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## BOOK REVIEWS

### *The Power of Beauty: Commercial Beauty Culture, the Body, and Women's Political Activism*

Tiffany M. Gill. *Beauty Shop Politics: African American Women's Activism in the Beauty Industry*. Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2010. ix + 192 pp.; ill. ISBN 978-0-252-03505-0 (cl); 978-0-252-07696-1 (pb).

Holly Grout. *The Force of Beauty: Transforming French Ideas of Femininity in the Third Republic*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2015. vii + 243 pp; ill.; tables. ISBN 978-0-8071-5988-0 (cl).

Rebecca M. Herzig. *Plucked: A History of Hair Removal*. New York and London: New York University Press, 2015. 280 pp.; ill. ISBN 978-1-4798-4082-3 (cl); 978-1-4798-5281-9 (pb).

Blain Roberts. *Pageants, Parlors, and Pretty Women: Race and Beauty in the Twentieth-Century South*. Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2014. xii + 384; ill. ISBN 978-1-4696-1420-5 (cl); 978-1-4696-2986-5 (pb).

#### **Christina Burr**

The four books under review convincingly demonstrate how much the scholarship on beauty culture has moved beyond the narrative of sociopolitical subjugation. The authors explore how women's writings, the women's press, and cosmetics and advertising industries targeted women as consumers and took pleasure in applying cosmetics, how women could use their bodies as tools of self-expression amid changing definitions of femininity in modernity, and how beauty culture stimulated social, economic, and political activism. Although all of the books focus on some aspect of beauty culture, each author asks different historiographical questions about women's bodies, the beauty industry, and political, economic, and social change: How did beauty emerge as a goal to pursue, rather than function exclusively as a tool of women's oppression? How did beauty become an expression of woman's individual personality? How was the pursuit of beauty related to racial division? How did beauty practices challenge social boundaries? Taken together, the books remind us that beauty culture is not only a tool of women's oppression—although there are oppressive elements. These authors instead help us understand that beauty was an expression

of woman's individual personality, that beauty and bodily transformation were culturally produced, and that race was a crucial defining marker of beauty and status.

In *The Force of Beauty*, Holly Grout examines how beauty culture in the French Third Republic (1870–1940) “posed overlapping contradictions for French women, contradictions that enabled women to simultaneously reinforce and challenge established gender norms” (3). The book is divided into three parts: “Respectable Beauty,” “Exceptional Beauty,” and “Modern Beauty.” The first part demonstrates how the emergence of a new commercial beauty culture in the late nineteenth century gendered beauty as essential to middle-class respectability by drawing on sanitary self-care promoted by healthcare professionals. At the same time, women were encouraged to embrace their sexuality. The Grand Coquette—a beauty ideal—emerged as another representation of feminine beauty in fin-de-siècle France. The Grand Coquette—associated with actresses, models, and socialites—made a spectacle of feminine beauty and was a component of an emerging celebrity culture. The female figure provided a glamorous model of womanhood that required a considerable amount of work to achieve and was one that middle-class women wanted to emulate. Grout examines the contradiction between a beauty culture that simultaneously promoted female pleasure and desire, while also keeping women locked within the bounds of middle-class conventions (59). “Beauty Countesses,” who authored instructional manuals, transformed women's pursuit of beauty from an extravagant self-indulgence into a necessary and respectable part of bourgeois women's work in the home.

In the second part, entitled “Exceptional Beauty,” Grout traces this contradiction in women's beauty culture into the twentieth century using the writing of the celebrated French author and beauty entrepreneur Sidonie-Gabrielle Collete. She examines two of Collete's most complex fictional characters: Léa, a courtesan, and Renée, an actress. Both characters confront the reality of their aging bodies, but with different effects. For Léa, beauty and youth were important tools in her domination of men, and as her body aged so did her influence. Renée, in contrast, was able to maintain her influence by taking on different stage identities with the use of cosmetics. Grout suggests that for Collete beauty was a “fluid category consistently under revision,” and it was “artificial, contested, transient, subversive, competitive, infinite and finite simultaneously.” In Collete's novels beauty “rested at the center of how her characters understood themselves as both women and individuals” (100–101). Grout devotes a separate chapter to Collete's work in the beauty industry as the *directrice* (owner) of her own cosmetics company. For Collete, cosmetics were agents of transformation that enabled

a woman to produce her own self. For some women cosmetics were thus a subversive tool of self-expression.

