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## Marketing to the 'liberated' woman: Feminism, social change, and beauty culture, 1960–2000

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MARKETING TO THE 'LIBERATED' WOMAN

Feminism, Social Change, and Beauty Culture, 1960–2000

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A Dissertation

Presented to

The Faculty of the Department of History

The College of William and Mary in Virginia

In Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

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by

Elizabeth A. Kreydatus

2005



APPROVAL SHEET

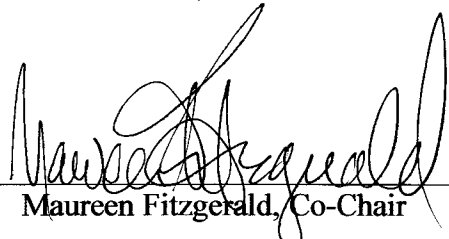
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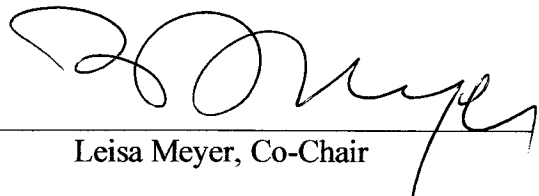
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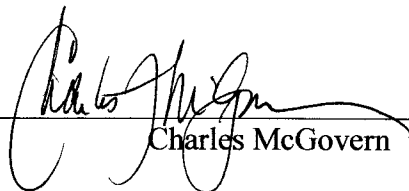
  
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## ABSTRACT

This dissertation is a study of the influence of the women's movement on the marketing of beauty products between 1960 and 2000. The first and last chapters study feminist critiques of normative beauty standards and explore the challenges feminists faced when they tried to effect cultural change.

While the dissertation is framed by analysis of feminist engagement with beauty culture, the bulk of the dissertation examines beauty industries, focusing on the ways that these industries reflect debates over woman's identity and status. Chapter two traces the marketing of perfume between 1960 and 2000 by chronicling changing advertising campaigns as marketers adapted to and participated in social change. The third chapter explores the direct sales strategies of Mary Kay Cosmetics, a company dependent on independent consultants, typically women, to market its products. Finally, chapter four details the genre of beauty advice books and articles, focusing on how the tone and content of this advice has been shaped by the social world of the advisor. By looking specifically at these beauty industries, these chapters demonstrate the ways that ordinary Americans engaged with feminism in their professional lives.

These case studies illuminate late-twentieth-century debates over womanhood, sexuality, and femininity that took place within the business world and the culture at large. Ultimately, this dissertation offers a clearer picture of the interconnections between beauty marketing and feminism, highlighting the ways in which social movements affect the industries they critique.

## MARKETING TO THE 'LIBERATED' WOMAN

## INTRODUCTION

*“Let us have fashion plates in our popular magazines of active, healthy, sensibly dressed women, in place of the waxen-faced, wasp-like beflounced and befurbeled caricatures of women which now appear there to mislead the weak and disgust the sensible.”<sup>1</sup>*

Amelia Bloomer, *The Lily*, 1854

In the early 1850s, Amelia Bloomer, the editor of a temperance and women’s rights journal, promoted a “reform” style of dress. Along with several prominent women’s rights advocates, including Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Susan B. Anthony, and Lucy Stone, Bloomer rejected fashionable corsets and heavy, trailing skirts in favor of loose pants worn under a mid-calf length skirt.<sup>2</sup> The “dress reformers” sought to change fashions that were uncomfortable, unhealthy, and—especially—part of a cultural system that measured a woman’s worth based on her appearance. These activists quickly discovered that their reform costumes were controversial tactics through which to argue for women’s rights. In the face of public ridicule for the “bloomer costume,” most women’s rights advocates abandoned the dress reform effort by the mid-1850s, despairing of changing aesthetic norms or their roles in women’s lives.

A little over a century later, American feminists renewed the dress reformers’ critique of beauty norms. Like the dress reformers of the 1850s, late-twentieth-century

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<sup>1</sup> Amelia Bloomer, “Paris Fashions,” *The Lily* 7 (August 1, 1854): 109.

<sup>2</sup> Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Susan B. Anthony, and Matilda Joslyn Gage, eds., *History of Woman Suffrage*, 2d ed., vol. 1 (Rochester, NY: Charles Mann, 1889), 844.

feminists agreed that beauty culture—or the commodification and idealization of the female body—underpinned, or at least reflected, a sexist system that defined women by their appearances. An array of activists challenged sexist, racist, and heterosexist practices that appeared in beauty cultural venues, such as beauty product advertisements, women’s fashion magazines, and beauty pageants. This project investigates the most influential late-twentieth-century critiques of beauty culture, beginning with the Black Nationalists and the radical and liberal feminists of the 1960s, tracing their activism across four decades, and concluding with a discussion of “third-wave” feminists of the 1990s.

Black Nationalists and radical, liberal, and third-wave feminists all shared in a struggle to empower American women. Black Nationalism is an ideology that celebrates a separate black American heritage and culture. While Black Nationalist ideology had been articulated by Marcus Garvey as early as the 1910s, Black Nationalism as a philosophy was especially popular among African Americans during the 1960s and 1970s, when a number of black Americans expressed doubts that white Americans would ever permit integration, or that integration would truly empower African Americans. Radical feminists, who first organized in “women’s liberation” groups during the late 1960s, view normative gender roles as inherently oppressive. They wish to empower women by fundamentally reordering social, cultural, economic, and political structures to recognize female values and female power. Liberal feminism, commonly associated with organizations like NOW, (which formed in 1966) seeks the same opportunities and privileges for women as men, without radically altering the nature of the American capitalist society. Finally, “third-wave” feminists are young 1990s and early twenty-first



century feminists who define their own feminism as inspired by but distinct from the “second-wave” activism of the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s.<sup>3</sup>

As we shall see, these activists disagreed about what would constitute an “empowering” beauty culture for American women or how to go about developing this empowering system. For example, Black Nationalists devoted considerable attention to the marginalization of black women within beauty culture, an issue that many white feminists ignored. However, most male Black Nationalists did not object to the pressures beauty marketers put on women to purchase and use beauty products. Radical feminists were much more critical of capitalism’s role in beauty culture than were liberal feminists. Finally, some third-wave feminists accused second-wave feminists of having a puritanical approach to beauty culture compared to their own “fun” approach. Because moderate and radical feminists and Black Nationalists had different agendas and tactics when it came to reforming beauty culture, they were unable to respond collectively to conservative opponents who viewed their activism with hostility.

While activists disagreed about how best to change beauty culture, conservative opponents disputed the need for change in the first place. As in the nineteenth century, many late-twentieth-century American women and men rejected activists’ critiques of beauty culture, interpreting those critiques as an attack on their understanding of American womanhood. In conservatives’ eyes, women’s desire to meet normative beauty standards—or the prescriptive expectations that society set for women—was a “natural” instinct and an essential step toward fulfilling their primary role as a wife and mother. Conservatives argued that women willingly participated in beauty culture

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<sup>3</sup> I will only identify feminists as part of the third wave if they themselves do so. I describe feminism as part of the “second wave” when I am describing the activism of the 1960s, 1970s, and early 1980s. I use this term primarily to distinguish the activism of this era from feminist activism of earlier and later periods.

because the system accommodated their “innate” desire to attract a heterosexual partner. Any attempt to change the beauty cultural system or women’s place within that system was inappropriate meddling with biological destiny. On the other hand, feminists and Black Nationalists contended that, because of late-twentieth-century prejudices, society evaluated women by a single, narrowly defined standard of beauty, promoting conformity and anxiety among women rather than appreciation of female individuality and racial diversity. While women *and* men might instinctively appreciate physical beauty, sexism and racism had distorted Americans’ definition of beauty, making that definition distinctly “unnatural.”

Late-twentieth-century debates between feminist activists and their conservative opponents over beauty culture are historically significant because they illuminate broader debates over the status of women. Between 1960 and 2000, largely due to feminist activism, Americans questioned the justice of women’s relegation to a subordinate position within the family, the workplace, the political structure, and society. Beauty culture served as a focal point for the broader debate over women’s rights, as Americans turned to beauty culture to voice competing understandings of “womanhood.” In the early twentieth century, Marxist theorist Antonio Gramsci asserted that, especially within capitalist, democratic societies, *culture* serves as a primary battleground for power struggles. Cultural dominance and social, political, and especially economic power usually go hand-in-hand. According to Gramsci, the dominant members of society maintain their power by controlling a “hegemonic” culture through a combination of coercive and persuasive methods. In order for the dominant class (or sex or race) to maintain hegemonic control, the subordinate members of society must consent to the

cultural supremacy of the dominant group.<sup>4</sup> This project will illustrate that the late-twentieth-century struggle for equal rights for American women took place to a significant degree in a cultural arena.

For American feminists and Black Nationalists, challenging conservative hegemonic control of “acceptable” representations of the female body became increasingly important toward the century’s end. While activists in the 1960s and 1970s successfully dismantled many of the legal barriers to women’s equal participation in the economy and politics, cultural expectations continued to limit female power. These feminists and Black Nationalists were acutely aware of oppressive cultural norms; however, they had little success in their efforts to challenge those norms. Cultural change is simply more difficult to accomplish, largely because the source of “culture” is harder to pin down than the source of “government” or even “business.” By the 1980s and 1990s, many feminists and Black Nationalists shifted the focus of their activism to the cultural realm, as they grew increasingly frustrated with the sexist and racist beauty ideals promoted by hegemonic beauty marketers.

Beginning in the 1960s, feminists and Black Nationalists set about challenging commercial beauty rituals as an important step toward the larger goal of identifying and eradicating sexism and racism. Conservatives, on the other hand, viewed female conformity to normative beauty culture as an essential and “natural” marker of gender identity, and treated feminist and Black Nationalist challenges to normative beauty standards with hostility. During the forty-year period of this study, conservatives, feminists, and Black Nationalists all contributed to popular understandings of beauty

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<sup>4</sup> For an explanation of Gramsci’s ideas and an analysis of their application to historical research, see T. J. Jackson Lears, “The Concept of Cultural Hegemony: Problems and Possibilities,” *The American Historical Review* 90, no. 3 (June 1985), 567–593.

culture. Because these groups consistently used debates over beauty to promote their views on women's rights, we can use the debates over beauty culture to get a better sense of competing definitions of womanhood that predominated in the late twentieth century. Furthermore, by studying the ways the debates over beauty culture shaped beauty marketing generally, we can trace some of the ways feminists and Black Nationalists influenced—or failed to influence—the larger culture.

Beauty marketers—including corporate executives and advertising agents as well as direct salespeople and sales clerks—were participants in the debates over beauty culture, and by extension, women's rights. Beginning in the 1960s, marketers faced a steady stream of criticism from feminists and Black Nationalists for using sexist and racist methods to promote beauty products. It is important to remember that marketers played a very different role in the debates over beauty culture than did feminists, Black Nationalists, or conservatives. While feminists and Black Nationalists worked to remake beauty culture and empower women, and conservatives fought to enforce rigid distinctions between the genders, beauty marketers strove to expand the commercial appeal of their products. As the authors of *Social Communication in Advertising*, William Leiss, Stephen Kline, and Sut Jhally explained, advertisers choose messages that they believe will most successfully reach consumers. Leiss, Kline, and Jhally warned critics of advertising to recognize marketers' pecuniary interests when assessing their actions, saying, "We need instead to understand the mediational position of the industry. Advertising personnel are no more sexist or racist than people in other areas. They are merely concerned with *communication that will sell products*."<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> William Leiss, Stephen Kline, and Sut Jhally, *Social Communication in Advertising: Persons, Products, and Images of Well-Being* (New York: Methuen, 1986), 310, emphasis in original.

Acknowledgement of marketers' financial motivations should not imply that beauty marketers were "neutral" in debates over beauty culture. As this dissertation will illustrate, some marketers clearly exhibited racism and sexism in their professional decisions, whereas others struggled for social justice. Regardless of their personal politics, beauty marketers shared an overriding interest in defusing feminist and Black Nationalist critiques of the consumer ethos of beauty culture and in maintaining a cultural atmosphere that encouraged consumer spending. As proponents of consumer capitalism, beauty marketers depended upon consumers agreeing on some normative definition of beauty. For the most part, consumers purchase beauty products primarily because they hope those products will help them meet normative beauty standards. On the other hand, feminists and Black Nationalists have argued that women should define beauty for themselves, rather than struggle to conform to a socially created, sexist and racist norm. While individual marketers might crave social justice, their economic motivations required them to perpetuate and even exaggerate exclusive standards of beauty in hopes of driving women to purchase beauty products.

In order to appeal to the broadest spectrum of female consumers and to perpetuate the consumer ethos, marketers responded to feminist and Black Nationalist critiques by suggesting that beauty products allowed women to meet both conservative and progressive ideals of womanhood. Beginning in the late 1960s, beauty marketers peppered advertisements and beauty advice with references to "liberation," "black pride," and "empowerment." Beauty marketers appropriated feminist and Black Nationalist rhetoric partly to appeal to consumers who found progressive ideals compelling. Some marketers used feminist and Black Nationalist rhetoric to express their own progressive

ideals. But beauty marketers also employed progressive rhetoric to defuse and deflect activist criticisms of beauty culture. Beauty marketers promoted beauty culture as a “female-centric” escape from white and male-dominated society, and suggested that by participating in female beauty rituals, women could subtly resist or subvert white or male authority. They attempted to persuade consumers that, by purchasing beauty products, they could exercise newly won independence *and* conform to a conservatively defined, white, heteronormative “feminine” identity. During the late-twentieth century, these oblique references to depoliticized feminism and Black Nationalism allowed beauty marketers to expand upon sexist, racist, and heterosexist business practices, while creating an illusion that their industry was progressive and liberating.

Like the dress reformers of the nineteenth century, feminist and Black Nationalists’ efforts to empower women by remaking beauty culture had, at best, disappointing results. While Black Nationalists and feminists demanded that marketers diversify beauty advertising, marketers continued to feature white models or black models with light-colored skin. Radical and lesbian feminists challenged normative assumptions that women needed to beautify to attract a male sexual gaze. Beauty marketers, in turn, suggested that heterosexual male attention and the social status that women could derive from heterosexual relationships was dependent on meeting a narrow standard of beauty. Feminists pointed to the sexism of a social and professional world that required women—and not men—to spend significant time and money on beauty products and services. However, there was no diminishment of these tasks for women seeking career or social advancement. While feminists argued that it was impossible to

meet normative standards of beauty, beauty marketers continued to promote an unattainable beauty standard.

By closely studying feminist and Black Nationalist efforts to remake beauty culture, it is possible to explain why these activists were not more successful at transforming beauty culture or the larger culture. Chapter one will evaluate feminists' and Black Nationalists' tactics for changing beauty culture, as well as the significant opposition they faced from conservatives. Activists disagreed about whether to use moderate or radical tactics or how individual women could best bring about cultural change. Beauty marketers idealized white, middle-class, heterosexual women in their advertising, and this pattern of discrimination divided women from one another when they developed priorities for resistance. Activists struggled, and frequently failed, to develop an inclusive critique of beauty culture without undermining, alienating, or marginalizing other women who experienced oppression within this culture differently than they did themselves. Chapter one will investigate feminist and Black Nationalist efforts to reform beauty culture through the 1980s.

In addition to internal disagreements, feminists struggled with a hostile reception to their activism. Ultimately, they were unable to correct the conventional wisdom that their movement was "antibeauty." By the 1990s, even many third-wave feminists believed that their predecessors vehemently and bitterly opposed female participation in *any* type of beauty culture. The final chapter of this dissertation examines the effect that the stereotype of feminists as unattractive "bra-burners" had on 1990s feminists and their activism. Third-wave feminists struggled with many of the same problems and relied on many of the same activist strategies as the activists of the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s. They

also struggled with the complicated history of feminism and beauty culture. Third-wavers strived to avoid repeating their predecessors' mistakes; however, they found themselves echoing antifeminist stereotypes when they identified those mistakes. They coped with feminism's complicated legacy while facing a beauty culture that had grown significantly more menacing over the previous three decades. During the early 1980s, Americans discovered that a growing number of girls and women were suffering and dying from eating disorders. By the 1990s, feminists, whether they identified as third wave or not, viewed the pressure to maintain an unrealistic body size to be a significant danger for women. Cosmetic surgery became a normative beauty ritual during the 1980s and 1990s, despite its expense and risk.<sup>6</sup> Chapter five will assess the growing dangers nineties beauty culture held for women and the efforts of third-wave feminists to respond to those dangers.

While chapters that assess feminist and Black Nationalist efforts at reforming beauty culture frame this project, chapters two, three, and four explore the professional decisions beauty marketers made while grappling with ideological change. Historians of advertising, such as T. Jackson Lears, Roland Marchand, and James Twitchell, have all provided useful research on the motivations and experiences of advertisers and their role in shaping American culture, but none of these historians have focused exclusively on how marketers engaged with social activism, particularly activism directed at changing their industry.<sup>7</sup> Cultural critic Thomas Frank did look at the intersection of the 1960s

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<sup>6</sup> Elizabeth Haiken, a historian who has studied cosmetic surgery, argues that it was in the mid-to-late 1980s and early 1990s that cosmetic surgery became a normative beauty ritual. Elizabeth Haiken, *Venus Envy: A History of Cosmetic Surgery* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1997), 4.

<sup>7</sup> Jackson Lears, *Fables of Abundance: A Cultural History of Advertising in America* (New York: Basic Books, 1994); Roland Marchand, *Advertising the American Dream: Making the Way for Modernity, 1920–1940* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985); James B. Twitchell, *Adcult USA: The Triumph of Advertising in American Culture*. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996).



“counterculture” and the advertising industry in his book, *The Conquest of Cool: Business Culture, Counterculture, and the Rise of Hip Consumerism*. Frank argued that advertisers embraced the counterculture of “the young insurgents” as a model for their own institutional revolution.<sup>8</sup>

In Thomas Frank’s analysis, feminists and Black Nationalists did not present a serious *challenge* to advertisers; instead, these countercultural activists were “symbolic allies” with advertisers who shared their disapproval of the advertising industry’s hierarchical structure and lack of imagination.<sup>9</sup> I have found much evidence to support Frank’s contention that *some* advertisers shared the concerns of countercultural activists and sought to reshape their industry from within. However, the credit for changes in 1960s advertising styles should go to both the marketers who struggled to reshape their industry *and* the activists who pressured advertisers to make these changes. Obviously, feminists and Black Nationalists devoted considerable effort to raising marketers’ and consumers’ awareness about sexism and racism.

As feminists and Black Nationalists worked to draw attention to the inequalities of beauty culture, a growing number of Americans, including some beauty marketers, identified with their agenda, even if they chose not to identify themselves as activists. While the beauty industry certainly did not abandon sexist, racist, or heterosexist marketing styles between the late 1960s and 2000, individual beauty marketers, such as

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<sup>8</sup> Thomas Frank, *The Conquest of Cool: Business Culture, Counterculture, and the Rise of Hip Consumerism*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997), 9. Frank devoted a disappointingly small section to feminism (p. 152–156) and never specifically referred to Black Nationalism. He described countercultural ideology in the same broad way he argued 1960s advertisers would have—as an inspiring, but loosely defined ideology of youthful rebellion, or “hipness.” While he implied that cultural revolutionaries were influenced by sixties political struggles, Frank did not focus on political activists. He explained in a footnote, “It is important to note that, according to virtually every observer, the counterculture was a phenomenon distinct from the New Left.” Frank, *The Conquest of Cool*, 246 n. 21.

<sup>9</sup> Frank, *The Conquest of Cool*, 10.

advertiser Amelia Bassin and exercise advice writers Jane Fonda and Susan Powter, promoted an explicitly feminist agenda. Other beauty marketers, such as the direct sales entrepreneur Mary Kay Ash, revealed that they had been influenced by feminism, even if at best, they supported a limited definition of female empowerment.

Whether women purchase beauty products and buy advice books and magazines or forgo all makeup and fashion trends, they participate in beauty culture on a daily basis. Throughout the late-twentieth century, beauty culture was an inevitable part of a woman's life, and by examining the creation of this culture, we can also understand how it shaped women's options and opportunities. While there were countless ways that women interacted with beauty culture, I focus on the development of relatively "ordinary" beauty industries, and specifically on the role of beauty marketers themselves as they remade beauty culture for women familiar with (if not necessarily receptive of) feminist critiques. Chapters two, three, and four of this dissertation examine the production of beauty culture by perfume advertisers, the direct saleswomen of Mary Kay Cosmetics, and beauty advice writers. By examining these normative forms of beauty marketing, we can better understand why and how beauty standards came to play such a central role in women's day-to-day lives in the late twentieth century. And by looking at beauty advice writing and advertising along with Mary Kay Cosmetics, a beauty corporation run by a woman, this project will illustrate how and why American women actively participated in a beauty culture that was sexist, racist, and heterosexist. Furthermore, it will provide insight into the ways that Americans who fundamentally disagreed over women's rights and status employed debates about beauty to voice their beliefs.

Discussion of perfume advertising, Mary Kay Cosmetics, and beauty advice writing will not, of course, offer a comprehensive picture of beauty culture from 1960 to 2000. Beauty culture could be studied from any number of vantage points, and no examination of beauty culture could cover all of the ways this culture is produced. I have chosen these case studies to emphasize the production of beauty culture from the point of view of just some of the successful marketers of the late twentieth century. Chapters two, three, and four convey the range of ways beauty culture was produced and the diversity of opinions beauty marketers expressed when it came to women's status. While the beauty marketers I looked at were primarily white, upper- and middle-class businesspeople, these individuals held an array of views about feminism, Black Nationalism, and women's status, and their beauty marketing strategies shaped the experiences of women of all racial, ethnic, and class backgrounds. For example, Mary Kay Ash, the founder of Mary Kay Cosmetics, and many of her sales consultants expressed outright hostility toward feminism. Some female advertisers and beauty advice writers explicitly identified themselves as feminists, while others carefully distanced themselves from any type of social activism. Yet, all of these marketers ended up incorporating feminist and Black Nationalist rhetoric into their marketing strategies concurrently with the rise of these political movements. Furthermore, all of these marketers compromised their political beliefs when they interfered with their primary task of encouraging consumers to buy more beauty products.

Perfume advertisers, the subject of chapter two, struggled among themselves over the representation of women in their advertisements. These advertisers viewed women as an audience that they must manipulate into purchasing a specific scent, and they strived

to capture consumer attention by linking their product to sex, romance, wealth, and status. As “women’s liberation” became a common concept, some advertisers worried that “modern” women would reject advertising that focused primarily on perfume’s capacity to attract male attention. Beginning in the early 1970s, these advertisers linked their perfume to female self-expression and professional advancement. Chapter two employs magazine print advertisements and trade journal accounts to closely follow the debates among advertisers over women’s status. By looking at print perfume advertisements in women’s magazines—a format that, unlike television commercials, did not witness a radical technological transformation in the late-twentieth century—chapter two assesses how feminism and Black Nationalism affected advertising styles and beauty ideals. As we will see, late-twentieth-century advertisers developed perfume ads that evoked progressive ideals of diversity and female empowerment while still idealizing and commodifying the white female body.

Chapter three focuses on the motivations of female beauty marketers as they struggled to advance in the male-dominated business world. Mary Kay Cosmetics, a direct sales company founded in 1963, developed concurrently with the revival of feminism in the late twentieth century. The company founder, Mary Kay Ash, employed both liberal feminist and conservative social rhetoric to motivate her predominately female sales force. While Ash argued that women’s primary role was as a wife and mother, in her efforts to build a woman-centered business, she also promoted a view of womanhood more in line with feminist ideals, emphasizing women’s need for economic and personal independence. In chapter three, I investigate how the women at Mary Kay both created and coped with late-twentieth-century beauty culture. By focusing on the

female direct sales consultant and the company ideology that shaped her business practices, chapter three explores how and why individual businesswomen produced and promoted sexist, racist, and heterosexist beauty culture. In order to understand the development of American beauty culture, it is essential to recognize women's role in creating and maintaining that culture. Ultimately, a study of Mary Kay Cosmetics provides a useful example of how women stage resistance *within* beauty culture by combining rhetoric from across the political spectrum. The consultants compromised significant liberties and tolerated sexist and racist business principles in order to attain a measure of power within this conservative business.

Chapter four investigates beauty advice writers—the women and men writing for women's magazines and the authors of full-length beauty books—who positioned themselves as intermediaries between the “business” of beauty and the consumers. Beauty advice writers offer the best example of a group of beauty “marketers” who internalized and depoliticized feminist rhetoric, and then used that rhetoric in the business of “selling” beauty to their readers. Throughout the time period of this study, women were bombarded with advice literature about how to best engage with beauty culture. Beauty advice writers promised readers that they were reliable, trustworthy authorities and that they could help readers successfully navigate beauty culture; however, these advisers shared an underlying assumption that all women wanted to “look good” by the standards set by beauty marketers. The primary role of beauty advice was to reinforce and popularize beauty culture to suit the economic demands of beauty industries. Nevertheless, many beauty advice writers agreed with and even voiced a feminist critique of beauty culture. Given the conflicting priorities of these writers, beauty advice in the

late twentieth century shifted to describe female beautification as an opportunity for self-empowerment, rather than a means for catching or keeping a man's sexual interest. As advice writers linked beautification to personal expression and racial pride, the penalties for failing to meet beauty standards expanded. Beauty advice writers warned reluctant women that they limited their professional opportunities, risked their mental health, and failed to take advantage of their newfound "liberation" when they refused to beautify.<sup>10</sup>

In the late twentieth century, perfume advertisers, the Mary Kay direct sales strategists, and beauty advice writers all promoted beauty products by linking those products to female empowerment. The pressures for women to conform to beauty cultural norms grew stronger over time, as they were told that their conformity to these norms offered their best opportunity to demonstrate their personal power. Of course, by this definition, female power was best expressed visually, rather than verbally. As the perfume advertisers for Coty's late-1980s fragrance, "Ex'cla-ma'tion," reminded women, they could "Make a statement without saying a word," if they only looked "good" and wore the right perfume.<sup>11</sup> Beauty marketers encouraged women who wished to voice their independence and their activism to do so through their participation in beauty culture. In this way, women would be able to enjoy the lifestyle of liberation while still attracting male sexual interest, theoretically fulfilling both conservative and feminist ideals of womanhood.

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<sup>10</sup> While he was primarily interested in newspapers and news magazines, media critic Ben Bagdikian has argued that the media suffers "from built-in biases that protect corporate power," largely because media "groups" (including the popular women's magazines studied here) are part of an "endless chain" binding them together to other major corporations. Women's magazines, like most popular magazines, depend on advertisers for their financial well being, making it necessary for editors to cater to the wishes of their advertisers. Ben Bagdikian, *The Media Monopoly* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1983), ix, 3, 119.

<sup>11</sup> Pat Sloan, "Coty's New Scent Gets Its Point Across," *Advertising Age* 59 (July 11, 1988): 10. These tactics were not new, nor were they limited to ads for teens. In the late seventies, Coty advertised "Nuance" with the line "If you want to capture someone's attention, whisper." The 1990s scent, "Poème" by Lancôme, had a similar silence-inspiring slogan: "More than words can say."

Feminists had many good reasons to object to beauty marketers' casual depoliticization of feminism. However, their responses were complicated, partly because many feminists shared marketers' view of beauty culture as an avenue with potential for female empowerment. Regardless of their class, race, or sexuality, late-twentieth-century feminists understood beauty culture as both a source of female oppression and a site of resistance and contestation to that oppression. For example, during the 1960s and 1970s Black Nationalists viewed an African American beauty culture, expressed through Afro hairstyles and African-inspired clothing or jewelry, as a venue for recognizing and celebrating black distinctiveness. "Girlie" feminists of the 1990s argued that participation in "feminine" beauty rituals, such as the application of nail polish and makeup, permitted female bonding and affirmation of "female" values. Because beauty culture played such a prominent role in late-twentieth-century women's lives, feminists agreed that it was necessary to both address the sexism, racism, and heterosexism of this culture, and also preserve and enhance the ways women used beauty culture to add meaning and pleasure to their lives.

Feminist theorists and cultural historians have debated the possibilities for female empowerment and resistance within beauty culture, and it is with this debate that this dissertation engages. Feminist theorists such as Susan Bordo, Sandra Lee Bartky, bell hooks, and Iris Young have described beauty culture as a hegemonic system that no woman can truly escape. These theorists describe the "disciplines" of femininity, such as wearing cosmetics, straightening or curling hair, dressing fashionably, and dieting, as largely disempowering, arguing that these tasks drain women's resources away from more rewarding pursuits and convince women that their bodies and faces are defective.

Borrowing from the hegemonic theory advanced by advertising critics such as T. J. Jackson Lears, Judith Williamson, and Stuart and Elizabeth Ewen, these feminist theorists argue that beauty marketers have created a culture of self-discipline by setting unrealistic standards of beauty that compel women to constantly “police” their bodies in an effort to meet ideals of whiteness, wealth, and sexual propriety.<sup>12</sup> Chapters two, three, and four of this dissertation build on this analysis, illustrating the ways that perfume advertisements, Mary Kay sales techniques, and beauty advice “discipline” female sales consultants and consumers.

Susan Bordo, a prominent scholar in the field of “body studies,” provides perhaps the best example of how feminist theorists analyze the role of beauty culture in late-twentieth-century women’s lives. Bordo warns her readers not to assume that individual women could “choose” to engage with or ignore beauty culture.<sup>13</sup> Instead, she explains that beauty culture, a system she argues is chiefly crafted by influential beauty marketers, constitutes a set of rules that individual women must deal with on a daily basis. Bordo suggests that academics wrongly overemphasize the free will of individuals, for fear of casting beauty culture as a totalizing force or casting subjects within that culture as passive dupes who are preyed upon by marketers. Relying upon Michel Foucault’s

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<sup>12</sup> T. J. Jackson Lears, *Fables of Abundance: A Cultural History of Advertising in America* (New York: Basic Books, 1994); Stuart Ewen and Elizabeth Ewen, *Channels of Desire: Mass Images and the Shaping of American Consciousness* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1982); and Judith Williamson, *Decoding Advertisements: Ideology and Meaning in Advertising* (London: Marion Boyars, 1978). Iris Young, “Women Recovering our Clothes,” and “Breasted Experience: the Look and the Feeling,” in *Throwing like a Girl and other Essays in Feminist Philosophy and Social Theory* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990). Sandra Lee Bartky, “Suffering to Be Beautiful,” in *Sympathy and Solidarity, and Other Essays*. (New York: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2002), 13–29. Susan Bordo, “Braveheart, Babe, and the Contemporary Body,” in *Twilight Zones: The Hidden Life of Cultural Images from Plato to O. J. Berkeley* (University of California Press, 1997), 27–65; Bordo, “‘Material Girl’: The Effacements of Postmodern Culture,” in *Body and Flesh: A Philosophical Reader*, ed. Donn Welton (Malden, Mass: Blackwell Publishers, 1998), 45–60.

<sup>13</sup> Susan Bordo, “Bringing Body to Theory,” *Twilight Zones*, 173–191.



theory of “power,” Bordo distinguishes between individual agency and pure power, arguing that women (and men) do not ever “have” power, but instead are positioned within power. Therefore, for women to maintain their position within the power structure, they need to conform to the codes the structure sets forth for them. Ultimately, Bordo suggests that most women do *choose* to conform to normative beauty culture, but largely because nonconformity is punished. To illustrate the consequences of dissent, Bordo points to African American women who *choose* not to straighten their hair, but are punished for their decision by being passed over by potential employers.<sup>14</sup>

In order to analyze the continual negotiations taking place within beauty culture, I depend on Susan Bordo’s characterization of this culture as an inescapable and limiting system. However, many feminist theorists also suggest the possibilities of resistance or self-expression *through* beauty culture. Iris Young and bell hooks have described the sensory pleasures and affirmative rituals that beauty culture can offer women.<sup>15</sup> Most recently, third-wave feminists, including Leslie Heywood, Jennifer Drake, Amy Richards, Jennifer Baumgardner, and Rebecca Walker, have all argued that engagement with popular culture—especially beauty culture—offers the movement its best opportunity to unite disparate feminists who cannot articulate a shared utopian vision.<sup>16</sup> As long as we keep in mind Bordo’s point that women “choose” to participate in beauty culture within a narrow context of options, we can get a better picture of how individual women adapt to and survive within a culture that contributes to their oppression.

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<sup>14</sup> Susan Bordo, ““*Braveheart, Babe*, and the Contemporary Body,” Bordo, ““Material Girl.””

<sup>15</sup> Young, “Women Recovering our Clothes.” bell hooks, “Beauty Laid Bare: Aesthetics in the Ordinary,” in *To Be Real: Telling the Truth and Changing the Face of Feminism*, ed. Rebecca Walker (New York: Anchor Books, 1995) and “Straightening Our Hair,” *Zeta Magazine* 1 (September 1988): 33–37.

<sup>16</sup> See Jennifer Baumgardner and Amy Richards, *Manifesta: Young Women, Feminism, and the Future* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2000); Rebecca Walker, ed., *To Be Real*; and Leslie Heywood and Jennifer Drake, *Third Wave Agenda: Being Feminist, Doing Feminism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997).

When studying late-twentieth-century beauty culture, I was fortunate to draw upon a rich historiography of work on early and mid-twentieth-century women's experiences working within and in opposition to beauty culture. Cultural historians such as Nan Enstad, Kathy Peiss, Susannah Walker, and Jennifer Scanlon, and sociologist Maxine Leeds Craig have illustrated how, by "choosing" to conform to normative beauty culture, women have created a space for self-expression and dissent, even while they were disempowered in their larger culture. These authors have examined the ways individual women and activists experience beauty culture, and have used this research to establish how women engage with the broader, white and male-dominated popular culture—or the system of beliefs and values articulated through news media, film, art, television, and popular presses that structures the individual woman's experiences. One of the primary questions these historians continue to ask is whether women could ever mount an effective resistance to the sexism, racism, or heterosexism of beauty culture, given that, as products of that culture, they are simultaneously participating within and judged by that sexist, racist, and heterosexist system of beauty.

Historian Nan Enstad describes popular culture as "one resource (among many) that people use to create community, pleasure, and sometimes politics." Enstad shows how working-class women in New York City's Progressive era used popular culture generally, and beauty culture in particular, as a political resource. While Progressive-era elites understood "working girls" to be outside the realm of respectability, these women wore fashionable clothing (with a flourish of their own style) to demonstrate their dignity. By wearing French high heels and decorative hats to their workplaces and during strikes, working-class women visually defined themselves as "ladies," and sought respect from

their factory employers and foremen.<sup>17</sup> Kathy Peiss also posits beauty culture as a tool for resistance. In her history of early twentieth-century beauty culture, Peiss argues that there were rituals, social relationships, and female institutions within beauty culture that were affirmative and enjoyable for their participants. While Peiss acknowledges that women internalized “a ‘regime’ of scrutiny, assessment, and instruction,” she suggests that this regime offered many women a sense of control over their identities while operating in a sexist and racist culture. Peiss offered female entrepreneurs, such as Madame C. J. Walker and Elizabeth Arden, as examples of working-class women who used beauty culture to create a remarkable economic niche for themselves and their female employees.<sup>18</sup>

Kathy Peiss convincingly argues that women do not merely “react” to beauty culture; they also actively participate in the *creation* of beauty culture, profiting from this “regime” even as they conform to it. As this dissertation will illustrate, because the consumers of beauty products are overwhelmingly female, individual women have had opportunities to reach prominent positions in the business of selling these products. Historians such as T. J. Jackson Lears and Richard Ohmann have argued that, during the late-nineteenth, early twentieth-century, a highly educated, professional middle class promoted (unwillingly, according to Lears) mass consumer culture.<sup>19</sup> Because women did most of the work of consuming in the American economy, educated, middle-class women were able to find professional employment with advertising agencies and

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<sup>17</sup> Nan Enstad, *Ladies of Labor, Girls of Adventure: Working Women, Popular Culture, and Labor Politics at the Turn of the Twentieth Century* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999).

<sup>18</sup> Kathy Peiss, *Hope in a Jar: The Making of America's Beauty Culture* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 1998), 200.

<sup>19</sup> T. J. Jackson Lears, *No Place of Grace: Antimodernism and the Transformation of American Culture, 1880–1920* (New York: Pantheon, 1981). Richard Ohmann, *Selling Culture: Magazines, Markets, and Class at the Turn of the Century* (New York: Verso, 1996).

women's magazines. Corporate executives hoped to capitalize on existing female networks and shared experiences by hiring women to market beauty products to female consumers.<sup>20</sup> However, the presence of (some) women in the upper ranks of the beauty business does not necessarily indicate that the industry, or those women, will resist oppressive aspects of beauty culture. Historian Jennifer Scanlon, like Peiss, offers insight into the reasons women participated in early twentieth-century beauty culture. Scanlon analyzes the authority that a select number of women gained as advertisers, editors, and writers while working for *The Ladies' Home Journal* in the early twentieth century. According to Scanlon, the female staff frequently acknowledged a sense of alienation from the images of white, middle-class normative femininity that they used throughout the magazine. The women at the *Journal* comforted themselves with the belief that consumer culture—the system promoted by most American media, which promised status and satisfaction from consumer purchases—offered discontented readers a respite from the burdens of domesticity. Scanlon argues that the magazine staff, both men and women, believed that the products they marketed could assuage both their own and their readers' "inarticulate longings."<sup>21</sup> Scanlon's work suggests that women could achieve prominent positions in the business of creating beauty culture, but a prerequisite for this success was some internalization of the basic tenets of beauty and consumer culture.

Historian Susannah Walker and sociologist Maxine Leeds Craig both describe the ways that African Americans struggled against the racism of beauty culture by creating new standards of beauty that celebrated a black aesthetic. Craig argues that, for a brief time during the mid-1960s, Black Nationalists politicized beauty culture and reversed the

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<sup>20</sup> Marchand, *Advertising the American Dream*, 33–35.

<sup>21</sup> Jennifer Scanlon, *Inarticulate Longings: The Ladies' Home Journal, Gender, and the Promise of Consumer Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1995).

traditional “pigmentocracy” in which lighter-skinned blacks with straighter hair were judged as more beautiful than darker-skinned blacks.<sup>22</sup> Walker asserts that even in the mid-1960s at the height of Black Nationalism, the “Afro” hairstyle was both political and commercial; yet, as a cultural resource, the Afro only held political significance when it appeared in a political context. Walker explores the economic agenda of African American hairstylists and marketers of black hair products who capitalized on the politics surrounding this hairstyle to improve their own businesses.<sup>23</sup> Both Craig and Walker illustrate the problems activists faced when using beauty culture to make or sustain political arguments. Craig explains, “Without an active social movement, the natural [Afro hairstyle] was just a haircut.”<sup>24</sup> Both Craig and Walker suggest that marketers will inevitably appropriate styles that grow popular through political movements. While Craig and Walker do not necessarily view appropriation of Black Nationalist aesthetics as wholly damaging to the movement, they do suggest that this appropriation depoliticizes movement styles, making it exceptionally difficult for any activists to depend on beauty culture alone as a medium for political protest. In other words, the experiences of Black Nationalists offer a cautionary lesson for “girlie” feminists who promote beauty culture as a realm for feminist action.

Altogether, historians and feminist theorists engaging with beauty culture have agreed that beauty culture was generally sexist, racist, and homophobic throughout the late-twentieth century. These writers have usually emphasized either the opportunities

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<sup>22</sup> Maxine Leeds Craig, *Ain't I a Beauty Queen? Black Women, Beauty, and the Politics of Race* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002).

<sup>23</sup> Susannah Walker, “Black is Profitable: The Commodification of the Afro, 1960–1975,” *Beauty and Business: Commerce, Gender, and Culture in Modern America*, ed. Philip Scranton (New York: Routledge, 2001).

<sup>24</sup> Craig, *Ain't I a Beauty Queen?*, 160.

women found for empowerment within beauty culture, or the ways this cultural system limited women's choices. This project combines both of these approaches, focusing on women's agency within beauty culture *and* women's inability to escape the oppressions inherent in this culture. Like the research of Maxine Leeds Craig and Susannah Walker, this project investigates the efforts of activists to *change* beauty culture altogether.

Similarly to Walker and Craig, I argue that the beauty cultural system was too powerful and too entrenched for activists to radically restructure it. However, activists' inability to remake beauty culture should not obscure the opportunities for empowerment enjoyed by individual women within beauty culture or the significance of feminists' efforts to reform this culture.

As feminists since Elizabeth Cady Stanton's era have pointed out, "masculinity" has historically been defined by what men *do*, whereas "femininity" has been defined by how women *look*. Because of the disproportionate role appearance has played in determining women's identity, feminists and Black Nationalists have agreed that a rethinking of normative standards of beauty is necessary for widespread recognition of women's right to equality. Throughout the chronology of this study, activists have searched for intelligent, critical ways of adapting to and challenging beauty culture without alienating the women who operate within it. Many feminists and Black Nationalists have celebrated beauty culture, enjoying the positive traditions, relationships, and meanings women have shared through beauty rituals or the opportunities beauty culture presents for demonstration of racial pride. However, these activists have mixed a celebration of beauty culture with an awareness that women are operating in a commercial world built by marketers who purposefully work to make women feel

insufficiently attractive so they will buy more products. This dissertation will explore and assess efforts to remake that world.

