’s most formidable competitor in these early years, however, came from Brandford Models, an agency started by the African American artist Edward Brandford and his two female associates Barbara Watson and Mary Louise Yarbo. Brandford founded his agency in 1946, the same year DeVore began Grace Del Marco Models, and the two agencies fought with each other for the spotlight throughout the late 1940s and 1950s.

Both Brandford Models and Grace Del Marco Models received heavy coverage in the black press. Indeed, the success of African American models was closely tied to the distribution of *Ebony* and *Jet*, the first mass-circulation periodicals that appealed to a black middle-class readership. *Ebony* and *Jet*, respectively published for the first time in 1945 and 1951, became the venues by which many Brandford and Grace Del Marco Models were popularized at the national level. In addition to appearing on the covers of these magazines and being featured in the advertisements found inside them, many of the models were themselves the subject of gossip columns and news articles in these publications. In this way, black models themselves became a commodity and helped to sell a new black ideal. As historian Jason Chambers notes, Edward Brandford was successful in starting not only a modeling agency but in creating the “Brandford Look” — a swelle woman with long hair whose skin did not appear too dark—which, women wanted to emulate and with which advertisers wished to have their goods associated (16).

Barbara Watson

In 1953 Barbara Watson, who had directed Bradford’s agency since its opening in 1946, purchased the company for a price of $10,000 (17). Renaming the agency Barbara Watson Models, she pushed to have her models visible to the American mainstream. By the early 1950s, Watson’s resume boasted supervision of more than two hundred professional models of color whose photos appeared in advertisements for variety of retailers, including Beech-Nut Gum, Ipana Tooth Paste, Colgate, Tampax, Remington Rand, Tetley Tea, Noxema, Lucky Strike, and Lysol.

While the looks of Watson’s models continued to reinforce white aesthetic norms, she was not completely submissive to the favors of whites. Lobbying for the interests of her African American models and favorably positioning her company within the wider market, Watson boldly asserted in a 1954 interview for the periodical *Visualized Physical Culture* that by comparison with their white counterparts, “colored models are healthier.” She further contended that the black models schooled by Barbara Watson Models were not “the hallowed [sic] cheek models” promoted by her white competitors, but rather “perfect [size] 125″ (18). Furthermore she also proclaimed that at her school any woman, regardless of race, could achieve beauty given the proper training, time, and effort needed to accomplish a flawless physical appearance:

Instructors [at Watson’s charm school] don’t believe that there’s a prevalence of a naturally beautiful body among models. They’ve done enough on redistribution of wayward curves...
and chiseling down of fleshy figures to know that top models work hard for their coveted conformations.

Thus, according to Watson, beauty was made and not born (19).

The beauty entrepreneur had earlier promoted this sentiment. In 1948, Watson, then director of Brandford Models, published The Brandford Home Study Charm Course, a beauty and charm manual for use by the everyday woman. In the introduction, Watson gave her black readers the following orders: “Ladies, look into your mirror again. Erase from your mind any preconceived idea that you—because of your coloring—cannot achieve beauty; you can, you will” (20). As Watson advised, beauty was not a natural condition bestowed upon white women only, citing Cleopatra, Nephrodite, and the Queen of Sheba as evidence of black magnificence. Watson argued that beauty was the result of an expertise in feminine arts that every woman could learn in order to create a radiant personal appearance. Indeed, she dedicated her charm manual to “the thousands of women of color who appreciate the advantages of charm and poise for their betterment” (21). Loveliness and grace were not dictated by one’s race. As Watson’s words suggested, such riches resulted not from birthright but from personal initiative and the will to change.

In this way, beauty culturists such as Ophelia DeVore and Barbara Watson encouraged black women to participate in a cultural movement that was shaping the lives of women of all races in the mid-twentieth century. This era saw the expansion of beauty products that were sold for mass consumption, as well the growth of an advertising industry that promoted them. In addition to beauty products that promised to change women’s appearances, experts such as DeVore and Watson promised to teach women how best to use them. Thus, during the middle decades of the twentieth century, the mandate to beautify took on a profound and serious intensity in many women’s lives. Since it was popularly understood that all American women could become beautiful, cultural mandates began to require that all women should aspire to such ideals. This directive had a significant impact on how women measured both their bodies and their self-worth.

According to an in-house record, by the end of the 1960s more than 10,000 individuals participated in Ophelia DeVore’s teaching and techniques. In addition, DeVore served as a marketing consultant to major American companies, including Johnson & Johnson, TWA, and Philip Morris. From its office in the Empire State Building in New York, the Ophelia DeVore School of Charm continued to grow and promote people of color into the twenty-first century, marketing its founder as a “pioneer architect of positive imagery.” Taking a different path with her life, Barbara Watson retired from the field of beauty culture in 1956 to begin a second career as a lawyer and public servant. Within the Carter Administration, Watson became the highest-ranking black female diplomat in the State Department and ended her career in 1981 after serving as the U.S. Ambassador to Malaysia.

Conclusion

African American modeling and charm school owners such as DeVore and Watson believed that creating a positive public image for black women was a necessary step toward the realization of racial equality for black people in the United States. In addition to enriching and empowering themselves, black beauty entrepreneurs conceptualized their business efforts as part of a larger mission to improve the lives of the women who purchased their services. In this way, beauty entrepreneurs utilized conservative measures to achieve otherwise progressive 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 African American women as sophisticated and professional people. When beauty culturists’ efforts succeeded, they generated positive effects for black women—the inclusion of images of black bodies into mainstream culture—albeit through conservative methods that did not challenge the hegemony of the predominant “white is right” aesthetic or diminish societal pressures that linked a woman’s worth with her beauty.

Endnotes


5. For a good analysis of the work of middle-black women see: Stephanie J. Shaw, What a Woman Ought to Be and to Do: Black Professional Women Workers during the Jim Crow Era (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1996).


8. Ibid., 198.


11. Wilson, Meet Me at the Theresa, 99.


13. Ibid., 198.


19. Ibid.


21. The Brandford Home Study Charm Course, 1948, 1. Watson papers, SCRBC.

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