The third section of Grout's book focuses on "Modern Beauty." Building on the work of the Modern Girl Around the World research group, she explores a new type of femininity typified by "the Modern Girl," a beauty icon that emerged after World War One based on the intersection of commodities and women's bodies.<sup>1</sup> The beauty industry encouraged women to create identities through cosmetic products. Grout explains how movie starlets and beauty pageant contestants engaged in cultural debates about women's visibility in public. These celebrities linked beauty and commerce, and, as Grout writes, "promoted an idealized model of womanhood that was presented as both performative and purchasable" (141).

Grout's insightful analysis of how beauty posed overlapping contradictions for French women draws on a vast array of primary sources: hygiene manuals, legal and medical literature, advertisements for cosmetics and other beauty products, contemporary fiction and art, and silent cinema. Grout's emphasis on beauty as a form of political power and a form of contention informs the other books under review.

In *Pageants, Parlors, and Pretty Women*, Blain Roberts offers an interpretation of modernity in the twentieth century US South that provides an important contribution to the study of race, consumption, and southern history. She argues that beauty culture in the South was deeply tied to the tumultuous racial divide in the region. African American and white women's bodies were so inextricably tied to race that racial difference both masked and revealed class, gender, and assumptions about rural backwardness. "By making women's bodies do important work on behalf of their race," Roberts writes, "both white and black southerners blunted their disconcerting modernity" (8). She demonstrates how white and African American beauty were mutually constitutive and determined by the presence of a racial "other." Beautiful white women became symbols of white supremacy, and they condemned the aesthetic choices and consumption practices of African American women as "distasteful." For African American southerners beauty represented racial uplift and progress; although there was some concern among African American critics that by engaging in some beauty practices, like hair straightening and skin bleaching, they were embodying race in the wrong way.

Unpainted faces and long hair stood as evidence of southern white women's virtue and their identity as southern women. The deeply tanned skin of rural women who worked in the fields was a sign of their working-class status. According to Roberts, cosmetics companies democratized southern ladies' whiteness by making it available to all women through bleaching creams and face powders. Beauty contests similarly made whiteness widely

accessible in the rural South. Later, during the Great Depression, beauty pageants marketed agricultural products through the commodification of women's bodies. Participants dressed in swimsuit-like costumes made out of the crop they advertised. Pageants thus turned women into sexualized spectacles, and "woman-as-commodity" became "woman-as-commodity crop" (130). Roberts considers the string of victories of white southern women in the Miss America pageant (African Americans were excluded during segregation) in the mid-twentieth century. White southern beauty queens, Roberts states, served "as persuasive public relations agents for a region tarnished by its reactions to calls for racial justice" (204).

For African American women, beauty practices were tools of resistance. Beauty parlors offered African American women an opportunity to set up their own businesses either in separate shops or in their own homes, depending on resources and family needs. In the early 1900s, Annie Turnbo Malone and C. J. Walker, the two most famous African American beauty culturalists, created a form of self-employment away from white supervision when they developed their own line of hair care products. Underscoring the connection between personal appearance and "racial uplift" was the controversial "politics of respectability," which included hair straightening. Some African American beauty culturalists thought this form of personal conduct was the most realistic way to subvert the politics of racism in the context of Jim Crow (70). Roberts suggests that African American beauty culture was both liberating and restricting. Beauty colleges, however limiting, provided African American women with a way to deal with life in the segregated South, and African American women asserted their claim to attractiveness through beauty pageants. Some African Americans, including Booker T. Washington and Nannie Helen Burroughs, initially argued that beautification was an attempt by African American women to "get white" and reject their race (68). Both would later change their position, however, as they came to see that beauty culture encouraged self-respect among women.

Roberts draws on Tiffany Gill's 2010 book, *Beauty Shop Politics*. Both authors demonstrate convincingly how African American beauticians built on a long tradition of business-based activism over the course of the twentieth century. Gill's study, however, focuses exclusively on African American women's activism in the beauty industry. She situates her text in the literature of African American women's politics and the less-developed historiography on African American women's entrepreneurial initiatives (4). She argues that the African American beauty industry provided opportunities for women to assert themselves in their communities by serving as leaders and mobilizers in grass-roots and national campaigns. She contends that beauticians were politically active because they were the most economically autonomous members of African American communities (2).

Gill's chronological and thematic approach allows her to go about her task of "finding politics in unexpected places" (5). Throughout the twentieth century, African American beauticians worked to legitimize themselves and their industry. The opening of beauty schools offered women a marketable set of skills and a viable financial opportunity; whereas settlement houses and domestic training schools focused on protecting these women from entering into a life of prostitution (35). Gill explains how beauticians during the interwar years engaged in gender politics alongside racial politics as they negotiated the terrain of modernity, the expectations of women's roles in African American communities, and the challenges of their minority status and the Great Migration north.