CHAPTER I

“BURNT” BRAS AND UNSTRAIGHTENED HAIR:  
FEMINIST CRITIQUES OF BEAUTY CULTURE, 1960s–1980s

*“Unlike our feminist foremothers, who claimed that makeup was the opiate of the misses, we’re positively prochoice when it comes to matters of feminine display.”<sup>1</sup>*

Debbie Stoller, *The Bust Guide to the New Girl Order*, 1999

When asked to describe second-wave feminists’ attitudes about beauty, many Americans would agree with Debbie Stoller’s characterization of her “feminist foremothers” as rigidly antibeauty. Since the 1960s, critics in the media have portrayed feminists as bra-burning harridans; therefore, it has become conventional wisdom that American feminists were and are opposed to beauty culture. Nevertheless, it might come as a surprise that this sweeping generalization of second-wave feminists is coming from a prominent third-wave feminist. A number of third-wave feminists, particularly those who identify themselves as “girlies,” are defining themselves—to a degree—in opposition to the second wave, which they characterize as having an inflexible and puritanical approach to beauty culture. According to Jennifer Baumgardner and Amy Richards, authors of *Manifesta: Young Women, Feminism, and the Future*, “Girlies are girls in their twenties or thirties who are reacting to an antifeminine, antijoy emphasis

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<sup>1</sup> Debbie Stoller and Marcelle Karp, eds., *The Bust Guide to the New Girl Order* (New York: Penguin Books, 1999), 47.



that they perceive as the legacy of Second Wave seriousness. Girlies have reclaimed girl culture, which is made up of such formerly disparaged girl things as knitting, the color pink, nail polish, and fun.”<sup>2</sup> Debbie Stoller, co-founder and editor-in-chief of *Bust* magazine (and author of a handbook on knitting), is an archetypal girlie feminist.

Stoller and the girlies are not the first feminists to charge other activists with advocating an “antibeauty” stance. Throughout the late-twentieth-century women’s movement, feminists have challenged one another, and challenged themselves, to find a way to critique beauty norms without appearing to attack either “beauty” as an ideal or normatively beautiful women. As this chapter will illustrate, feminists and Black Nationalists have found it extremely difficult to articulate a critique of normative beauty culture that reflected the wide-ranging concerns of American women. While all of the feminist and Black Nationalist activists I have studied understood their efforts as part of a larger project of empowering women, they all had significantly different definitions of “empowerment.” Activists’ critiques were mediated by their priorities for change, as well as by their own sexual, racial, and class prejudices. Individual feminists’ views about consumer capitalism, legislative reform, and collective action determined their preference for radical or moderate tactics for effecting cultural change. Because radical and liberal feminists and Black Nationalists all approached beauty culture with different tactics and agendas, they lacked the unity necessary to control public perceptions of their efforts. Meanwhile, conservative opponents characterized any challenge to normative beauty culture as a bitter and irrational attack on normatively beautiful women. By looking at the history of feminist and Black Nationalist engagements with beauty culture,

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<sup>2</sup> Jennifer Baumgardner and Amy Richards, *Manifesta: Young Women, Feminism, and the Future* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2000), 80.

it is possible to see why misperceptions of these movements developed and how those misperceptions undermined the efforts of activists to empower women.

### **Radical Critiques of Beauty Culture**

In the first national action of what came to be called “radical feminism,” about one hundred feminists converged on the Atlantic City boardwalk during the 1968 Miss America Pageant to protest “the Degrading Mindless-Boob-Girlie Symbol” that “we are all forced to play as women.”<sup>3</sup> In the months before the protest, these feminists had organized into women’s liberation groups across the country because they found normative expectations of gender to be inherently oppressive. In order to liberate women, they believed that social, cultural, economic, and political structures would all have to be reshaped to acknowledge female values and female power. At the Miss America Pageant protest, radical feminists protested the role beauty culture played in women’s lives. They crowned a sheep “queen” and tossed implements of beauty culture such as curlers, girdles, bras, and tweezers into a “Freedom Trash Can.” Their protest, organized by the New York Radical Women (NYRW), was given ample media attention. According to historian Alice Echols, author of *Daring to Be Bad: Radical Feminism in America*, this action “marked the end of the movement’s obscurity” and made both “women’s liberation” and beauty culture topics for national discussion.<sup>4</sup>

NYRW’s pamphlet, “No More Miss America!”, written by Robin Morgan, a leading organizer of the protest, anticipated many of the issues feminists would

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<sup>3</sup> “No More Miss America!” in *Sisterhood is Powerful: An Anthology of Writings from the Women’s Liberation Movement*, ed. Robin Morgan (New York: Vintage Books, 1970), 586.

<sup>4</sup> Alice Echols, *Daring to Be Bad: Radical Feminism in America, 1967–1975* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989), 93.

subsequently tackle in debates over beauty culture.<sup>5</sup> Morgan and the NYRW pointed to the blatant racism of the Miss America Pageant, which had never had a Puerto Rican, Alaskan, Hawaiian, Mexican American, or Native American winner, or a black contestant. NYRW contended that the contest reflected a beauty culture in which “women must be young, juicy, [and] malleable”: after contestants ardently competed for the title, they only served as “Miss America” for a single year. Frustrated that social expectations pushed young girls to win beauty pageants and boys to run for political office, the pamphlet characterized the pageant winner as receiving “the Irrelevant Crown on the Throne of Mediocrity,” and argued that the pageant compounded low expectations for women, treating them like mere “specimens” at a 4-H show. Morgan described women’s frustration with the “unbeatable Madonna-Whore combination” that pervaded the pageant, as contestants’ sexual morality was relentlessly scrutinized while their bodies were displayed. This insistence that women balance sexiness with wholesomeness presented women with an irreconcilable schizophrenia. According to the pamphlet, the beauty ideals promoted by the pageant organizers created an inescapable and inflexible prescription for women everywhere, since “The Pageant exercises Thought Control, [and] attempts to sear the Image onto our minds.” Finally, organizers of the protest described the pageant as “The Consumer Con-Game,” for chiefly serving to promote products.<sup>6</sup>

Indeed, through the 1968 protest, these feminists voiced dissatisfaction with a society that evaluated women primarily on the basis of their appearances. Morgan and her sister protestors pointed to the Miss America Pageant as the most blatant example of a beauty culture that expected women to demonstrate their respectability and their

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 95. Robin Morgan, editor of *Sisterhood is Powerful: An Anthology of Writings from the Women’s Liberation Movement*, included “No More Miss America!” in this 1970 compilation.

<sup>6</sup> “No More Miss America!” 588.

desirability with their bodies, rather than through their actions. However, the NYRW quickly discovered that critiques of beauty culture were a very touchy subject. Carol Hanisch, a participant in the protest, suggested that some observers might have interpreted the action as “anti-womanist” for the criticism some protestors voiced of pageant participants. Hanisch argued that “we didn’t say clearly enough that we women are all *forced* to play the Miss America role—not by beautiful women but by men who we have to act that way for.” Hanisch argued that the brochure distributed by the protestors was inscrutable to the average American woman, who was repelled by “‘in-talk’ of the New Left/Hippie movements.” Hanisch was especially disappointed by signs reading “Miss America Sells It” and “Miss America is a Big Falsie,” which she believed alienated the beauty contestants from the feminists’ cause.<sup>7</sup> Hanisch encouraged feminists to find a way to challenge the competitiveness among women inspired by beauty culture without criticizing the women who were participating in that culture. Finding a way to articulate this critique without offending women enmeshed in normative beauty culture would be a central dilemma for the women’s movement.

While it did not receive the same degree of national attention, another protest took place in Atlantic City on the night of the 1968 Miss America Pageant. African American women, spurred by their exclusion from the national Miss America contest, vied for the title of “Miss Black America.” Sandra Williams, the winner of Miss Black America, observed, “Miss America does not represent us because there has never been a black girl in the pageant.”<sup>8</sup> While the NYRW specifically critiqued the racism of the “Miss

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<sup>7</sup> Carol Hanisch, “A Critique of the Miss America Protest” in *Notes from the Second Year*, ed. Shulamith Firestone (New York: New York Radical Women, 1970), 85–86.

<sup>8</sup> Judy Klemesrud, “Along With Miss America, There’s Now Miss Black America,” *New York Times*, 9 September 1968, sec. L, p. 54.

America” pageant, the sponsors of the Miss Black America pageant believed the white radical feminists were really missing the point. When a *New York Times* reporter interviewed the protesters, the lack of communication between the radical feminists and the Miss Black America pageant organizers became obvious. Robin Morgan, representing the NYRW, declared, “basically, we’re against all beauty contests . . . . We deplore Miss Black America as much as Miss White America but we understand the black issues involved.”<sup>9</sup> J. Morris Anderson, an organizer of the Miss Black America pageant, distinguished Miss Black America from the feminist protests: “We’re not protesting against beauty. We’re protesting because the beauty of the black woman has been ignored.”<sup>10</sup>

While the two protest groups acknowledged each other, both Anderson and Morgan misunderstood and misrepresented the other protestors’ intent and goals. Though both strongly criticized the pageant system, these misunderstandings reveal the different perspectives of each group. Radical feminists sought to abolish the beauty pageant and African American activists were primarily interested in challenging white exclusivity in the world of beauty.<sup>11</sup> By describing the radical feminists’ protest as “against beauty,” J. Morris Anderson oversimplified their argument and echoed many of their critics.<sup>12</sup> And while the racism of the pageant most overtly affected women of color, Morgan incorrectly implied that a racialized beauty standard was merely a “black issue.” By defining beauty as the preserve of white women, the Miss America Pageant exacerbated

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<sup>9</sup> Charlotte Curtis, “Miss America Pageant is Picketed by 100 Women,” *New York Times* 8 September 1968, sec. L, p. 81.

<sup>10</sup> Curtis, “Miss America Pageant is Picketed by 100 Women.”

<sup>11</sup> Maxine Leeds Craig, *Ain’t I a Beauty Queen? Black Women, Beauty, and the Politics of Race* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002).

<sup>12</sup> Harriet Van Horne of the *New York Post* described radical feminists as “Amazons,” and scolded, “If they can’t be pretty, dammit, they can at least be quiet!” “Female Firebrands,” *New York Post*, 9 September 1968.

racial tensions between women of color and white women, reminded white women that the privilege of beauty was contingent on conformity to racial codes, and defined all women of color as unattractive.

The Miss Black America Pageant reflected the political climate of the late 1960s. A growing number of African American men and women were disillusioned by the ongoing struggle for civil rights and the violent response of white segregationists. Some African Americans believed that whites would never permit full integration, or if they did, black values and culture would invariably be marginalized within a white-dominated society. Following the example of Marcus Garvey, who had advocated a plan to emigrate to Africa along with black cultural unity and pride in 1920s Harlem, Black Nationalists of the 1960s and 1970s urged African Americans to demand economic and political independence from their white oppressors, rather than integration within the white community. In order to demonstrate black cultural autonomy, Black Nationalists—including Black Muslims, Black Panthers, and members of the black power movement—devoted considerable energy to celebrating their ancestry and cultural uniqueness. For example, many Black Nationalists referred to themselves as “African Americans” or “Afro-Americans” to honor their African heritage. Malcolm X, a prominent Black Muslim and an outspoken critic of the white-dominated political structure, inspired a significant number of young black activists to embrace Black Nationalist ideology. Malcolm’s assassination by rival Black Muslim leaders in 1965 cemented his renown among young black activists.

Aesthetics played a significant role in the Black Nationalist struggle against white cultural domination. Black Nationalists, including Malcolm X, encouraged black men

and women to reinterpret African racial characteristics such as “nappy” hair and black skin as beautiful. Nationalist black men and women were encouraged to cease straightening their hair, a practice Malcolm X described as a “first really big step toward self-degradation.”<sup>13</sup> Black Nationalists derided beauty cultural practices that required black Americans—and not white Americans—to dramatically alter their physical appearance as inherently racist. By wearing “natural” and unprocessed hairstyles, Black Nationalists and the African Americans who found their rhetoric appealing asserted their independence from white aesthetic domination, and suggested that they would measure “beauty” by their own standards.

While Black Nationalists challenged the racism of normative beauty culture by reconstructing aesthetic norms to allow black women to claim feminine beauty, they did not challenge the sexism inherent in beauty culture. For example, Michele Wallace described her transition into Black Nationalism after having grown up believing “being feminine meant being white.” While she was heartened to find that male Black Nationalists liked her skin color and her natural hairstyle, she was disappointed to find that black men still carefully regulated her appearance: “No I wasn’t to wear makeup but yes I had to wear long skirts that I could barely walk in. No I wasn’t to go to the beauty parlor but yes I was to spend hours cornrolling my hair. No I wasn’t to flirt with or take shit off white men but yes I was to sleep with and take unending shit off Black men. No I wasn’t to watch television or read *Vogue* or *Ladies’ Home Journal* but yes I should keep my mouth shut.”<sup>14</sup> Wallace discovered that participation in the black power movement

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<sup>13</sup> Malcolm X, *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* (New York: Grove Press, 1964), 54.

<sup>14</sup> Michele Wallace, “A Black Feminist’s Search for Sisterhood,” in *All the Women are White, All the Blacks are Men, But Some of Us Are Brave: Black Women’s Studies*, eds. Gloria T. Hull, Patricia Bell Scott, and Barbara Smith (Old Westbury, NY: The Feminist Press, 1982), 6.

allowed recognition of black women's beauty (if displayed with proper modesty and respect for Allah), but the female Black Nationalist was still measured chiefly for her appearance rather than her accomplishments.

Unfortunately, black women found that while Black Nationalists did not address gender as a source of oppression, their membership in the feminist movement was undermined by both the black community and by white feminists. Black Nationalist scholars and activists, echoing the sexist language of the Moynihan Report, accused black women of benefiting from racism by acquiring a too powerful role in the black family and community. According to the white political scholar Daniel Patrick Moynihan, author of *The Negro Family: The Case for National Action* (1965), slavery and racism created a "tangle of pathologies" in the black community. Moynihan suggested that black women, or "matriarchs," acquired significantly more power in white-dominated America than black men because, as women, they seemed relatively unthreatening to white Americans. Black men such as C. Eric Lincoln, Maulana Ron Karenga, and Imamu Amiri Baraka suggested that black women should submissively step aside and allow black men to "reclaim" their authority.<sup>15</sup> Furthermore, any attempt on the part of black women to organize for gender rights was viewed with suspicion and hostility by many in the black community.<sup>16</sup> On the other hand, white feminists were slow to recognize black women's double oppression, and racism was an everyday part of the women's movement. Many white feminists, reluctant to acknowledge their own responsibility for oppressing their black sisters, discounted differences between their own experiences and those of women of color. Nevertheless, black women expressed a "unique feminist

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<sup>15</sup> Johnnetta Betsch Cole and Beverly Guy-Sheftall, *Gender Talk: The Struggle for Women's Equality in African American Communities* (New York: Ballantine Books, 2003), 81–83.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 94.



consciousness,” while critiquing white-dominated feminist organizations for focusing exclusively on white, middle-class women’s issues.<sup>17</sup>

Women of color frequently described feeling marginalized by normative beauty standards. While feminists of all races protested sexist social systems that determined a woman’s worth based on her attractiveness, for black women (as for women of color generally) “attractiveness” by American normative standards was virtually impossible. In 1970, Toni Cade compiled writings by black feminist thinkers in *The Black Woman: An Anthology*. Therein, singer Abbey Lincoln lamented, “our women are encouraged by our own men to strive to look and act as much like the white female image as possible . . . . We are the women whose hair is compulsively fried, whose skin is bleached, whose nose is ‘too big,’ whose mouth is ‘too big and loud,’ whose behind is ‘too big and broad,’ whose feet are ‘too big and flat,’ whose face is ‘too black and shiny,’ and whose suffering and patience is too long and enduring to be believed.”<sup>18</sup>

In the late 1960s, black Americans offered a collective re-evaluation of a beauty culture that denigrated the appearance of the individual black woman, and, by extension, the black community. With much success, black women and men used the visible politics of hairstyling to bring the nation’s attention to the marginalization of black aesthetics. Through the early 1960s, many African Americans felt that unstraightened, “natural” hair on a black woman was a sign of poor hygiene and social backwardness. After decades of weekly hair-straightening sessions, many black women (and black male

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<sup>17</sup> Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* (New York: Routledge, 1991), 7.

<sup>18</sup> Abbey Lincoln, “Who will Revere the Black Woman?” in *The Black Woman: An Anthology*, ed. Toni Cade (New York: Mentor Book, New American Library, 1970).

onlookers) associated straightened hair with good grooming, dignity, and racial uplift.<sup>19</sup> In other words, many African American women demonstrated their respectability by regularly straightening their hair. But by the mid-1960s, Black Nationalists were vocally denouncing hair straightening as an attempt to look “white,” and as symbolic of the internalization of white oppression. Advocates of the Afro could reference the psychological study done by Kenneth and Mamie Clark that was used in the *Brown vs. Board of Education* case in 1954. The Clarks argued that black children were aware of race by the age of three, and almost immediately developed feelings of self-hatred, mirroring society’s negative perception of blackness. Throughout the 1960s and 1970s, many African Americans argued that black men and women who straightened their hair or bleached their skin did so because they hated their own racial characteristics.<sup>20</sup> The “self-hatred theory” has profoundly influenced struggles over aesthetics among blacks and whites. Many civil rights advocates have used this theory to investigate ways that black people internalized the values of their oppressors.

Activists—both in the African American civil rights movement and the feminist movement—often employed the term “false consciousness” to explain why women and men of color appeared to share many “self-hating” racist and sexist cultural beliefs. In the nineteenth century, Marxist theorist Friedrich Engels used this concept to explain why the proletariat conformed to the dominant capitalist ideology of the bourgeoisie. According to civil rights activists and feminists who employed the term false consciousness, oppressed peoples were deceived and misled by their white, male oppressors into accepting and even embracing a sexist and racist system. Debates over

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<sup>19</sup> Craig, *Ain't I a Beauty Queen?*, 30.

<sup>20</sup> Eldridge Cleaver, *Soul On Ice* (New York: Dell, 1968), 127; Malcolm X, *Autobiography*, 54; William Grier and Price M. Cobbs, *Black Rage* (New York: Basic Books, 1968).

aesthetics, therefore, took on political significance. When individual African Americans chose to straighten their hair or wear blue or green-tinted color contacts, some Black Nationalists suggested they were demonstrating false consciousness, and that they had been “brainwashed” into idealizing white aesthetics and trying to look white.<sup>21</sup> In her autobiography, the Black Nationalist activist Assata Shakur urged other African Americans to avoid making hasty criticisms of other African Americans’ appearances. “It’s not what you have on your head but what you have in it. You can be a revolutionary-thinking person and have your hair fried up. And you can have an Afro and be a traitor to Black people.” However, Shakur went on to say “When you go all your life processing and abusing your hair so it will look like the hair of another race of people, then you are making a statement and the statement is clear. . . . In a country that is trying to completely negate the image of Black people, that constantly tells us we are nothing, our culture is nothing, i felt and still feel that we have got to constantly make positive statements about ourselves.”<sup>22</sup> Shakur’s comments suggest that, while Black Nationalists urged toleration for individual aesthetic choices, they also believed that hairstyles served as “statements” of political consciousness and racial loyalty.

Notably, Afro-wearing women intended the “natural” look to represent a *black* beauty ideal, not to counter beauty itself as an ideal. These black women were working

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<sup>21</sup> In 1970, Toni Morrison introduced the novel *The Bluest Eye*, the classic interpretation of the effects of self-hatred inculcated by racist aesthetics. Pecola Breedlove, a young black girl growing up in a poverty stricken, dysfunctional family, views the acquisition of beauty as the window to all happiness. But Pecola defines beauty in solely white terms, hoping to look like Shirley Temple, with the bluest eyes. As we shall see, feminists shared Black Nationalists’ concerns over internalized oppression. White feminists used consciousness-raising sessions to help women recognize elements of their oppression that they’d been taught to accept as “natural.” See Ingrid Banks, *Hair Matters: Beauty, Power, and Black Women’s Consciousness* (New York: New York University Press, 2000); Craig, *Ain’t I a Beauty Queen?*, 37–43; bell hooks, “Straightening our Hair,” *Zeta Magazine* 1 (1988): 33–37; Echols, *Daring to Be Bad*, 144.

<sup>22</sup> Assata Shakur, *Assata: An Autobiography* (Westport, Connecticut: Lawrence Hill & Co., 1987), 174–175. See also “Ebony Minds, Black Voices,” rap led by Adele Jones, in *The Black Woman*, 180.

to broaden mainstream definitions of beauty to include black aesthetics. In 1968, Sandra Williams won the Miss Black America contest wearing a “natural” hairstyle, rejecting what many were interpreting as a “white” beauty standard. She said she was wearing the natural to show her individual style, but also as a “form of protest.”<sup>23</sup> The Afro, in the eyes of many Americans, served as an unmistakable symbol of militancy and adherence to a Black Nationalist ethic.<sup>24</sup> In the early 1970s, Angela Davis’s Afro sparked controversy in realms of politics and style. Davis, a prominent participant in black power politics, was implicated in a violent attempt to free Black Panther George Jackson from prison, a shootout that took four lives. While Davis was eventually cleared of all charges, she was briefly a fugitive on the FBI’s most wanted list. Davis’s hairstyle acquired notoriety during her time underground. Young black women wearing Afros found themselves accosted by (predominantly white) police officers, mistakenly identified as Davis. Some women expressed a desire to serve as “decoys” to confuse federal agents.<sup>25</sup>

Retrospectively analyzing the politics surrounding her hair, Davis emphasized the hardships and risks that Afro-wearing women faced, and expressed disappointment that her image acquired a celebrity for its significance to *fashion*. Davis responded to a 1994 *Vibe* magazine fashion layout themed around the FBI photos of her arrest, saying, “It is humiliating because it reduces a politics of liberation to a politics of fashion.”<sup>26</sup> Davis insisted that her appearance during the early 1970s was not related to fashion or consumerism; she prioritized the “politics of liberation” above the “politics of fashion.” Yet, fashion—and especially the aesthetic styles promoted by Black Nationalists—

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<sup>23</sup> “Face to Face with Miss Black America,” *Seventeen* 28 (March 1969): 151.

<sup>24</sup> Craig, *Ain’t I a Beauty Queen?*, 18.

<sup>25</sup> Angela Davis, “Afro Images: Politics, Fashion, and Nostalgia” in *The Angela Y. Davis Reader*, ed. Joy James (Malden, Mass: Blackwell Publishers, Ltd., 1998), 276.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 273.

provided a venue for the battle over political liberation. By wearing a “natural” hairstyle, African Americans attributed value to hair widely viewed as “bad,” and treated a distinctively black characteristic as “beautiful.” Whether black Americans chose an Afro to make a political or a fashion statement, their hairstyle had political significance in the context of the ongoing struggle for black liberation.

Other black activists shared Davis’s dismay at the commercialization of black political appearance. Black feminist participants in a 1969 Harlem University rap session looked forward to a time “when the afro goes out of style” and “the people to whom it means something can still have it” as their own distinctive look.<sup>27</sup> Black Nationalists were especially disturbed to find the look becoming popular among whites, saying they “take from everybody else, these young white kids. See them start wearing Indian clothes, buffalo boots. Try to get an afro. Start wearing a dashiki.” Black women pointed to the Afro as a possibility for black women’s precedence in the interracial beauty competition, suggesting, “suddenly we have something they don’t.”<sup>28</sup> Many black women discovered that the Afro offered not only a visible articulation of black pride, but also a new way of looking beautiful.

While black women welcomed definitions of their appearance as beautiful, they were disappointed when (both black and white) observers described their appearance as the measure of their politics. *The Black Woman* included the transcriptions of the rap session held at Harlem University in 1969, during which one woman remarked:

“Everybody looks at the hair first to see if she’s Black. They don’t check out the person

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<sup>27</sup> “Ebony Minds, Black Voices,” 180.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

and what she has to say.”<sup>29</sup> African American women found that some Black Nationalists measured their loyalty to the race based on physical appearance. Black women who did not have the kinky, long hair necessary for the Afro, or black women who chose not to style their hair into an Afro, discovered that many Black Nationalists judged them as either disloyal or victims of false consciousness.<sup>30</sup>

Black women whose hair did not “naturally” kink into an Afro could turn to beauty culturists, who capitalized upon this political demonstration. Historian Susannah Walker chronicles the “commodification of the afro” by examining the history of black beauty culture, including “hair and cosmetic preparations produced, promoted, and sold to black women, advertising and beauty advice appearing in the media, as well as the services offered by owners and operators of African-American beauty salons.”<sup>31</sup> After briefly rejecting the Afro in the early 1960s, black beauty culturists embraced the style, and encouraged black consumers to redefine black aesthetics *and* invest in an array of commercial products and costly grooming as a means of doing so. To a great degree, African American-owned beauty salons reacted to the Afro as entrepreneurs, selling “black pride” products and services such as “his and her” Afro styling, Afro wigs, Afro picks, and Afro hair preparations. According to Walker, by 1966 marketing of Afro products erased all the “natural” undertones to the natural hairstyle, making it evident that the hairstyle required design and artifice to be properly “managed.”<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> Banks, *Hair Matters*, 77-87; Craig, *Ain't I a Beauty Queen?*, 37-43.

<sup>31</sup> Susannah Walker, “Black is Profitable: the Commodification of the Afro, 1960–1975,” in *Beauty and Business: Commerce, Gender, and Culture in Modern America*, ed. Philip Scranton (New York: Routledge, 2001), 255.

<sup>32</sup> Walker, “Black is Profitable,” 264–274. Walker also describes the competition black beauty culturists faced from white-owned companies like Avon and Clairol. While white-owned companies were generally slow to cash in on the Afro in the 1960s and 1970s, by the 1980s and 1990s, white companies realized the marketability of African American hair care. In response, black-owned beauty businesses formed

However, profit and beauty sense do not necessarily preclude political participation. Early twentieth-century black beauty entrepreneurs such as Annie Turnbo Malone and Madam C. J. Walker were both part of the bedrock of the black business community and advocates for civil rights. Historian Kathy Peiss explains that, for Walker and Malone, “beauty culture was a vindication of black womanhood, a way to achieve personal dignity and collective advancement.” Neither woman sold skin bleaches, and both were committed to serving the black community. Madam Walker contributed to organizations such as the National Equal Rights League and the International League of Darker Peoples.<sup>33</sup> By the mid-twentieth century, like male-dominated barber shops, black hair salons were often a forum for black political activism.<sup>34</sup>

The debates and aesthetic experimentation that took place in black beauty parlors across America permanently and indelibly changed the political landscape. Most Americans (black and white) rejected black separatism; however, the Afro and black aesthetics offered all African Americans a way to demonstrate cultural pride. Black men and women used the Afro—and the beauty products, styling, and marketing that went with it—to signify their political commitment to black cultural innovation. Aesthetics and Afro hairstyles offered many African Americans a relatively safe means of engaging in the politics of Black Nationalism and showing support for black liberation.

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organizations such as the American Health and Beauty Aids Institute, a business association for black beauty entrepreneurs. AHBAI labeled members' products with a “Proud Lady” symbol to encourage black consumers to buy from black companies. See [www.ahbai.org](http://www.ahbai.org) for details. Furthermore, in 1987 the Rev. Jesse Jackson's PUSH campaign staged a funeral for Revlon after the company announced intentions of leading a white takeover in the black hair care industry. Ayana Byrd and Lori Tharps, *Hair Story: Untangling the Roots of Black Hair in America* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2001), 72–73.

<sup>33</sup> Peiss, *Hope in a Jar*, 90, 94.

<sup>34</sup> Tiffany Melissa Gill, “‘I Had My Own Business . . . So I Didn't Have to Worry’: Beauty Salons, Beauty Culturists, and the Politics of African-American Female Entrepreneurship,” in *Beauty and Business*, ed. Scranton, 169–194.

While Black Nationalists struggled for the recognition of black aesthetics, feminists critiqued beauty culture for the reduction of the female body to mere aesthetics. In a classic feminist novel, *Memoirs of an Ex-Prom Queen*, the radical feminist author Alix Kates Shulman described the plight of Sasha Davis, a Jewish-American girl growing up during the 1950s and 1960s.<sup>35</sup> Throughout the story, Sasha required male affirmation of her appearance in order to maintain a sense of self-worth. From youth, Sasha was encouraged by parents and the cultural norms of her community to see her appearance as her leading attribute. She actively pursued beauty, defining it as a “skill” that would do her more good than would intelligence. But as Sasha aged, she realized that the men around her defined beauty, and her struggles to meet their standards left her obsessive, unhappy, and undervalued.<sup>36</sup> *Memoirs of an Ex-Prom Queen* touched on many of the elements of normative beauty culture that white feminists critiqued during the late 1960s and early 1970s. Like Black Nationalists working to combat “self-hatred,” white feminists were concerned that American women were internalizing the values of their oppressors. Because men prioritized white women’s appearances, women felt compelled to match male expectations, even if those expectations were out of reach. The consequences for failure, feminists argued, were quite harsh.

Also similar to Black Nationalists, radical feminists struggled to determine whether participation in beauty culture was evidence of “false consciousness.” The Boston women’s liberation group Cell 16 viewed all women, including themselves, as the victims of “sex-role conditioning,” which had brainwashed them into compliance with

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<sup>35</sup> *Memoirs of an Ex-Prom Queen* sold roughly a million copies, and was described by the *Oxford Companion to Women’s Writing* as “the first important novel to emerge from the Women’s Liberation Movement.” See Alix Kates Shulman’s website, “Alix Kates Shulman,” <http://www.alixkshulman.com/> [accessed June 13, 2005].

<sup>36</sup> Alix Kates Shulman, *Memoirs of an Ex-Prom Queen* (New York: Penguin Books, 1972), 52.



gender expectations.<sup>37</sup> Dana Densmore's discussion of beauty culture in "The Temptation to Be a Beautiful Object," (1969) first published in Cell 16's journal, *No More Fun and Games*, was representative of her women's liberation group's outlook on beauty. Densmore and Cell 16 described beauty culture as a tool of male supremacists, used to keep all women in a state of subservience. Densmore argued that beauty culture was an enticement that would inevitably bring women grief. According to Densmore, beauty advertisements "inevitably" permeated women's "subconscious in an insidious and permanent way." And the effect of those ads was to reduce women's worth to a measure of their appearance, and doom them to endless consumption of beauty products, in hopes of measuring up.<sup>38</sup>

By blaming vast, impersonal cultural systems for "conditioning" women to accept their status, Densmore hinted that, with the guidance of the women's movement, individual women could reexamine their received notions of "beauty" and choose to defy their own conditioned responses to aesthetic expectations. By rejecting their own conditioning, or "false consciousness," radical feminists hoped to introduce a new understanding of beauty, one which did not require women to endlessly struggle to measure up to impossible standards. Following the example of Black Nationalists who rejected hair straightening in favor of "natural" hairstyles, radical feminists encouraged women to reject beauty cultural practices that required women—and not men—to spend significant time and effort altering their "natural" appearances in order to meet normative standards of beauty. Both Black Nationalists and radical feminists promoted the unadorned female body as inherently beautiful, and they argued that refusal to conform to

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<sup>37</sup> Echols, *Daring to Be Bad*, 160.

<sup>38</sup> Dana Densmore, "On the Temptation to Be a Beautiful Object," *No More Fun and Games* no. 2 (February 1969).

normative beauty standards served as a symbolic rejection of white male cultural dominance.

Radical feminists did not all approach beauty culture in the same way. Historian Alice Echols chronicles the theoretical debates between women's liberation groups such as Densmore's Cell 16 and The Feminists, who viewed women as the victims of sex-role conditioning, and groups such as the New York Radical Women and the Redstockings, who adopted a "pro-woman line."<sup>39</sup> According to "pro-woman" radical feminists, women submitted to sexist institutions like beauty culture not because of false consciousness, but because they faced dangerous consequences (including getting fired from their jobs, criticism from observers, or loneliness) for resistance. Pro-woman feminists argued that Densmore and Cell 16 underplayed the very real pressures to conform to normative beauty standards by viewing oppression as a battle over women's consciousness.

Radical feminists sought consensus on the origin of oppressive gender norms because this theoretical grounding determined how best to address the problem. If false consciousness was responsible for women's oppression, women's liberation required "un-conditioning." In an attempt to experience egalitarianism, women could reject the trappings of normative culture within their consciousness-raising groups, and withdraw from (to a degree) or dispute the values and the expectations of sexist society. In terms of beauty culture, this would involve the rejection of normative beauty standards by refusing

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<sup>39</sup> Cell 16, a group organized by Roxanne Dunbar, was based in Boston, and ran from 1968 until 1973. Ti-Grace Atkinson organized The Feminists (1968–1973) as a splinter group from NOW in New York. Shulamith Firestone and Pam Allen formed New York Radical Women in 1967, and it lasted until 1969. Firestone and Ellen Willis then organized the Redstockings (1969–1970), also in New York. Echols, *Daring to Be Bad*, 91–92, 387–388.

to wear makeup, fashionable clothing, or elaborate hairstyles.<sup>40</sup> Members of The Feminists and Cell 16 argued that participating in consumer culture lent support to oppressive economic systems and perpetuated the sex-role conditioning of other women. Furthermore, they believed that they would be better able to respond to cultural domination by overtly rejecting that culture. Ultimately, by refusing to conform to beauty culture, many radical feminists hoped to collectively inspire a new definition of beauty that would be both egalitarian and non-commercial.

Radical feminists struggled to find ways to reject normative beauty culture. Vivian Rothstein, a member of the Chicago-based Westside group (the first women's liberation group in the country), advocated the development of a "uniform" for radical feminists. Rothstein's main objective was to allow feminists "to disassociate ourselves from the 'women as consumer and clothes-horse image.'" She also pointed to the advantages of being able to visually identify feminists through their mode of dress. Feminists in a uniform could identify one another, and they could visually signal their politics and their unity to observers. Rothstein admitted that many women would reject a "uniform," preferring to express individuality through their sartorial style, and commented, "This is a measure of how the fashion industry has distorted our concept of individuality."<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> Members of Cell 16 also rejected heterosexual (and homosexual) relationships, arguing that they could better devote sexual energy to the movement. They described heterosexual intimacy as a male social construction meant to oppress women. In the late 1960s, they argued that homosexual relationships between "butch" and "femme" partners modeled oppressive gender norms. Dana Densmore, "On Celibacy," *No More Fun and Games* no. 1 (October 1968).

<sup>41</sup> The editors of *The Voice of the Women's Liberation Movement* exhorted readers to write in to debate this suggestion, implying that they expected feminists to disagree on the proposal. To the best of my knowledge, no feminists ever adopted a "uniform." Vivian Rothstein, "Women vs. Madison Avenue," *The Voice of the Women's Liberation Movement* (August 1968): 7.

While some feminists found the process of “un-conditioning” liberating and unifying, others believed it placed too much of the burden of change on the shoulders of individual women. Historians of second-wave feminism, including Alice Echols and Ruth Rosen, argue that one of the major problems within the radical feminist movement occurred when individual feminists prioritized lifestyle above political reform.<sup>42</sup> These mistakes can be traced to the corruption of the key feminist concept, “the personal is political.” Since at least 1969, when Redstockings feminist Carol Hanisch published an article entitled “The Personal Is Political,” feminists had argued that many of the problems individual American women experienced were caused by structural social inequalities.<sup>43</sup> Countless women faced issues such as inadequate childcare, domestic violence, and sexual harassment, yet convention dictated that these were “personal” problems that must be dealt with privately and quietly. Hanisch and other feminists maintained that systematic sexual discrimination had led to these problems and their marginalization by the male-dominated political structure. A major purpose of consciousness-raising sessions was to allow women an opportunity to collectively voice the ways they experienced sexual oppression in their private lives, as a first step to finding collective solutions to that oppression.

Over time, however, some feminists’ understanding of the phrase “the personal is political” shifted. Instead of looking at women’s personal lives for explanation of collective oppression, some feminists looked at women’s personal lives to measure their commitment to the movement and the political implications of their personal choices. While the movement had originally hoped to use consciousness-raising to critique the

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<sup>42</sup> Rosen, *The World Split Open*, 229; Echols, *Daring to Be Bad*, 17.

<sup>43</sup> Carol Hanisch, “The Personal is Political,” *Feminist Revolution* (March 1969): 204–205.

patriarchal system, some individuals found themselves facing harsh criticism for their perceived compliance to this system. A few radical feminists began to express their politics through their personal lives, a reprioritization that had negative consequences for the movement.<sup>44</sup> Radical feminists, like Black Nationalists, began to expect individual feminists to demonstrate their resistance to normative, sexist culture by adopting ascetic lifestyles.<sup>45</sup> Despite their insistence on finding collective solutions to individual women's problems, some women's liberation groups allowed a focus on personal behavior to derail the movement.

While many radical feminists appreciated the opportunity to reject beauty disciplines, some liberal feminists described the emphasis on “un-conditioning” as threatening or distracting. For example, at the November 1969 Congress to Unite Women in New York City, members of Cell 16 demonstrated their un-conditioning and rejection of normative beauty standards by cutting off founding member Roxanne Dunbar's long hair.<sup>46</sup> Some feminists, including a leading member of NOW, Betty Friedan, believed that this action exemplified the emphasis radical feminists placed on personal behavior, to the detriment of collective action. Friedan commented, “the message some were trying to push was that to be a liberated woman you had to *make yourself ugly*, to stop shaving under your arms, to stop wearing makeup or pretty dresses—any skirts at all.”<sup>47</sup> Friedan hinted that women who did not conform to normative beauty culture by shaving, wearing makeup, and donning skirts were “ugly,” precisely the “conditioned” response that Cell 16 was trying to challenge.

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<sup>44</sup> Echols, *Daring to Be Bad*, 17.

<sup>45</sup> Rosen, *World Split Open*, 234.

<sup>46</sup> Echols, *Daring to Be Bad*, 162.

<sup>47</sup> Betty Friedan, *It Changed My Life: Writings on the Women's Movement* (New York: Dell, 1977), 186, emphasis in original.

Radical feminists disagreed among themselves about the usefulness of the concept of false consciousness. “Pro-woman” radical feminists presented an alternative to the sex-role conditioning analysis favored by Cell 16 and the Feminists. Pro-woman radical feminists argued that aesthetics were largely a matter of personal taste. For example, a member of the Redstockings argued, “If we are to build a mass movement, we must recognize that no personal decision, like rejecting consumption, can alleviate our oppression. We must stop arguing about whose life style is better (and secretly believing ours is).” This Redstocking “sister” explicitly rejected Cell 16’s arguments about sex-role conditioning, saying, “when a woman spends a lot of money and time decorating her home or herself . . . it is not idle self-indulgence (let alone the result of psychic manipulation), but a healthy attempt to find outlets for her creative energies within her circumscribed role.”<sup>48</sup> Carol Hanisch, a member of the Redstockings and a leading proponent of the “pro-woman” line, argued that women could use beauty culture as a temporary survival strategy.<sup>49</sup> The Redstockings and many other radical feminists did not expect women to reject beauty culture, nor did they assume that a woman who conformed to normative beauty expectations was any less a feminist. However, like the feminists in Cell 16, pro-woman feminists welcomed a redefinition of “beauty” that would allow women to be evaluated for qualities other than their appearances.

Refusing to buy fashionable clothes or wear cosmetics often had as much to do with radical feminists’ anti-capitalism as it did with their struggle to challenge gender and

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<sup>48</sup> A Redstocking Sister, “Consumerism and Women,” in *Woman in Sexist Society: Studies in Power and Powerlessness*, ed. Vivian Gornick and Barbara K. Moran (New York: Basic Books, Inc., 1971), 483–484. The Redstockings, like many radical feminists, often refrained from taking “credit” for their work, in an effort at egalitarianism. Alice Echols described the Redstockings as a “pro-woman” group. Echols, *Daring to Be Bad*, 388.

<sup>49</sup> Echols, *Daring to Be Bad*, 144.

sexual norms. In her history of radical feminism, Alice Echols described one of the origins of the radical feminist movement within the New Left.<sup>50</sup> Echols argued, “Most early women’s liberation groups were dominated by ‘politicos’ who attributed women’s oppression to capitalism, whose primary loyalty was to the left, and who longed for the imprimatur of the ‘invisible audience’ of male leftists.”<sup>51</sup> By 1969, the politics had given sway to feminists who viewed patriarchy as the overarching oppressive system. These feminists organized women’s liberation groups to address gender oppression. Nevertheless, many radical feminists continued to share the Left’s anti-capitalist perspective. From the protests at the Miss America Pageant in 1968 (where radical feminists critiqued the pageant for its part in “the Consumer Con-game”) on through the 1970s, radical feminists critiqued beauty culture as an especially pernicious example of sexist capitalism.<sup>52</sup>

Radical feminists often found they disagreed about issues of capitalism and class, and these disagreements made critiquing beauty culture a divisive project. After the Baltimore Feminist Project took a consciousness-raising trip to a local mall in 1972, participants wrote about their experiences for *Women: A Journal of Liberation*. Some participants felt empowered by the experience, saying: “It was good shopping with feminists. I felt like no one could hurt me, that we weren’t accepting what the male capitalists produce for women consumers. We were rather obnoxious at times, but I felt I was getting revenge at last.” Other feminists seemed ashamed of the ridicule they had expressed for beauty commodities, admitting: “we were taking objects that a woman in another segment of the working class might treasure, and we were ridiculing them, thus

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<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 3–22.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 3.

<sup>52</sup> Morgan, *Sisterhood is Powerful*, 588.

*emphasizing* the difference between her and us, instead of the things we have in common.” Another participant added “the fact remains that, for most women, including feminists, our personhood is defined by how we look. Our survival in a sexist society depends on being ‘attractive’ . . . so the sight of the so-called ‘suburban middle-class wife’ en masse in the Mall did not upset me. Since I know that few diversions exist for women of any life-style, I cannot fault women for seeking some outlet in our otherwise solitary lives.”<sup>53</sup>

It is significant that these feminists rethought their ridicule for beauty culture *retrospectively*, when they sat down to write about their experiences. The shoppers in the mall would likely not have had access to their reevaluation unless they subscribed to this feminist journal, and would have only seen the feminists ridiculing the cosmetics and lingerie sold at the mall. Like the Women’s Liberationists at the Miss America Pageant protest, the members of the Baltimore Feminist Project failed to agree upon a unifying philosophy for their mall consciousness-raising venture. They disagreed upon tactics, and only after their protest did they have an opportunity for exploring their differences. While their mall visit was intended, in part, to spread a feminist message to shoppers, they discovered that their tactics alienated many shoppers, especially as they ridiculed products that some working-class women valued.

The radical feminist movement was particularly vulnerable to public misunderstandings because it so adamantly rejected “leaders.” Radical feminists, in their quest for egalitarianism, encouraged individual women to express their personal thoughts on feminist philosophy. While these feminists did not fail to critique and evaluate each other, and while antifeminists harshly evaluated their actions and rhetoric, radical

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<sup>53</sup> “Up Against the Mall,” *Women: a Journal of Liberation* 3, no. 2 (no date): 33–35.



feminist organizations generally lacked the structure necessary to present the public with a unified, coherent feminist philosophy.<sup>54</sup> Furthermore, feminism, like all social movements, has been interpreted, used, and misused by individual men and women. As we shall see in chapter five, even third-wave feminists describe their second-wave feminist mothers as prohibiting frilly dresses, makeup, and high heels because they were signs of capitulation and betrayal of the movement.<sup>55</sup> The news media has been selective in the images it has shared with the public, and it has tended to focus on the most extreme positions feminists have advanced. And in public consciousness, second-wave feminists have generally been remembered as “bra burners” intent on destroying beauty culture and lashing out at beautiful women.

The news media was generally more interested in feminists’ appearance than their message. For example, when prominent feminists Betty Friedan and Gloria Steinem publicly disagreed, the media ignored their political differences and suggested the primary source of their disagreement was beauty rivalry. Friedan recounted a newspaper column, which “sneered that I was ‘jealous’ of Gloria Steinem, because she was blond and pretty and I was not (illustrated by one of those monstrous ugly pictures of me, mouth open, fist clenched).” With her description of her “ugly” photo, emphasizing her “open” mouth and “clenched” fist, Friedan hinted that she was described as “ugly” largely for her “unfeminine” outspokenness. However, she admitted that Steinem’s looks “paralyzed” her, saying, “I would writhe and wonder. Was that really what it was all

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<sup>54</sup> While radical feminists produced numerous books and magazines, they never had public relations on par with liberal feminists. Jo Freeman, “A Model for Analyzing the Strategic Options of Social Movement Organizations,” in *Waves of Protest: Social Movements since the Sixties*, ed. Freeman and Victoria Johnson (New York: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 1999).

<sup>55</sup> For an example of this generational tension, see Jeannine DeLombard, “femmenism,” in *To Be Real: Telling the Truth and Changing the Face of Feminism*, ed. Rebecca Walker (New York: Anchor Books, 1995), 25–26.

about—a mere petty power struggle among the girls? Gloria is assuredly blonder, younger, prettier than I am—though I never thought of myself as quite as ugly as those pictures made me.”<sup>56</sup> Historian Ruth Rosen has suggested that Friedan did allow her “jealousy” of Steinem to motivate her political disputes, commenting, “Like Cinderella’s older sister, Friedan had to watch as the media lavished attention on the telegenic Steinem.”<sup>57</sup> The media certainly fixated on conventionally beautiful Steinem, putting her on the covers of *McCall’s*, *Newsweek*, and *Time* magazines in 1972.<sup>58</sup> However, it must have been even more frustrating to Friedan to have her political disputes with Steinem dismissed as “jealousy.”

Feminists agreed that one of the most insidious characteristics of normative beauty culture was its power to inspire competitiveness among women. In 1971, Alta, a feminist poet, described how beauty competition was an everyday reality, even for the most conscious of feminists. “My lover used to say how i was prettier than the other women in my women’s liberation group and i would feel better while feeling worse and wish it weren’t even a consideration in anybody’s mind, including mine.”<sup>59</sup> Alta suggested that, while feminists might take a critical approach to normative beauty standards, they were still subject to the pressures those standards placed on individual women.

When feminists visibly rejected beauty norms, they risked significant consequences, including social ostracism, sexual rejection, and ridicule. Detractors

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<sup>56</sup> Friedan, *It Changed My Life*, 234–235.

<sup>57</sup> Rosen, *The World Split Open*, 238.

<sup>58</sup> Amy Erdman Farrell, *Yours in Sisterhood: Ms. Magazine and the Promise of Popular Feminism* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998), 45.

<sup>59</sup> Alta, “Pretty,” in *Woman in Sexist Society: Studies in Power and Powerlessness*, ed. Vivian Gornick and Barbara K. Moran (New York: Basic Books, Inc., 1971), 3.

dismissed feminists' political critique of beauty, arguing that they were simply "bitter" because they were "ugly."<sup>60</sup> Heterosexual feminists risked alienating male sexual interest—and the financial and social rewards heterosexual relationships provided—when they challenged normative beauty standards. Finally, because many feminists refused to conform to normative beauty standards and did not seek male sexual approval and attention, opponents labeled them as lesbians. Some prominent feminists, including Betty Friedan, reacted to "dyke-baiting" by silencing and marginalizing lesbian feminists.<sup>61</sup> The hostility toward lesbians both within and outside the feminist movement made any critique of normative beauty culture, not to mention open identification as a lesbian, a risky decision.

Despite their exclusion during the late 1960s and early 1970s, lesbian feminists demanded that the movement challenge heterosexual bias in both the culture at large, and within feminist theory and activism. By encouraging other feminists to identify institutionalized heterosexuality as a central component of women's oppression, lesbian feminists expanded and enhanced the critique of normative beauty standards. Lesbian and straight feminists agreed that the cultural emphasis on female sexual desirability to men degraded women by reducing them to sexual "objects."<sup>62</sup> Lesbian feminists added that normatively attractive heterosexual women could win a measure of sexual, social, and sometimes even economic power if they played by the "rules" of beauty culture;

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<sup>60</sup> Betty Friedan's experiences, described above, provide one good example of how anti-feminists described feminists as "ugly." See also Harriet Van Horne, "Female Firebrands," *New York Post* 9 September 1968.

<sup>61</sup> Rosen, *The World Split Open*, 83.

<sup>62</sup> Densmore, "On the Temptation to Be a Beautiful Object"; Coletta Reid, "Coming Out in the Women's Movement," in *Lesbianism and the Women's Movement*, ed. Nancy Myron and Charlotte Bunch (Baltimore: Diana Press, 1975), 99.

however, doing so further marginalized women who might prefer to discourage male sexual interest or attract female sexual interest.<sup>63</sup>

Lesbian aesthetics were a controversial topic among feminists. During the postwar era, many young and working-class lesbians had relied on “butch” or “femme” clothing, hairstyles, and behaviors to attract and identify one another as lesbians.<sup>64</sup> Butches wore “mannish” pants and T-shirts, shortly cropped hair, and no cosmetics (invoking considerable controversy and risk in the 1950s), whereas femmes conformed more closely to the demands of normative beauty culture. In a study of the lesbian community of Buffalo, New York, in the 1940s and 1950s, historians Elizabeth Kennedy and Madeline Davis argue that, “at a time when lesbian communities were developing solidarity and consciousness, but had not yet formed political groups, butch-fem roles were the key for organizing against heterosexual dominance.” Butch and femme clothing took on a subversive meaning when lesbians adopted this apparel for the purpose of expressing desire for and identification with other lesbians.<sup>65</sup> Joan Nestle, reminiscing about her experiences as a femme during the 1950s and 1960s, explained, “we were a symbol of women’s erotic autonomy, a sexual accomplishment that did not include them [heterosexual observers].”<sup>66</sup>

During the late 1960s and early 1970s, however, there was significant dispute among feminists, lesbian and straight, as to whether butch-femme practice and culture

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<sup>63</sup> Charlotte Bunche identified and challenged a range of “heterosexual privileges” in this essay. Charlotte Bunche, “Learning from Lesbian Separatism,” in *Lavender Culture*, ed. Karla Jay and Allen Young (New York: Jove/HBJ Books, 1978), 438–439.

<sup>64</sup> Lillian Faderman, *Odd Girls and Twilight Lovers: A History of Lesbian Life in Twentieth-Century America* (New York: Penguin Books, 1991), 167–174.

<sup>65</sup> Elizabeth Lapovsky Kennedy and Madeline D. Davis, *Boots of Leather, Slippers of Gold: The History of a Lesbian Community* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 5–6.

<sup>66</sup> Joan Nestle, “Butch-Femme Relationships: Sexual Courage in the 1950s,” in *A Restricted Country* (Ithaca, New York: Firebrand Books, 1987), 102.

imitated heterosexual roles and reinforced sexist structures. In an article entitled “Lesbianism and Feminism,” radical feminist Anne Koedt commented, “*All role playing is sick*, be it ‘simulated’ or ‘authentic’ according to society’s terms.”<sup>67</sup> Some lesbian feminists defended butch and femme roles, explaining, “Lesbians who dress and act in a particular manner do so as a means of mutual recognition—that’s how they know who’s eligible to fall in love with, since you’re not allowed to just ask.”<sup>68</sup> However, most lesbian feminists in the 1970s rejected butch and femme roles, agreeing that they reinforced oppressive gender constructs.

According to historian Lillian Faderman, “Although butch-and-femme were “p.i.,” [politically incorrect,] in the lesbian-feminist community everyone looked butch.”<sup>69</sup> Many lesbian feminists in the 1970s adopted an androgynous, asexual style of self-presentation to replace butch and femme roles *and* the normative fashions pushed by beauty marketers.<sup>70</sup> Observers frequently interpreted the preferred lesbian feminist aesthetic—jeans, t-shirts, flannel shirts, work boots, and shortly sheared hairstyles—as “masculine,” for its similarity to working-class men’s styles. Coletta Reid, a member of the lesbian separatist group the Furies, explained, “Lesbians wear male clothing because it’s more comfortable, better made, more durable, cheaper and doesn’t immediately brand you as a potential ‘sex object’ to all men.”<sup>71</sup>

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<sup>67</sup> Anne Koedt, “Lesbianism and Feminism,” *Notes from the Third Year*, 1971, reprinted in *Radical Feminism*, ed. Koedt, Ellen Levine, Anita Rapone (New York: Quadrangle Books, 1973), 249, emphasis in original.

<sup>68</sup> Judy from Womankind, “Bogeyman and Bogeywoman” (1971), Chicago Women’s Liberation Union Herstory Website Archive, <http://www.cwluherstory.com/CWLUArchive/sexuality.html> [accessed April 7, 2005].

<sup>69</sup> Faderman, *Odd Girls and Twilight Lovers*, 231.

<sup>70</sup> Arlene Stein, *Sex and Sensibility: Stories of a Lesbian Generation* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997): 81.

<sup>71</sup> Reid, “Coming Out in the Women’s Movement,” 99.

Not all lesbians and feminists were comfortable adopting an androgynous aesthetic. Asian American lesbian Dale Hoshiko found that when she moved to San Francisco from Hawaii in the mid-1970s, she was not immediately welcomed into the lesbian community. “I didn’t have the lesbian look. I carried a handbag. I wasn’t seen as a lesbian. I was seen as an Asian woman.”<sup>72</sup> Hoshiko’s style of dress marked her as “different,” but at least some white lesbians alienated her because of her race. During the 1970s and early 1980s, lesbian and straight feminists who chose to conform to normative beauty standards by wearing cosmetics or fashionable clothing occasionally faced criticism from other feminists for their appearance. Erica Jong, a feminist author, argued, “There was a style prevalent then in which you were expected to *look* like you’d stepped right off the commune. Lipstick and eyeshadow were not only counter-revolutionary, they would be mentioned in reviews of your books.”<sup>73</sup> Just as black women were expected to prove their allegiance to Black Nationalism with their hairstyles, some feminists working for radical change expected their comrades—white and black—to use their bodies to illustrate fidelity to the movement.

The majority of radical feminists tried to clearly explain that, as feminists, they were *not* opposed to the appreciation of “beauty” or the actions of individual women within beauty culture, but instead were opposed to the commodification and idealization of female beauty practices. Shulamith Firestone warned against an attack on beauty: “Feminists need not get so pious in their efforts that they feel they must flatly deny the beauty of the face on the cover of *Vogue*. For this is not the point.” Firestone encouraged

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<sup>72</sup> Quoted in Stein, *Sex and Sensibility*, 83.

<sup>73</sup> Rosen, *World Split Open*, 234, emphasis in original.

feminists to appreciate beauty that was achieved without “artificial props.”<sup>74</sup> Following the example set by Black Nationalists in the mid-1960s, feminists such as Firestone encouraged women to appreciate “natural” female beauty, one which did not require women to alter their bodies, hair, or faces to meet unrealistic beauty standards. While radical feminists aspired to free women from the burdens (such as the time-consuming work and cost) of beautification, individual feminists found that the “natural” beauty idealized by radical feminists created a new standard that some women felt pressured to meet.

### **Liberal Critiques of Beauty Culture**

Because liberal feminists did not share radical feminists’ rejection of capitalism, they approached beauty culture with the assumption that its commercialism was not inherently oppressive. *Ms.* magazine struggled to balance its role as an agent of consumerism (between 1972 and 1989 the magazine was supported by advertising dollars, sometimes garnered from companies selling beauty products) and a critic of sexist business practices (exemplified in the “No Comment” page meant to shame sexist advertisers).<sup>75</sup> Gloria Steinem described the difficulties the advertising and editorial staff at *Ms.* encountered from inflexible advertisers, who reacted with outrage when *Ms.* put women without makeup on the magazine’s cover.<sup>76</sup> The magazine went on the offensive with advertisers, declaring in a November 1974 issue that they refused to print another “catalog” meant to appeal to women as “consumers” rather than “as readers and opinion-

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<sup>74</sup> Shulamith Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex* (New York: William Morrow and Company, Inc., 1970), 175.

<sup>75</sup> Farrell, *Yours in Sisterhood*. Farrell argues that *Ms.* deliberately set out to change the ad industry from within, rather than reject capitalism and beauty culture outright.

<sup>76</sup> Steinem described how Revlon refused to grant an ad schedule because of an award-winning article by Robin Morgan on Soviet feminists. The cover depicted the Soviet women without makeup. Gloria Steinem, “Sex, Lies, and Advertising,” in *Moving Beyond Words* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1994), 142.

makers.”<sup>77</sup> This approach was remarkable, considering the pains most magazines took to appeal to advertisers.<sup>78</sup>

*Ms.* did hope to get ad dollars from cosmetic companies, and therefore, the editorial staff avoided the critical denunciations of beauty culture prevalent among some radical feminists. Of course, *Ms.*'s willingness to include cosmetic ads did not necessarily translate into advertiser interest in buying space in a feminist magazine. In fact, most beauty marketers chose not to advertise to a feminist audience, which they characterized as “anti-beauty.”<sup>79</sup> *Ms.* articles did reflect ambivalence about beauty culture, describing shaving as an “intimate tyranny” and the decision to stop straightening hair as a liberating “conversion.”<sup>80</sup> However, the magazine did not describe self-adornment and participation in beauty culture as inconsistent with feminism. In 1983, Letty Cottin Pogrebin reassured *Ms.* readers that “no woman should have to make excuses for how she chooses to look.” Aware that some feminists felt pressured by their own political ties to perfect the “look” of a feminist, Pogrebin encouraged women to reject narrow standards of beauty, but not to deny the presence or importance of beauty to individual women. Both in Pogrebin's article and in the magazine generally, *Ms.* editors moved to make beauty culture a legitimate area of political discussion: “We dissect every element of woman's condition, yet in personal terms, we find beauty and our continued obsession with our looks very hard to talk about.”<sup>81</sup>

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<sup>77</sup> “Everything You Ever Wanted to Ask about Advertising and Were Not Afraid to Ask,” *Ms.* 3 (November 1974): 56, 58.

<sup>78</sup> See Ellen McCracken, *Decoding Women's Magazines: From Mademoiselle to Ms.* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1993).

<sup>79</sup> Steinem, “Sex, Lies, and Advertising,” 142.

<sup>80</sup> See Harriet Lyons and Rebecca Rosenblatt, “Body Hair: The Last Frontier,” and Margaret Edmonson, “The Saturday Morning Nap Conversion,” *Ms.* 1 (July 1972): 64, 72.

<sup>81</sup> Letty Cottin Pogrebin, “The Power of Beauty: A Feminist Wrestles with the Indisputable ‘Fact’ That Looks Do Count,” *Ms.* 12 (December 1983): 73, 109.



By the mid-1970s, liberal and radical feminists expressed concern that marketers were profiting off the image of emancipated women, but ignoring the message of the movement. In a 1978 article, "The Selling of the Women's Movement," Elizabeth Cagan warned that advertisers were using feminist rhetoric and the image of an "assertive, ambitious woman" as a "new cultural type" to market beauty culture.<sup>82</sup> Women's magazines (such as *Working Woman*) and television shows (such as the *Mary Tyler Moore Show*) joined advertisers in seeking to capture an audience of "liberated" women.<sup>83</sup> Many radical feminists had long articulated an anti-capitalist stance, and could point to the consumerist ethic that motivated the new "liberation" craze as evidence that this commercialized feminism was problematic. On the other hand, liberal feminists, who fought for moderate reforms to the legal and capitalist systems, found that the co-optation of feminism by marketers was a difficult issue with which to grapple. While many liberal feminists hoped that "popular" feminist imagery could help the movement appeal to the mainstream, others worried that appropriation by marketers would negate the feminist ideals of movement. Like the radical feminists who struggled over how to define and address their objections to beauty standards, liberal feminists found beauty culture to be a difficult and divisive issue.

The reform of the Miss Chinatown USA pageant offers a perfect example of how beauty culture illuminated and exacerbated ideological tensions among feminists. This beauty pageant was first organized by Chinese Americans during the late 1950s to celebrate the Chinese New Year and to draw tourists to San Francisco's Chinatown. Historian Judy Tzu-Chun Wu has described how, during the late 1960s and early 1970s,

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<sup>82</sup> Cagan, Elizabeth "The Selling of the Women's Movement," *Social Policy* 9 (May/June 1978): 4-12.

<sup>83</sup> For a discussion of what she terms "consumer feminism," see Rosen, *The World Split Open*, 308-314.

the concerted protests of Chinese American activists pushed the coordinators of the Miss Chinatown USA beauty pageant to transform a contest that had long signified static community gender norms and inter- and intraracial tensions. Grassroots organizations of Chinese American feminists and civil rights advocates decried the pageant for idealizing a white standard of beauty and for presenting a “plastic” vision of Chinese American womanhood meant for consumption by white tourists. Responding to the critique, Chinese American pageant organizers argued that the pageant participants enjoyed a “sisterhood.” They also offered women leadership roles within the pageant organization.<sup>84</sup> Tzu-Chun Wu suggests that the strategies for feminist and racial progress shifted between the 1970s and the 1980s. By the 1980s and 1990s, pageant contestants were using the language of the feminist movement to explain their participation, explaining that they were “role models” to their sister Chinese Americans. Tzu-Chun Wu expresses disappointment at what she views as a misappropriation of feminist ideology: “The continued popularity of beauty pageants combined with the decrease in vocal opposition suggests the decline of alternative strategies that advocate structural change and group-based solutions to achieve gender and racial equality.”<sup>85</sup> Individuals could use the language of the movement to *uphold* and *reform* the Miss Chinatown USA pageant, despite the fact that feminist language had originally been used to challenge the necessity of the pageant in the first place. Feminist calls for the dismantling of the pageant diminished at the same time promoters of the pageant adopted feminist rhetoric to adapt the pageant to, arguably, more liberal policies.

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<sup>84</sup> Judy Tzu-Chun Wu, “‘Loveliest Daughter of our Ancient Cathay!’: Representations of Ethnic and Gender Identity in the Miss Chinatown USA Beauty Pageant,” in *Beauty and Business*, ed. Scranton, 278–308.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*, 303.

The battle over the Miss Chinatown USA beauty pageant illustrates an intractable problem for second-wave feminist practice. Feminists of the 1970s disagreed on the best way to repair damage inflicted by sexism. Radical feminists were calling for a complete overthrow of the sexist capitalist system, not merely a “bigger slice” of the pie for women. Liberal feminists, most commonly associated with the National Organization for Women (NOW), Betty Friedan, Gloria Steinem, and *Ms.* magazine, worked *within* the system to make it more equitable and more advantageous to women. The challenge of self-definition for a feminist made issues like beauty culture contested terrain. Chinese American pageant organizers could work to make the pageant more representative of the interests of women, distributing leadership positions to women, challenging embedded racial stereotypes, encouraging participants to exhibit talents and intelligence along with an idealized pretty face, all in the name of feminism. But many radical feminists would reject this agenda outright. They saw the pageant as an unredeemable feature of a sexist, capitalist system. Working to improve a beauty pageant—what many radical feminists had described as a 4-H livestock show—was nothing more than cementing a shaky patriarchal structure. Some radical feminists believed that liberals were “selling” the movement by trying to reform beauty culture rather than rejecting it.

### **Backlash and Beauty Culture**

During the 1980s, many Americans rejected both radical feminists and Black Nationalists and their demands for an overhaul of normative beauty culture as passé. A growing number of African Americans argued that the important struggles over beauty culture had been fought and won in the 1960s and 1970s, and that it was no longer necessary for black women to “prove” their racial pride through their hairstyles. For

example, M. Denise Dennis wrote an article for *Essence* titled, “Is Black Hair Political in 1982?” answering, “I think not. Today hair is a mode of self-expression, a reflection of personal convenience and style—but a political statement, no.” Dennis did not oppose “natural” or “ethnic” hairstyles; instead, she defended black women who “chose” straightened hair, explaining, “What goes on *inside* our heads has worlds more meaning than what’s on the outside.” Dennis’s comment sounds remarkably similar to Black Nationalist Assata Shakur’s comment, “It’s not what you have on your head but what you have in it.”<sup>86</sup> However, unlike Shakur, Dennis argued that Afro-centric styles—and implicitly, Black Nationalism—were no longer politically necessary because black women no longer faced an unequal cultural and social *system* that marginalized black aesthetics. Dennis admitted that “there are still those who use the terms ‘good hair’ and ‘bad hair’ to refer to different Black hair textures,” however, she asserted, “that is *their* problem.”<sup>87</sup>

African American feminists and “womanists” struggled to revive flagging interest in the racial and sexual politics of aesthetics.<sup>88</sup> Writing in 1988, bell hooks disagreed that the decision to straighten black hair was *ever* strictly a personal issue, explaining, “straightened hair is linked historically and currently to a system of racial domination.” Specifically, normative white beauty culture was responsible for devaluing black women’s appearances. As a result, hooks explained, black women straightened their hair to look more “white,” to improve their job opportunities, and to look normatively

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<sup>86</sup> Dennis’s comments actually predated those of Shakur. Shakur’s autobiography, written in 1987, reflected on her experiences as a Black Nationalist activist in the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s. Shakur, *Assata*, 174–175.

<sup>87</sup> M. Denise Dennis, “Is Black Hair Political in 1982?” *Essence* 13 (August 1982): 136, emphasis in original.

<sup>88</sup> In 1983 Alice Walker characterized black feminists as “womanists,” calling for greater attention to the interlocking systems of race, class, and gender oppression. Alice Walker, *In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1983), xi.

“attractive.” However, “above all it is a part of [the] black female body that must be controlled.” Hooks opted not to straighten her own hair because she believed “such a gesture would carry other implications beyond [her] control.” Like Black Nationalists and radical feminists of the 1960s and 1970s, hooks encouraged black women in the 1980s to continue to celebrate their own inherent beauty, and reject hair straightening as a white and male aesthetic tool for domination.<sup>89</sup>

Throughout the 1980s, feminist women of color pointed to normative beauty standards as evidence of combined racism and sexism in American culture.<sup>90</sup> Poet Nellie Wong illustrated how racism could drive women of color to view themselves as unattractive, admitting, “I know now that once I longed to be white.”<sup>91</sup> But while beauty culture remained an arena for critical exploration, feminists of color explored this topic with trepidation, fearing that a critique of beauty culture would alienate individual women. Barbara Smith, editor of *Home Girls: A Black Feminist Anthology*, warned her sister feminists, “In finding each other, some of us have fallen into the same pattern—have decided that if a sister doesn’t dress like me, walk like me, and even sleep like me, then she’s not really a sister.” By the 1980s, feminists of color could look back at the experiences of both Black Nationalists and radical feminists for examples of how critiques of beauty culture could be perceived as a demand for “conformity” or an accusation of “false consciousness.”<sup>92</sup>

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<sup>89</sup> hooks, “Straightening Our Hair,” 32–37.

<sup>90</sup> The Kitchen Table Press, the first publishing company run by and for women of color, published many feminist anthologies beginning in the 1980s.

<sup>91</sup> Many of the writers in this anthology, including Cherríe Moraga, in “La Güera,” and Andrea Canaan, in “Brownness,” discussed their painful experiences with a normative white beauty culture. Nellie Wong, “When I Was Growing Up,” in *This Bridge Called my Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color*, ed. Cherríe Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa (New York: Kitchen Table, Women of Color Press, 1981).

<sup>92</sup> Barbara Smith, ed. *Home Girls: A Black Feminist Anthology* (New York: Kitchen Table, Women of Color Press, 1983), xl.

In 1989, Arlene Stein, a sociologist and writer for *Out/Look* magazine, reported, “lesbian-feminism is on the wane, and lifestyle lesbianism—particularly among younger, urban dykes, is on the rise.”<sup>93</sup> Whereas lesbian feminists wore androgynous styles to signify their politics, Stein argued that “lifestyle lesbians” made feminist politics less of a priority, at least when it came to their day-to-day personal choices. Rather than use their clothing to indicate their lesbian and feminist identity or their rejection of heterosexist and sexist beauty standards, Stein claimed that “lifestyle lesbians” used their wardrobes to signify the multiplicity of “identities” they might claim.<sup>94</sup> She suggested that lesbians were “playing” with elements of normative beauty culture to express their distinctions from lesbian feminists of the 1970s.

Stein’s primary example of sartorial “play” among lesbians was the revival of “neo” butch and femme roles, which she argued were “enjoying a renaissance” within lesbian communities.<sup>95</sup> Through the 1980s, lesbians and feminists continued to debate whether butch-femme identities reinforced sexist structures, with many worrying that these lesbians were concerned with “fitting in, assimilating into the straight world, shedding their anger, and forgetting their roots.” Stein herself indicated that she viewed the “renaissance” of butch-femme roles as a sign of lesbian accommodation to the dominant sexist system. She suggested that lesbians turned to sartorial “play” and butch-femme roles because “politicizing every aspect of personhood . . . was just too tall an order to live with.”<sup>96</sup> However, some activists disagreed that butch-femme roles were a

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<sup>93</sup> Arlene Stein, “All Dressed Up, But No Place to Go?: Style Wars and New Lesbianism,” *Out/Look* 1 (Winter 1989): 38.

<sup>94</sup> *Ibid.*, 39.

<sup>95</sup> Furthermore, condescending articles in the *Wall Street Journal* were highlighting and labeling lesbians who dressed in “feminine” styles as “lipstick lesbians.” *Ibid.*, 37, 38.

<sup>96</sup> Stein, “All Dressed Up,” 37, 39.

sign of accommodation. Historians such as Joan Nestle, Elizabeth Kennedy, and Madeline Davis argued that, since the 1940s and 1950s, butch-femme lesbians had been at the vanguard of lesbian feminist activism. Joan Nestle explained, "Butch-femme women made Lesbians visible in a terrifyingly clear way in a historical period when there was no Movement protection for them." She argued that the lesbian feminist community should show greater appreciation for this political and "erotic heritage."<sup>97</sup>

As women's studies programs were instituted in colleges across the nation in the 1980s, feminists in these programs debated normative beauty standards and the role aesthetics should play within feminist communities.<sup>98</sup> Feminists used disciplines such as history, sociology, literature, and psychology to articulate a critique of normative beauty culture. By making beauty an element of political discussion within academic fields, feminists hoped to make evident the ways that, for women, "appearance is the first, constant commentary."<sup>99</sup> Some feminists within the academy submitted normative beauty ideals to a rigorous examination, and exposed the ways that beauty culture supported racial, gender, and economic inequalities for economic profit. For example, the works of social scientists such as Wendy Chapkis (*Beauty Secrets*, 1986) and Robin Tolmach Lakoff and Raquel Scherr (*Face Value*, 1984) examined how normative beauty ideals were both a product of and a contributor to racism and sexism. All of these social scientists made use of the feminist practice of making personal experience the basis for political action. For example, they incorporated narratives of women struggling with the

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<sup>97</sup> Nestle, "Butch-Femme Relationships," 108; Kennedy and Davis, *Boots of Leather, Slippers of Gold*, 5–6.

<sup>98</sup> Elizabeth Lapovsky Kennedy, "Women's Studies," *Reader's Companion to U.S. Women's History* [http://college.hmco.com/history/readerscomp/women/html/wm\\_040500\\_womensstudie.htm](http://college.hmco.com/history/readerscomp/women/html/wm_040500_womensstudie.htm) [accessed November 13, 2004].

<sup>99</sup> Wendy Chapkis, *Beauty Secrets: Women and the Politics of Appearance* (Boston: South End Press, 1986), 6.

politics of beauty into their work, or began their books with descriptions of how beauty culture touched their own lives.<sup>100</sup> These personal narratives, when combined with sociological analysis, wed feminist activism and academic study.

By making gender, sexuality, and especially beauty culture issues of legitimate intellectual concern, feminists found it possible and necessary to expand their goals from merely increasing awareness of the significance of normative beauty standards to providing an avenue for individual and collective change. Academic and popular psychology works, such as Marcia Millman's *Such a Pretty Face* (1980), Kim Chernin's *The Obsession: Reflections on the Tyranny of Slenderness* (1981), Susan Brownmiller's *Femininity* (1984), Rita Freedman's *Beauty Bound* (1986), and Susie Orbach's *Fat is a Feminist Issue* (1988) all employed feminist theory to argue that a misogynist society had socialized women and men to overvalue the appearance of female bodies, a socialization that undervalued a woman's mind and character and was ultimately detrimental for her psyche. These authors called on women and men to reject dominant social norms and to view the "natural" female body (including the overweight female body) as beautiful. But these authors also called for an array of cultural changes, such as a feminist revamping of medical and psychological methods, the cessation of employment discrimination against overweight, nonwhite, aging women, and the advancement of more flexible beauty ideals in the media, featuring women of all different races, ages, and sizes. They encouraged parents to raise their children to define "beauty" as a human, rather than feminine,

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<sup>100</sup> Chapkis, *Beauty Secrets*; Robin Tolmach Lakoff and Raquel L. Scherr, *Face Value: The Politics of Beauty* (Boston: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1984).



quality. They also encouraged women to join consciousness-raising groups in order to discuss body image issues collectively.<sup>101</sup>

The growing awareness of the political implications of women's body size in the 1980s reflects the "discovery" of eating disorders during this decade. Thirteen years after the 1981 publication of *The Obsession*, a psychological analysis of eating disorders, author Kim Chernin recounted the furor surrounding her book and the topic of eating disorders. While she and her publishers originally considered eating disorders to be an "obscure topic," and while Chernin continually found herself having to "argue . . . that an obsession with weight existed among American women," this invisibility quickly changed in the early 1980s. Within a few years of *The Obsession's* publication, the public—particularly women's advocates—began to identify eating disorders to be an "emerging crisis" among young, white, college-aged women.<sup>102</sup> Self-identified feminists such as Chernin, psychologist Susie Orbach, and sociologist Marcia Millman connected eating disorders to a sexist beauty culture in which women were primarily evaluated for their appearances. Historian Joan Jacobs Brumberg, author of a history of anorexia, described the work by Chernin, Millman, and Orbach as a "popular feminist reading of anorexia nervosa." Brumberg explained that unlike most doctors and psychiatrists—traditionally male-dominated professions—these feminists approached eating disorders as a social problem: "They seek to demonstrate that these disorders are

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<sup>101</sup> Unfortunately, another characteristic that these works share is their tendency to treat the category of "women" as one made up solely of white women. To varying degrees, these works pay lip service to women of color; however, they do not include serious analysis of the influence race has on beauty standards. Brownmiller's *Femininity*, for example, has been critiqued for oversimplifying the issues surrounding black hair by comparing African American description of kinky and tightly curled hair as "bad" to a white person's bad hair day. See Banks, *Hair Matters*, 12. The self-help books, such as *Fat is a Feminist Issue*, do not distinguish between white and black conceptions of fat.

<sup>102</sup> Kim Chernin, *The Obsession: Reflections on the Tyranny of Slenderness* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1994), xvi–xviii.

an inevitable consequence of a misogynistic society that demeans women.” Brumberg credited Chernin, Millman, and Orbach with overcoming the “trivialization” of eating disorders, as well as analyzing eating disorders as social problems, rather than merely “personal” psychological problems.<sup>103</sup>

While feminist writers made significant progress in the 1980s addressing the burden of normative beauty culture, they were frequently sidetracked by media distortions of the movement as “anti-beauty.” Authors such as Rita Freedman repeatedly addressed and refuted the stereotype that feminists were unattractive and bitterly opposed to participation in beauty culture. Freedman reassured her audience that, despite the influence of feminism on her work as a psychologist, *Beauty Bound* “is not an antibeauty book.”<sup>104</sup> As feminists, academics discovered that their audience had basic preconceptions about their appearances and their aesthetic preferences. After listing numerous studies that showed the public expected feminists to be unattractive, Freedman recounted her own experience with a student who expressed surprise that, as a feminist teacher, Freedman looked “feminine.”<sup>105</sup>

Perhaps in an attempt to distance themselves from this negative stereotype, some feminists working in the academy did not credit second-wave radical feminists for their groundbreaking critiques of beauty culture. Lakoff and Scherr, authors of *Face Value: The Politics of Beauty* (1984), explicitly identified with the women’s movement; yet, the authors asserted, “the subject [of beauty] had never to our recollection been mentioned,

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<sup>103</sup> Joan Jacobs Brumberg, *Fasting Girls: The History of Anorexia Nervosa* (New York: Vintage Books, 1988), 34–37.

<sup>104</sup> Rita Freedman, *Beauty Bound* (Lexington Books: Lexington Mass, 1986), x.

<sup>105</sup> *Ibid.*, 229. For the studies Freedman cites, see Goldberg, Gottesdiener, and Abramson, “Another Put-down of Women? Perceived Attractiveness as a Function of Support for the Feminist Movement,” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 32 (1975): 113–115; and Jacobson and Koch, “Attributed Reasons for Support of the Feminist Movement as a Function of Attractiveness,” *Sex Roles* 4 (1978): 169–174.

not in those groups of thoughtful, feminist, politically-savvy and angry women.”<sup>106</sup> By claiming to be writing the first feminist tract on the topic of female beauty, Lakoff and Scherr lost the opportunity to build upon feminist ideas on this topic. They presented their efforts “to preserve our enjoyment of beauty and . . . to appreciate and be appreciated without resentment and without obsession” as a novel idea rather than a longtime goal of the movement.<sup>107</sup> Lakoff and Scherr, like many feminists who would follow them, did not question popular wisdom by assuming that the feminist movement had oversimplified or neglected the politics of beauty in the 1960s and 1970s.

Other feminist authors exhibited a tone of disappointment at the lack of change within normative beauty culture since the 1960s. In *Femininity*, Susan Brownmiller, who had been a leading member of the New York Radical Feminists, challenged the “nostalgic tradition of imposed limitations” with which women were saddled. Brownmiller expressed discouragement at the backlash of the early 1980s: “My congratulations to the cosmetics industry—they weathered the storm [of feminist criticism]. Makeup doesn’t even have to look ‘natural’ any more. Women are proudly celebrating the fake.” Brownmiller argued that the feminist critique of beauty culture was still relevant despite growing backlash against the movement. She sarcastically invoked and embraced the stereotype that feminists bore for their critiques of beauty culture: “I am the dowdy feminist, the early Christian, the humorless sectarian who is surely against sex and fun.”<sup>108</sup>

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<sup>106</sup> Robin Tolmach Lakoff and Raquel L. Scherr, *Face Value: The Politics of Beauty* (Boston: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1984), 14.

<sup>107</sup> Lakoff and Scherr, *Face Value*, 283.

<sup>108</sup> Susan Brownmiller, *Femininity*, (New York: Linden Press, 1984), 14, 160.

### Consequences of Beauty Cultural Critiques

As early as 1982, journalists described the women's movement as having stalled out in a "postfeminist" stage.<sup>109</sup> Alice Echols argues that the movement was "the victim of its own success," in that it *had* improved opportunities for white middle-class women, the "women who had traditionally made up the bulk of its ranks."<sup>110</sup> But even these achievements—which still left women of color of all classes and white working-class women in the lurch—were precarious. 1980s conservative backlash forced feminists to work very hard to just maintain the most basic achievements of the 1960s and 1970s, as Republican legislators began to dismantle programs and laws important to women, including abortion rights and welfare. According to Ruth Rosen, the 1980s also marked a time of fragmentation for the feminist movement. Feminists found that their movement had acquired a stigma that many women were unwilling to shoulder. While the "Superwoman" juggling work and family became the normative model for middle-class women, the popular media was unsympathetic to any woman who wished to use political means to improve her situation.<sup>111</sup>

Growing hostility toward feminists made it more difficult for activists to critique normative beauty standards. In the 1980s, a significant number of Americans argued that beauty was no longer (or never had been) political, or that feminist critiques of beauty were puritanical or unfounded. On the other hand, feminists and Black Nationalists maintained that beauty culture desperately demanded significant changes. While feminists strived to maintain the legal and economic victories won by 1960s and 1970s activists, they also carried on the struggles of their predecessors by challenging cultural

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<sup>109</sup> Susan Bolotin, "Voices of the Post-Feminist Generation," *New York Times Magazine*, 17 October 1982.

<sup>110</sup> Echols, *Daring to Be Bad*, 293.

<sup>111</sup> Rosen, *The World Split Open*, 275.

norms that disempowered women. By critiquing normative beauty culture, feminists and Black Nationalists continued to raise awareness of the sexism and racism of the American culture at large.

As the following three chapters will illustrate, feminist and Black Nationalist efforts *did* have a significant effect on beauty culture. Across the period of this study, beauty marketers engaged with feminism and Black Nationalism, but most marketers disregarded the substance of the activists' criticisms and focused instead on their ideal of empowered womanhood. Beauty marketers such as the perfume advertisers, direct sales entrepreneurs, and beauty advice writers studied in the following three chapters capitalized on political debates over feminine identity by offering beauty culture as a compromise for women caught between competing ideals of womanhood. Marketers suggested that, by purchasing beauty products, ordinary women could enjoy a sense of "liberation" without the risk that came with challenging prevailing social norms. Many beauty marketers appropriated feminist and Black Nationalist rhetoric and combined it with images and text that continued to idealize an exclusive, white, upper- and middle-class standard of beauty. By suggesting that their beauty products offered women a socially acceptable means of self-empowerment and self-expression, beauty marketers raised the stakes for women who were unable or unwilling to conform to the beauty norms produced in these advertisements.

For the most part, beauty marketers did not set out to impose a conservatively defined ideal of womanhood on female consumers. Many marketers genuinely identified with feminist and Black Nationalist activists, and they believed that women could express themselves and even demand equal rights with men by participating in beauty culture.

As chapter two will illustrate, some perfume advertisers can be identified as liberal feminists: they worked *within* the American capitalist system to expand women's opportunities through moderate reforms. Several of the perfume advertisers featured in chapter two ardently opposed advertising that was overtly sexist or racist, and they struggled to expand opportunities for women in the advertising industry. Indeed, many of the marketers studied in the following chapters were not merely influenced by feminist activism; they were participants in the movement.

As chapter two will illustrate, feminists and Black Nationalists were quite successful in raising consumers' and marketers' consciousness about sexism and racism within beauty culture. Nevertheless, marketers continued to promote unattainable and exclusive beauty standards in order to inspire women to purchase an endless supply of beauty products, and women perpetually struggled with those impossible standards. The following chapter will investigate how individual marketers responded to feminist and Black Nationalist critiques, and it will explore why marketers' responses fell short of feminist and Black Nationalist goals. By looking closely at perfume advertisers, chapter two will illustrate the similarities and the crucial differences in the motivations of feminists, Black Nationalists, and beauty marketers when they reached out to American women.