*The Politics of Beauty* underscores the significance of beautician activists. In addition to the familiar figures, C. J. Walker and Annie Turnbo Malone, Gill brings to light the activism of such lesser-known individuals as Marjorie Stewart Joyner, Rose Morgan, Bernice Robinson, and others. Organizations of African American beauticians played an important role in the 1950s and 1960s in solidifying beauticians' professional class identity. Beauticians, moreover, were instrumental in mobilizing the civil rights movement. According to Gill, state organizations focused on organizing those within their communities, and the beauty shop was the site of most of the local civil rights activism (103-4). They also provided a place for women to relax after confrontations with Jim Crow.

In the late 1960s, beauticians were at the forefront of the organization of the women's health movement. Hair salons were a depository for condoms and education about HIV and AIDS prevention. Gill takes the reader up to the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina and the issues of race and gender in the Democratic campaign that resulted in the election of Barack Obama as president in 2008. Local African American beauticians realized how important hairstyling was to Katrina evacuees and provided their services free of charge. During the Democratic presidential primary, the "beauty culture vote" was seen as crucial to winning states with a large African American population (135-6). Gill brings together a vast array of scattered sources to produce a book that successfully demonstrates how African American women merged beauty parlors as a public space for their activism with their quest for economic self-sufficiency.

*Plucked*, by Rebecca Herzig, is a fascinating story of body hair removal among both women and men in the United States; a work situated in the history of the body, science, and culture. Herzig argues that practices of body modification served as a medium for communicating and challenging social boundaries. She traces commonly held beliefs about hair removal that have shifted rapidly over the last century, and escalated significantly in the 1920s when women exposed more of their bodies following changes in fashion.

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Homemade hair removal recipes dating from the eighteenth century were replaced by packaged depilatories in the nineteenth century. Herzig provides an intriguing account of the origins of commercial depilatories for bovine hair removal in the meat-processing sector. The task of stripping hair from hides was a bottleneck in production, and the most effective labor-saving process involved the use of noxious chemicals—usually a combination of sulfides, cyanides, and amines that weakened and stripped the hair from the skin, but were also highly combustible or poisonous (45). Toiletry manufacturers used the same technical knowledge. Herzig indicates that by the mid-nineteenth century these chemically volatile commercial depilatories became a medical issue and a matter of public health; but, in the absence of legislation regulating the products, the older products remained on the market.

Body hair played a pivotal role in British naturalist Charles Darwin's theories of evolution. These theories posited the absence of a hairy covering as a sign of a higher stage in the evolutionary chain. Herzig explains how Darwinian ideas were absorbed into American popular culture. Freak shows displayed extraordinarily hairy people as "bearded ladies" and "dog-faced men" (64). The late nineteenth century medical community viewed hirsutism (excessive hair growth on women) as a sign of mental illness and lesbianism.

As body hair removal escalated in the 1920s, x-ray salons touted radiation as a new and painless technique of hair removal. Herzig describes the horrors that ensued from the use of x-rays, a procedure that was used until the 1940s. With the women's liberation movement of the 1970s, hairy underarms transformed into a symbol of women's political consciousness and their call for self-ownership and control of their bodies. Bodily self-determination has informed discussions of hair removal ever since. Third wave feminists have argued that "feminism wants you to be whoever you want to be even if you shave, wax, and pluck" (138). Despite feminist politics of bodily self-determination and horror stories surrounding hair removal, Herzig points out that hair removal has "become normalized—a persistent standard of health, beauty, cleanliness, and desirability" (187). That complicity has meant that "we are all plucked" (191). Herzig, however, leaves us with the reminder that "the very boundaries of our bodies, to say nothing of the limits of empathy and political action, are, and may be, continually remade" (192).

*Plucked* is an engaging book and very readable. It is well suited for senior undergraduate students and graduate students. Herzig might have dealt more with race, particularly given the distinct African American beauty culture studied by Roberts and Gill. The book, nevertheless, is well researched, covering a wide array of scientific and medical journals and popular magazines.

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Each book tackles difficult questions concerning women's beauty, body work, consumption, and political activism, considering how women might use beauty culture as a tool of resistance. A consideration of how race complicates the matter is an important contribution to the scholarly literature on women's beauty culture. The books leave us asking other questions about ethnicity and the politics of beauty and the body among various immigrant groups to the twentieth century United States.

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup>The Modern Girl Around the World Research Group, *The Modern Girl Around the World: Consumption, Modernity, and Globalization*, ed. Alys Eve Weinbaum, et. al. (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008).