## CHAPTER II

### PERFUME FOR THE “LIBERATED” WOMAN

In 1965, Edward Weiss, chairman and chief executive officer of Edward H. Weiss and Company, advised his fellow advertisers that the “modern woman” was seeking advertising that would help her find meaning in her life, and it was their responsibility to help her. Weiss chastised advertisers for treating women as if they only used cosmetics to compete for men, and reminded them that the modern woman “doesn’t want to be treated like a ninny, to be manipulated like a puppet, to be patronized by advertisers, to be exploited through her fears and anxieties and her nebulous hopes, such as we do all too often in cosmetic advertising.”<sup>1</sup> Weiss’s comments about cosmetic advertisers’ failings were similar to the criticisms feminists would make about perfume advertising over the following three and a half decades. However, Weiss’s motivations differed significantly from those shared by most feminists; he was an advertising executive hoping to improve the effectiveness and profitability of cosmetics advertising. Weiss’s comments remind us that it was the advertiser’s *business* to find a way to attract female consumers, and therefore, advertisers would always have their own reasons to keep abreast of the ways that American women found meaning in their lives.

During the 1960s, most advertisers were developing and refining marketing strategies that incited feminist criticism over the following three decades, often because

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<sup>1</sup> “Advertising Should Help Modern Woman Find Herself, Weiss Says,” *Advertising Age* (October 4, 1965): 93.

this marketing did exploit the “fears and anxieties” and “nebulous hopes” of women. Debate within the advertising industry makes it evident that the marketing styles that emerged in the late twentieth century were not inevitable, but instead were the result of collaboration and dispute from within and outside of the industry. Advertisers had debated how best to craft advertisements for women since the early twentieth century, and cultural historians such as Roland Marchand and Jennifer Scanlon have offered insight into these earlier debates.<sup>2</sup> This chapter examines advertising of the 1960s through the 1990s, focusing on a time when advertisers faced a robust critique of their work articulated by an array of feminist and Black Nationalist activists. By framing this study around a single advertised product—perfume—it is possible to trace subtle but significant trends in how advertisers responded professionally to feminism.

Perfume advertising, more than most beauty marketing, drew the attention of feminist and Black Nationalist critics. Next to designer clothing, accessories, and jewelry, perfumes—especially “prestige” scents—were the most expensive beauty products marketed to women in either “haute couture” magazines such as *Vogue* and *Harper’s Bazaar* or mainstream “women’s” magazines such as *Ladies’ Home Journal* and *Glamour*. Because of their financial clout and a reputation for creative leadership, perfume advertisers set a stylistic standard imitated by other beauty cultural advertisers.<sup>3</sup> Like every other beauty advertiser, perfume marketers strived to create a popular image for their product; however, they had to craft this image without being able to “show” their

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<sup>2</sup> Jennifer Scanlon, *Inarticulate Longings: The Ladies’ Home Journal, Gender, and the Promise of Consumer Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1995); Roland Marchand, *Advertising the American Dream: Making the Way for Modernity, 1920–1940* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985).

<sup>3</sup> For example, advertisers imitated Calvin Klein’s “Obsession” advertisements for years after they were first introduced. Elizabeth Collier, “Finding Many Ways to ‘Cut Through the Clutter,’” *Women’s Wear Daily (WWD)* 157 no. 112 (June 9, 1989): F10. Revlon’s “Charlie” advertisements also set a standard, later defined as “lifestyle” advertising, that was imitated for half a decade. Nadeen Peterson, “Fragrance Ads Last Bastion of Gut Hunch,” *Advertising Age* 50 (February 26, 1979): section 2, S1.



product, a scent, in the advertisement. Perfume advertisers were (and are) notorious for advertising their products with highly sexualized depictions of the female body and text that urges women to capture male desire by meeting a narrow, white, upper-class standard of beauty and wearing perfume. Feminists and Black Nationalists have repeatedly objected to the sexual objectification of the female body, the idealization of whiteness and thinness, and the emphasis on catching and keeping male sexual attention within perfume advertisements.

Between 1960 and 2000, perfume advertisements sparked debates over sexuality, class, race, gender, and the obligations of advertisers to their consumers. Perfume marketers continually pushed the envelope to entice new customers; in reaction, Black Nationalists, feminists, and other consumers challenged advertisers, demanding a role in the definition of boundaries for acceptable marketing. Since the 1960s, Americans have taken part in a sexual revolution, a feminist movement, a civil rights movement, and the development of the New and the Religious Right. As we saw in chapter one, beauty culture was often at the center of late-twentieth-century social debates; as we shall see in this chapter, perfume advertising in particular served as a site for these debates. Social movements inevitably affected advertising styles as marketers sought to capitalize on changing cultural trends and shifting demographics. The perfume advertisements developed between 1960 and 2000 offer insight into the decisions made by marketers as they navigated the cultural and social debates of the late twentieth century.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> I looked at advertisements from magazines such as *Ladies' Home Journal*, *Vogue*, *Seventeen*, *Harper's Bazaar*, *Ebony*, *Essence*, *Mademoiselle*, and *Good Housekeeping*. By exclusively looking at print advertisements, it is easier to attribute changes to social trends, rather than technological developments. Like television and radio advertisements, print advertisements have been shaped by technology; however, 1960s print advertisements do not differ significantly from 1990s print advertisements in terms of layout or style. It is the text of the advertisements that changed during this period. My investigation of perfume advertisements is not meant to represent the range of advertising across this period. Instead, I focused on

Investigating the commentary that ensued from these marketing campaigns makes clear how American businesspeople have engaged with feminism.<sup>5</sup> Perfume advertisers held a range of opinions when it came to feminism and women's status. A look at the industry's discussion of perfume print advertisements illustrates that feminist critics emerged *within* the advertising industry contemporaneously with the development of the women's movement. Advertisers such as Amelia Bassin and Franchellie Cadwell devoted significant energy to demanding professional opportunities for women and critiquing overtly sexist advertisements. But regardless of individual advertisers' support or opposition to feminism, they were professionally vested in normative beauty culture. Perfume advertisers made their living promoting products that claimed to help women meet socially constructed ideals of beauty—ideals that many feminists and Black Nationalists critiqued as racist and sexist. These advertisers glossed over the concerns feminists and Black Nationalists raised about normative beauty culture and merely emphasized a vague ideal of female empowerment in their ads. Ultimately, by editing activists' messages down to mere catchwords like "liberation," "pride," and "individuality," perfume advertisers reinforced normative beauty culture with the same rhetoric feminists and Black Nationalists had used to question that culture.

### **Sex, Race, and the Baby Boomers: the 1960s**

In the early 1960s, perfume advertising was consistently aimed at the wealthiest Americans. Many perfume marketers ignored women of color of all classes, working-

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ads that illustrate both the common ground and the disagreements between feminists, Black Nationalists, and marketers.

<sup>5</sup> In order to chronicle debates over perfume advertising, I used the *Business Periodicals Index* (New York: H. W. Wilson Co., 1958–) to find articles in trade journals between 1960 and 2000. The journals indexed include well-known journals such as *Forbes*, along with advertising industry journals such as *Advertising Age*, *Printer's Ink*, and *Adweek*. The index also includes journals that pertain more to the perfume industry, such as *Chemical Week* and *American Druggist*.

class white women, and teens entirely. The industry emphasized high-priced scents and advertised in haute couture magazines, where women who presumably were willing to pay more for their beauty products would see them.<sup>6</sup> These advertisements almost universally depicted white, upper-class women in evening gowns holding beautiful perfume bottles and being held by “sophisticated” white men. Marketers promised romance and status along with their scents, and assumed that most women would receive perfume as a gift from a husband or boyfriend rather than purchase it themselves.<sup>7</sup>

During the 1960s, very few perfume advertisers marketed their scents as a good value; most reminded women that their product was out of reach. Many perfume marketers across the period of this study have emphasized the precious and unattainable nature of their products; for instance, “Joy” employed the same tagline, “the costliest perfume in the world,” for most of the twentieth century.<sup>8</sup> In the 1960s, perfume marketers tied their products to social status and wealth. Lanvin promised women that their scent would win them millionaire husbands in an ad that featured a perfume bottle floating over a seascape. The copy “How to Marry a Millionaire . . . Arpège!” hovered next to the bottle.<sup>9</sup> Nina Ricci marketed “Capricci” to “those with the wisdom to recognize an elegant perfume, and the wherewithal to wear it.”<sup>10</sup> And “Prophecy,” by

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<sup>6</sup> In the early 1960s, marketing observers urged perfume manufacturers to recognize the potential in mass merchandising of scents. “Fragrance Field Uncorks New Ad Appeals,” *Printers’ Ink* 274 (March 3, 1961): 11–12.

<sup>7</sup> Mid-1960s market research showed that during the holiday season (the peak season for perfume sales), 75% of women’s perfumes were purchased as gifts by men, although researchers believed that women offered suggestions about the products they preferred. “Orphan Annie and perfume!” *Printers’ Ink* 292 (April 8, 1966): 25–26.

<sup>8</sup> Carolyn Pfaff, “House of Patou Carefully Spreads Its Joy: For 50 Years, the World’s Costliest Perfume Has Kept Its Image,” *Advertising Age* 55 (February 27, 1984): M42.

<sup>9</sup> “Arpège” advertisement, *Vogue* (October 1, 1963): 95.

<sup>10</sup> “Capricci” advertisement, *Vogue* (November 1 1961): 52–53.



*Expect the unexpected with* PROPHECY

*Earth's newest fragrance...*

*created by* PRINCE MATIABELLI



Parfums, Cologne, Toilette, Spray, Mist, Disting Powder, Cream, Soap, etc. 40-50% plus tax.

19039

This advertisement appears in  
Seymour's - May, 1965

“Prophecy” advertisement, Chesebrough-Ponds Box 22 (1959-1969) J. Walter Thompson Domestic Advertising Collection

Prince Matchabelli, was “the perfume for the cherished woman.”<sup>11</sup> These campaigns connoted wealth and status. Marketers implied that a man who truly “cherished” a woman would buy her an expensive perfume, and it was the hefty price tag that proved his love.

Throughout the 1960s, a few advertisers were critical of the industry’s elitist advertising approach, and recommended a change. In 1964, Phyllis Johnson, senior editor of *Advertising Age*, warned attendees at a Fragrance Foundation seminar that perfume marketing was failing to keep up with the times. Johnson strongly disapproved of the perfume ads she had seen in women’s magazines, describing them as an “unpardonable bore, so ladylike and dull, filled with trancelike ladies who look like they’re playing charades.” Johnson went on to call for fragrance advertising that would reflect the youth and vitality of the population: “This is the revved-up pop art age, a hip, swinging time where the mood is sort of innocent deviltry, sort of Bacchanalian Beatle. And you should be presenting your product as part of it.”<sup>12</sup>

Johnson advised ambitious advertisers to embrace new populations of consumers, especially the baby boomers, explaining, “Remember, by next year half the women in the country will be under 25. Your customers are gals who are tearing around and living it up in a manner that’s rarely reflected in your ads.”<sup>13</sup> These teenagers and young women were becoming a surprisingly active and wealthy consumer group, and by the early 1960s advertisers began tentatively reaching out to younger markets. Chanel started advertising its perfumes in *Seventeen* (a magazine for girls younger than seventeen, in publication

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<sup>11</sup> “Prophecy” advertisement, *Vogue* (November 15, 1967): 69.

<sup>12</sup> “Perfume Does Its Own Advertising, Foundation Told,” *Advertising Age* 35 (October 26, 1964): 119.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*

since the mid-1940s) in 1959.<sup>14</sup> Advertisements for teens, like those for adults, suggested that perfume would attract a man. In 1963, Prince Matchabelli marketed “Prophecy” perfume in *Seventeen* with advertisements that showed a young, white woman’s well-manicured hands holding a broken fortune cookie containing a boy’s class ring and the message: “Expect the Unexpected.” Another advertisement for the same scent zoomed in on a girl’s sweater, “pinned” with a dizzying array of fraternity pins. Using variations of the same advertising campaign in the magazines *Glamour* and *Mademoiselle*, Prince Matchabelli targeted slightly older consumers in their late teens or early twenties. These more mature readers found a diamond engagement ring in their fortune cookies, rather than a class ring.<sup>15</sup> These advertisements suggest that Prince Matchabelli’s advertising company, J. Walter Thompson, linked their products to young consumers’ quest for romantic relationships. They depicted romance as following a series of age-defined stages: teens would naturally pine for “steady” boyfriends, young adults for fiancés, and consumers in both groups would be more likely to purchase perfume if they thought it could help win a suitor. Ultimately, this advertising campaign, and the 1960s advertising for teenagers generally, followed the formulas used for adult women, appealing to heterosexual romance and commitment, and the status derived from these relationships.

Throughout the 1960s, African American civil rights advocates exhorted the perfume industry to recognize another overlooked consumer group: women of color. Very few perfume companies advertised in African American magazines such as *Ebony*, and those that did tended to be inexpensive brands such as Avon. Most perfume marketers clearly assumed that African Americans could not afford their products.

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<sup>14</sup> “Fragrance Field Uncorks New Ad Appeals,” 11–12.

<sup>15</sup> “Prophecy Advertisements,” Chesebrough-Ponds Box 22, 1959–1969, J. Walter Thompson Advertising Collection, Duke University Rare Book, Manuscript, and Special Collections Library.

Advertisers who did target women of color often featured white models.<sup>16</sup> Revlon, for instance, subscribed to a single (white) beauty standard for models featured in its cosmetics commercials, propagating the “Revlon look” throughout the world—regardless of nationality, skin color, or local beauty standards. One Revlon ad director explained the company’s insensitivity to diversity by arguing, “a beautiful woman is beautiful no matter what her race or nationality.”<sup>17</sup> Of course, a cursory examination of Revlon perfume ads would suggest that “a beautiful woman” was a slender, well-to-do white woman.

When national women’s magazines did feature women of color in perfume ads, the advertisement exoticized the women. 1960s ads for “Shalimar” perfume, sold by the French perfumery Guerlain, featured Shah Jahan—ruler of seventeenth-century India—and the “loveliest of his wives,” Mumtaz Mahal, the inspiration for both the Taj Mahal and a “lovers’” garden, Shalimar.<sup>18</sup> Guerlain featured a beautiful Indian woman, but as a historical character, representing a tragic, romantic love. In America, well-to-do women could wear the scent that made Mahal irresistible to her husband, the scent that won his heart despite the competition of his other wives. Of course, Mumtaz was relegated to a corner of the page; it was her story that inspired, not her face.

Fabergé broke the mold with advertisements for “KiKU” that ran in *Ebony* in 1969. These ads featured black women, including Ruth Warren, secretary of *Ebony* magazine, with text that asked, “Ruth Warren is a little bit KiKU. Isn’t every woman?”

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<sup>16</sup> See, for example, “Tabu” advertisement, *Ebony* (October 1969): 146.

<sup>17</sup> “Revlon Enchants the World With One Selling Technique,” *Printers’ Ink* 271 (June 3, 1960): 40–41; “Revlon Keeps Ads Alike Worldwide—‘Lovely Woman is Lovely Anywhere,’” *Advertising Age* 36 (October 25, 1965): 108.

<sup>18</sup> “Shalimar” advertisement, *Vogue* (November 1, 1966): 78–79; “Shalimar Perfume Evokes Spirit of Love,” *Advertising Age* 38 (November 27, 1967): 87.

## Ruth Warren is a little bit KiKU. Isn't every woman?



Secretary of Ebony Magazine.



KIKU. Love potions for the bath  
and after bath. By

*Fabergé*

“KiKU” advertisement, *Ebony* (November 1969): 24.

Modeling for a foreign perfume name (“Kiku” is the Japanese word for chrysanthemum), Warren is shown with an Afro, wearing African-print clothing. Her hairstyle, dark skin, and apparel likely appealed to the political sensibilities of black Americans during the



heyday of black pride—a time when many African Americans were demonstrating race loyalty by refusing to straighten their hair and rejecting normative white beauty standards. Warren looked attractive, but the Fabergé ad characterized her as a “secretary” rather than as a model, captioning her photo with her job title.<sup>19</sup> This emphasis on Warren’s occupation suggests that perfume advertisers assumed African American consumers were members of the working class. Elsie Archer, a fashion editor for *Ebony* and a representative of a multicultural public relations firm, had advised advertisers just three years earlier that African American women were “vitaly concerned in making [their] dollar go as far as possible.” By having a secretary, rather than a model, promote KiKU, Fabergé hinted to consumers that their product was affordable to the average working woman. Archer had also pointed out that a substantial percentage of African American women worked outside their homes.<sup>20</sup> Fabergé appealed to the interests and experiences of African American women by having a working-class woman promote KiKU.

Companies like Fabergé had two good reasons to advertise to African American women in the late-1960s. As Great Society legislation took effect, the incomes of some African American women slowly began to rise.<sup>21</sup> Marketers hoped that black women’s new resources would translate into a new customer base for perfume sales. However, marketers did not just “discover” this consumer group. Throughout the 1960s, civil rights advocates, including national lobbying groups like the NAACP and the Congress

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<sup>19</sup> “KiKU” advertisement, *Ebony* (November 1969): 24.

<sup>20</sup> Elsie Archer, “How to Sell Today’s Negro Woman,” *Sponsor* 20 (July 25, 1966): 49.

<sup>21</sup> After the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, some African American men and women’s employment opportunities and economic status improved. Unfortunately, these advances were offset by the growing “feminization of poverty” within the black community, as many African American women struggled to raise children with only their own wages for income. Jacqueline Jones, *Labor of Love, Labor of Sorrow: Black Women, Work, and the Family from Slavery to the Present*. (New York: Vintage Books, 1985), 302.

of Racial Equality (CORE), and African American marketers such as D. Parke Gibson Associates, the first black-owned public relations firm in the United States, exhorted businesses to expand their advertising purview to include black Americans. African American marketers, seeking expanded opportunities within the advertising industry, provided companies with research on the advantages of marketing to African American consumers, and advice on how best to appeal to this particular demographic.<sup>22</sup> On the other hand, lobbying groups such as CORE focused on drawing national attention to the under-representation or misrepresentation of minorities in advertising through petitions and boycotts. It was partly due to these ongoing efforts that mainstream companies began to recognize African American women as consumers.<sup>23</sup>

Regardless of the consumer's race or class, perfume marketers attempted to inflame consumers' insecurities and anxieties, and implied that these feelings could only be assuaged with the purchase of perfume. In publications such as *Advertising Age*, beauty marketers hinted that women who used the products they advertised were particularly vulnerable to manipulation. Advertising executive Edward H. Weiss, though sagely advising his fellow advertisers to respect the modern woman, described frequent users of cosmetics as an "insecure minority" that would "try everything, anything, almost irrespective of advertising claims." Weiss explained that his company's research revealed that one-quarter of American women regularly relied on cosmetics. He went on to characterize regular users as "compulsive," "self-preoccupied," plagued by "irrational

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<sup>22</sup> "White-Oriented Ads Don't Sway Negro Buyers," *Advertising Age* 37 (April 11, 1966): 128; Elsie Archer, "How to Sell Today's Negro Woman," *Sponsor* 20 (July 25, 1966): 49; "Marketing to Negro Isn't Segregation in Reverse: Gibson" *Advertising Age* 36 (September 27, 1965): 27.

<sup>23</sup> See, for example, "Boycott by Negroes?" *Printers' Ink* 284 (August 23, 1963): 5-6. See also Marilyn Kern-Foxworth, *Aunt Jemima, Uncle Ben, and Rastus: Blacks in Advertising Yesterday, Today, and Tomorrow*. (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood, 1994).

fears, like fear of the dark,” and insecure about their appearances, “even though in reality they might be, and often were, quite attractive.”<sup>24</sup> Furthermore, these women “were indeed more preoccupied with their relationship with men than the low cosmetics users—sometimes to the point of obsession.”<sup>25</sup> While Weiss recommended that advertisers appeal to the more secure majority of women, who used cosmetics less frequently, he clearly believed that women purchased and used cosmetics and perfumes to deal with their own insecurities.

Marketers were aware that, through perfume advertising, they were defining the “ideal” characteristics that they believed American women should possess. Kenyon and Eckhardt, the advertising agency for cosmetics and perfume company Helena Rubinstein, divided women into six marketing groups. These included “The Happy Slob, who gets no kick out of looking pretty . . . The Worker Bee, who gets her kicks from what she does . . . The Girl Next Door, who is susceptible to the door-to-door salesman . . . The Glamour Girl, who is more interested in attracting men than a man . . . The Faddist, who has the need to sport the latest thing to wear, whether it looks good on her or not,” and finally, “The Real Woman,” their ideal consumer. Kenyon and Eckhardt defined the “Real Woman” wholly in terms of behaviors she refrained from: real women never looked like slobs, took their careers too seriously, exhibited sexual promiscuity, or got

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<sup>24</sup> “Advertising Should Help Modern Woman Find Herself, Weiss Says,” *Advertising Age* (October 4, 1965): 93.

<sup>25</sup> Weiss suggested that advertisers should ignore frequent users of cosmetics when designing ad campaigns, reasoning that this market needed no further persuasion. He recommended that advertisers concentrate instead on recruiting the remaining three-quarters of American women to the use of cosmetics. While he cautioned that these infrequent cosmetic users were more sensible and less gullible than their perfumed and elaborately made-up peers, he did seem to think they could be persuaded to purchase more products. “Advertising Should Help Modern Woman Find Herself,” 93.

tricked into following the latest trend. The marketers did agree that she needed to invest considerable money in fragrances to maintain her femininity.<sup>26</sup>

While advertisements for many toiletries, such as soap, mouthwash, and feminine douches, preyed on women's insecurities about cleanliness, most perfume advertisements billed their scents as a pleasing accessory, not as part of a hygienic routine.<sup>27</sup> Instead, marketers positioned perfume as a necessary component of "feminine allure."

Advertisements suggested that women who wore perfume possessed a supernatural power of attraction. For example, during the early 1960s, advertising agency J. Walter Thompson designed advertisements for "Wind Song" perfume, by Prince Matchabelli. Each advertisement showed an attractive, well-groomed man with a forlorn expression on his face, with some posed beside pianos and others walking along deserted beaches. The copy read: "He can't get you out of his mind when Wind Song whispers your message." With a consistent slogan since the early 1960s (today it reads, "I can't seem to forget you. Your Wind Song stays on my mind"), the advertising team at J. Walter Thompson suggested that Wind Song was the key to attractiveness. Women who did not heed this advice were warned, "If you're not wearing Wind Song Sheer Essence, you're missing something," and were shown a woman whose body had mysteriously begun to vanish, presumably becoming invisible to men.<sup>28</sup> Indeed, these slogans strive to subtly create the fear that, without Wind Song, a woman would be both unattractive and single.

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<sup>26</sup> "The 'Real Girl' May Give Way to the 'Real Woman,'" *American Druggist* 158 (September 23, 1968): 64.

<sup>27</sup> Historian Lynn Peril describes a shocking variety of "feminine hygiene" products marketed to women in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, including Lysol and Zonite, which contained a bleaching agent. Peril argues that advertisements deliberately hinted that these douches would also work as contraceptives, which of course was untrue. Lynn Peril, *Pink Think: Becoming a Woman in Many Uneasy Lessons* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 2002), 122–127.

<sup>28</sup> "Wind Song Advertisements," Chesebrough-Ponds Box 22, 1959–1969, J. Walter Thompson Domestic Advertising, Duke University Rare Book, Manuscript, and Special Collections Library.

In an industry that consistently pitched perfume as a love potion, it is unsurprising that the sexual revolution had a significant effect on marketing styles. As early as 1961, *Printer's Ink* described "the [perfume] industry's old stand-by advertising theme" as "sex." However, the way consumers and marketers understood "sex" was rapidly changing in the 1960s. In their work on the history of sexuality in America, historians John D'Emilio and Estelle Freedman characterized the 1960s as a time when "American society seemed to have reached a new accommodation with the erotic."<sup>29</sup> In the 1953 publication of *Sexual Behavior in the Human Female*, biologist Alfred Kinsey presented evidence that white women and men engaged in a diversity of sexual activities outside of heterosexual marriage. Kinsey used his findings to assert that American women were no less sexual than men. The report (and the media attention it attracted) started a national debate over white sexual mores.<sup>30</sup> While Americans had been challenging sexual norms throughout the twentieth century, by the 1960s many middle-class youths publicly cast off the expectation that sexual relationships were a private matter, to be contained within heterosexual marriage. Helen Gurley Brown's bestselling *Sex and the Single Girl* (1962) encouraged women to enjoy extramarital heterosexual relationships, and expanding access to contraception made these relationships seem less risky.<sup>31</sup> Simultaneously, legislation that banned books containing explicit eroticism, such as D. H. Lawrence's

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<sup>29</sup> John D'Emilio and Estelle Freedman, *Intimate Matters: A History of Sexuality in America* (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1988), 300.

<sup>30</sup> Brenda Weber, "Talking Sex, Talking Kinsey: 1950s Print Culture and its Response to Kinsey's Sexual Behavior in the Human Female" (paper presented at the 13<sup>th</sup> Berkshire Conference on the History of Women, *Sin Fronteras: Women's Histories, Global Conversations*, Claremont, California, June 3, 2005).

<sup>31</sup> By April 1963, *Sex and the Single Girl* had sold 150,000 hardcover copies. Melissa Hantman, "Helen Gurley Brown," *Salon.com* [http://dir.salon.com/people/bc/2000/09/26/contest\\_winner\\_brown/index.html](http://dir.salon.com/people/bc/2000/09/26/contest_winner_brown/index.html) [accessed July 11, 2004]. The birth control pill was first made available in the United States in 1960; however, unmarried women had a difficult time gaining access to it until the late 1960s. It was during the mid-1960s and early 1970s that legislation barring access to contraception was finally declared unconstitutional. D'Emilio and Freedman, *Intimate Matters*, 251.

*Lady Chatterley's Lover* and Henry Miller's *Tropic of Cancer*, was overturned after a series of high-profile court decisions.<sup>32</sup> Americans were becoming more accustomed to explicit references to heterosexual sex in their literature, movies, television programs, and advertisements.

An ongoing debate over one of the longest-running perfume ad campaigns, for "Tabu," by Dana Perfumes, reveals how advertisers identified and adapted to changes in popular perceptions of female sexuality. Tabu advertisements, first designed in 1942, featured a young, female pianist and a male violinist—her teacher, according to the critics of the 1960s—succumbing to romantic passion, and breaking taboos in the process. The models wore Victorian-era clothing and hairstyles, and in the ad the violinist is in the process of bending his young student back over her piano stool with what appears to be a spontaneous and passionate kiss. The tagline described Tabu as "the 'forbidden' fragrance."<sup>33</sup> In a 1963 unsigned *Advertising Age* editorial column titled "The Creative Man's Corner," the editorialist argued that the Tabu ad still captured the "female dream." The columnist insisted that women "dream of somehow becoming so irresistible to the male principle of mastery that they will be crushed like a bouquet of roses in ardent appreciation. The very position of this accompanist—off balance, saved from ignominiously falling over the piano stool only by the male strength of her suddenly over-boiled friend—is the position, par excellence in which a female likes to fancy herself. Irresistible but still intact."<sup>34</sup> According to this advertiser, the Tabu ad captured the female sexual fantasy by depicting women as the passive recipients of male passion.

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<sup>32</sup> D'Emilio and Freedman, *Intimate Matters*, 287.

<sup>33</sup> For an example of an early Tabu ad, see *Harper's Bazaar* (October 1968): 65.

<sup>34</sup> "The Female Dream," *Advertising Age* 34 (March 18, 1963): 84.

TABU

the forbidden fragrance

Dana

PERFUME - COLOGNE - SPRAY COLOGNE - LIPSTICK - DUSTING POWDER - SOAP

“Tabu” advertisement, *Harper’s Bazaar* (October 1968): 65.

Of course, this sexual “fantasy,” which resembled the cover art of a bodice-ripper romance novel, was quite violent. The female pianist was literally bent backwards and “crushed” by the aggressive male violinist in pursuit of “mastery.”

By the late 1960s, some advertisers began to question whether Tabu’s ad still evoked “forbidden” passion. Art director and *Advertising Age* columnist Stephen Baker asked whether the Tabu ad was sexy enough, noting that, “today to the majority of female observers, this picture appears too saccharin.” He continued his critique, arguing, “The modern woman is no longer passive enough to accept this picture. She has been around. She realizes that romantic encounters such as depicted are rare.” Baker insisted that, while the 1940s woman felt this ad represented “forbidden” passion, the 1960s woman “expects a bolder expression of love from her boyfriend.”<sup>35</sup> By the late 1960s, Baker and his fellow advertisers viewed female sexual fantasy as having changed. They assumed that women, having “been around,” had greater sexual experience and were less likely to be impressed by the advertisement’s depiction of “passion” as a man aggressively kissing a passive woman. Baker compared the Tabu ad to an advertisement for “Vivara” perfume, which featured a white woman with long blonde hair, depicted naked from waist up with her arms clasped across her chest to hide her breasts. Baker praised the Vivara ad for “get[ting] the message across without coyness,” adding, “Here’s a girl who seems to have the capacity and know-how to enjoy love in all its forms. She typifies the female who accepts men for what they are.”<sup>36</sup> The title of Baker’s article asked, “Today’s Woman: Romantic or Sexy?” Baker was clearly a proponent of “sexy.” He argued that, by the late 1960s, consumers’ sexual fantasies were best represented through naked

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<sup>35</sup> Stephen Baker, “Today’s Woman: Romantic or Sexy?” *Advertising Age* 39 (October 21, 1968): 115.

<sup>36</sup> Baker, “Today’s Woman,” 115.



photographs of “sexy”—and sexually available—women, rather than the outdated and “coy” Tabu advertisements that emphasized “romance” and female passivity.

### **The “Liberated” Woman?: 1970s “Lifestyle” Advertisements**

In 1973, through the efforts of the D’Arcy, Masius, Benton and Bowles advertising agency, Dana Perfumes adjusted the Tabu advertisement to respond to these concerns about changing sexual norms. Reflecting and parodying social changes, the advertisement reversed the gendered positions of the man and the woman from previous ads. An elegantly dressed woman was cast as the violinist/teacher, kissing a male pianist wearing a suit—her student, presumably. The female teacher is clearly cast as the aggressor in this romantic embrace. She holds the pianist at the arch of his back, tilting him backward with the weight of her embrace.<sup>37</sup> Like the female pianists of years past, this male student is “off balance, saved from ignominiously falling over the piano stool only by the [fe]male strength of [his] suddenly over-boiled friend.” All of the Victorian sentiment is gone: unlike previous Tabu advertisements, this modern couple is definitely a product of the 1970s. They stand on a shag carpet amid modern art, and they are wearing styles appropriate for the early 1970s. The tagline’s suggestion, “Never mind how it happens. It happens,” encourages readers to take women’s new role—as a more confident, aggressive sexual partner—in stride. As long as “it” still happens, the advertisement suggests, it does not matter who is the initiator.

By depicting a woman as a sexual aggressor and as the authority (as the teacher) in an advertisement, Dana hoped to capture and capitalize on new sexual conventions. By the early 1970s, a growing number of Americans assumed that women had the same right

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<sup>37</sup> “Tabu Advertisement,” D’Arcy, Masius, Benton & Bowles Archives, Dana Box 50, Duke University Rare Book, Manuscript, and Special Collections Library.



"Tabu Advertisement," D'Arcy, Masius, Benton, and Bowles Archives, Dana Box 50,  
Duke University Rare Book, Manuscript, and Special Collections Library.

and inclination to enjoy and pursue sexual relationships, both within and outside marriage, as did men. It would make sense to many Americans of the early 1970s that “passion” could originate in a woman, and that she could be the sexual initiator. A growing number of Americans were familiar with the writings of radical feminists, who argued that sexual norms reflected an unequal and artificial gender system that made sex an issue of power, and put that power in the hands of men.<sup>38</sup> American women were learning about their own reproductive systems and demanding sexual and reproductive freedoms, such as access to contraception and abortion and equal partnership in sexual relationships.<sup>39</sup> D’Arcy, Masius, Benton & Bowles could assume most consumers were familiar with Tabu advertisements that depicted “old-fashioned” romance as male dominated. By recasting the roles, Tabu could poke fun both at its own Victorian-inspired ads and at “modern” courtship.

Few advertising campaigns adapted to changing sexual and social standards with as much lighthearted panache as Tabu. When the women's movement coalesced in the late 1960s and early 1970s, feminists had much to criticize in perfume ads that reflected advertisers’ narrow, negative image of women. Although women were purchasing more perfume than they ever had before, they were simultaneously participating in an upsurge

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<sup>38</sup> See Anne Koedt, “The Myth of the Vaginal Orgasm,” in *Notes from the First Year* (New York: New York Radical Feminists, 1968); and Kate Millet, “Sexual Politics: A Manifesto for Revolution,” in *Notes from the Second Year: Women’s Liberation*, ed. Firestone and Koedt (New York: New York Radical Feminists, April 1970), 112.

<sup>39</sup> For example, the bestselling book *Our Bodies, Ourselves* was released by the Boston Women’s Health Collective in the same year the revamped Tabu ad appeared. And American women had access to the Kinsey study, *Sexual Behavior in the Human Female* (1953), which detailed the wide variety of sexual behaviors women engaged in.

of consumer activism. Consumers, whether they identified with feminism or not, were calling marketers to account for their products and the messages they used to sell them.<sup>40</sup>

Feminists organized and articulated an ongoing critique of marketing and media standards. In a 1979 documentary, *Killing Us Softly: Advertising's Image of Women*, feminist media critic Jean Kilbourne described the “inescapable” effects of advertising on women, summing up many of the women’s movement’s chief grievances with the advertising industry. Kilbourne critiqued the advertising industry for ads that incessantly portrayed female beauty as an “absolute flawless,” white, slender aesthetic. She also scrutinized the industry for infantilizing women in advertisements. For example, Kilbourne pointed to Love’s “Baby Soft” perfume ads, first introduced in the 1970s, as an example of a campaign that depicted feminine immaturity as “sexy.”<sup>41</sup> Showing a Baby Soft ad that depicted a child model wearing makeup and jewelry, with the tagline, “Because innocence is sexier than you think,” Kilbourne argued that the campaign was “designed to give a very strong sexual message,” which is “of course insulting to adult women.” “What [Love’s Baby Soft advertisements are] saying to us is don’t mature, don’t be grown up, don’t be an adult.” While Kilbourne criticized the campaign’s message to adult women, she was especially concerned that this type of advertising could be “dangerous to little girls” for sexualizing “the little girl look.”<sup>42</sup> Nevertheless, the Baby Soft advertisements continued to run through the 1980s.

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<sup>40</sup> David Bollier, *Citizen Action and Other Big Ideas: A History of Ralph Nader and the Modern Consumer Movement* (Washington, D.C.: Center for the Study of Responsive Law, 1991).

<sup>41</sup> Pat Sloan, “Teen Fragrance Market Braces for Round of Activity: Revlon and MEM Introducing Brands,” *Chain Drug Review* 11, no. 23 (August 14, 1989): 36.

<sup>42</sup> Jean Kilbourne, *Killing Us Softly: Advertising's Image of Women* (Cambridge Documentary Films, Inc., 1979).

Feminists employed a variety of tactics when critiquing the sexism of advertising. Many feminists agreed that control of media was essential for female empowerment. Dr. Donna Allen, a member of the League of Women Voters and a founding member of Women Strike for Peace, directed her attention to the misrepresentation of women in the media. In 1972, Allen founded the "Women's Institute for the Freedom of the Press," and began a newsletter, *Media Report to Women: What Women are Doing and Thinking about the Communications Media*. Throughout the 1970s, this newsletter examined the image of women in advertisements, film, newspapers, television, and radio, and called for more and fairer representations of women in media. Over time, the *Media Report to Women* evolved into a quarterly journal, and it is still in publication.<sup>43</sup>

Other feminists employed more dramatic and confrontational tactics. Members of women's liberation groups joined together to form "Media Women," and on March 18, 1970, they staged a sit-in at the *Ladies' Home Journal* offices. Nearly two hundred feminists protested the magazine's practice of including "degrading and useless" advertisements, called for a day-care center for the children of employees, and demanded that the magazine cover the women's movement in its pages.<sup>44</sup> They also demanded that the male editor-in-chief, John Mack Carter, resign and be replaced by a female editor. Carter refused to resign and the advertising content did not noticeably change; however, the magazine did run an eight-page supplement, written by and about feminists, encouraging readers to organize across the country.<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> Wolfgang Saxon, "Donna Allen, 78, a Feminist and an Organizer," *New York Times*, 26 July 1999, B9.

<sup>44</sup> Verna Tomasson, "Ladies' Home Journal 2," *Rat* 3, no. 3 (April 4-18, 1970): 5.

<sup>45</sup> Ruth Rosen, *The World Split Open: How the Modern Women's Movement Changed America* (New York: Viking, 2000), 300. Alice Echols, *Daring to Be Bad*, 195-197.

Many feminists also spoke out from within the advertising industry. Midge Kovacs, a successful advertising executive and a member of the “Image Committee” of the National Organization for Women, advocated for more racial diversity in advertisements, along with a portrayal of women as equally confident, intelligent, and accomplished as men.<sup>46</sup> Kovacs tackled an early 1970s “Emeraude Parfum” ad by Coty that asked: “Want him to be more of a Man? Try being more of a Woman.” She pointed out that the “advertising appeals . . . are to a woman’s insecurities and anxieties about looking right, smelling right and catching a man.”<sup>47</sup> Unlike the advertisements for Tabu, the Emeraude advertising campaign implied that men and women had static gender-based identities, which could only be defined in opposition to one another. In other words, women took their identities from their dissimilarity from men, and vice versa. Therefore, the best way for a woman to “improve” a man was to change her own ways, adopting behaviors conventionally defined as “feminine.” Kovacs argued that, in 1971, as second-wave feminists and the nation in general reexamined gender norms, the Emeraude campaign was out of place and ineffective.

By writing columns for popular advertising trade journals, Kovacs exhorted advertisers to recognize the demands of feminists. In one article, “Women’s Lib—Do’s and Don’ts for Ad Men,” Kovacs attempted to summarize feminists’ demands for fair advertising: “What do these women want? Remember, we asked that about the blacks not so very long ago. We want to see women portrayed in a dazzling spectrum of possibilities—as lawyers, teachers, architects and business executives, as well as

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<sup>46</sup> Midge Kovacs, “Women’s Lib: Do’s and Don’ts for Ad Men,” *Marketing/Communication* 299 (January 1971): 34–35.

<sup>47</sup> Midge Kovacs, “New Magazines (and Ads) Show New Attitude toward Women,” *Advertising Age* 43 (March 13, 1972): 41–42.

housewives and typists. We want to see them living for their own goals, not merely through their children and their men. And we want to see these broadening roles for both white women and black.”<sup>48</sup> Within months, some feminists treated Kovacs’ article as a comprehensive critique of sexism in the advertising industry. In 1971, NOW used Kovacs’ research on advertising discrimination when they bestowed “Old Hat” awards on the ten “worst” advertising campaigns that perpetuated the discrimination against women. “Winners” were awarded old hats, a letter explaining NOW’s criticism of the campaign, and a copy of Kovacs’ article, “Women’s Lib: Do’s and Don’t’s.” NOW used the “Old Hat” awards, along with “Barefoot and Pregnant” awards, in hopes of shaming advertisers into abandoning sexist advertising styles.<sup>49</sup>

A number of advertising women and men worked with Midge Kovacs to improve the image of women in advertisements. Anne Tolstoi Foster, a vice-president and creative supervisor at the J. Walter Thompson advertising agency, wrote an article for the *New York Times* in 1971 promoting “ad lib” as a movement “designed to end the slurs and slams and putdowns given to women in today’s advertising.” Foster warned complacent advertisers, “You cannot afford to think of women as easy to fool,” and argued that advertisements that avoided sexist stereotypes were more effective for appealing to female consumers.<sup>50</sup> Foster and Kovacs teamed up with advertising women from J. Walter Thompson, NOW, and *Ms.* magazine to create a series of public service advertisements promoting “Womanpower.” One of these advertisements, which first ran in *Ms.* and *Mademoiselle*, featured a cartoon drawing of a man dressed in a business suit,

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<sup>48</sup> Kovacs, “Women’s Lib”: 34–35.

<sup>49</sup> NOW frequently awarded the “Barefoot and Pregnant” awards, like the “Old Hat” awards, to sexist advertisers whose advertising campaigns depicted women in demeaning or stereotypical roles. “Women’s Lib Offers Unsought Awards,” *Broadcasting* 81 (August 23, 1971): 24.

<sup>50</sup> Anne Tolstoi Foster, “Ad Lib Takes Clue from Women,” *New York Times*, 28 November 1971, F13.

pulling his pant legs up to his knees. The advertisement read, "Hire him. He's got great legs."<sup>51</sup> By suggesting that a man's job qualifications could be based on his physical appearance, this feminist advertisement exposed and ridiculed the ways sexism and beauty culture combined to demean female workers.

Some women within the advertising industry exhorted their peers to use their skills and resources to improve women's public image, rather than undercut it. Amelia Bassin, the chief executive of her own creative shop, Bassinova, publicly supported the women's movement. Bassin had spent the 1950s and 1960s moving up the ranks from the position of art director to become corporate senior vice-president at Fabergé, a leading perfume and cosmetics company. When the American Advertising Federation recognized Bassin as the 1970 "Advertising Woman of the Year," she used the occasion "to make a women's lib appeal to the assembled adfolk." Bassin prodded other female advertising executives, saying "the people who should really speak out [in favor of "women's lib"] are the women who have already made it, but they don't." Bassin singled out Mary Wells, the head of Wells, Rich, and Green, for failing to "lead women." Bassin proposed an advertising campaign to "improve the image of women in the business world," commenting: "I have considered many slogans, but the one I wound up with is 'Equal rights—for men.' Make men realize that they have just as much right as women to do the lowly jobs, to be left unconsidered when promotion vacancies come along, to be featured, in advertising, only in their specific, traditional humdrum activities." Bassin recommended that all advertising women donate an hour's pay to the project.<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> "Women's Rights Drive Gets Off the Ground," *Advertising Age* 43 (September 25, 1972): 73.

<sup>52</sup> "Amelia Bassin Makes Women's Lib Appeal as She Accepts Adwoman of Year Award," *Advertising Age* 41 (June 29, 1970): 81.



In 1971, advertising executives including Bassin; Jane Trahey, the president of Trahey/Wolf Advertising; and Reva Korda, senior vice-president of Ogilvy and Mather; met with members of the New York chapter of NOW for a “dialog with women.” NOW leaders encouraged advertisers to “avoid using women or their bodies as ‘objects’” and to show women as students, professionals, workers, and leaders.<sup>53</sup> While Bassin and Trahey publicly identified themselves with the women’s movement, some of the advertising executives were unfamiliar with feminists’ critiques of advertising. Korda admitted, “I was much more impressed than I thought I would be.”<sup>54</sup>

Liberal feminists within and outside of the advertising industry worked hard to reform the sexism entrenched within the advertising industry by organizing dialogues and by speaking to groups of advertisers on the topic of sexist advertisements. After their first dialogue, NOW and the American Association of Advertising Agencies (AAAA) arranged monthly workshops to develop more female-friendly advertising.<sup>55</sup> These efforts continued at least into the late 1970s. NOW’s lobbying and training helped raise awareness among advertisers about the significance of sexism. For instance, after much prodding from the New York chapter’s Media Reform Task Force, the National Advertising Review Board (advertising’s self-regulatory agency) published *Advertising and Women* in 1975 to assess the problem of sexism in the industry. In 1978, Midge Kovacs and other members of the Task Force conducted a workshop on advertising and women for NBC’s Broadcast Standards and Practices Department, upon the invitation of

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<sup>53</sup> Don Grant, “Are Femmes Fettered? This Week It’s 2 to 1 Yes: Women’s Lib ‘Dialog’ Tells Adfolk: Mend Ad Implications,” *Advertising Age* 42 (January 25, 1971): 3.

<sup>54</sup> Philip Dougherty, “Advertising: Anheuser Adds Malt Liquor,” *New York Times*, 18 January 1971, 62.

<sup>55</sup> Grant, “Are Femmes Fettered?” 3.

NBC vice-president, Bettye Hoffman.<sup>56</sup> Individual feminist advertisers, such as Janet Marie Carlson, the president of Carlson, Liebowitz & Gottlieb; and Franchellie Cadwell, president of Cadwell/Compton, a division of Compton Advertising, gave lectures to business groups and other advertisers on the topic of sexism in advertising.<sup>57</sup> Cadwell spoke before the Adcraft Club and the Women's Advertising Club, warning her fellow advertisers, "Advertising has mistaken most women's not wanting to march down Main St. or swap roles with their husbands for a desire to continue the status quo. In truth, the mass of women has been revolutionized—only advertising to women hasn't."<sup>58</sup>

Cadwell, Carlson, and the participants in NOW/AAAA dialogs all strived to expose and challenge the sexism within their industry. However, they also distanced themselves from the radical feminists "marching down Main Street," who they implicitly identified as advocating gender role "swapping." For the most part, feminist advertisers would be better defined as "liberal feminists" than "radical feminists." Feminists within the advertising industry were critical of advertisements that demeaned or objectified women, and they pushed advertisers to diversify the products promoted for female consumers. However, these advertising women were firm believers in consumer capitalism. They did not publicly question whether beauty standards—or the products they sold to women so they could try to meet those high standards—were sexist. Feminist advertisers revealed that they believed it was consistent for them to promote both perfume and feminism; however, they sought promotional styles that refrained from sexist stereotyping and that acknowledged women's diverse roles and experiences.

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<sup>56</sup> "NOW Discusses Advertising to Women with Networks and Ad Agencies," *Media Report to Women* (December 1, 1978): 2.

<sup>57</sup> "Janet Carlson Lists Woes of Women in Agency Work," *Advertising Age* 44 (August 27, 1973): 165.

<sup>58</sup> "Libs Have Had Little Effect on Ads to Women," *Advertising Age* 44 (March 19, 1973): 44.

While many advertisers publicly supported feminism, others just as publicly disavowed the movement. After the first NOW/AAAA dialogue, one “agency man” in attendance commented, “It wasn’t a ‘Dialog with women,’ it was a diatribe from a few select women.”<sup>59</sup> Advertisers, both male and female, sometimes expressed outright hostility to feminism. In a dismissive article on “women’s lib” for *Advertising Age*, columnist Don Grant encouraged female advertising executives, or “ad gals,” to comment on the growing women’s movement. According to Grant, “most agreed, at least partially, with some of the general aims of the women’s liberation movement, but all felt the subject had been overemphasized, overpublicized, and had little, if any, relevancy to them personally.” For example, Mary Wells Lawrence, the advertising executive who Amelia Bassin had singled out for neglecting to “lead women,” asserted: “I’ve never been discriminated against in my life. These days it is fashionable to get mad at something or somebody.” Lawrence trivialized feminist-led sit-ins and demonstrations at magazines and television networks by characterizing them as “tantrums.”<sup>60</sup> Helen Van Slyke, advertising director of Helena Rubinstein Incorporated, admitted that she subscribed to the “equal-pay-for-equal-jobs theory,” but declared, “when they get into the ‘This advertising-is-offensive’ bit about cosmetics, it just makes me sleepy. What is degrading about teaching women to be more beautiful? . . . Don’t they realize it makes everybody happy?” Van Slyke recommended that feminists turn their focus to banking or steel mills. Jacqueline Brandwynne, the executive at Jacqueline Brandwynne Associates, a subsidiary of Benton and Bowles, summed up the attitude of some female advertising

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<sup>59</sup> Grant, “Are Femmes Fettered?” 3.

<sup>60</sup> Don Grant, “Women’s Libs Fume at ‘Insulting’ Ads; Ad Gals are Unruffled,” *Advertising Age* 41 (July 27, 1970): 1.

executives when she said, “ten horses couldn’t make me join one of those women’s lib groups.”<sup>61</sup>

Given that these comments were all made in the context of Don Grant’s dismissive article on “women’s lib,” which was published in the leading trade journal *Advertising Age*, it is possible that these advertising women disparaged the movement partly out of concern for their professional image. While women in advertising might sympathize with some feminist goals, many were concerned about being labeled a “woman’s libber” and discredited in their industry. Advertising women were frequently interviewed about their opinions on feminism and sexism, and the scrutiny must have been uncomfortable.<sup>62</sup> Before Mary Wells Lawrence would consent to an interview on the topic of feminism for *New York Times* reporter Judy Klemesrud, “her male press agent warned that she wasn’t a ‘women’s liberationist’ and that she didn’t like to discuss ‘controversial subjects.’”<sup>63</sup> Advertisers like Mary Wells Lawrence and Jacqueline Brandwynne enjoyed professional success and considerable authority within the advertising industry. Yet these women had to negotiate relationships within a male-dominated business world, appeasing their male coworkers and the male clients served by their advertising agencies at a time when many within the industry perceived feminist criticisms as an attack. Klemesrud noted that “Several of the women executives interviewed showed a . . . reluctance to appear ‘too militant.’ ‘It might scare off

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<sup>61</sup> Grant, “Women’s Libs Fume,” 1.

<sup>62</sup> Grant, “Women’s Libs Fume,” 1; Jane Levere, “Portrayal of Women in Ads Defended by Top Ad Women,” *Editor and Publisher* 107 (June 8, 1974): 11; Judy Klemesrud, “On Madison Avenue, Women Take Stand in Middle of the Road,” *New York Times*, 3 July 1973, 28.

<sup>63</sup> Klemesrud, “On Madison Avenue,” 28.

prospective male clients,' one woman president explained. Others were reluctant to attack particular commercials, even if they thought they were offensive to women."<sup>64</sup>

Many advertising women were troubled by the ways women—both consumers and advertisers—were treated by their industry. And some, such as Kovacs, Bassin, and Cadwell, used their authority as advertisers to speak publicly about the sexism of the industry. Others, given their own success in the advertising industry, viewed feminist criticisms as unnecessary and unfounded, or they were intimidated into keeping silent about the discrimination around them.<sup>65</sup> Grant's article provides a good example of how feminism, particularly women's liberation, was received by many advertisers, both male and female. Clearly, by featuring powerful "ad gals'" skepticism about feminism, Grant intended to discredit the women's movement. Assertions such as Mary Wells Lawrence's that she had "never been discriminated against" were meant to prove that the advertising industry and the nation at large was not sexist. Grant assumed that his readers would interpret the presence of female advertising executives within the industry—and within his article—as proof that the industry did not discriminate against women.<sup>66</sup>

Like most businesses in the 1960s and early 1970s, women faced tremendous discrimination within the advertising industry, despite the success of some individuals. Companies like Revlon, which had an in-house advertising shop, had a terrible reputation as workplaces for women; the chief executive and founder Charles Revson had a reputation as an intolerant and chauvinist employer.<sup>67</sup> During the 1970s, as feminists drew attention to the issues of sexism in the workplace, articles frequently appeared in

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<sup>64</sup> Klemesrud, "On Madison Avenue," 28.

<sup>65</sup> "JWT Defended by 11 Women Against Harragan's Charges," *Advertising Age* 43 (September 25, 1972):

67. "Slow Improvement in Status Our Fault, Two Adwomen Say," *Advertising Age* 47 (April 5, 1976): 22.

<sup>66</sup> Grant, "Women's Libs Fume," 1.

<sup>67</sup> Andrew Tobias, *Fire and Ice: the Story of Charles Revson* (New York: Morrow, 1976).

*Advertising Age* detailing the frustration experienced by women working in the ad business. Female advertisers contended that ad men rarely listened to their ideas and demeaned and harassed them, and they pointed out that there was a glass ceiling in the advertising industry, just as in most businesses.<sup>68</sup> In 1977, a survey of advertisers' salaries revealed that women were paid considerably less than their male counterparts, even when they held the same job titles and responsibilities.<sup>69</sup>

For the most part, however, the chief concern about the advertising industry expressed by feminists (both within and outside the business) was the image it promoted, not discrimination within the industry. When Gloria Steinem and Elizabeth Forsling Harris gave a press conference to introduce *Ms.* magazine to advertisers, they made it clear that "advertising that is really insulting to women" would not be welcome in its pages.<sup>70</sup> A *Ms.* editorial on advertising policy asserted: "Yes, we may use scent and various personal-care products (so do men . . .). But more to feel good about ourselves than to attract or hang on to a male."<sup>71</sup> Steinem and her colleagues soon discovered that advertisers rebelled against the expectation that they alter their campaigns to meet the magazine's standards. Few fragrance advertisements appeared in *Ms.* Not only did most marketers dismiss feminists as perfume consumers, but they were dismayed that the editors refused to provide "advertorials" (editorial text that supported products). The perfume industry and marketers viewed *Ms.* magazine, with its focus on activism, current

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<sup>68</sup> "Janet Carlson Lists Woes of Women in Agency Work," *Advertising Age* 44 (August 27, 1973): 165. "Women Copywriters Get Better, But Male Chauvinism in Ads Rolls On," *Advertising Age* 47 (October 4, 1976): 75-76.

<sup>69</sup> "Women in Advertising Get Less For Same Titles, Survey Reports," *Advertising Age* 48 (October 3, 1977): 94.

<sup>70</sup> "Now Feminists Have Their Own Magazine—'Ms.'" *Advertising Age* 42 (November 1, 1971): 8.

<sup>71</sup> "Everything You Ever Wanted to Know about Advertising," 58.

events, and politics, as a poor vehicle for perfume ads, which generally pitched a product using the promise of romantic attachments, glamour and beauty, or economic status.<sup>72</sup>

While advertisers might outwardly reject the women's movement, the influence of the women's movement on advertisers is evident in campaigns that appropriated feminist rhetoric to advertise their products. Historian Ruth Rosen describes the emergence of marketing styles that appropriated feminist language as "consumer feminism," pointing to the Virginia Slims cigarette ads, with their slogan, "You've Come a Long Way, Baby," as an example.<sup>73</sup> Several 1970s perfume advertisements are excellent examples of consumer feminism. Revlon's "Charlie," a perfume introduced in 1973, and perfectly positioned for the twenty-something baby boomer, was perhaps the best example of this style of advertising. Not only did the scent have a "unisex" name, but also the Charlie ad campaign was the first to prominently feature a woman wearing slacks. The model strides across the page holding a briefcase, leaving behind the elegant, hyper-sophisticated leisure of 1960s advertisements. Whereas models for perfume ads were usually posed languidly resting against handsome men, sitting, or even laying, supine, in glamorous settings, Charlie's wide strides indicated an uncommon level of activity and hinted at ambition and power. Revlon explained its decision to shun the traditional French-inspired names, saying: "We just felt that Charlie was a kicky, alive name for a new liberated woman who is not afraid to wear a fragrance named after a man."<sup>74</sup>

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<sup>72</sup> Gloria Steinem, "Sex, Lies, and Advertising," in *Moving Beyond Words* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1994).

<sup>73</sup> Rosen, *The World Split Open*, 308.

<sup>74</sup> Lorraine Baltera, "Revlon Launches Push to Create 'Charlie Girl,'" *Advertising Age* 44 (April 2, 1973): 25.

Charlie's a gorgeous  
sexy-young smell.  
(Concentrated!)  
And full of surprises  
Just like you  
If you haven't met Charlie yet,  
what are you waiting for?

most original fragrance. By REVLON

Concentrated Cologne • Concentrated Cologne Spray • Concentrated Perfume Spray  
Concentrated Perfume Purse Spray • New Concentrated Perfume in-a-Pot • New Concentrated Perfume Oil

"Charlie" advertisement, *Glamour* 72 (October 1974): 9.



Revlon created a detailed personality for “Charlie.” In both advertisements and press releases, Revlon described Charlie as a nonconformist, suggesting that the scent would appeal to “anyone who is definitive, declarative, independent and slightly irreverent.” While Revlon and most advertising critics primarily described Charlie as “liberated,” their definition of liberation is difficult to define.<sup>75</sup> In the early 1970s, depending on your point of view, a liberated woman could be a feminist, or she could have rejected the idea that women needed to settle down and get married. For example, a year before the Charlie ads were introduced, Carven Perfumes marketed “MaGriffe” with advertisements that read: “You’re liberated. You don’t believe in marriage. You tell him so. You wear MaGriffe. He slips on the ring. (It’s five carats.)” The advertisement ends with an apology for “unliberating the liberated woman.” Carven assumed that readers would agree that—for women—“liberation” was dependent on remaining unmarried.<sup>76</sup> Certainly, a large part of Charlie’s appeal was meant to be her refusal to define herself through intimate attachments to men. In the early 1970s, the media continually pointed to the effects of the sexual revolution on American women, as baby boomers postponed or abstained from marriage.<sup>77</sup> Revlon intended to capture this trend with Charlie, and company press releases created a background for Charlie: “She lives in a fair size city; her age is 20-something. Her marital status: Not yet, but she says ‘yes’ to career.”<sup>78</sup> Charlie was liberated enough to postpone marriage, but conventional enough to view heterosexual marriage as part of her future.

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<sup>75</sup> Baltera, “Revlon Launches Push,” 25.

<sup>76</sup> Lorraine Baltera, “Fragrance Marketers Move from ‘Special Occasions Only’ Strategies,” *Advertising Age* 43 (August 14, 1972): 28–29.

<sup>77</sup> D’Emilio and Freedman, *Intimate Matters*, 330.

<sup>78</sup> Baltera, “Revlon Launches Push,” 25.

The “Charlie girl” set the standard for “lifestyle” perfumes, closely linking the product to a carefully crafted image meant to appeal to a group of women with lots of buying power. Charlie’s sales were phenomenal, and the marketing style inspired numerous imitators, including Fabergé’s “Babe,” Max Factor’s “Just Call Me Maxi,” and Coty’s “Smitty.” All of these scents positioned themselves to white baby boomers—twenty-something women who expected to hold a full-time job regardless of their marital status. In ads for Charlie, Revlon appealed to the career woman by depicting her in a professional environment, carrying a briefcase, and declaring that she said “yes” to career. While Revlon sought to capture the attention of baby boomers postponing or forgoing marriage, the Charlie ads also subtly conveyed support for the most popular demand fought for by feminists: equal opportunities for women in the workplace. Revlon, continuing in the tradition of ads that linked perfume to status and wealth, defined the “workplace” in white-collar terms, showing Charlie in professional business attire.

Smashing the glass ceiling was the only struggle shared by Charlie and feminists. While feminists critiqued the advertising industry for portraying women as sex objects and for playing on consumers’ fears about looking right, Charlie, like all perfume ad models, fit 1970s normative standards of beauty and fashion. By clothing Charlie in a pantsuit and giving her a man’s name, Revlon capitalized upon the unisex styles and androgynous imagery that was popular in the mid-1970s. Heterosexual norms of beauty in the mid-1970s shifted to permit women to wear pants, “natural” or muted makeup, short hairstyles, and by the late 1970s, Ralph Lauren trouser suits replete with fedoras,

ties, and vests, and still be considered “feminine.”<sup>79</sup> Perfume advertisers cautiously and infrequently featured unisex styles, preferring even in the late 1970s to feature models in skirts. Revlon advertisers certainly did not emphasize Charlie’s androgyny. Charlie wore pants, but she was still a thin, expensively dressed white woman with long, shiny hair and an elaborately made-up face. This contradiction—the attractive, yet independent, confident, even powerful-looking woman, gave audiences a “liberated” woman they could appreciate. Even in a pantsuit, Charlie was not threatening, she was “sexy.” Through Charlie, Revlon advertisers proved that the values advanced by women’s liberation (confidence, independence, intellect) could be repackaged and sold to women if those ideals were “prettified” and made to look like a new, more empowered *lifestyle* rather than a concerted challenge to social inequality.

Perfume advertisers in the 1970s readily incorporated images of “liberated” white women into their advertisements; however, most perfume print ads in “mainstream” women’s magazines ignored consumers of color. In 1970 when a group of African American businessmen launched *Essence*, a fashion and “lifestyle” magazine for black women, it quickly became popular among African American consumers, particularly middle-class consumers. In order to showcase a distinctively black aesthetic within the magazine’s pages, the *Essence* editorial staff insisted that marketers who bought space within the magazine feature black women in their ads, something that advertisers generally resisted. Hoping to generate an income by selling ad space, the magazine staff wooed cosmetics and fragrance advertisers, pointing to the financial stability—and spending potential—of *Essence* consumers. Nevertheless, it was not until the early 1990s

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<sup>79</sup> For a discussion of androgynous fashions, see Fred Davis, *Fashion, Culture, and Identity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 35–37.

that major fragrance and cosmetics companies, such as Revlon and Estée Lauder, began to purchase advertising pages in the magazine.<sup>80</sup> Most companies continued to neglect black women as consumers of fragrance.

When lesser-known fragrance companies did advertise in magazines such as *Essence* or *Ebony*, marketers frequently employed copycat ads that merely took white campaigns and reworked them with black models. Cachet had employed the tagline “It’s the fragrance as individual as you are” for national magazines like *Cosmopolitan*, *Glamour*, *Life*, *Seventeen*, *Ladies’ Home Journal*, and *Time* with white models before it reworked the ad for *Ebony* with black models. The *Ebony* ad, reformulated to appeal to an African-American audience, even recognized “ethnic” names, promising that the scent would be “different on Michelle than on Radiah.”<sup>81</sup> Few perfumes positioned themselves for African Americans exclusively, and those that did fared poorly. A writer for a druggist trade magazine remarked, “We have a small black population here and we meet their needs with our regular lines. . . . Cachet and Emeraude and Heaven Scent and Tabu are all very popular with blacks here. We don’t get requests for something like Polished Amber.” Retailers speculated that “ethnic” scents made African Americans feel singled out and excluded from national beauty culture, so they often just refused to stock these products.<sup>82</sup>

Fabergé’s “Tigress” was one of the few perfumes that marketed itself to African American women during the 1960s and 1970s in “mainstream” magazines. However, the campaign relied on portrayals of black women as “animals,” feeding on white stereotypes

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<sup>80</sup> Charles Whitaker, “Essence,” in *Women’s Periodicals in the United States: Consumer Magazines*, ed. Kathleen Endres and Therese Lueck (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1995): 80.

<sup>81</sup> “Cachet” advertisement, *Ebony* (December 1973): 4; “Matchabelli Ads Push Cachet as Individual Scent,” *Advertising Age* 41 (August 17, 1970): 16.

<sup>82</sup> “Selling Black Cosmetics Proves a Tricky Business,” *American Druggist* 176 (August 1977): 59–61.



**Tigress.**  
**Because men are such animals.**

Tigress perfume, Tigress cologne, new Tigress Musk and other wild life accessories. Tigress® — at fine stores.

Falco

“Tigress” advertisement, *Cosmopolitan* 179 (December 1975): 275.

of black women as sexually primitive creatures, physically available, even predatory.<sup>83</sup> The perfume was sold in a tiger-stripped bottle, contributing to the “jungle” image advertisers used to market the scent. Advertisements pictured a slim black woman in a tiger-stripped leotard, crouching over the perfume bottle. The leotard, combined with dark eye makeup and an orange-streaked hairstyle evidently meant to resemble a lion’s mane, depicted the African American woman as a tiger. The ad copy read: “Tigress. Because men are such animals.”<sup>84</sup> Yet because it was a woman portrayed as an animal in the ad, Tigress advertisers implied that *women* responded to “animalistic” male sexuality in equally animalistic ways. Other Tigress ads used celebrities such as Tamara Dobson, who was famous for her role as Cleopatra Jones in Blaxploitation films, to cement the connection between the perfume and “animalistic” black female sexuality. In the Tigress ad, Dobson wore an evening gown; however, Dobson’s “Cleopatra Jones” character was known for her extravagant clothing, especially furs. Film historian Yvonne Tasker has argued that Dobson’s wardrobe in Blaxploitation films played on the white public’s perceptions of black female sexuality as animalistic.<sup>85</sup>

One of the most significant changes of the 1970s was the newfound discovery of the working white woman. As a growing number of white middle-class female baby boomers entered the workforce (usually more lucrative positions than the women of color—especially African American women and Latinas—who had long been there), marketers hoped to capture this burgeoning market by encouraging women to wear

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<sup>83</sup> Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*. (New York: Routledge, 1991), 170–172.

<sup>84</sup> “Tigress” advertisement, *Cosmopolitan* 179 (December 1975), 275.

<sup>85</sup> Yvonne Tasker, “Women Warriors: Gender, Sexuality and Hollywood’s Fighting Heroines,” in *Spectacular Bodies: Gender, Genre and the Action Cinema*. (New York: Routledge, 1993). “Tigress” advertisement, *Cosmopolitan*, 185 (December 1978): 41.

perfume to the office. However, perfume advertisers continued to focus primarily on wealthy white career women. Furthermore, they preferred not to show them actually *doing* any work; instead, they indicated women's career status through their clothing. Amelia Bassin, the advertising executive who publicly identified with women's liberation, sarcastically described how most advertisers depicted working women: "Simple, it's done with pants."<sup>86</sup> Rena Bartos, a senior vice-president at the J. Walter Thompson advertising agency, reminded advertisers, "Just taking a woman in a commercial and putting a briefcase in her hand doesn't mean you are communicating with the new working woman."<sup>87</sup> Many women in the paid workforce indicated disgust with campaigns (such as Revlon's Charlie) that only understood "work" as well-paid professional work, and therefore "liberating." At a *Glamour* magazine panel representing the "Outstanding Young Working Women" of 1977, participants unanimously advised marketers to "lay off the cutesy liberated women stuff." Panel participants such as Elizabeth Harrington, vice-president and management supervisor at the advertising agency J. Walter Thompson, declared that most companies were "missing the point with working-women-oriented advertising. I don't tend to think of myself in terms of any single consumer description. I function as a working woman, but also as a mother, homemaker, sports enthusiast as well as an individual."<sup>88</sup>

Unfortunately, advertisers interpreted individual women's frustration with "liberated-woman" advertising as a sign that the women's movement had collapsed.

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<sup>86</sup> Amelia Bassin, "Amazing New Discovery!" *Drug and Cosmetic Industry* 121 (August 1977): 20.

<sup>87</sup> Ibid. Bartos did research on female consumers through the 1970s for J. Walter Thompson and eventually published *The Moving Target: What Every Marketer Should Know about Women* (New York: The Free Press, 1982).

<sup>88</sup> Lorraine Baltera, "Working Woman Ads Often Off Target: Panel," *Advertising Age* 48 (January 31, 1977): 33.

Rather than adjust advertising to show a more complex, modern working woman, the perfume industry executives increasingly believed that women were tired of independence and wanted to return to “traditional” roles, as romantic partners, seductresses, wives, or mothers. As early as 1975 Revlon offered “Jontue,” a fragrance positioned to appeal to “a less active and more female woman” than the Charlie user.

Revlon promoted Jontue by arguing,

In today’s technocratic, presumably rational world, young women are becoming deeply romantic . . . underneath their coolly contemporary clothes, they still thrill to a crinoline Scarlett O’Hara. And that, even though most of the time they like the way they look, there are times when they want to look like Cybil Shepherd—or, at least, her sister . . . that even though they are absorbed by consumerism, and worry a lot about ecology and population growth, in their secret heart of hearts, they’d rather be loved by Robert Redford than Ralph Nader.<sup>89</sup>

Jontue promoters hinted that women were more interested in achieving an ideal standard of beauty and romance than they were in “liberation.” Describing the Jontue campaign almost a decade later, Revlon’s in-house advertiser Sanford Buchsbaum explained that feminism was a trend that met its demise by the mid-1970s: “Revlon recognized that women had made the equality point, which Charlie addressed. By 1975, women were hungering for an expression of femininity. They were ready to re-express themselves personally, and that was Jontue’s position.”<sup>90</sup> In other words, equality and femininity were irreconcilable goals; if women chose to have the same rights as men, they had to imitate a male standard, emulating men in appearance and behavior. In the late 1970s and early 1980s, Revlon executives removed what they clearly saw as the lesser of the two options. Revlon gradually “softened” Charlie’s image by dressing her in a skirt and

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<sup>89</sup> Lorraine Baltera, “Revlon, Under New Top Exec, Leads Fall Fragrance Intros,” *Advertising Age* 46 (September 22, 1975): 1.

<sup>90</sup> Bess Gallanis, “New Strategies Revive the Rose’s Fading Bloom,” *Advertising Age* 55 (February 27, 1984): sec. 2, M9.



Jontue

Sensual...  
but not too far from innocence.

The Beautiful Fragrance by Revlon

“Jontue” advertisement, *Glamour* 75 (December 1977): 17.

picturing her embracing men. As early as 1978, Jerry Levitan, the vice-president of marketing for Charlie at Revlon, declared, “the Charlie girl has matured. But her goals are still valid and she is still a trendsetter. She’s just a little softer and not as uptight.”<sup>91</sup>

### **Celebrities, Sex, and Status: Backlash of the 1980s**

Charlie’s metamorphosis did not go unnoticed by feminists or advertising pundits. Amelia Bassin, who established herself as both a feminist and an advertising pundit in the 1970s, addressed Charlie’s “shocking” new marketing approach in a 1983 column entitled “Et tu, Charlie?” Bassin praised the early Charlie for replacing “the pretty-faced, porcelain-pored princess-on-pedestal—so aloof, so alone, so all-alike; to whom we had grown so glued” with “Something Else—invisible, but chock full of PRESENCE. Somebody called it ‘Lifestyle,’ . . . and ‘Lifestyle’ came to be interpreted in our ads as either Women’s Lib, or, at the very least, aggressive ladies in pants.” However, Bassin lamented the direction the Charlie campaign had taken:

Ten years and dozens of knockoffs later, here comes Charlie in something new; same old ‘gorgeous sexy young’ scent but—what’s this? a strapless, all ruffly, dress-up dress and a brand-new accessory: a handsome, hand-kissing GUY. And that, my dears, is when I went into this state of high shock . . . . Oh Charlie, how could you? . . . Why, oh why, after all that truly breakthrough excitement, head for that ever-more-crowded Clone Country? Beats me.

According to Bassin, Revlon assumed women to be increasingly interested in “traditional relationships” instead of “liberation,” although she strongly disagreed with the market research that Revlon used to justify their new approach. After pointing out that this research neither reflected the diversity of Charlie users, nor accounted for the fact that the average age of the Charlie user was merely fourteen years old, Bassin concluded, “All

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<sup>91</sup> Pat Sloan, “Fragrance Arena Getting Whiff of Designer Trend,” *Advertising Age* 49 (April 24, 1978): 102.

they had to do was picture our Charlie person striding BACKWARD . . . and save pots of money.”<sup>92</sup>

As perfume marketers moved into the 1980s, the “lifestyles” approach of the 1970s seemed to have lost its luster. Perfume advertisers emphasized designer fragrances, celebrity fragrances, and “New Romantic” campaigns, arguing that a focus on women’s lifestyles—particularly a “liberated” lifestyle—was no longer cutting edge. After introducing its “New Romantics” line, Estée Lauder marketers reassured: “Women today have accomplished. They can now relax a little and be romantic without giving up anything.”<sup>93</sup> The market had “matured” as well. Baby boomers were reaching their thirties, and marketers assumed they were looking for more conventional, romantic images. Fragrance marketers lamented declining sales through the early 1980s, and blamed the losses on the recession, oversaturation of the baby boomer market, and “lifestyle” burnout. Their means of adapting to the economy mimicked a larger 1980s marketing trend. Many perfume marketers turned their focus to extremely expensive prestige scents, banking on the wealthy to pull their companies out of the slump.<sup>94</sup>

Some marketers also had a second and more controversial solution to declining perfume sales: use explicit sexual imagery—particularly, nudity—to catch and keep consumers’ attention. Calvin Klein’s print advertising for “Obsession” between the mid-1980s and mid-1990s provides a specific example of a controversial campaign that provoked debate among feminists, advertisers, religious fundamentalists, and many

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<sup>92</sup> Amelia Bassin, “Et Tu, Charlie?” *Drug & Cosmetic Industry*, 132 (March 1983): 22. In her analysis of 1980s “backlash,” Susan Faludi used Charlie’s “softened” image as evidence that marketers were attempting to regain ground they had lost to feminists during the women’s movement. Susan Faludi, *Backlash: The Undeclared War against American Women* (New York: Crown, 1991).

<sup>93</sup> Sloan, “Fragrance Arena Getting Whiff of Designer Trend,” 102.

<sup>94</sup> “Treating an Industry’s Sensitive Complexion,” *Advertising Age* 54 (February 27, 1983): sec. 2, M9; Karrie Jacobs, “The Name Is the Game: Warner Cosmetics Banks on Designer Names Like Vanderbilt, Picasso, and Lauren to Boost Its Fragrance Line,” *Madison Avenue* 26 (September 1984): 48.

others. The ads were generally shot in black and white, and depicted men and women either scantily dressed, or completely naked. Obsession ads were meant to connect the product to “raw sexuality,” linking the scent to chance sexual encounters, rather than romance or marriage, showing naked men and women (usually in pairs, but in one series, in a ménage a trois) engaged in sexual exchanges.

Feminist responses to the Obsession ads illustrated the differences of opinion that developed among feminists during the “sex wars” of the early 1980s. During the late 1970s and throughout the 1980s, feminists developed a political critique of the pornography industry. Many feminists, most notably Andrea Dworkin and Catherine MacKinnon, argued for state censorship of pornography on the basis that it inherently oppressed women. Dworkin and other “antipornography” feminists contended that the underlying theme of pornography is male power, and that pornography educated men to view heterosexual sex as a violent act of male domination.<sup>95</sup> Antipornography feminists understood pornographic images as an incitement to violence, and argued that, even if the particular pornographic film or magazine did not depict sex as a violent act, men raised in a patriarchal culture have been taught to view sex as an instrument of domination.<sup>96</sup> On the other hand, “anti-antiporn” activists, such as members of FACT, the Feminist Anti-Censorship Taskforce, argued that censorship would limit Americans’ right to sexual dissent, and exacerbate the political repression of sexual minorities and gender nonconformists.<sup>97</sup>

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<sup>95</sup> See, for example, Andrea Dworkin, *Pornography: Men Possessing Women* (New York: Perigee, 1979).

<sup>96</sup> Jane Gerhard, *Desiring Revolution: Second-Wave Feminism and the Rewriting of American Sexual Thought, 1920 to 1982* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001), 173–195.

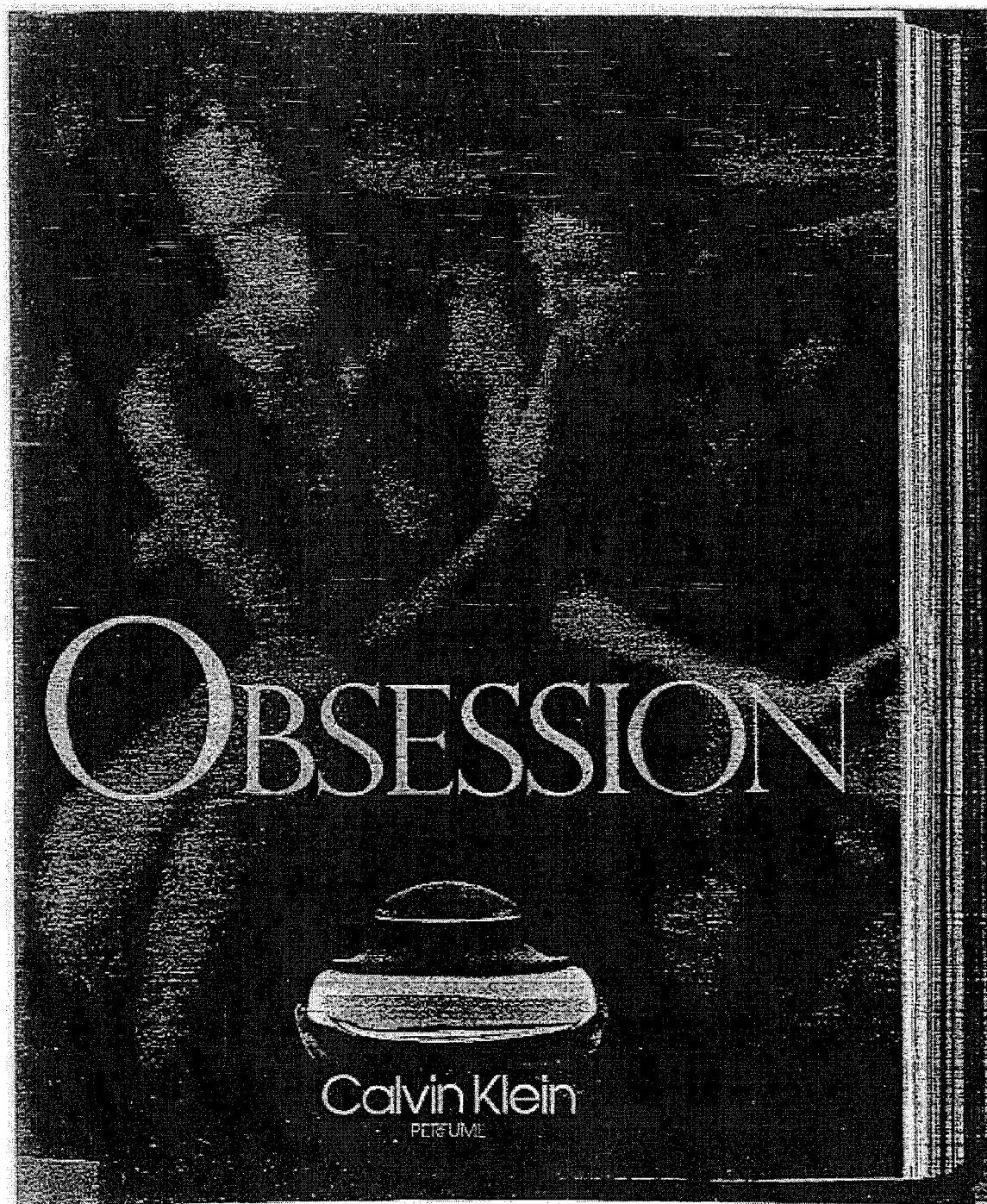
<sup>97</sup> Nan Hunter and Lisa Duggan, *Sex Wars: Sexual Dissent and Political Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1995), 6.

The Obsession campaign, with its suggestive sexual imagery, served as a topic of dispute among feminists debating pornography's acceptability. In 1986, Gloria Steinem surprised some feminists by accepting Obsession ads for publication in *Ms.* She justified her decision by saying, "sexuality and nudity are a part of life, and if it's appropriate, fine. . . . There's a difference between women in tight jeans—where the ads are aimed at pleasing men—and ads like the Calvin Klein Obsession ad, where a man and a woman are in positions of equality."<sup>98</sup> Steinem alluded to a Calvin Klein advertisement from the early 1980s for Klein's designer jeans ads, which featured fifteen-year-old Brooke Shields asserting, "Nothing comes between me and my Calvins." For these controversial ads, Klein had capitalized upon the fact that Shields had recently starred in films such as *Pretty Baby* (1978) and *Blue Lagoon* (1980), which had featured her as a sexually active—and sexually available—prepubescent girl. Steinem, along with members of Women Against Pornography (a feminist alliance founded by Susan Brownmiller in 1979) joined conservative activists such as the American Family Association and the Catholic Women's League to protest the jeans advertisements, pointing out that, by depicting Shields in a sexually provocative manner, they focused a sexualized "gaze" onto a girl legally too young to consent to sex.

While Steinem was still ambivalent about Calvin Klein's advertising policies, she chose to not object to the Obsession perfume advertisements. Steinem suggested that, because the Obsession ads eroticized both adult men and adult women, and therefore could appeal to both male and female heterosexuals, it was not "sexist." However, many feminists disagreed with Steinem's analysis. Women Against Pornography, for example, critiqued the Obsession ads as "one long pornographic fantasy" and called for their

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<sup>98</sup> Jeffrey A. Trachtenberg, "It's Become Part of Our Culture," *Forbes*, 137 (May 5, 1986): 134.



“Obsession” advertisement, *Ms. 15* (January 1987): 7.

censorship.<sup>99</sup> Of course, censorship frequently sparked prurient interests: when Texan 7-11 stores wrapped *Texas Monthly* magazines containing the offending Obsession ad in brown paper, the stores sold their entire stock of the magazine.<sup>100</sup>

Advertising pundits waffled in their commentary on Calvin Klein's controversial ads. Although they acknowledged that Obsession was making impressive sales, many advertisers still found much to criticize about the campaign. Michael McWilliams, an editorialist for *Advertising Age*, described the Obsession television commercials, which continued in the hypersexual vein of the print ads, as "neo-yuppie drivel" and "narcissistic posing in glamorous settings."<sup>101</sup> He also critiqued the campaign for its sexual explicitness. Barry Day, vice chairman of the ad group McCann-Erickson Worldwide, commented "Klein's the creative leader of the new eroticism in ads. But he makes the public think about sex and their own sexuality—and that's very disturbing to a lot of people."<sup>102</sup> While the Obsession campaign was similar to most perfume ads in that it pitched the product by associating it with sexual passion, it "disturbed" many consumers and advertisers because it did not connect that passion to romance or marriage. Nor did these ads merely hint at sexual passion by showing a couple flirting, courting, or kissing. Instead, Obsession ads showed a couple (or a trio) engaged in sexual exchanges. Not only did Obsession push the envelope in terms of explicitness shown in advertisements, but by showing a ménage à trois, it depicted "deviant" sexuality.

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<sup>99</sup> Maggie Paley, "The Magnificent Obsession of Robin Burns," *Savvy* 7 (October 1986): 42.

<sup>100</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>101</sup> Michael McWilliams, "Calvin Bests Fellini with Obsession Spots," *Advertising Age* 56 (April 1985): 81.

<sup>102</sup> Kim Foltz, "A Kinky New Calvinism," *Newsweek* 105 (March 11, 1985): 65.

Feminist Amelia Bassin commented favorably on the Obsession campaign, complimenting the female president of Calvin Klein Cosmetics and the executive behind the ads, Robin Burns, for creating a campaign that would spark the interest of consumers.

Obsession has all the ingredients of success—sensational, sexy name . . . socko, sexy fragrance . . . unique packaging . . . terrific merchandising strategy . . . an extremely healthy budget, definitely not to be sneezed at . . . and that absolutely priceless asset, highly controversial advertising. Sure, some will be turned off by it, but plenty more will be thrilled and intrigued and tempted to indulge in Calvin Klein's Obsession.<sup>103</sup>

Like Gloria Steinem, Bassin did not view the Obsession advertisements as “sexist.”

Bassin concluded with commendations for Robin Burns: “Congrat’s.—smart cookie

Robin Burns, and lots and lots of luck. We sure could use more originality all

’round. . . .”<sup>104</sup> Bassin’s comments suggest that in the realm of perfume advertising, the

more “highly controversial” the campaign, the better the sales. Through the mid-1980s,

many fragrance marketers, including Christian Dior, Anne Klein, and Chanel, imitated

the Obsession ads’ use of nude models and emphasis on “sex,” rather than “romance.”

Stacey Mokotoff, executive producer for Gerard Hameline Productions, explained

marketers’ eagerness to cash in on Klein’s controversial style, saying, “Sex is a real big

motivator. It’s a lot of illusion. . . . There is a fantasy involved that says you will get

what you want if you buy this particular product, that if a woman uses this perfume, then

men will stop dead in their tracks when they see her.”<sup>105</sup>

Robin Burns acknowledged the eroticism of Obsession ads, but after the controversy of the 1985 ads, promised to tone down the sexual content: Obsession ads would continue to stand for sexual passion, she asserted, “but sex between two people

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<sup>103</sup> Amelia Bassin, “As the Fur Flies,” *Drug & Cosmetic Industry*, 136 (May 1985): 18.

<sup>104</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>105</sup> Greg Prince, “Sex in Advertising: Where to Draw the Line,” *Back Stage* 27 (November 14, 1986): 8B.



instead of a *menage a trois* or *quatre*.”<sup>106</sup> Indeed, Calvin Klein did tone down the sexuality of its advertising in coming years. In 1988, the company added “Eternity,” a perfume that emphasized “commitment” as opposed to “raw sexuality,” to its roster. The changes at Calvin Klein reflected a larger shift in the mood of the country.

In 1981, the Centers for Disease Control in Atlanta announced the discovery of a devastating new disease. Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome, or AIDS, was first discovered among gay men, and through the early 1980s, many Americans viewed AIDS as a disease specific to gay male and lesbian communities. It was not until the mid-1980s, after an infected blood supply caused hundreds of “innocents” to contract AIDS (including, for example, teenager Ryan White), that a growing number of Americans recognized that AIDS was not unique to the gay male community. The disease had a significant impact on the mindset of Americans. The New Right interpreted AIDS as evidence that sex between anyone other than a husband and wife was not merely “deviant,” but also dangerous. While many other Americans disagreed that extramarital or same-sex sexual acts were “immoral” or “deviant,” they began to share the opinion that such acts were dangerous. Many Americans began using condoms, they demanded more openness and honesty about their partners’ sexual history, and they sought public education programs to increase awareness of sexually transmitted diseases.<sup>107</sup>

By the late 1980s, many advertisers realized that, with the anxieties inspired by the AIDS epidemic, a growing number of consumers viewed *any* sex outside of heterosexual marriage to be dangerous, rather than erotic. In 1988, Pat Sloan, a columnist for *Advertising Age* remarked, “consumers may not be in the mood for sex” in

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<sup>106</sup> Pat Sloan, “Love Shines in Eternity Ads: New Calvin Klein Fragrance Emphasizes Commitment,” *Advertising Age* 59 (August 1, 1988): 4.

<sup>107</sup> D’Emilio and Freedman, *Intimate Matters*, 354–357.

an article titled “Chaste Back: Sex Out, Romance In For the Fragrance Market.”<sup>108</sup> Other advertising observers agreed that it was necessary to connect any sexual imagery to heterosexual commitment and marriage. Josef Schreick, vice-president of Ketchum Advertising (the company which worked on Coty perfume ads), assured *Women’s Wear Daily* that, “for the most part the decadence typified by the early Calvin Klein Obsession campaign is out. People are pulling things back to the point where we’re talking about relationships, versus the old Obsession ads with the hints of an orgy. Now, we see more ads with one man and one woman that seem to imply relationships. I think it reflects what’s happening in the world and the country today.”<sup>109</sup> Schreick claimed that marketers understood and reflected late-1980s American “family values” by idealizing heterosexual and committed relationships.

Calvin Klein revealed that he could advertise with idealized imagery of marriage as well as he did with depictions of anonymous sexual encounters when he introduced “Eternity.” Klein surprised the industry by “switching from steamy eroticism to something that you might call mystical monogamy,” with ads that showed a white, well-dressed couple—wedding rings clearly visible—frolicking on the beach with their young son. These ads portrayed this heterosexual nuclear family as cuddly, well balanced, emotionally satisfied, and—above all—amazingly beautiful. The white, romantic setting matches the models’ white skin and light clothing, exuding a look of flawless purity. Klein was pursuing what he and his ad executives saw as the American woman’s marital fantasy, although he was casting it exclusively with white models. Christy Turlington, a longtime Eternity model, played a self-satisfied wife still enjoying the romance of her

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<sup>108</sup> Pat Sloan, “Chaste Back: Sex Out, Romance in for Fragrance Market,” *Advertising Age* 59 (February 15, 1988): 3.

<sup>109</sup> Collier, “Finding Many Ways,” F10.

nuptials years after her wedding day. Of course, campaigns like Estée Lauder's "Beautiful" were more simplistic in their use of the bride; with a tagline reading "for all your beautiful moments," the ads pictured a bride in a white gown and veil, prepared to enjoy the chief "beautiful moment" of her life.<sup>110</sup>

Wealthy, leisured "ladies" received special attention during the late 1980s, as the industry turned to the time-tested technique of the celebrity endorsement. Celebrities such as Cher, Julio Iglesias, and Joan Collins promoted the scents "Uninhibited," "Only," and "Spectacular." By featuring celebrities of various races and ethnicities, perfume companies could appeal to diverse segments of the American consuming public. However, celebrity campaigns were treated by the industry and by consumers as novelties, and few scents earned much money.<sup>111</sup> Elizabeth Taylor's "Passion" was the most successful celebrity scent, and one of the few to outlive its introduction, largely because Taylor's image was both widely recognized and easily adaptable to perfume advertising trends.<sup>112</sup> By playing on upper-class imagery, the Ogilvy and Mather advertisements for Passion promised women status and glamour along with their perfume. Ads for Passion showed an elegantly dressed Taylor quoting Shakespeare and Dryden. Taylor also hosted promotional "teas" across the country with customers who bought a \$200 special-edition bottle of Passion.<sup>113</sup> And Taylor defended the high price of

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<sup>110</sup> Ibid.

<sup>111</sup> Celebrity fragrances often failed because the celebrity's name recognition was not strong enough, the celebrities were unwilling to devote enough time and effort to marketing their product, or because advertisers were unable to capitalize on the celebrity's "image" in a way that would entice perfume customers. Joshua Levine, "Doesn't Everyone Want to Smell Like Cher?" *Forbes* 145, no. 7 (April 2, 1990): 142.

<sup>112</sup> Ibid.

<sup>113</sup> Pat Sloan, "Making Scents: Liz Taylor, Tiffany to Drench Fragrance Market this Fall," *Advertising Age* 58 (August 24, 1987): 3.

her perfume, remarking, “You wouldn’t expect me to be involved in anything cheap, would you?”<sup>114</sup>

Advertisers sometimes combined images of white women as leisured, wealthy “ladies” with odes to matrimony, leaving women to stagger under the combined weight of two ideal “types.” Female consumers found that they were expected to succeed at work while simultaneously sacrificing for their families, all the while meeting ideals of beauty and leisured socializing—in sum, they were expected to be “Superwomen.”<sup>115</sup> Superwomen in perfume advertisements typically made “work” look glamorous. Ads for scents like Anne Klein’s “Blazer” and Estée Lauder’s “Private Collection” showed elegant women dressed for the office, but also for entertaining.<sup>116</sup> 1980s career women’s chief “business,” according to perfume ads, was the business of socializing. Bill Blass’s perfume described itself as “the cocktail party Blass,” “the tennis Blass,” “the dining out Blass,” and “the New Year’s Eve Blass,” driving home the idea that perfumes would complement a busy round of socializing among the well-to-do.<sup>117</sup> Just as they had done consistently since the 1960s, perfume advertisers featured expensively dressed, leisured women in their advertisements. Most advertisers continued to assume that women were more likely to purchase a perfume if they associated it with access to wealth.

Furthermore, the perfume industry continued to target advertisements almost exclusively to white women. Feminist Michele Wallace, author of *Black Macho and the Myth of the Superwoman*, pointed to Calvin Klein’s advertising as evidence of the way

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<sup>114</sup> Fred Danzig, “Scent of Passion Follows Liz,” *Advertising Age* 58 (January 19, 1987): 85.

<sup>115</sup> Susan Faludi pointed to 1980s “Superwoman” social expectations as an example of backlash against women. Faludi, *Backlash*, xii-xiii. Rosen, *The World Split Open*, 295–330.

<sup>116</sup> “Private Collection” advertisement, *New Yorker* (December 17, 1984): 3; and “Blazer” advertisement, *Vogue* (October 1977): 111.

<sup>117</sup> “Bill Blass” advertisement, *Vogue* (November 1982): 6.

“images of blacks are marginalized, trivialized or non-existent.” At a seminar on “Race, Gender and Sexuality in Contemporary Advertising” at New York’s Cooper-Hewitt Museum, she characterized the ads for Calvin Klein’s perfumes as idealizing an “omnipresent, homogeneous, airbrushed white female image” while ignoring black women.<sup>118</sup> Indeed, Calvin Klein did not include men or women of color in either the Eternity or the Obsession ads. However, this was by no means unique to Klein’s advertisements. Wallace also pointed to Ralph Lauren advertisements for their overwhelming neglect of African Americans as both models and as perfume consumers.<sup>119</sup> Throughout the 1980s, perfume advertisements continued to feature mostly white women. By only advertising with and to white women, Ralph Lauren, Calvin Klein, and other perfume companies persisted in treating “beauty,” “sexiness,” “glamour,” and “romance”—the chief characteristics they used to sell their products—as exclusively white.

Although advertisers had been sexualizing “the little girl look” for decades, it became a growing problem as more perfume companies marketed to teens in the 1980s.<sup>120</sup> MEM marketed “Wild” in four categories: “Passion Flower (sensual), Baby Blue Eyes (romantic), Tiger Lily (mysterious) and Fire Pink (impulsive),” with each type labeled to suggest appropriately “wild” emotions for teenage girls.<sup>121</sup> In an effort to acquire the trappings of maturity, teens responded to marketing for adult women and

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<sup>118</sup> Jane Weaver, “Multi-racial Ads: The Exception, Not the Rule,” *ADWEEK* (Eastern edition) 31, no. 48 (November 26, 1990): 30.

<sup>119</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>120</sup> Furthermore, during the late-1980s, MEM marketed “Tinkerbell” for girls and “Dirt Busters” for boys, perfume names that made it perfectly clear that gender distinctions were established at a young age. Pat Sloan, “Kids Smell Sweet to Fragrance Marketers,” *Advertising Age* 60 (July 10, 1989): 50.

<sup>121</sup> Pat Sloan, “Teen Fragrance Market Braces for Round of Activity: Revlon and MEM Introducing Brands,” *Chain Drug Review* 11, no. 23 (August 14, 1989): 36.

purchased designer perfumes such as Giorgio and Calvin Klein.<sup>122</sup> Marketing for teens had to compete with these “adult” brands, and scents like Prince Matchabelli’s “Night Rhythms”—with the tagline “The fragrance that dances ’til dawn”—suggested that young consumers stayed out late at clubs, mingled in heterosocial groups, and possibly even engaged in heterosexual relationships with the individuals they met at those clubs. Irma Zandl, the president of Xtreme, a New York marketing consultant firm, warned against timidity: “If they [advertisements] keep being gingham and young, they’ll lose the teen customer by the time she’s fourteen. They have to be more sophisticated.”<sup>123</sup>

### **“Heroin Chic” and Androgyny: Kate Moss in the 1990s**

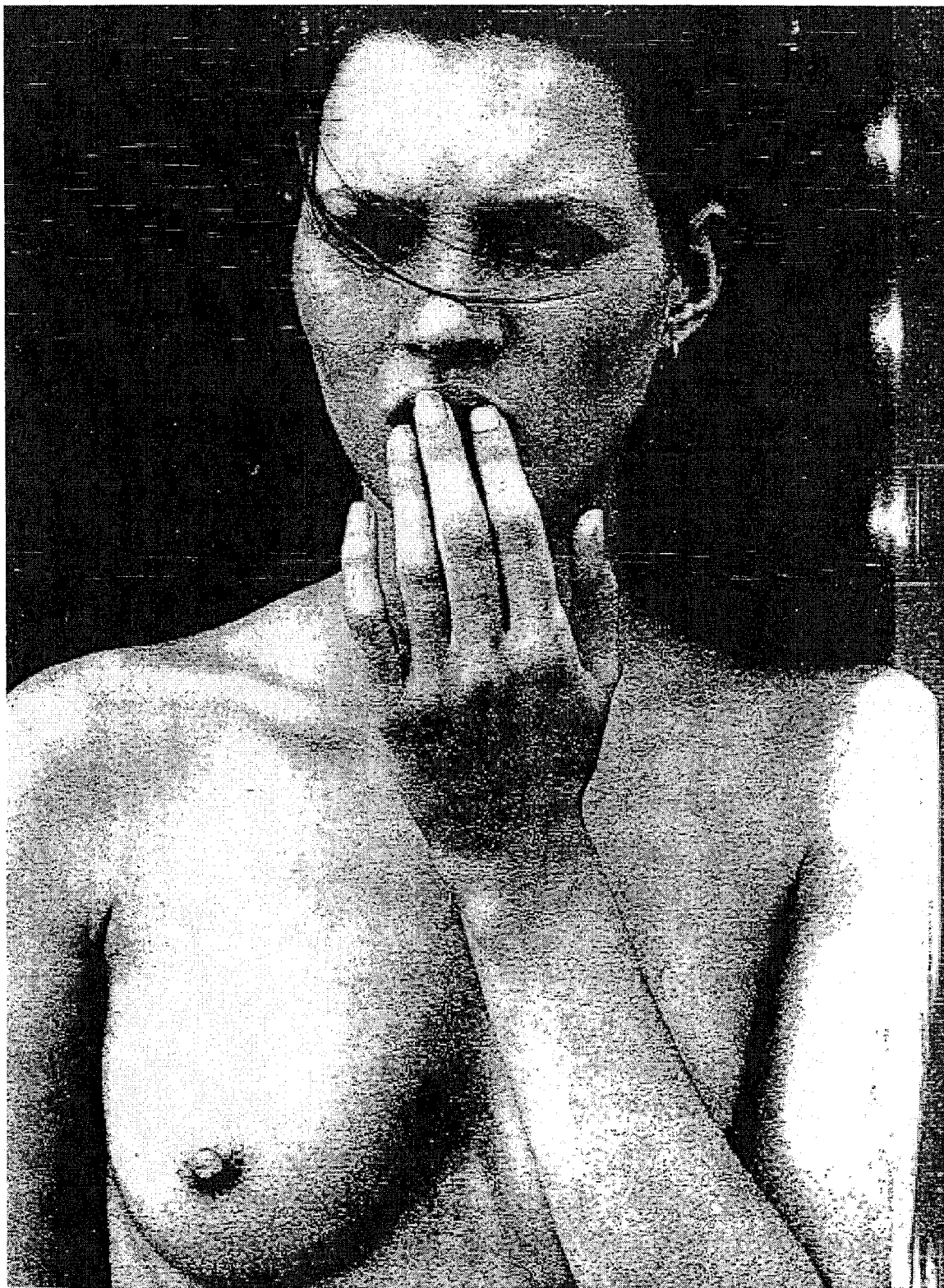
Advertising that featured extremely slender young models particularly disturbed feminists. Calvin Klein ranked among the leading perfume marketers relying on images of excessively slender women to portray ideal feminine beauty. In 1993, Klein redesigned the Obsession campaign around a nineteen-year-old British waif, model Kate Moss.<sup>124</sup> Moss’s vulnerability and starkly thin appearance startled and disturbed Klein’s audience, and some pronounced the ads “too ‘victim,’” especially because Moss looked as if she was ravaged by drugs, alcohol, or physical violence.<sup>125</sup> In some advertisements, Moss posed naked from the waist up, exposing one breast, and others depicted her nude, lying on her stomach on a couch, recalling the nude advertisements Obsession had run in the mid-1980s. Observers critiqued Klein for ads that sexualized Moss despite her youth, and several noted that Moss’s gaunt frame resembled that of a young boy rather than a

<sup>122</sup> Sloan, “Kids Smell Sweet,” 50.

<sup>123</sup> Ibid.

<sup>124</sup> “Calvin Klein Cosmetics Company Introduces New Obsession Fragrance Advertising,” *PR Newswire*, (July 29, 1993): p0729NY070.

<sup>125</sup> Julie L. Belcove, “Rating the Ads: From Sensual to Self-indulgent,” *WWD* 167, no. 112 (June 10, 1994): S14.



“Obsession” advertisement, *Vogue* (September 1993): 40.

rounded female body. While some commentators suggested that the ads were meant to appeal to gay men; others feared that Moss's appearance would contribute to the female culture of eating disorders that was growing in colleges and high schools. Moss denied that she suffered from an eating disorder, insisting, "well, I'm not anorexic, but I am a chain smoker."<sup>126</sup> And Klein defended his exaltation of thinness, arguing that Moss was starting to fill out. "She's gaining weight. She has started to have a woman's body. She is growing up."<sup>127</sup> Despite these feeble protests, Klein and Moss helped create the rawly exposed, waif-like "heroin chic," a look that feminists criticized for its exaltation of female vulnerability.<sup>128</sup>

Moss's boyish appearance also connoted androgyny, a novel approach for an industry that usually focused on feminine *difference* from men in their campaigns. Theorists such as Judith Butler have argued that women and men consciously and unconsciously use clothing, cosmetics, and hairstyles to construct and "perform" gender.<sup>129</sup> Throughout the time of this study, female models in perfume advertisements usually wore clothing, cosmetics, and hairstyles that signified "femininity." However, as early as the 1970s, perfume advertisers had experimented with androgynous styles by featuring models in "mannish" clothing, with cropped hairstyles, or without makeup in order to attract interest and attention to their advertisement. Perfume advertisers typically added androgynous touches to an otherwise "feminine" looking model. With Revlon's

<sup>126</sup> Barbara Lippert, "Over and Out," *ADWEEK* (Eastern edition) 35, no. 1 (January 3, 1994): 25.

<sup>127</sup> Pete Born, "Calvin's New Passion," *WWD* 168, no. 107 (December 2, 1994): 7.

<sup>128</sup> In 1997, President Clinton publicly condemned "heroin chic" advertising after a fashion photographer, Davide Sorrenti, died from a drug overdose. Sorrenti was the brother of Kate Moss's boyfriend, Mario Sorrenti, who had appeared with Moss in a series of 1993 Obsession television commercials. "Calvin Klein Cosmetics Company Introduces New Obsession Fragrance Advertising," *PR Newswire* (July 29, 1993): p0729NY070. For the story on Clinton, see "Clinton Decries 'Heroin Chic' Fashion Look," *Opioids.com*, <http://opioids.com/heroin/heroinchic.html> [accessed January 12, 2005].

<sup>129</sup> Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990), xvi.



“Charlie,” for instance, advertisers idealized “feminine” cosmetics and long, styled hair for the “liberated” model in the pantsuit. Indeed, perfume advertisers generally avoided androgynous styles, choosing to feature models with long hair, makeup, and jewelry to indicate to consumers that the advertised perfume was a necessary ingredient to performing femininity.

Unlike most perfume ads, the Obsession ads did not neatly fit into a feminine/masculine binary. Instead, in an attempt to raise consumer curiosity, these ads interrupted the binary and seemed to suggest more fluidity in gender. Moss wore no makeup, she posed in bleak settings with a grim expression on her face, and she had a “boyish” gaunt figure. The advertisements were still clearly meant to capture Moss’s “beauty,” but they presented hers as a new category of beauty. Marjorie Garber, author of *Vested Interests: Cross-Dressing and Cultural Anxiety*, suggests that female-to-male cross-dressers have used “masculine” attire—such as pants, tuxedos, top hats, cigars—to create a distinctly female-created (and often lesbian) ideal of beauty.<sup>130</sup> While Moss was not wearing any masculine attire (or sometimes any clothing at all), she was an androgynous model in a *perfume ad*; she appeared in a format that usually stressed models’ “femininity.” By featuring an androgynous model devoid of “feminine” clothing and makeup, Obsession ads defied the gender binary in order to create a more provocative presentation of “beauty” and suggest a more fluid understanding of gender.

While Moss’s nudity provoked outrage among many conservatives and religious fundamentalists, women’s groups were more concerned about Moss’s physique than her

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<sup>130</sup> Marjorie Garber, *Vested Interests: Cross-Dressing and Cultural Anxiety* (New York: Routledge, 1992), 128–164.

nudity.<sup>131</sup> Women in Boston formed “BAM” (Boycott Anorexic Marketing) to demand that marketers such as Klein find ways to advertise their products without resorting to waifish models.<sup>132</sup> *Inside Media* reported that an unidentified “women’s magazine” received more than two hundred letters to protest the Kate Moss Obsession ads, ten times more than the magazine typically received. These readers were disappointed in Moss’s emaciated appearance. They critiqued the women’s magazine for featuring advertising that glorified “hipless and shapeless” models. The editor of this unnamed magazine praised readers for “pointing out that the media continue to use women’s bodies as selling tools,” and suggested that it was finally “time to reconsider how far we’ve gone toward accepting and unwittingly encouraging this practice.”<sup>133</sup>

Feminist theorists argued that advertisers bore considerable responsibility for the spread of anorexia in the 1980s and early 1990s.<sup>134</sup> In her essay, “Never Just Pictures,” Susan Bordo specifically addressed the impact of Klein’s advertising, asserting that marketing that sells products with “heroin chic” shapes cultural understandings (and young girls’ lives) more than anyone wants to admit. Bordo maintained that models do not just sell aesthetics or sexuality, they also sell emotions; and Kate Moss, with her emaciated physique, captured cool detachment and triumph over human appetites. Klein capitalized on a misogynist culture that permitted ads to consistently suggest women

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<sup>131</sup> Conde Nast magazines decided to refuse future Obsession ads featuring Moss after southern newsstand distributors pulled the magazine. The media group soon changed its mind after weighing the disadvantages of losing Klein’s ad dollars. Laura Rich and Ann Marie Kerwin, “More Outdoor for Klein’s Scents,” *Inside Media* (January 19, 1994): 5.

<sup>132</sup> Stuart Elliot, “Advertising: Ultrathin Models in Coca-Cola and Calvin Klein Campaigns Draw Fire and a Boycott Call,” *New York Times*, 26 April 1994, D18.

<sup>133</sup> Rich and Kerwin, “More Outdoor For Klein’s Scents,” 5.

<sup>134</sup> It was through the efforts of feminist psychologists that the medical community was able to diagnose and identify anorexia. Feminist mental health professionals, such as Kim Chernin, brought the gendered nature of eating disorders to the attention of the public in the early 1980s. Kim Chernin, *Obsession: Reflections on the Tyranny of Slenderness* (New York: Harper & Row, 1981).

were “too much”—that they exhibited *too much* hunger, *too much* personality, *too many* insecurities, *too much* sexual desire, or *too much* vulnerability.<sup>135</sup> Bordo and many other feminists found a link between the “too much” mentality and women’s eating disorders. Bordo contended that extremely slender models such as Kate Moss gave consumers the impression that it is possible to control and dismiss their desires for food, along with any other desires or emotions. Bordo suggests that this emphasis on slenderness is also evidence of backlash against feminism. In a culture that discourages young women from demonstrating “too much” individuality or emotion, these young women instead choose to literally take up less space, to become less visible by dieting.

Just as in the 1960s, nineties perfume marketers were guilty of sorting through women’s fears, anxieties, and nebulous hopes, and packaging their products to manipulate these emotions for economic gain. The “1990 Compendium of Trends,” published by Marketing to Women Incorporated, reported that “images of women in the media . . . are now nearly 20% less than the medical ideal for normal weight” (an ideal that experts increasingly critiqued as unrealistic in the first place).<sup>136</sup> Unsurprisingly, given the media’s trend toward excessively slender models, forty-two percent of twentysomething women surveyed by *Mademoiselle* in 1994 reported that their appearances were often on their minds. This survey also reported that eighty percent of surveyed women would characterize the media as paying too much attention to sex and

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<sup>135</sup> Susan Bordo, *Twilight Zones: The Hidden Life of Cultural Images from Plato to O. J.* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 111–135, esp. 127.

<sup>136</sup> “1990 Compendium of Trends,” *Marketing to Women*, 4, no. 3 (December 1990): 3, Non-proprietary research, box 4, J. Walter Thompson Advertising Collection, Duke University Rare Book, Manuscript, and Special Collections Library.

looks and not enough attention to women's accomplishments and intelligence.<sup>137</sup>

Whereas Kate Moss was in reality an extremely slender model, she also represented a trend in the advertising aesthetic. In the 1990s, ads (especially for fashions and cosmetics) consistently featured skinny models.<sup>138</sup>

Advertisers such as Calvin Klein helped create an aesthetic demand for exceptional slenderness. However, advertisers were also responding to the consuming public's dissatisfaction with the female body.<sup>139</sup> American girls and women had remarkably poor body image during the 1990s. In a marketing report called "The Self-image Revolution," prepared by *Self* magazine, forty-eight percent of women said "they'd look more attractive if they were 20 pounds thinner," and twenty-nine percent said "they can't be satisfied until they have thin bodies."<sup>140</sup> Advertisements featuring slender models would presumably connect the product with women's general aspirations toward thinness, and encourage women to purchase perfume while yearning for a slender body. What responsibility advertisers bore for instilling this low self-esteem in women is a matter of great debate; however, it is evident that many advertisers took advantage of women's insecurities.

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<sup>137</sup> "The *Mademoiselle* Report: Redefining a Generation, an Executive Summary," *Mademoiselle*, Spring 1994, charts Q.9 & Q.46, Non-proprietary research, box 4, J. Walter Thompson Advertising Collection, Duke University Rare Book, Manuscript, and Special Collections Library.

<sup>138</sup> Amber Valletta, model for Elizabeth Arden beginning in 1997, and Shalom Harlow, model for Coco Chanel, were also described as "waifs." "How Thin is Too Thin?" *People* (September 20, 1993): 78; Kim-Van Dang and Soren Larson, "Chanel Ups Ad Action," *WWD* 173, no. 100 (May 23, 1997): 5; "Arden's Image Gets a Lift," *Cosmetics International* 21, no. 473 (March 25, 1997): 6.

<sup>139</sup> Joan Jacobs Brumberg discusses societal pressures on women and girls mounting through the 1980s, leading to a growing incidence of eating disorders in *Fasting Girls: The History of Anorexia Nervosa* (New York: Vintage Books, 1988).

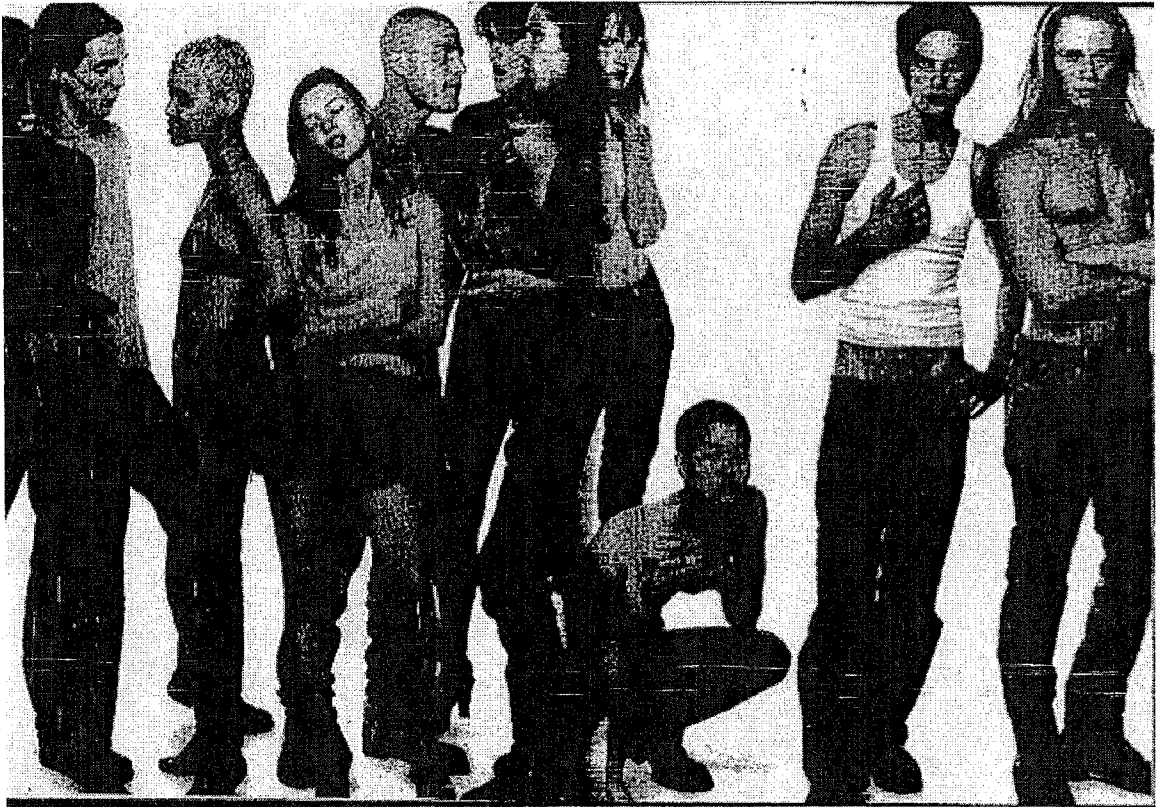
<sup>140</sup> "The Self-Image Revolution," *The New Diversity V Self* (November 1992): 10–11, Non-proprietary research, box 4, J. Walter Thompson Advertising Collection, Duke University Rare Book, Manuscript, and Special Collections Library.

Since the late 1960s, perfume advertisements had primarily targeted baby boomers. But in the mid-1990s, Calvin Klein began to direct his advertising toward Generation X, rather than the baby boomers. In the early 1990s, the styles of grunge bands like Nirvana and Pearl Jam appealed to Generation X-ers who preferred ultra-casual, cheap, sloppy clothing. For many young Americans, grunge was a means of rejecting the consumer-oriented values of the 1980s. However, in the hands of designers such as Calvin Klein, grunge became an expensive new trend. Designers and the well-to-do viewed grunge as an opportunity to “play” with poverty, an appealing novelty after a decade of fashions that glorified ostentation and prestige. Only the wealthiest of Americans, presumably, could afford to *deliberately* look impoverished, counting on observers to realize that ripped jeans and t-shirts were evidence of the highest taste and class. The grunge look soon became a costly addition to middle- and upper-class wardrobes. Young consumers could use grunge as a form of rebellion, disturbing their parents by paying exorbitant prices for ragged-looking clothing.

Calvin Klein introduced grunge-inspired androgynous styles with his “CK One” and “CK Be” ads, continuing to rely on Moss as a primary model. With Moss’s gaunt physique, Klein could display sloppy grunge fashions on a half-starved body—the perfect combination for a look that glamorized poverty. While these campaigns seemed to reverse decades of upper-class imagery in perfume ads, ultimately, grunge was still unmistakably elitist. His campaign showed “a group of real-looking people” depicted as unwashed, disillusioned Generation-X urbanites.<sup>141</sup> Despite the “realness” of the models, Klein marketers counted on consumers to recognize the expense of grunge clothing.

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<sup>141</sup> Soren Larson, “CK One Campaign: The Genderless Scent Will Have Sexless Ads,” *WWD* 168, no. 25 (August 5, 1994): 1.



“CK One” advertisement, *Harper’s Bazaar* no. 3395 (October 1994): 118-119.

With CK One, Klein marketed a “genderless scent” for both men and women. Klein advertising executives argued that younger female consumers were dissatisfied with the trappings of feminine beauty, and preferred an androgynous, “natural” advertisement to the stylistic romance favored by their parents.<sup>142</sup> While many companies continued to rely on the romantic ad campaigns they had used to appeal to baby boomers, the CK One ads courted consumers with a manufactured nineties style emphasizing “cool” urbanity instead of the normative “feminine” aesthetics. As with the Kate Moss Obsession ads, the models in these “unisex” Calvin Klein perfume ads enacted an androgynous beauty ideal. The female models did not wear heavy makeup, some of the male models wore

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<sup>142</sup> Ibid.

jewelry and had long hair, and most of the male and female models wore torn jeans and t-shirts. But even though the female models played with a gendered understanding of beauty by posing without makeup or “pretty” clothing, they were still young, slender, and delicately featured. These ads hinted that urbane nineties women could look “beautiful” without performing femininity. Despite the claim the CK One was a “genderless scent,” the featured models deliberately performed androgyny in order to capture consumers’ attention.

Ironically, Calvin Klein’s intention to market “genderless scents” made it possible to promote racial and ethnic diversity. Klein asserted, “The whole point of the shared fragrance is that it’s ‘more than just for me.’ We can achieve this message by using a group rather than an individual.” The ads cast models of various races and ethnicities together, sometimes even as partners in heterosexual interracial couples. Klein used the image of people of color to project youthful angst, apathy, and urban cool. Many of his models were tattooed and pierced and projected attitudes of passive rebellion; however, these models were dressed in expensive grunge clothing. In other words, they appeared to only “play” with the economic troubles experienced by many urban minorities. While the company included models of color in CK One and CK Be to capture urban trends, ads for Eternity, Escape, and Obsession—ads that project romance, passion, and sexuality—still featured only white models.<sup>143</sup>

While women of color appeared in perfume ads during the 1990s to represent exoticism, normative beauty was still the domain of white women. “Chantilly” featured an Indian model to promote its perfume, but pictured her behind an elaborate veil, with a muted, sad expression on her face. In the United States, women of color were portrayed

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<sup>143</sup> Ibid.

as outsiders, with the implication that these “exotic” women suffered tragically in repressive foreign cultures.<sup>144</sup> Women of color were rarely shown as confident, satisfied, or intelligent in perfume ads. In fact, even today, they are rarely shown at all.

By the 1990s, the heyday of the baby boomer was passing. Marketers resigned themselves to dwindling numbers of boomer consumers, certain that the “average use of fragrance declines with age, so the general aging of the population retards growth [in the fragrance market].”<sup>145</sup> While many companies continued to reap profits from the aging baby boomer population, few were willing to show older women in advertisements. Companies like Chanel, Aperge, and Halston relied on photos of perfume bottles in magazines that targeted older women. Or they created advertisements with younger models, hoping that baby boomers—now in their forties and fifties—might aspire to recapture youthful beauty by buying some fragrance.

### **The Effects of Social Activism on Perfume Advertising?**

The perfume industry was at the center of late-twentieth-century debates over sexuality, class, race, and gender because perfume advertisers repeatedly succeeded in attracting national attention through socially controversial campaigns. Advertisers across the beauty industry imitated the most successful perfume campaigns. Perfume advertisers’ provocative choices drew a steady and vocal stream of protest from feminists and Black Nationalists disturbed by the sexism and racism exhibited in these advertisements. Across the decades, but especially in the 1990s, advertisers aggravated

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<sup>144</sup> “Chantilly” advertisement, *Essence* (November 1987): 51.

<sup>145</sup> Steven McLaughlin and Denise M. Zimmerle, “The *Cosmopolitan* Report: The Changing Life Course of American Women: Consumer Behavior” part 3 (Seattle, Washington: prepared by Battelle, 1988), 12, Non-proprietary research, box 4, J. Walter Thompson Advertising Collection, Duke University Rare Book, Manuscript, and Special Collections Library; “Women and Self Image,” vol. 3 of *The New Diversity: Self Magazine Reports on American Women* (1990), Non-proprietary research, box 4, J. Walter Thompson Advertising Collection, Duke University Rare Book, Manuscript, and Special Collections Library.



women's anxieties about body size by idealizing "waifish" models such as Kate Moss. Perfume advertisers marginalized women of color and working-class women by consistently featuring white, wealthy-looking women in their advertisements. When perfume models were not dressed in expensive evening gowns, it was usually because they were shown naked or wearing skimpy lingerie. Advertisers for companies such as Calvin Klein, Love, and Fabergé developed advertising campaigns that eroticized women and girls' bodies, reducing female bodies to sexualized objects. These campaigns suggested that women could enjoy (heterosexual) relationships only if they managed to capture male attention by wearing the right perfume and meeting an exclusive standard of beauty.

Despite the poor record of perfume advertisers, individual women and men within the industry clearly responded to feminism and Black Nationalism. While many advertisers were hostile to feminism, individual perfume advertisers such as Amelia Bassin and Franchellie Cadwell openly expressed an interest in working for women's rights within the advertising industry. Most perfume advertisers did not set out to curtail women's rights or demean their customers in their advertisements. Indeed, some perfume advertisers, such as the designers of the early Charlie ads, attempted to reflect the spirit of "liberation" and female independence in their campaigns. Regardless of the political beliefs of advertisers, perfume advertising has repeatedly displayed an exclusive and offensive image of femininity. Why have perfume advertisers failed to reform their advertising?

While the sexism of individual advertisers was clearly significant, the failures of the perfume industry ultimately reflect the demands of this consumer capitalist industry

as a whole. Perfume advertisers' primary goal was to promise female consumers that advertised products allowed them to meet normative standards of beauty. Perfume advertisers began with standards that were culturally defined by the public at large; however, they were responsible for perpetuating and exacerbating racist and sexist standards of beauty. Advertisers emphasized the most exclusive beauty standards—by featuring the thinnest models, for instance—in order to notify ordinary consumers that they fell short of normative expectations, and needed to take action (buy products) in order to catch up. To attract consumer attention and create reputations for their brands, perfume advertisers created controversial campaigns that depicted women in provocative and sexualized ways. Regardless of feminist and Black Nationalists' objections, perfume advertisers continued to design advertisements in ways that they believed would make the most money possible.

While advertisers worked within an established consumer capitalist system, this should not suggest that, as individuals, they had no free will when it came to their professional decisions. However, it is necessary to emphasize the pressures the industry placed on individual advertisers to create ads that would capture the attention of the public and aggravate the insecurities of female consumers so they would feel compelled to buy the product. Clearly, some advertisers hoped to find a way to combine feminist beliefs with the imperatives of their industry. Feminist advertisers such as Amelia Bassin expressed enthusiasm for the early Charlie advertisements because they believed they depicted a more empowering ideal of femininity than most perfume ads. But as we have seen, even Charlie advertisements idealized a narrow and racially exclusive standard of beauty and reduced feminism to a vaguely defined ideal of "liberation." Balancing

feminist beliefs with careers devoted to the promotion of beauty products was extremely difficult, especially for female advertisers who were underrepresented and undervalued within the workplace.

In chapter three, we will look at a company that defined itself as woman-run and woman-centered, and assess the options available to women working at all levels of this company, from the founder down to the direct saleswomen. The following chapter will closely investigate the professional world of beauty marketers at Mary Kay Cosmetics, a Texas-based, conservative direct sales company. By studying women from all different ranks of this company, we will see how individual professional women expressed or suppressed their beliefs about women's status through their choices on the job. As we will see, direct saleswomen enjoyed more autonomy in their professional lives (although they also endured greater risk) than most perfume advertisers, allowing some saleswomen to manipulate normative beauty cultural expectations to create businesses—and definitions of beauty—that they found empowering.

### CHAPTER III

#### “ENRICHING WOMEN’S LIVES”: THE MARY KAY APPROACH TO BEAUTY, BUSINESS, AND FEMINISM

*“All of us believe in our mission. Our mission is to enrich other women’s lives. And that’s what we do. That’s our mission. It gives you a purpose. So many women today don’t know why they’re here . . . .*

*We have a mission. We have a purpose. And it’s all under the heading of Mary Kay and it’s not just makeup. Makeup is the vehicle that we use.”<sup>1</sup>*

“Gretchen,” Interview, 2004

The perfume advertisers discussed in chapter two typically worked within Northern, urban, male-dominated corporate organizations. While a few extraordinary women ran advertising agencies or owned beauty corporations, most of these businesswomen answered to male bosses, and all of these women operated in an industry overwhelmingly dominated by men. In order to get a different perspective on beauty marketing, this chapter will focus on a direct sales company, Mary Kay Cosmetics, which was founded by a Southern, conservative, evangelical Christian woman. Mary Kay Ash, the founder of Mary Kay Cosmetics, began her company in Dallas, Texas, in 1963 by encouraging women to sell her skin care, makeup, nail color, and perfume to their friends, family, and neighbors. As we shall see, Ash capitalized on existing female

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<sup>1</sup> “Gretchen,” interview by author, Williamsburg, Va., 29 March 2004.

networks and feminist rhetoric to create an extraordinarily successful company that claims to be woman-centered and woman-run.<sup>2</sup> By studying Mary Kay Cosmetics, we will have a chance to investigate the professional lives of female beauty marketers who operated in a politically conservative corporation far removed from Madison Avenue. While the saleswomen at Mary Kay Cosmetics generally came from very different backgrounds than perfume advertisers, they were just as committed to consumer capitalism and beauty marketing as their New York competitors. Additionally, they grappled with the same issues of womanhood and feminism that their urban contemporaries struggled with. By studying Mary Kay Cosmetics, we have a unique opportunity to examine the ways that working- and middle-class women defined “beauty” and engaged with late-twentieth-century feminism. As we will see, for the women of Mary Kay, the political debates over women’s status were exceptionally relevant to their business practices and career opportunities.

“Enriching women’s lives” is the official mission statement at Mary Kay Cosmetics.<sup>3</sup> The sales staff is almost universally female, and sales consultants and their directors describe themselves as part of a “sisterhood.” Mary Kay was twice included in a list of *The 100 Best Companies to Work For*, with reviewers remarking, “Because it’s run by a woman, male chauvinists need not apply. Few do.”<sup>4</sup> More than one commentator

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<sup>2</sup> In 2004 alone, Mary Kay did 1.8 billion dollars wholesale and had over a million sales consultants worldwide. Mary Kay Cosmetics, [http://www.marykay.com/Corporate/Company\\_CompanyInformation.aspx](http://www.marykay.com/Corporate/Company_CompanyInformation.aspx) [accessed September 11, 2005].

<sup>3</sup> Vice Chairman Dick Bartlett described enriching women’s lives as the company mission in his preface to *More than a Pink Cadillac*. Jim Underwood, *More than a Pink Cadillac: Mary Kay Inc.’s Nine Leadership Keys to Success* (New York: McGraw-Hill, Inc., 2003), x. See also Mary Kay Cosmetics, <http://www.marykay.com> [accessed January 25, 2005].

<sup>4</sup> Robert Levering, Milton Moskowitz, and Michael Katz, *The 100 Best Companies to Work for in America* (Reading, Mass.: Addison-Wesley Publishing Company, 1984), 200. See the Mary Kay website for awards and honors won by the company, “Milestones, Awards and Honors,” Mary Kay Cosmetics, [http://www.marykay.com/Headquarters/Company/Milestones\\_1.asp](http://www.marykay.com/Headquarters/Company/Milestones_1.asp) [accessed January 25, 2005].

has described Mary Kay Ash—the chief executive of the company from the time she founded it in 1963 until she retired in the mid-1990s—as a “de facto feminist.”<sup>5</sup> Critics, however, describe Mary Kay Cosmetics as a socially conservative corporation that exemplifies backlash against feminism. Historian Alice Clarke, who has written on Tupperware direct selling in the 1950s, described Mary Kay as a company that “embraced religion and domestic subordination in a far more orthodox fashion than Tupperware had.”<sup>6</sup> How is it that Mary Kay could make such a strong case for the potential of women in the workforce, and simultaneously enforce “domestic subordination”?

An examination of Mary Kay Ash’s corporate philosophy reveals how a Texan businesswoman selectively appropriated and rejected elements of feminism to shape late-twentieth-century beauty culture. Ash built a successful multimillion-dollar business by patching together a strong belief in women’s economic empowerment with an equally fervent conviction in the “rightness” of normative gender roles. Her company philosophy responded to the incipient feminism of middle-class women who were frustrated by the “feminine mystique,” especially in terms of the professional limitations this mystique placed on the ambitious suburban housewife. Like liberal feminists, Ash demanded recognition of and rewards for women’s professional abilities. When it came to women’s social roles and participation in beauty culture, however, Ash parted ways with most feminists, particularly radical feminists. Ash believed that to earn respect as businesspeople, women must demonstrate their respect for male authority within their families and workplaces, in part by wearing “feminine” clothing, makeup, and hairstyles.

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<sup>5</sup> Carol Flake, “Evangelicals and Feminists,” *The Nation* 233 (December 12, 1981): 645.

<sup>6</sup> Alison J. Clarke, *Tupperware: The Promise of Plastic in 1950s America* (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1999), 193.

By clinging to a pre-feminist aesthetic standard, Ash reassured observers that, though Mary Kay might facilitate women's entrance into the business world, the company stood as a bulwark against further social change. Yet, because Ash defined consultants' participation in the business world as progressive and liberating, her company ideology allowed consultants to view themselves as empowered women who simultaneously conformed to "traditional" gender roles.

The experiences of Mary Kay Ash and her saleswomen offer valuable insight into the opportunities and drawbacks women faced when working *within* beauty culture in the late twentieth century. Studying a beauty business owned and operated by women makes visible how and why women collaborated in creating a sexist, racist, and heterosexist beauty culture. In order to better understand these experiences from a variety of perspectives, I interviewed seven Mary Kay consultants and three sales "directors" living and working in the Tidewater region of Virginia. With such a small and regionally specific sample of opinions, these interviews do not provide a representative survey of the Mary Kay sales staff. However, this chapter primarily focuses on the corporate image and philosophy Ash created when building her business, and these interviews clarified how that image was presented to, and received by, the sales team. The women I spoke to offered useful insight into the experience of selling beauty products for a conservative, female-centric beauty company.

Mary Kay Cosmetics is organized through a system of multilevel marketing. In other words, independent contractors, or "beauty consultants," sell all of the products. If consultants wish to make substantial profits, they have to recruit more salespeople for the company, building hierarchical sales teams of consultants organized and managed by a

“sales director.” Everyone within the company, from the newly recruited consultant to the national sales director, is encouraged to view recruitment as a major part of their job. All of the Mary Kay publications—the bulk of my sources for this chapter—were written to make the company seem appealing to potential recruits. Furthermore, several of the consultants and directors I spoke to tried to recruit me into the company, and almost all of them offered to sell me products.<sup>7</sup> I have kept the profit motives of the saleswomen and the company in mind, since these motives shaped the way they described and experienced their company. The women of Mary Kay Cosmetics have been motivated to work in this beauty business primarily in hopes of financial reward.

### **The Structure and History of Mary Kay**

Financial rewards are hard to come by in direct sales. While Mary Kay Cosmetics entices new recruits by focusing on the pink Cadillacs and millions of dollars earned by some sales directors, few beauty consultants make it that far. Annual turnover rates among the sales consultants have been as high as eighty percent.<sup>8</sup> By the 1980s, most consultants worked part-time for the company. In 1981 *Forbes* reported “most consultants are lucky to earn \$1,500 a year in a nine-hour week; the more active ones; perhaps \$4,000.” “And heaven help the disillusioned consultant who wants to return her unused beauty kit for a refund. She’s given seemingly endless pep talks before the

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<sup>7</sup> The names of the consultants and directors have been changed to encourage their frankness during the interview. “Betty,” interview by author, Williamsburg, Va., 12 April 2004; “Gretchen,” interview.

<sup>8</sup> In 1984, the authors of *The 100 Best Companies to Work for in America* estimated that Mary Kay lost 80% of its sales consultants annually. Less than a decade later, the same publication suggested that the turnover had declined to 40% annually, suggesting that the company had found a means of retaining consultants. The change can partly be explained by the management’s efforts to retain consultants who sold very few products. By the early 1990s, 70% of consultants were working part-time. Nevertheless, at 40%, turnover was still quite high. Mary Kay lists its inclusion in these compilations in a chronology of its achievements, implying that the company does not dispute this estimate of its turnover rate. Some competitors, such as Avon, have even higher turnover rates. Levering, Moskowitz, and Katz, *100 Best Companies* (1984), 201; Levering and Moskowitz, *The 100 Best Companies to Work for in America* (New York: Currency, Doubleday, 1993), 271.



company comes across with the money.”<sup>9</sup> Direct selling is hard and discouraging work, involving endless rejection, and because consultants sell products they have already purchased from the company, they personally shoulder the financial risk. Consultants describe direct selling as “a numbers game,” saying, “if you approach ten people, about one of ten of those would agree to do a facial.”<sup>10</sup> Sales directors spend much of their time motivating their consultants to persist in the face of defeat.<sup>11</sup>

Nevertheless, observers note the infectious enthusiasm shared by consultants and their sales directors. Much of this “Mary Kay Enthusiasm” originated from the company founder, Mary Kay Ash.<sup>12</sup> Ash was a retired white, middle-aged widow and grandmother when she began the company with \$5000 in savings, in Dallas, Texas. Until her death in November 2001, Ash served as the charismatic spiritual guide, mentor, and mother figure to the sales force and employees. Photos of the immaculately coifed and made-up founder appear in almost every Mary Kay office. Ash used her own appearance and lifestyle as recruiting tools. For instance, when she published her autobiography, *Mary Kay* (1981), she was well aware that her writings were as much about the company’s image as her own. Her son and company co-founder, Richard Rogers, referred to his mother’s autobiography as “a philosophical book about how women should conduct their lives.” But he also revealed another purpose the book might serve, saying: “What if we

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<sup>9</sup> Currently, the company offers a 90% buy back guarantee for all the products the consultant purchased within the year (excluding the starter kit) should she decide to leave the company. However, the company discourages consultants from this decision by making it impossible to re-active Mary Kay membership when a consultant has taken advantage of the refund. Howard Rudnitsky, “You Gotta Believe,” *Forbes* 127 (June 22, 1981): 105.

<sup>10</sup> “Laura,” interview by author, Williamsburg, Va., 30 March 2004.

<sup>11</sup> “Managing the Mary Kay Way,” *Working Woman* 20 (April 1995): 49, 82.

<sup>12</sup> “That Mary Kay Enthusiasm” is the title of a company song, which is sung at meetings to encourage consultants. Ash explains that in the early years of the company she sponsored a song-writing contest, and chose this tune as “a theme song.” To hear the song, ask almost any consultant for a performance or watch “The Pink Panther,” *60 Minutes* (produced by Jim Jackson, CBS News, 1979). Mary Kay Ash, *Mary Kay*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (New York: HarperPerennial, 1994), 44.

sell a million copies in 1982? What do you think *that's* going to do to recruiting?"<sup>13</sup>

Indeed, her autobiography has sold over two million copies, and the consultants I spoke with had either read it or intended to.<sup>14</sup> When Ash retired as chairman emeritus in 1995 due to poor health, company executives admitted to a readjustment period, when senior management briefly lost "the Mary Kay way." However, the company now confidently calls upon the substantial body of teachings Ash left behind to motivate the sales force and guide company policy.<sup>15</sup>

Mary Kay Ash founded her cosmetics company, originally "Beauty by Mary Kay," at a pivotal historical moment. The early 1960s are commonly associated with American liberalism, as the New Left and Civil Rights activists led vocal grassroots movements and Democratic presidents occupied the White House.<sup>16</sup> In Washington, D.C., Martin Luther King Jr. spoke at one of the most memorable rallies of the Civil Rights movement, calling for freedom, jobs, and justice for African Americans. Furthermore, second-wave feminists, not yet part of a cohesive women's movement, were openly challenging normative gender ideologies. In 1963, the year "Beauty by Mary Kay" opened its doors, Betty Friedan's book on middle-class women's discontent, *The Feminine Mystique*, hit the bestseller lists. During the same year, the President's Commission on the Status of Women, appointed by President Kennedy and led by Eleanor Roosevelt, published a report that drew national attention to discrimination

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<sup>13</sup> Rudnitsky, "You Gotta Believe," 105.

<sup>14</sup> The company currently gives away copies of Ash's autobiography when recruits place their first \$600 minimum wholesale order (if the order is placed immediately after signing their "Independent Beauty Consultant Agreement"). See "Press Room: 2004 Corporate Press Kit," Mary Kay Cosmetics, [http://www.marykay.com/Headquarters/Pressroom/Press\\_2004FactSheet.asp](http://www.marykay.com/Headquarters/Pressroom/Press_2004FactSheet.asp) [accessed April 1, 2004].

<sup>15</sup> Underwood, *More Than a Pink Cadillac*, 192.

<sup>16</sup> One of the most memorable and infamous events of the early 1960s occurred right in Dallas, Texas. In November 1963, a mere five weeks after Ash founded her company, President John F. Kennedy was assassinated, several miles from her new business at Exchange Park.

against women in the workplace. In addition, female activists in the New Left and Civil Rights movements were laying the groundwork for feminism in the late 1960s.<sup>17</sup>

Nevertheless, in Ash's hometown of Dallas, Texas, grassroots activists were pursuing a more conservative agenda. In her work on Southern California conservatism, historian Lisa McGirr characterizes the early 1960s as the "origins of the New American Right." McGirr describes the Sunbelt region—highlighting Dallas, Texas, specifically—as an area that "had a tremendous influence on the national scene, providing many of the rank-and-file supporters of the libertarian and Christian Right." She argues that Sunbelt conservatives were not just reacting to liberal change, but were also creating a conservative philosophy that appealed to a broad range of Americans. McGirr defines Sunbelt conservatives as free market capitalists opposed to the expansion of federal government (except in matters of national defense). Most of these conservatives also advocated male authority within the family, religiosity, and individual responsibility.<sup>18</sup>

Elements of this conservative philosophy were particularly resonant within Mary Kay Ash's direct sales company. Ash, like many entrepreneurs, had economic incentive

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<sup>17</sup> Betty Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique* (New York: Norton, 1963). See Sara Evans, *Personal Politics: The Roots of Women's Liberation in the Civil Rights Movement & the New Left* (New York: Vintage Books, 1979); William Chafe, *Civilities and Civil Rights: Greensboro, North Carolina, and the Black Struggle for Freedom* (New York: University Press, 1980); and Cheryl Greenberg, "Twentieth-Century Liberalisms: Transformations of an Ideology," in *Perspectives on Modern America: Making Sense of the Twentieth Century*, ed. Harvard Sitkoff (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 53–79, for a few works that focus on the 1960s as a time of political and social liberalism.

<sup>18</sup> Lisa McGirr, *Suburban Warriors: The Origins of the New American Right* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), 13–14. Indeed, by 1964, Betty Friedan's *Feminine Mystique* competed for sales with Phyllis Schlafly's first bestseller, *A Choice Not an Echo*. Schlafly quickly earned a reputation within the Republican Party as a grassroots activist, a leader of conservative women, and a "pro-family" opponent of feminist change. For a discussion of Schlafly's balancing act of conservative activism and gender traditionalism, see Catherine E. Rymph, "Neither Neutral nor Neutralized: Phyllis Schlafly's Battle Against Sexism," in *Women's America: Refocusing the Past*, ed. Linda Kerber and Jane Sherron De Hart, 5<sup>th</sup> ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 501–507.

to support politicians who favored unregulated capitalist expansion.<sup>19</sup> In her 1984 work, *Mary Kay on People Management*, Ash quoted her son Richard at length:

Over the years I have given many Mary Kay speeches related to our free enterprise system. I feel our free enterprise system is important because without it you would not be here. I would not be speaking. Mary Kay Cosmetics would not exist. And the Mary Kay dream would never have become a reality.<sup>20</sup>

Richard Rogers went on to describe the benefits of living in a nation whose “founding fathers . . . were determined to set up a free citizenry rooted in the natural law of supply and demand with minimal state and federal interference. They envisioned the right of everyone to succeed or fail according to his or her own initiative, drive and ability.” Ash described listening to her son’s speech, given in the early 1980s to consultants and directors at the annual Seminar, with tears of pride in her eyes.<sup>21</sup>

Not only did Mary Kay match the economic conservatism of the Sunbelt, but she also incorporated much of the social agenda of the Sunbelt conservatives into her business philosophy. Mary Kay Cosmetics has regularly reminded consultants to share the company’s priorities by placing “God first, family second, career third.”<sup>22</sup> Clearly, religion and family authority are high priorities within the company; so high, in fact, that the company encourages its female sales force to fulfill familial obligations *before*

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<sup>19</sup> The company has been careful to keep government regulation at a minimum. Like other network direct sales organizations (DSOs), Mary Kay defines consultants and directors as “independent” contractors, and therefore, the consultant is considered “self-employed” and assumes responsibility for Social Security, income taxes, and all other dealings with state and federal government herself. During the late 1960s and 1970s, DSOs fought the IRS in court to preserve their right to declare direct sellers independent contractors for federal tax purposes. The Tax Equity and Fiscal Responsibility Act of 1982 upheld this designation, exempting DSOs from paying FICA and making business expenses incurred by recruits tax deductible. For explanation, see the “Independent Beauty Consultant Agreement” (Section A-5) that new consultants sign. Nicole Woolsey Biggart, *Charismatic Capitalism: Direct Selling Organizations in America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 185 n. 49.

<sup>20</sup> Mary Kay Ash, *Mary Kay on People Management* (New York: Warner Books, 1984), 110.

<sup>21</sup> Ash, *People Management*, 110.

<sup>22</sup> Ash, *Mary Kay*, 60.

working on their careers.<sup>23</sup> Ash regularly stressed in her writings and speeches that consultants should take time away from their work when their families needed them, and she reassured consultants that their positions in the company would not be lost.<sup>24</sup> While Ash named “God” as the top priority, she suggested that working for Mary Kay Cosmetics and religious devotion would never conflict. Mary Kay Cosmetics also prioritized patriotism. Ash drew attention to her nationalistic pride by saying, “I know in some circles it’s not considered good taste to wave the flag at company gatherings. I disagree. We think it’s a healthy emotion, and a message that can never be told too often.”<sup>25</sup>

Like many Sunbelt conservatives, Mary Kay Ash viewed problems like poverty, unemployment, or lack of education as the responsibility of the individual rather than society. During the early 1980s, when feminists were voicing concern about the feminization of poverty, Ash proudly sought “to counter negativism by emphasizing *what’s right with America.*” She refuted social criticisms, saying “there are more

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<sup>23</sup>Mary Kay Ash was described as “a traditionalist,” and she described herself as a “square”; “Mary Kay Cosmetics’ Mary Kay Ash,” *Chemical Week* 117 (August 6, 1975): 40. In 1995, Mary Kay Ash wrote an advice book for women, entitled *Mary Kay You Can Have it All: Lifetime Wisdom from America’s Foremost Woman Entrepreneur*. In her introduction, she commented on the unpopularity of stressing “old-fashioned values” to modern women, since “feminists” don’t want to be told to prioritize (xi). Nevertheless, Ash never shirked from advertising her own priorities of “God first, family second, career third.” For example, Ash warned modern women against putting their careers before their (future) families by postponing childbearing. “My advice to every young woman is to consider this issue carefully and make a definite commitment to her plan. Then she won’t give up what may be the most precious gift God gives us.” Ash, *Mary Kay You Can Have it All: Lifetime Wisdom from America’s Foremost Woman Entrepreneur* (Rocklin, California: Prima Publishing, 1995), 29.

<sup>24</sup> See the work by the Independent National Sales Directors of Mary Kay, *Paychecks of the Heart* (Dallas: Mary Kay Incorporated, 2000), for endless examples of the company (and its founder) supporting individual consultants when they chose to put their families first. Note the story of Virginia Robirds, who was supported through two family crises by her sister consultants (43–44). However, in 1998 the company faced a lawsuit by sales director Claudine Woolf, who was asked to relinquish her directorship and requalify for the position after a drop in sales when she struggled with breast cancer. (Her condition was aggravated by the fact that she was pregnant and chose to have the baby—against the advice of several doctors—despite increased danger to her health.) While the company changed course on the directorship by renewing her position, Woolf sued for wrongful dismissal. See “Kayoed by Mary Kay?” *People* 50 (August 10, 1998): 129.

<sup>25</sup> Ash, *People Management*, 111.

opportunities today, especially for women, than at any other time in history.” In fact, she optimistically declared, “Opportunities *have* always and *will* always be around. You simply have to take advantage of them.”<sup>26</sup> Ash may have emphasized the unlimited opportunities available in America because she wished to encourage women to view direct selling—especially selling Mary Kay Cosmetics—as a possibility to which they could always turn. Sociologist Nicole Woolsey Biggart notes that direct sales companies flourish in times of economic depression, when salaried work is harder to secure.<sup>27</sup> During the Great Depression, for example, companies like Avon and the Fuller Brush Company absorbed new recruits from the ranks of the unemployed. By implying that unemployed women could always “choose” to work in direct sales, Ash constructed poverty as willful laziness or irresponsibility. Certainly, direct selling did not offer regular wages or benefits like insurance or health care.<sup>28</sup> But presumably, through diligence and dedication, the hardworking beauty consultant could earn a good income. And when women did not succeed, it would be a lack of diligence or dedication, not social problems, that held them back.

As a direct sales organization, Mary Kay Cosmetics was neither exceptional, nor especially innovative when it opened its doors in September 1963. Elements of the Mary Kay formula—especially emphasis on female networks, conservative family values, and corporate religiosity—had been used by other direct sales companies such as Tupperware, Avon, and Stanley Home Products. All of these companies imitated the successful direct sales systems of early twentieth-century African American beauty entrepreneurs such as Madam C. J. Walker and Annie Turbo Malone, even if they did not

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<sup>26</sup> Ash, *People Management*, 113.

<sup>27</sup> Biggart, *Charismatic Capitalism*, 33.

<sup>28</sup> Today, directors (not consultants) qualify for some insurance and health benefits.

acknowledge the debt. Malone and Walker developed hair treatments that reputedly nourished, straightened, and styled African American women's hair. Due to a discriminatory job market that left African American women with few opportunities for advancement, Walker and Malone found many women eager to sell their hair treatments to earn extra money. In the early twentieth century (and on through most of the century), retail stores favored white toiletries and cosmetics to the disadvantage of black products. The African American community, therefore, embraced the opportunity to purchase products from Walker and Malone's independent sales forces, which sold products door-to-door or through the mail. Walker and Malone created and managed cosmetic empires, giving employment to thousands of African American women and making hundreds of thousands of dollars. Like Mary Kay Cosmetics half a century later, Walker and Malone attracted women with an opportunity to build a business without much credit or capital, and secured the loyalties of these businesswomen by offering them gifts, public commendations, and a sense of membership in a sales-based sisterhood.<sup>29</sup>

In the postwar era, direct sales work for Mary Kay, Avon, Tupperware, and Stanley Home Products appealed particularly to the ranks of white, lower middle-class, married women.<sup>30</sup> In a 1963 speech, the vice-president of Avon's sales, Norman Chadwick, explained,

Among married women with children between the ages of six and eighteen, only one in twenty has a steady job. Here is where the Avon opportunity fits dramatically into the scheme of things. It is the women who cannot take a steady job who find in Avon an opportunity for gainful

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<sup>29</sup> Kathy Peiss, *Hope in a Jar: The Making of America's Beauty Culture* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, Metropolitan Books, 1998), 67–77.

<sup>30</sup> For a discussion of Avon's development in the first half of the twentieth century, see Katina Manko, "A Depression-Proof Business Strategy: The California Perfume Company's Motivational Literature," in *Beauty and Business: Commerce, Gender, and Culture in Modern America*, ed. Philip Scranton (New York: Routledge, 2001).

endeavor on a part-time basis. And it will be from the ranks of these people that we will draw the Avon Representatives of tomorrow.<sup>31</sup>

Avon executives assumed that married women would join the ranks of the sales representatives with the intention of putting “extra money in the family sugar bowl,” or acquiring a little “pin money,” rather than fulfilling personal ambitions or creating an independent income.<sup>32</sup> Nevertheless, Avon officials reassured these representatives, “YOU ARE AVON in your territory,” and boosted their enthusiasm for the sales work with motivational literature preaching self-empowerment.<sup>33</sup> In 1963 Avon Cosmetics was the acknowledged leader of cosmetic direct sales, a position it had won by stressing the convenience of having an attentive door-to-door saleswoman deliver inexpensive products right to the customer’s home.<sup>34</sup> Avon left a window for Mary Kay by marketing a broad range of toiletries at low prices. “Beauty by Mary Kay” cleverly capitalized on a gap in the Avon market by highlighting *luxury* skin care products; however, the Mary Kay sales force was made up of the same population as Avon. Particularly in the 1960s

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<sup>31</sup> Norman C. Chadwick, “Heritage of Avon” (speech given at Pathways Achievements conference, 1963), 19–20, Administration Policies/Misc.—Products Box 110, Record group 2, series 1, Hagley Archives, Delaware.

<sup>32</sup> Although companies like Avon often assumed that their female sales representatives would be married mothers, single mothers like Mary Kay Ash (a divorcee) relied on direct selling in the 1950s to support themselves and their children. Avon, *Outlook*, Campaign 11 (1960): back cover, from Box 34, series 6, subseries C, Hagley Archives.

<sup>33</sup> Avon, “I Am Avon,” *Outlook*, Campaign 7 (1960): 2, from Box 34, series 6, subseries C, Hagley Archives. For a discussion of Avon’s reliance on motivational literature, see Manko, “A Depression-Proof Business Strategy.”

<sup>34</sup> Both the customer and the salesperson were assumed to be married women, usually young mothers. For example, Avon’s magazine for salespeople, *Outlook*, informed representatives in 1960: “Many times you call just in the nick of time . . . just when your service is most needed . . . the baby’s down with a cold . . . the dishes are waiting . . . and there’s housework to do . . . she’s upset, depressed. And then the doorbell rings . . . it’s YOU . . . her Avon Representative . . . with a warm and friendly smile . . . just the thing she needs to take her mind off her troubles . . . just the time she really needs the convenient, time-saving, home service you offer.” *Outlook*, Campaign 7 (1960): 3, from Box 34, series 6, subseries C, Hagley Archives. For a discussion of Avon’s sales strategy, see also, Ramona Behtos, “Avon shifting to ‘value’ ads to combat declines,” *Advertising Age* 44 (October 8, 1973): 1. The sales brochure took center stage for Avon because the company had such a vast range of products that the saleswomen could not carry all of them with them. Mary Kay Cosmetics has always made a point of keeping its range of products narrow, in an effort to supply customers immediately upon purchase.



and early 1970s, Mary Kay Ash and her directors recruited lower-middle-class white women in the Sunbelt region.

Before starting her own company, Ash herself had worked for Stanley Home Products, another female-staffed direct sales organization. During the 1940s and 1950s, Stanley Home Products introduced the very successful “party plan” to the world of direct sales. Whereas most direct sellers, such as Avon Products and Fuller Brush Company, sold their products door-to-door, Frank Beveridge, the founder of Stanley Home Products, directed his salespeople to present their products (household cleansers) at small “parties” in neighborhood homes. The salesperson would encourage an acquaintance to “hostess” a party in her home, inviting her friends and neighbors for light refreshments and a presentation by the salesperson. The party plan allowed Stanley Home Products salespeople to make their sales pitch to several women at the same time. Furthermore, parties often created a sense of peer pressure, and attendees might purchase products to “keep up with the Joneses.” At every party, the salesperson could encourage individual guests to hostess the next party.<sup>35</sup>

The parties thrown by Mary Kay representatives are most comparable to the direct selling style developed by Tupperware Home Parties Incorporated. Brownie Wise, the vice-president of the Tupperware corporation and the brain behind the business between 1951 and 1958, turned a small kitchenware company into a direct sales giant by enhancing the sociability, conviviality, and communal materialism of the direct sales party. Wise played upon stereotypes of femininity and domesticity, encouraging attendees to swap recipes and engage in games such as “Clothes Pin,” “Waist

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<sup>35</sup> Biggart, *Charismatic Capitalism*, 42–43.

Measurement,” “Game of Gossip,” and “Chatter.”<sup>36</sup> Even though Tupperware reinforced the idea that women’s “place” was within the home, many feminists in the 1970s and early 1980s described Tupperware direct sales parties as a welcome opportunity for “housewives who don’t get much chance to go out.”<sup>37</sup>

Mary Kay Ash agreed that the party plan was the perfect sales tool for selling cosmetics and skin care, since sales consultants could use and create female networks to find customers and new recruits. Ash instructed her consultants to limit their sales parties—also called “facials” or “classes”—to a maximum of six guests, in order to give each attendee close attention.<sup>38</sup> The consultant deliberately uses the “party” atmosphere to suggest that the guests are not viewing a sales presentation, but instead participating in a “girls’ night” makeup ritual. Ash insisted, “Our emphasis is on teaching,” specifically, teaching skin care and cosmetic skills to potential customers.<sup>39</sup> She explained, “If you go into a department store and let the person behind the counter make you up, you can no more recreate what that person does than you can fly to the moon . . . . At our shows, you are taught why and shown how to apply your makeup. You do it yourself, make

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<sup>36</sup> Clarke explains that these games were meant to reinforce a sense of “female” domestic culture, by emphasizing “overtly feminine issues.” By invoking stereotypes of femininity, these games presented guests with a common language, an icebreaker, and a means for getting involved in the “party.” And because the games were played with Tupperware products, they also gave guests an opportunity to handle and admire the containers before purchasing them. Clarke, *Tupperware*, 107–108. See also *American Experience: Tupperware!* (produced, directed, and written by Laurie Kahn-Leavitt for WGBH Boston, PBS, 2003).

<sup>37</sup> Dee Wedemeyer, “There’s a Tupperware Party Starting Every 10 Seconds . . .” *Ms.* 4 (August 1975): 73. Elayne Rapping, “Tupperware and Women,” *Radical America* 6, no. 14 (1980): 39, 48–49.

<sup>38</sup> Guests, as friends of the hostess, have special incentive to buy products, since their purchases would help their hostess earn gifts and prizes. “Sandra,” a Mary Kay director, described the “hostess thank you system” as an opportunity for women who couldn’t afford the products to earn free merchandise. If they host a party, they are rewarded for the amount of merchandise their guests buy, and also for the number of their guests who agree to host future parties. “Sandra,” interview by author, Williamsburg, Va., 5 April 2004. Mary Kay products are more expensive than the makeup and skin care sold at drugstores or by Avon, but they are somewhat less expensive than brands (including Clinique, Estee Lauder, Elizabeth Arden, and MAC) sold in high-end department stores (like Macy’s). “Mary Kay: The Mixture’s Odd, But Its Success Is Gratifying,” *Dallas Morning News* (July 7, 1974): 11B.

<sup>39</sup> “Lessons of Leadership: Flying High On an Idea,” *Nation’s Business* 66 (August 1978): 42.

mistakes, wipe it off, try again.”<sup>40</sup> By stressing the primary importance of “teaching” skin care at beauty parties, Ash continued to imply that her motive was giving women opportunities, not earning profits. Ash clearly recognized the potential of a small, streamlined beauty party. The beauty consultant would immerse potential customers in the “party” atmosphere, and ideally, these customers would be eager to buy many of the products they had already sampled. They might even be willing to speak to the consultant about starting their own Mary Kay careers.

### **“Positive Thinking” and Evangelizing at Mary Kay**

Mary Kay Ash incorporated her evangelical background as a Baptist and her own belief in God into her sales philosophy, and used her faith to inspire and recruit women with similar backgrounds. In fact, Ash often treated her company as a convenient vehicle for proselytizing to her saleswomen. In a 1979 news piece by *60 Minutes* entitled “The Pink Panther,” host Morley Safer commented that “no Mary Kay person, including Mary Kay herself, lets more than a minute go by without invoking God. It’s as if the road to heaven is paved with cosmetics sales.”<sup>41</sup> During his interview with Ash, Safer asked: “Do you think that’s really fair in terms of marketing to inject God into it as though there was some religious experience involved . . . .” Mary Kay responded, “Let me say this, I really feel that our company is where it is today and has been blessed beyond all belief by the fact that God is using our company as a vehicle to help women become the beautiful creatures that He created.” Safer then queried, “But do you think in a sense that you are using God?” Ash answered quickly, saying, “I hope not, I sincerely hope not. I hope

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<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 43.

<sup>41</sup> Morley Safer, in “The Pink Panther.”

He's using me instead."<sup>42</sup> Ash clearly viewed evangelizing as a key component of "enriching women's lives."

In 1952 Norman Vincent Peale authored *The Power of Positive Thinking*, popularizing a trend toward "practical" religion, wherein believers could focus their energy and prayer onto the problems of everyday life. Peale, a Methodist minister, taught that success required only optimism and faith in a Christian God.<sup>43</sup> Positive thinking mostly appealed to lower middle-class Protestant women; yet, it was also particularly resonant among salespeople, whose work required that they project enthusiasm to potential customers.<sup>44</sup> Sociologist Nicole Woolsey Biggart argued that positive thinking was a common element of all the direct sales organizations she studied.<sup>45</sup> It makes sense that direct sales companies would use positive thinking to inspire salespeople; not only did the work require a high degree of personal ambition, steadfastness, and confidence, but the salespeople were often the same lower middle-class Protestant women who followed Peale.<sup>46</sup>

Mary Kay directors address beauty consultants with Peale's philosophy from the time they sign their contracts. The company uses positive thinking to encourage consultants to take personal responsibility for their sales results. Mary Kay Ash hinted that low sales were the fault of the consultant, rather than the result of external economic circumstances, or—more importantly—the company's product or policy. However,

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<sup>42</sup> Directors drew my attention to this exchange as evidence of the company's Christian mission. Safer and Ash, "The Pink Panther." "Betty," interview.

<sup>43</sup> Carol George, *God's Salesman: Norman Vincent Peale & the Power of Positive Thinking* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), viii, xi.

<sup>44</sup> R. Laurence Moore, *Selling God: American Religion in the Marketplace of Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 241.

<sup>45</sup> Biggart, *Charismatic Capitalism*, 136.

<sup>46</sup> Companies such as Avon, Tupperware, Stanley Home Products, and Amway incorporated Peale's message into sales meetings and pamphlets, and some also invited Peale to speak to their salespeople. Clarke, *Tupperware*, 150–151.

company officials reassure consultants that they can overcome failure through the right attitude, prayer, and persistence. In a speech entitled, “You Can Fly, Don’t Forget. Thinking Makes It So,” Ash explained, “The only difference between a Consultant who never holds that first show and the Director who builds a million-dollar unit is BELIEF!”<sup>47</sup> Ash weaved encouragement and this message of personal accountability into most of the company literature, combining Peale’s writings with Biblical stories and American success stories (such as Thomas Edison and J. C. Penney) for examples of the “right” attitude.<sup>48</sup>

Positive thinking has proven extremely useful to direct sales companies largely because it is an extremely popular and non-denominational method of appealing to conservative Christians. Biggart described direct sales organizations generally as being in “the business of belief.” By investing the entrepreneurial activity of direct selling with “moral and social meanings,” direct sellers offer both “a sense of meaning that escapes many bureaucratic workers” and comfort for the relatively frequent economic disappointments that come with this discouraging line of work.<sup>49</sup> Ash firmly believed that “the Golden Rule”—do unto others as you would have them do unto you—would set her company apart from its competitors. She did not merely remind consultants that God was their chief priority, but also implied that the consultants were serving a higher purpose as

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<sup>47</sup> Excerpts from Mary Kay’s 1985 Seminar speech, photocopied from *Applause* (n.d.) author’s private collection.

<sup>48</sup> By the late 1960s, Ash’s chief role in the company was as a motivational speaker. In 1968, Mary Kay Cosmetics realigned management positions. Ash became board chairman, and her son Richard Rogers (at the young age of twenty-four) was elevated to company president. “Mary Kay Cosmetics Elevates Management,” *Dallas Morning News*, 19 January 1968, 5B. A quick look at Mary Kay Ash’s writings and speeches conveys these themes of self-reliance and persistence in the face of defeat. See, for example, “Green Pastures,” Mary Kay’s Seminar Speech from 1972, author’s private collection. In 1978, Norman Vincent Peale awarded Ash the “Horatio Alger Distinguished American Citizen Award,” through the Horatio Alger Association, which he had founded to honor American success stories. Ash, *Mary Kay*, 197.

<sup>49</sup> Biggart, *Charismatic Capitalism*, 102–103.

“beautifiers” introducing women to cosmetics.<sup>50</sup> She explained, “In the early 1960s God gave me the responsibility of helping women to see that not only could they be feminine but that they could be successful at the same time.”<sup>51</sup> Ash referred to God as the company’s “partner,” and suggested that her success indicated that God approved, claiming, “He has blessed us because our motivation is right.”<sup>52</sup>

In her autobiography and at company functions, Mary Kay Ash openly discussed her own faith.<sup>53</sup> Yet she maintained that her company was open to people of diverse religious backgrounds, saying, “I’m careful to remember that we *are* a business and that I must avoid preaching to our people. After all, as a company with so many associates, we are represented by every faith and denomination.”<sup>54</sup> Certainly, there are consultants who are not Christians, as the *Yahoo!* web group “MaryKayPagans”—“For Mary Kay Beauty Consultants who are Pagan rather than Christian”—illustrates.<sup>55</sup> The directors I spoke with insisted that nonbelievers are welcome.<sup>56</sup> Nevertheless, Mary Kay Ash and her sales directors were frequently evangelical, and consultants who do not share a belief in a Protestant God were likely to feel like unwelcome minorities. Consultants explained that in many units, they begin every meeting with a Christian prayer. Most of the consultants

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<sup>50</sup> Biggart, *Charismatic Capitalism*, 112–113.

<sup>51</sup> Ash, *Mary Kay*, 185.

<sup>52</sup> Ash, *Mary Kay*, 60.

<sup>53</sup> Though Ash was a devout Baptist, she was married to a Catholic, a Protestant, and a Jew, respectively. Richard Hattwick, “Mary Kay Ash,” *Journal of Behavioral Economics* (Winter 1987): 61.

<sup>54</sup> Ash, *Mary Kay*, 60.

<sup>55</sup> “Mary Kay Pagans,” *Yahoo!* Groups, <http://groups.yahoo.com/group/MaryKayPagans/> [accessed April 12, 2004]. “Laura” interview; “Betty” interviews

<sup>56</sup> Marci Chitwood, a self-proclaimed atheist, wrote bitterly of her experiences at “a Mary Kay (cosmetic) rally.” Chitwood rebuked a director’s efforts at recruitment by calling attention to her own atheism. The director responded, “Well, if you’re an atheist, I suppose you wouldn’t make a very good Mary Kay consultant.” This comment confirmed Chitwood’s belief that Mary Kay was “minimizing fine minds.” Marcia Chitwood, “Me and Mary Kay,” *The Humanist* 58, no. 2 (March/April 1998): 3. “Betty,” interview; “Sandra,” interview.

and directors I spoke to were devout, evangelical Protestants, and they described Mary Kay's evangelicalism as a primary reason they joined the company.<sup>57</sup>

### **The “Superwoman” Sales Consultant: Overcoming Racism and Sexism through Sales?**

In order to fulfill all of their obligations to God, family, and career, Mary Kay consultants had to manage their time wisely. The successful businesswoman needed to be self-abnegating and self-motivated. While Ash advised consultants to sacrifice their personal time to the presumably worthier needs of their church, family, and business, she promised that, ultimately, these sacrifices would bring personal happiness. In her autobiography, Ash described her own struggles as a working mother who eliminated most socializing, relaxation, and fun from her schedule to find time for work and family.<sup>58</sup> Ash suggested that ambitious consultants join her “Five O’ Clock Club,” waking up at five every morning to get more accomplished.<sup>59</sup> Ash also encouraged consultants to turn to motivational tapes and books (such as writings by Peale and his imitators) for inspiration.<sup>60</sup>

While in the 1960s and early 1970s isolated middle-class housewives might have viewed direct sales parties as a welcome social outlet, demographics shifted in the 1970s and 1980s, requiring Mary Kay to adjust its sales style. By the late 1970s, most women expected to work full-time outside their homes for most of their lives (even if that meant

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<sup>57</sup> “Betty,” interview; “Gretchen,” interview; “Laura,” interview; “Kendra,” interview by author, Newport News, Va., 25 March 2004.

<sup>58</sup> Ash, *Mary Kay*, 62.

<sup>59</sup> Ash, *Mary Kay*, 85.

<sup>60</sup> Directors built on this recommendation by encouraging their consultants to look to motivational literature while “training” for their business. “Betty,” interview.

working in low-paying, “pink-collar” jobs).<sup>61</sup> Mary Kay recruitment and sales dropped as more white, lower-middle-class married women got full-time, nine-to-five jobs away from the home. Not only was it harder to find women willing to work as direct sellers, it was increasingly unusual to find women at home during the day for sales parties. The direct sales party as a social outlet seemed less appealing to a generation of extremely busy women trying to balance work inside and outside the home. To win recruits in the face of this downturn, Mary Kay offered larger commissions and bonuses, but it also encouraged women to sell cosmetics at an occasional party or to close friends and family, part-time, to supplement their full-time wages. By the late 1980s, women were having a harder time making ends meet working only one job: whereas only 33 percent of the sales force had held other jobs in the early 1980s, nearly 70 percent did so by the end of the decade.<sup>62</sup>

During the late-1970s and 1980s, with the loss of consultants to full-time positions, Ash and her directors aggressively recruited beauty consultants. Ash and her directors billed Mary Kay Cosmetics as a progressive company that offered opportunities to former housewives who lacked education or job skills, working-class women, and women of color.<sup>63</sup> Nancy Tietjen of Minneapolis joined the company in 1971, and, during the late-1970s and 1980s her story was invoked as evidence of the rags-to-riches possibilities of Mary Kay Cosmetics. The company’s recruitment literature regularly pointed to Nancy’s previous job, where she had worked the “graveyard shift,” “packing

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<sup>61</sup> See Ellen Carol DuBois, Lynn Dumenil, eds., *Through Women’s Eyes: An American History* (New York: Bedford St. Martin’s, 2005), appendix A-38.

<sup>62</sup> Jay Pederson, ed., “Mary Kay,” *International Directory of Company Histories* 30 (New York: St. James Press, 2000), 308.

<sup>63</sup> Ash did an interview for *60 Minutes* in 1979, published her autobiography in 1981, and a book on “people management” in 1984, all in an effort to appeal to wider audience. “The Pink Panther,” *60 Minutes*, CBS News, 1979; Mary Kay Ash, *Mary Kay*, 1<sup>st</sup> ed. (New York: Harper & Row, 1981); Ash, *Mary Kay on People Management*.



shotgun shells on an assembly line, making much less than \$100 a week, living in a one-room apartment, and supporting two teenaged daughters.”<sup>64</sup> Tietjen described her work with Mary Kay as a personal transformation, saying, “It’s really been a self-improvement course for me.”<sup>65</sup> Ash and her directors also publicized the success of women of color, such as Ruell Cone-Dunn, who eventually went on to become a National Sales Consultant after joining in April 1971. A 1982 article in *Essence* magazine pointed to the “ten free Cadillacs and two full-length minks as well as diamonds and other jewels” won by Cone-Dunn.<sup>66</sup> Mary Kay promotional literature often paired Cone-Dunn’s success story with a description of her poverty before joining the company, noting that her family had been sharecroppers, and she had struggled to even furnish her home.<sup>67</sup>

In her autobiography, Ash proudly explained, “Mary Kay does work in the lives of all kinds of women—every age, every background, every race, color, and creed.”<sup>68</sup> Nevertheless, race and class play an important role in the make-up of individual sales units. “Laura,” a white consultant, explained that, by making consultants and directors “independent” of the company, directors tend to build units with racial and cultural backgrounds similar to their own: “There’s the white directors and their little white minions . . . sometimes you can get other ethnicities under the white directors, but most of the time with the black directors, they’re mostly black.” Laura, who began purchasing products in the late 1990s, argued that the company has only recently expanded its product line to include a wider variety of products for nonwhite women: “I’ve seen a lot

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<sup>64</sup> Cheryl Hall, “National Directors Sold: Mary Kay Called ‘Way of Life,’” *Dallas Morning News* 14 August 1975, 7D. “Lessons of Leadership,” 46. See also *There’s Room at the Top: The Success Stories of Some of America’s Leading Businesswomen* (Dallas: Mary Kay Cosmetics, 1987), 16-17.

<sup>65</sup> Hall, “National Directors Sold,” 7D.

<sup>66</sup> Vanessa J. Gallman, “Cashing In on Door-to-Door Dollars,” *Essence* 13 (June 1982): 24.

<sup>67</sup> *There’s Room at the Top*, 19.

<sup>68</sup> Ash, *Mary Kay*, 170.

of improvements . . . . When I first started getting involved with Mary Kay, not necessarily selling it, there weren't a lot of foundation shades, that was a major problem with women of color . . . if it's too light, they look ashy, if it's too dark, then it just looks really bad." Nevertheless, she argued that the company has "really made an effort to find lots more shades for women of color [since the late 1990s]." Laura also argued that the company does a "really good job" appealing to diverse readers of company publications. She joked that *Applause* (the company newsletter) and product brochures reminded her of college advertisements, because they consistently picture women of various races together on the cover.<sup>69</sup>

Laura described the company as "definitely equal opportunity, because every woman has skin and every woman needs products and every woman wants to feel good about themselves."<sup>70</sup> Kendra, an African American consultant, added, "it's like a melting pot, basically."<sup>71</sup> Indeed, since the 1980s the company has encouraged women of color to join the ranks of the sales consultants, publicizing their success stories as models for new recruits.<sup>72</sup> Company publications portray membership in this direct sales organization as the salvation of women who face "real-world" disadvantages such as poverty or racial discrimination. In the warm fold of Mary Kay Cosmetics, these "disadvantages" would be immaterial, since the company promises success to anyone willing to work hard and shoulder the financial risk of start-up costs.<sup>73</sup>

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<sup>69</sup> "Laura," interview.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid.

<sup>71</sup> "Kendra," interview.

<sup>72</sup> Mary Kay advertised in *Essence* magazine by the early 1980s. "Mary Kay" advertisement, *Essence* 13 (May 1982).

<sup>73</sup> Rosa Jackson, a Senior National Sales Director, explained to Jim Underwood that Mary Kay "personally got involved" in encouraging her career, by saying "Rosa, I apologize for our society. I believe we are all equal in the sight of God. You can go to the top in this company, so don't let a few narrow people

Despite the company's efforts to recruit working-class women, Ash clearly tried to cultivate an image of the consultants as middle-class "ladies." When Nancy Tietjen described Mary Kay as a "self-improvement course," she commented on the role Mary Kay tried to assume in consultants' lives. Rules forbidding smoking and gum chewing enforce a middle-class sense of propriety among the consultants. The "Cinderella" gifts with which the company rewards top sellers—such as the Cadillacs, jewelry, and fur coats—hint at the company's efforts to link Mary Kay consultants with the leisure and glamour associated with the 1950s. "Gretchen" described a company cookbook that featured menus for formal "teas," a social occasion that smacks of refinement and wealth. She joked, "who does teas anymore? Mary Kay consultants!"<sup>74</sup> Furthermore, Ash has revealed some misconceptions about the realities of working-class experience. For example, she recommended that her consultants manage their time more efficiently by eliminating "penny jobs" like housework. In 1981, Ash suggested that the busy saleswoman should hire a housekeeper as soon as she could afford one.<sup>75</sup> Ash's suggestion likely seemed unrealistic to the average consultant, who, at the time, made an average of \$1,800 a year from Mary Kay.<sup>76</sup> Ash revealed her nostalgia for the social order of the early 1960s South, when poor Latina and Black women's labor could be bought for pennies, giving white women—even middle-class white women—more time for leisure, nurturing their families, and volunteer work. Of course, Mary Kay

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discourage you." Jackson concluded, "We were an equal opportunity company long before it was fashionable." Underwood, *More than a Pink Cadillac*, 173.

<sup>74</sup> "Gretchen," interview.

<sup>75</sup> Ash, *Mary Kay*. 1<sup>st</sup> ed., 83.

<sup>76</sup> Levering, Moskowitz, and Katz, *The 100 Best Companies* (1984), 201. Granted, this average reflects the overwhelming number of women who work Mary Kay part-time or as a pastime. By the early 1990s, sales directors were making an average of \$48,000 a year.

recommended that her consultants hire housekeepers so they could spend more time on their Mary Kay businesses.

Perhaps because they could not afford to hire housekeepers, the consultants I spoke to struggled to maintain their energy level and ambition. Kendra, who combines Mary Kay with a full-time job and an assortment of social and religious commitments, expressed her determination to find more time for her business: “Got to make it work. Got to do the work.”<sup>77</sup> Kendra aspires to make Mary Kay into a full-time career, but another consultant characterized her as “a hobbyist”: she makes about twenty dollars monthly profits, and works about two and a half hours a month.<sup>78</sup> Some consultants described feelings of frustration with the pace of their business. Laura, a consultant who hopes to become a director, explained, “I tend to set goals that are too big—that are not achievable—and then I beat myself [up] for them when I don’t reach them.”<sup>79</sup> But others found that success came easily. “Diane,” a part-time consultant—who sold \$32,000 of products in one especially successful year—insisted, “To me there is really no stress in Mary Kay.”<sup>80</sup> A director, “Sandra,” explained that, ultimately, Mary Kay’s greatest weakness might be “our own weakness . . . that you’re in business for yourself, and that you don’t have a boss telling you what to do, you don’t even have to show up for work every morning.” Sandra implied that consultants frequently neglected their businesses, noting that while “your unit is meant to support you,” the consultant is responsible for the results. “We teach you to treat it like a business. You’re your own boss, your own treasury, you’re your own employee.” Sandra suggested that, while Mary Kay’s

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<sup>77</sup> “Kendra” interview.

<sup>78</sup> “Gretchen,” interview; “Kendra,” interview.

<sup>79</sup> “Laura,” interview.

<sup>80</sup> “Diane,” interview by author, Williamsburg, Va., 30 March 2004.

flexibility allowed women time for their families, it also led to disappointing sales.

Consultants might fail to put consistent effort into their businesses because, “sometimes this is the only moveable thing” in their lives.<sup>81</sup>

It was a particular family structure that Ash urged consultants to prioritize: one in which husbands operated as Christian patriarchs, responsible for decision-making, while wives served as domestic managers, caring for the children, preparing meals, doing the housework (until they could afford a housekeeper), and nurturing the hearts and souls of their family members. Ash explained that, although she was a successful company executive, she still viewed her husband, Mel, as the “chairman of the chairman of the board,” who expected her to be home every night to put his dinner on the table.<sup>82</sup> Many consultants and directors agreed that their primary role was within the home. Ila Burgardt, of Wichita, Kansas, appreciated the fact that at Mary Kay, “we can remain feminine, loving wives and good mothers.”<sup>83</sup> Arlene Lenarz, of Plymouth, Minnesota, left her career in nursing to become a Mary Kay consultant. She described her decision to join Mary Kay, saying, “I grew weary of always having to compromise my family for my job.”<sup>84</sup> These directors described Mary Kay Cosmetics as a company that would allow women to be “better” wives and mothers.

Many Mary Kay saleswomen did not share Ash’s belief that their primary obligation and purpose was to care for their children and defer to their husbands.

Individual saleswomen described using the company to build a life and a career outside

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<sup>81</sup> “Sandra,” interview.

<sup>82</sup> Mel Ash did not work at Mary Kay Cosmetics; he was a vitamin industry executive and retired wholesale manufacturer’s representative in Dallas. See “Handbook of Texas Online,” <http://www.tsha.utexas.edu/handbook/online/articles/view/MM/dhm1.html> [accessed March 24, 2004]. For quote, see Ash, *Mary Kay*, 1<sup>st</sup> ed., 73.

<sup>83</sup> *There’s Room at the Top*, 29.

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*, 31.

their family obligations, subverting Ash's idealization of domesticity. Colene Shadley of Tustin, California, joined Mary Kay Cosmetics in September 1964 despite the fact that "[her] husband didn't want [her] to work." She was determined to start a career anyhow: "While I loved my children and enjoyed being a mother, I felt that I was drowning in a 'little people's world.'"<sup>85</sup> Fran Cikalo, of West Bloomfield, Michigan, suffered from "periods of such frustration" as a full-time housewife and mother. "I noticed I had lost a lot of the confidence I had as a young girl. I was trying to live my life vicariously through my children's activities, and I knew my talents went far beyond what I was presently doing."<sup>86</sup> Mary Kay Cosmetics seemed to be the solution to her frustrations. In the late 1980s, feminist novelist Fannie Flagg suggested that Mary Kay could be an empowering experience for insecure homemakers. In *Fried Green Tomatoes at the Whistle Stop Cafe* (1987), Flagg's novel about Southern women who endured insensitivity and even abuse in their marriages, protagonist Evelyn Couch joins Mary Kay Cosmetics and earns a pink Cadillac to gain self-confidence.<sup>87</sup>

Rising divorce rates in the late twentieth century have made the two-parent, male-headed household idealized by Ash quite rare.<sup>88</sup> Several of the consultants and directors I interviewed explained that they joined Mary Kay to cope with painful divorces. Indeed, Ash herself first went into direct sales after a divorce left her feeling "like a complete and total failure."<sup>89</sup> When I asked one consultant why she joined the company, she explained, "I went through a divorce and I had some bills that I wanted to clean up and I was

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<sup>85</sup> Ibid., 75.

<sup>86</sup> Ibid., 95.

<sup>87</sup> Fannie Flagg, *Fried Green Tomatoes at the Whistle Stop Cafe* (New York: McGraw Hill, 1988).

<sup>88</sup> Sara Evans, *Born for Liberty* (New York: Free Press Paperbacks, 1997), 302.

<sup>89</sup> Ash, *Mary Kay*, 17.

lonely.”<sup>90</sup> Many consultants expressed appreciation for the emotional support they found through the company during their divorces: “That’s really what got me through those first few years, just going over all the things I was learning about what [Ash] was saying. Because everything kept falling apart around me! . . . And I kept saying all the things that Mary Kay would say and kept going . . . and so . . . what she believed really helped me.”<sup>91</sup> As Mary Kay “sisters,” consultants entered into a stable relationship with their sales unit that offered both emotional and (some) financial support. One consultant even suggested that her Mary Kay friends replaced her husband, saying it’s “almost like you have a marriage there.”<sup>92</sup> A national sales director, Dollie Griffin, of Stevensville Montana, credited Mary Kay with giving her the strength to leave an abusive relationship. “I was a battered wife and up until this time my self-esteem were [sic] in the minus. With Mary Kay I was learning to think positive, be positive and I realized that I didn’t have to stay trapped in the bad situation I had been in for 15 years. I finally recognized that I hadn’t been raising my son in a healthy atmosphere and was able to remedy that.”<sup>93</sup>

Many sales consultants and directors admitted that their families, and particularly their husbands, resisted their association with Mary Kay. Arlene Lenarz recalled that her husband “was not as thrilled [about Mary Kay] as I was. In fact he quickly informed me that this was ‘my’ business, not ‘our’ business. Funny how fast he changed his mind though, when I asked him to stamp the backs of all my checks.”<sup>94</sup> Virginia Robirds of

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<sup>90</sup> “Diane,” interview.

<sup>91</sup> “Sandra,” interview.

<sup>92</sup> “Gretchen,” interview. Gretchen was careful to re-establish this relationship within heterosexual bounds, saying that the reason this bond allowed “sister” consultants to discuss men.

<sup>93</sup> *There’s Room at the Top*, 69.

<sup>94</sup> *Ibid.*, 31.

Atlanta, Georgia, concurred: “My family agreed I could try this new venture as long as I didn’t have any classes at night or bother them with it. My son wasn’t too sure he wanted his mother to work since I never had, but he soon became my best supporter.”<sup>95</sup> Idell Moffett, of Dallas, Texas, said, “My husband, Hershel, didn’t really want me to work because I had just re-established my fashion modeling and charm school and had quite a few students. I convinced him that it wasn’t work—just something fun to do—and I would still be there when the kids got home from school.” However, Moffett found that her husband would accept her career in sales if she made a lot of money. “There was no peace at home until I told him I’d become a Director.”<sup>96</sup>

While the consultants and directors were not necessarily enjoying the domestic bliss Mary Kay Ash idealized, they did describe motherhood as a chief priority. Many joined Mary Kay to earn income without compromising their time at home with their children. Considering the business world’s resistance to flex time, direct sales is a rare opportunity for a woman to set her own working hours. Sandra explained that, when she joined the company twenty-five years ago, she was “looking for a way to support myself where I could be there with my children in the morning and the afternoon.”<sup>97</sup> Laura, who is planning to have children in the near future, described Mary Kay as a smart career move: “The eventual goal was to be able to stay home when we have kids and do this full time.”<sup>98</sup> Nevertheless, she hinted that this goal, which would require that she earn considerably greater profits, still seemed out of reach. The directors I spoke to estimated that three out of four of their consultants combine Mary Kay with other employment,

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<sup>95</sup> Ibid., 83.

<sup>96</sup> Ibid., 45.

<sup>97</sup> “Sandra,” interview.

<sup>98</sup> “Laura,” interview.



usually full-time.<sup>99</sup> Even the consultants who paired direct sales with a full-time job described Mary Kay as an opportunity to improve their children's lives. Gretchen, who described her grown kids as "Mary Kay children," explained that her earnings paid for special treats for her family, saying, "My children have lived a very good life, thank you Mary Kay."<sup>100</sup>

### **Mary Kay Business Practices: "Feminine" or Feminist?**

Ash, along with many of her consultants, believed that Mary Kay promoted "old-fashioned values" by encouraging women to conform to normative gender roles and acknowledging their obligations as homemakers.<sup>101</sup> However, Ash combined an idealization of "traditional" gender norms with enthusiasm for the successful career woman. By working within the normative capitalist system to improve women's economic opportunities, Ash embraced ideals of female self-advancement that might be defined as "liberal feminism." When Ash opened Mary Kay Cosmetics in 1963, she viewed her company as a corrective to the discriminatory practices she had encountered as a direct salesperson in male-dominated companies. Ash got her start in direct sales after her own divorce, when she began selling for Stanley Home Products to support herself and her three children. After retiring from Stanley, Ash decided to write a book about her experiences in direct sales, describing the best way to run a company "in which women had the opportunity to fully utilize their skills and talents."<sup>102</sup> Reflecting on her own experiences, Ash commented, "In twenty-five years, I had seen countless capable

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<sup>99</sup> Sandra explained, "They can make money, it's just that a lot of people today already have a job and they come into Mary Kay as something for fun. And then a few of those people decide, oh yes, I want more out of this." "Sandra," interview.

<sup>100</sup> "Gretchen," interview.

<sup>101</sup> Ash, *Mary Kay You Can Have It All*, xi.

<sup>102</sup> Ash, *Mary Kay*, 22.

individuals held back only because they were female.”<sup>103</sup> Ash discovered that her male co-workers assumed that, as a woman, she was not her children’s breadwinner, and therefore did not require a family wage.

One company paid me \$25,000 a year to be its national training director, but, in truth, I was acting as the national *sales manager*—and for a salary much less than the job was worth. Then there were the times when I would be asked to take a man out on the road to train him, and after six months of training, he would be brought back to Dallas, made my superior, and given twice my salary! It happened more than once. What really angered me was when I was told that these men earned more because they had families to support. I had a family to support, too.<sup>104</sup>

Ash soon expanded her goal of writing a book to forming a company. As she developed a business plan for Mary Kay Cosmetics, she was determined to make her company different from its competitors. First, Ash would encourage women to take the lead as salespeople and sales managers. “Instead of a tightly closed corporate door bearing the sign, “For Men Only,” our company has an open portal that bears the invitation “Everyone Welcome—*Especially Women*.”<sup>105</sup> Ash also vowed to accommodate women’s additional responsibilities as mothers, wives, and homemakers. For example, Ash had found that assigned territories were a disadvantage to women, since women needed to rebuild their business from scratch if their husbands found work in another city and moved the family. Mary Kay Cosmetics does not limit sales consultants to territories, allowing women to keep their clients if they relocate. Also, she set up the sales system to assist women with sick children or hectic schedules.<sup>106</sup> Ash

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<sup>103</sup> Ibid., 26.

<sup>104</sup> Ibid., 26.

<sup>105</sup> Ibid., 32.

<sup>106</sup> While sales women had to meet quotas to win prizes, they did not have to sell to stay in the business. And they could depend on their sister sales staff for assistance in emergencies through the “dovetail plan.” This plan enabled saleswomen with a family emergency to split the profits from a pre-arranged party with a fellow consultant who took over the event. One director recommends that consultants fill out a weekly schedule, marking off “pink time” for Mary Kay meetings and training, “green time” for the time they

reprimanded the business world at large for its neglect of family obligations: “Employers need to understand that these *are* a woman’s priorities.”<sup>107</sup>

Ash has frequently compared her company’s accomplishments to those achieved by feminists: “In 1963, the women’s movement had not yet begun—but here was a company that would give women all the opportunities I had never had.”<sup>108</sup>

“Opportunities” in Mary Kay Cosmetics include the flexibility of self-employment combined with the possibility to climb a ladder in sales unimpeded by a glass ceiling. As Ash frequently reminded her sales consultants, the only thing preventing a consultant from becoming a “Mary Kay Millionaire,” was her own lack of ambition. (Although observers might wonder if a woman’s presumably time-consuming obligations to God and family might slow her down, too.) Company officials acknowledge women’s double day by encouraging what they describe as flex time; essentially, flexible working hours that are set by the sales consultant herself. Recently, Mary Kay Cosmetics has gone (slightly) farther than mere accommodation to women’s unequal domestic burdens; company literature encourages “Mary Kay” husbands and children to assist with the tasks that wives and mothers usually shoulder. The Mary Kay website counsels women to “Give the small tasks to the kids and your hubby—making it a team effort will help you have more time to spend with your family in the end.”<sup>109</sup> Of course, by the early twenty-

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spend earning profits from their business, and time for family and prayer. She explained that she would counsel her consultants to follow the Mary Kay priorities of “God first, family second, career third” to balance these obligations. “Betty,” interview.

<sup>107</sup> Ash, *Mary Kay*. 1<sup>st</sup> ed., 60. In *People Management*, Mary Kay encouraged businesspeople to acknowledge the importance of family to their employees.

<sup>108</sup> Ash, *Mary Kay*. 1<sup>st</sup> ed., 7.

<sup>109</sup> Ash made a point of sending personalized letters home to the husbands during the week their wives attended Seminar, thanking them for taking on additional household chores during the week their wives were gone. “Beauty Biz Basics: Part three: A Delicate Balance,” Mary Kay Cosmetics, <http://www.marykay.com/CareerPath/Archives/bizbasics3.asp> [accessed April 1, 2004]. Hattwick, “Mary Kay Ash,” 67. Independent National Sales Directors, *Paychecks of the Heart*, 91.

first century, feminists had been calling for equal distribution of household work for several decades. Mary Kay's advice implies that women should still assume responsibility for domestic management and any "big tasks" the kids and hubby will not do.

Mary Kay has frequently drawn attention to the absence of "glass ceilings" for women consultants.<sup>110</sup> Indeed, unlike companies such as Tupperware and Stanley Home Products, women do hold the highest positions in sales.<sup>111</sup> Nevertheless, men have held senior management positions in the company since Mary Kay began it in 1963. As recently as 1992, women only held thirty-nine percent of managerial jobs at the Mary Kay Headquarters in Dallas.<sup>112</sup> In a 1981 *Forbes* magazine article on Richard Rogers, Mary Kay's son and long-time company president, Howard Rudnitsky interpreted the company's management style, relying on gendered language and concepts. Rudnitsky asserted, "If Mary Kay is the heart of Mary Kay Cosmetics, her son is the operational brains."<sup>113</sup> It is unlikely that Ash or Rogers would have found this gendered heart/brains binary misrepresentative. Richard's department of "financial" managers—made up mostly of men—was separate from Mary Kay's sales staff, in both ideology and

<sup>110</sup> "Mary Kay," Mary Kay Museum Brochure (Mary Kay Cosmetics, Dallas, 1996), 6.

<sup>111</sup> At the time Mary Kay was establishing her own business practices, Tupperware followed a practice of recruiting the husbands of successful Tupperware dealers, and shaping the business around "Tupper Families," rather than promoting women independently to the rank of distributors. See the documentary, *American Experience: Tupperware!* (produced, directed, and written by Laurie Kahn-Leavitt for WGBH Boston, PBS, 2003). In 1989, Nicole Woolsey Biggart reported that distributorships were still largely assigned to husband-and-wife teams, rather than successful women sellers. See Biggart, *Charismatic Capitalism*, 94. Mary Kay Ash described her own frustrating experiences with glass ceilings in her autobiography, *Mary Kay*. 1<sup>st</sup> ed., 24.

<sup>112</sup> "Mary Kay Cosmetics Elevates Management," *Dallas Morning News* 19 January 1968, 5B; Levering and Moskowitz, *The 100 Best Companies to Work for in America*, 271.

<sup>113</sup> Mary Kay's second husband, who had intended to run the financial aspects of the company, died a month before the company was to open its doors. Richard Rogers, then a mere twenty years old, offered to take on this role. In 1968, at the age of twenty-four, Richard was promoted to company president. Ash changed her own title to board chairman. "Mary Kay Cosmetics Elevates Management," *Dallas Morning News*, 19 January 1968, 5B. Howard Rudnitsky, "The Flight of the Bumblebee," *Forbes* 127 (June, 22 1981): 105.

geography.<sup>114</sup> Mary Kay explained, “The people at the other end of the building are involved in financial arrangements. I only see the IBM sheet once a month. The rest of my time I spend trying to help women find themselves and achieve their goals.”<sup>115</sup>

Richard’s primary responsibility was attending to profits. His role as the company’s “brains” allowed Mary Kay to devote herself more fully to matters of the “heart,” confident that her son would keep the profits pouring in. “My goal is to see women achieve self-respect,” Ash explained. “As far as money is concerned that’s Richard’s . . . problem.”<sup>116</sup>

Ash would have characterized her attention to matters of the heart as a “feminine” style of doing business, and she generally minimized the importance of profits, and Richard’s management role, in her public statements. She claimed that her feminine style of management appealed to women and befuddled men. Ash frequently suggested that women were naturally more sensitive and humane than were the men who ran most American businesses. For example, Ash introduced an adoptee system—again, using a family analogy to describe the relationships between consultants—that requires sales directors to “adopt” and train consultants who live too far away from the director who recruited them. The adoptive “parent” does not receive any compensation for this effort (the recruiter, rather than the trainer, is rewarded for the consultants’ sales) except the reassurance that her geographically distant recruits would receive similarly good treatment elsewhere. Ash asserted, “Now this [adoptee] system is almost unexplainable

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<sup>114</sup> While reviewers have favorably noted that “male executives are carefully screened to determine their ability to work with women as peers,” they also observed that “most of the company’s vice-presidents are men.” Levering, Moskowitz, and Katz, *The 100 Best Companies to Work for in America*, 200.

<sup>115</sup> “Mary Kay: The Mixture’s Odd,” 11B.

<sup>116</sup> *Ibid.*

to men, I've found. But it works. Everyone helps everyone else."<sup>117</sup> Ash met with criticism from her "CPAs" for sending birthday cards to all of her employees (who numbered in the tens of thousands by the early 1970s). She scoffed at their criticism of the cards' cost, saying, "That's men's thinking. What they don't realize is that my birthday card may be the only birthday card she receives."<sup>118</sup>

Ash celebrated virtues she understood as uniquely feminine—such as piety, warmth, and compassion—as superior to “masculine” ethics that stressed competition and conquest. Ash encouraged women to view their “femininity” as a tool of empowerment, particularly in the world of business. Indeed, she demanded that the male-dominated business world change to accommodate and encompass feminine business styles. In 1984, Mary Kay Ash published her *Guide to People Management*, which she dedicated to “those millions of women who have entered the job market over the past two decades, generally at the lowest levels of entry.”<sup>119</sup> Ash explained that she wrote this management guide because women think “differently” than men. She was careful to point out that women’s differences are not a sign of inferiority or superiority. “Although I believe that women can learn a great deal from management books written by men, it is not possible for us to clone ourselves from our male counterparts, because *we are different*. From early childhood our culture has made us different!”<sup>120</sup> Here, Ash sidesteps debates about whether gender difference is inherent or cultural. However, she makes it clear that even in the world of business, women’s differences are to be celebrated, not discouraged.

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<sup>117</sup> “Lessons of Leadership,” 43.

<sup>118</sup> “Mary Kay: The Mixture’s Odd,” 11B.

<sup>119</sup> Ash, *Mary Kay on People Management*, xix.

<sup>120</sup> Ash, *Mary Kay on People Management*, xix.

Mary Kay executives remind consultants that at Mary Kay, “thinking like a woman” is a requirement, not a disadvantage.<sup>121</sup> Ash defined her own image as “motherly,” for her nurturing, sympathetic style as a people manager.<sup>122</sup> Ash baked cookies for directors-in-training and sent personalized cards and gifts to her sales force.<sup>123</sup> She developed an informal management style that she described as feminine for its emphasis on nurturing and “praising people to success.” Ash refused to answer to a title; everyone called her Mary Kay. She contrasted her company with the corporate world by insisting that, at Mary Kay, P & L stood for “People and Love,” rather than “Profit and Loss.”<sup>124</sup>

Ash’s efforts to “enrich women’s lives” through beauty products and direct selling opportunities has been rewarded by the enthusiasm of women who wish to work in a company that they view as woman-centered and woman-run.<sup>125</sup> Within the sales teams, almost all supervisors are women, or “sisters,” in company parlance. Sister consultants do not compete against one another; instead, the gains of one consultant add to the profits and the reputation of the whole team. In fact, the company annually gives a highly coveted award to the most selfless saleswoman, recognizing the best team player

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<sup>121</sup> For example, Ash argued that “women have a special, intuitive quality that most men don’t possess,” and that exercising this intuition improved their business skills. Ash, *Mary Kay*. 1<sup>st</sup> ed., 106. Ash, *Mary Kay on People Management*, xviii. Also, see Underwood, *More than a Pink Cadillac*, xii.

<sup>122</sup> Ash, *Mary Kay on People Management*, 38.

<sup>123</sup> In his review of *People Management*, James Cole commented, “While most top executives would not bake cookies for their people, I’ve heard of several who have developed strong organizations through effective use of departmental barbecues and office picnics, often at their homes.” Cole’s comment suggests that he viewed “cookie baking” as a feminine endeavor, but backyard grilling as appropriately “masculine” and businesslike. James Cole, “Put on a Happy Face, You Managers,” *Wall Street Journal* Eastern edition, 204 (October 15, 1984): 30. For evidence of the importance of Ash’s cookie baking, see Underwood, *More than a Pink Cadillac*, xii-xiii.

<sup>124</sup> Underwood, *More than a Pink Cadillac*, xi.

<sup>125</sup> Almost all of the consultants I spoke to used the company motto, “enriching women’s lives,” when discussing the company.

with the “Miss Go-Give Award.”<sup>126</sup> Ash and her sales directors established a variety of rituals meant to inspire their consultants to work harder and maintain their enthusiasm for the company. Directors encourage their consultants to faithfully attend weekly meetings, meant to encourage and applaud their efforts. Consultants find that criticism is rare; instead, directors use praise and rewards to inspire good work. Consultants favorably compared their Mary Kay meetings, where they “feel welcomed” and are literally embraced by their fellow workers, to the “mean” and “bitter” world of their full-time jobs.<sup>127</sup> Mary Kay also offers incentives and recognition to ambitious saleswomen.<sup>128</sup> High-sellers win jewelry, mink coats, and the famous pink Cadillacs—“Cinderella gifts,” things every woman wants, but few would buy for themselves, according to Ash.<sup>129</sup> They also enjoy a supportive network of sister saleswomen. However, Ash believed that women should put on a happy face in times of trouble, rather than agitate for change. In

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<sup>126</sup> Biggart, *Charismatic Capitalism*, 4.

<sup>127</sup> “Kendra,” interview.

<sup>128</sup> High-sellers can expect to be applauded in weekly meetings, at regional conferences, and most importantly, at the national meeting, “Seminar,” a lavish stage spectacle in Dallas, Texas, which starred Ash herself until the late 1990s. Many of the consultants and all of the directors with whom I spoke had attended “Seminar,” an undertaking that requires paying for a hotel room and airfare to Dallas, Texas, in the middle of summer. Mostly, they raved about the experience. Gretchen described it as a “constant roll of emotion . . . combining a NY Broadway show, a Las Vegas show, and being a millionaire all into one.” Two consultants were particularly impressed that the company employed men to stand onstage wearing tuxedos, with the responsibility of escorting and *praising* the highest achievers as they made their way onstage. By employing elegantly dressed men to serve as escorts, Mary Kay reversed the practice of award shows like the Academy Awards, which casts normatively attractive women in this role. Laura explained, they “make you really feel like a star, like someone very important.” Diane agreed, “You feel like a glamour queen, you know. They just really make you feel like you’re very special.” While almost all of the consultants I spoke to were impressed by Seminar, the convention clearly does not appeal to everyone. “Jessica” confessed that she avoided Seminar because, “it’s just a little bit too over the top.” “Gretchen,” interview; “Laura,” interview; “Diane,” interview; and “Jessica,” interview by author, Williamsburg, Va., 28 June 2004.

<sup>129</sup> One director explained that the company gives Cinderella gifts because it presumes that women would use cash bonuses to contribute to family expenses. Ash saw these gifts as a way of making sure that the consultant enjoyed her reward. “Betty,” interview; Ash, *Mary Kay You Can Have it All*, 203.



other words, no matter how supportive Mary Kay meetings were, they were not supposed to serve as consciousness-raising sessions.<sup>130</sup>

Among the consultants and directors I spoke with, there was no consensus as to whether a woman-centered and woman-run company was “feminist” or not. Many of the consultants and directors expressed an aversion to feminism, arguing that it undermined family values or included a “radical” and “aggressive” quality that was unappealing to them.<sup>131</sup> Several consultants clearly believed that “feminism” privileged women and discriminated against men, or that it was a movement only for women. Diane explained, “there are men in the company, so it’s not like it’s totally all women and there’s absolutely no men in the company.”<sup>132</sup> Gretchen clarified, “my sons are as enriched as my daughters are by what mom does.”<sup>133</sup> Sandra, a director, insisted, “She’s supporting women, she has an opportunity for women to succeed. [But] Mary Kay has never put down men, Mary Kay has never put down home or family, and I see in some feminist organizations that tends to be put down a little bit, [women are] criticize[d] if they want to stay home.”<sup>134</sup>

Nevertheless, Sandra and several consultants did define themselves and their company as “feminist.” “What Mary Kay did, as a great feminist in her way, was to provide a way where the woman could stay home, take care of her family, be a wife and mother, and still go out and work and make money.”<sup>135</sup> Gretchen defined a feminist as “someone who truly wants women to have the opportunity to do anything a man can do

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<sup>130</sup> Ash, *Mary Kay*. 1<sup>st</sup> ed., 51.

<sup>131</sup> “Diane,” interview; “Betty,” interview.

<sup>132</sup> “Diane,” interview.

<sup>133</sup> “Gretchen,” interview.

<sup>134</sup> “Sandra,” interview.

<sup>135</sup> Ibid.

that she chooses to and get paid equally for it and recognized equally for it.” When asked if she’d use this description to define herself and her company, she said, “Sure, absolutely.”<sup>136</sup> Finally, several consultants seemed to connect “feminism” to “femininity.” Everyone agreed that Mary Kay exuded “femininity.” Laura explained: “I think feminism is just being able to embrace womanhood in whatever you do.” She went on to say, “I guess even Mary Kay was kind of her own little feminist movement, I mean . . . she really changed the roles of the woman in the workplace” by allowing women to “be their own boss and not have to worry about men and the corporate glass ceiling and all that.”<sup>137</sup> Betty, a director, explained that Ash created a perfect world, where employees could simultaneously enjoy a successful career *and* the responsibilities and privileges of womanhood.<sup>138</sup>

### **Debates Over Beauty Culture at Mary Kay**

While her sales staff expressed contradictory perspectives on feminism, Ash rejected the label outright. Mary Kay’s sales team remembered Mary Kay frequently saying, “We don’t have to burn our bras to make a point.” Her National Sales Directors claimed, “Mary Kay did more to liberate more women than any other woman in American history.” However, they also proudly insisted that Ash “was no women’s libber. She didn’t like it when the women’s movement urged women to begin acting more masculine—in their dress, demeanor and language.”<sup>139</sup> Ash clearly conveyed her disapproval of feminists who rejected normative beauty standards, and implied that this rejection of “feminine” attire indicated “deviance,” or even lesbianism. Ash frequently

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<sup>136</sup> “Gretchen,” interview.

<sup>137</sup> “Laura,” interview.

<sup>138</sup> “Betty,” interview.

<sup>139</sup> The Independent National Sales Directors, *Paychecks of the Heart*, 299.

expressed her concern about career women “failing” as wives and mothers, and she interpreted “manliness” in attire as the first warning sign:

Their zeal to be up there with the big boys changes them to such a degree, they may even lose the expression of their femininity by the way they dress. In their effort to imitate men, they compromise a major asset, their womanliness, and they are no longer good role models for their own daughters. Their aggression even carries over into family life. It begins to show up in their homes, and eventually, the subtle feminine touches essential to being a loving wife and mother are noticeably missing.<sup>140</sup>

According to Ash, erosion of beauty standards among women was the first deadly step toward gender disorder. Ash believed “women’s libbers” advocated “masculine” dress and “unwomanly” behavior, and were therefore to blame for this unwelcome social change.

While Ash wished to offer economic opportunities to women, her business philosophy glorified rather than challenged gender norms. Ash developed an elaborate code of feminine aesthetics that she expected her consultants to follow. She defined “femininity” as conformance to middle-class and evangelical Christian rules of respectability. For example, consultants are discouraged from cursing, chewing gum, smoking, or drinking as representatives of the company. However, in Ash’s eyes, “femininity” was largely determined by appearance. Consultants described a “feminine” dress code—defined as “a business skirt, a blouse, pantyhose, and heels, and they have to be closed-toes, closed-back heels . . . a professional appearance [with] hair and makeup done”—as “the one thing that Mary Kay really wanted.”<sup>141</sup> By having women dress conservatively, Ash attempted to subtly influence both the consultants and their beholders to behave “conservatively.” Ash imbued her dress code with the power to change

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<sup>140</sup> Ash, *Mary Kay You Can Have it All*, 48.

<sup>141</sup> “Laura,” interview.

consultants' lives, saying, "We know that if a woman feels pretty on the outside, she becomes prettier on the inside, too. In addition, she goes on to become a better member of her family and her community."<sup>142</sup>

Ash argued that late-twentieth-century men and women were too casual and promiscuous in their relationships, and she hinted that women's wardrobes were largely to blame. By dressing in "sexy" clothing or in pants, women had encouraged men to treat them either as sex objects or as "one of the boys." Women could resume their place as "ladies"—and earn the right to men's "respect" for their sexual propriety and social status—by wearing conservative clothing.<sup>143</sup> And by forgoing "masculine" pants, consultants performed and celebrated conventional feminine difference from men.<sup>144</sup>

Clearly, at Mary Kay, the company dress code has much to do with its product. Ash explained "We're selling femininity, so our dress has to be ultra-feminine."<sup>145</sup> Indeed, the Mary Kay dress code is "ultra-feminine" in that it harks back to norms of femininity from the 1950s and early 1960s, requiring that women wear skirts and dresses rather than pants, a "unisex" style that became increasingly understood as "feminine" during the 1970s. In the early 1980s, at the time Ash was explaining her company dress code in books such as her autobiography (1981) and *Mary Kay on People Management* (1984), many conservative Americans were idealizing the postwar period.<sup>146</sup> Even into

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<sup>142</sup> Ash obviously felt that much of a woman's femininity was conveyed through her appearance, and she criticized women who did not make the most of their looks: "Some women give no thought to their appearance when they're around their husbands and children--even though these are the most important people in their lives. Most of their 'dressing up' is for strangers. Shouldn't it be the other way around?" Ash, *People Management*, 179. Ash, *Mary Kay*, 28.

<sup>143</sup> Ash, *Mary Kay*, 109.

<sup>144</sup> Judith Butler has argued that all gender is socially constructed, and that clothing is one tool for "performing" gender. Butler, *The Judith Butler Reader* (Malden, Mass: Blackwell Publishing, 2004).

<sup>145</sup> Ash, *Mary Kay*, 110.

<sup>146</sup> Stephanie Coontz, *The Way We Never Were: American Families and the Nostalgia Trap* (New York: Basic Books, 1992).

the late-1990s, mid-century beauty culture—the beauty culture of Ash’s youth—shaped her standards for both her consultants and her customers. By embracing mid-century, middle-class, white aesthetics, Ash marginalized women of color and working-class women. By requiring women to wear dresses and skirts, Ash implied they should also strive for (what she understood as) the 1950s white suburban middle-class lifestyle, and stay at home to raise their children. By failing to develop a full range of cosmetics for women of color through the late 1990s—despite the fact that a growing number of women of color worked within the company—Ash, like many cosmetics manufacturers, perpetuated racist beauty standards, implicitly defining women of color as “unattractive.”

Mary Kay Ash had little tolerance for women who violated her code of feminine aesthetics. She described an interview she conducted with an author, a woman with “impressive” credentials and a “worthwhile” book project, whom she gave the pseudonym “Dr. Smith.” When the writer came to Ash’s office in slacks, no makeup, “sneaker-type shoes,” and a “masculine haircut,” Ash was appalled. While Ash might have refrained from commenting on a casually dressed man, she argued that Dr. Smith’s appearance undermined her professional credentials. Ash’s hasty and harsh judgment suggests that she interpreted Dr. Smith’s “masculine” appearance as a sign of something more “deviant” than sloppiness. Indeed, her emphasis on Dr. Smith’s “masculine” hairstyle and dress suggests that Ash might have assumed that the author was a lesbian. Ash described her son Richard, the company president, as “so turned off by her appearance that he didn’t want to give her the time of day.”<sup>147</sup> By describing Richard as “turned off” by Dr. Smith, Ash reveals the emphasis she placed on women satisfying an explicitly *heterosexual* male gaze. According to Ash, a woman’s chief means of

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<sup>147</sup> Ash, *Mary Kay*, 110-111.

impressing observers, especially her most important critics—heterosexual men—was through her appearance, not through what she had to say or do. In the end, neither Mary Kay nor her son were willing to spend much time on the interview because of the author's appearance, and they felt justified in brushing off the woman because she had “carelessly” dressed for their first interview.<sup>148</sup>

Despite its great importance to Ash, consultants disagreed about the meaning and even the existence of the dress code. Gretchen denied that there was a formal “dress code,” but observed that “Mary Kay asked us that we always remember that we’re women and that we dress that way, and that means that we’re in dresses.”<sup>149</sup> Sandra, a director, expressed frustration with enforcing the dress code, noting, “I find it’s a little hard to get across to some women” the importance of wearing a dress or skirt.<sup>150</sup> Indeed, Kendra, a consultant in Sandra’s unit asserted, “You can wear pants, so it’s not . . . just limited to skirts and dresses.”<sup>151</sup> Other consultants in the same unit were quite certain that the company required them to wear skirts and dresses. Ultimately, though consultants disagreed on the details of the dress code, everyone agreed that the company required “feminine” dress. Furthermore, they defended Mary Kay’s right to require this: “She [Ash] asks so very little of us that it would seem to me that for all the riches that she gives us by allowing us to be a part of her company that’s a very small concession if somebody objected to it.”<sup>152</sup>

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<sup>148</sup> Ash, *Mary Kay*, 110-111. One consultant I interviewed described at length a presentation on attire she had attended at a Mary Kay “Career Conference.” The “twin” study compared the sales’ success of a woman wearing pants to a woman wearing a dress, finding that the woman in the dress was immensely more successful. “Laura,” interview.

<sup>149</sup> “Gretchen,” interview.

<sup>150</sup> “Sandra,” interview.

<sup>151</sup> “Kendra,” interview.

<sup>152</sup> “Gretchen,” interview.

While even directors admitted that the dress code “seems like it’s a little outmoded,” many of the consultants I spoke to expressed enthusiasm for this requirement.<sup>153</sup> When I asked Gretchen if she found the dress code onerous, she responded, “Not at all, that’s what I’m all about, I’m a woman, I’m not a man. Proud to be one. Wouldn’t want to be a man. And I would want to be treated only as a woman.”<sup>154</sup> Like Ash, Gretchen believed that by wearing a skirt, she reminded observers that she was a “lady,” and therefore sexually and socially respectable. Furthermore, by dressing “as women,” or in conventionally “feminine” attire, Gretchen believed consultants visually opposed any effort (feminist or otherwise) to erase social differences between men and women. Laura agreed, “We don’t have to be men in a [man’s] world. I mean we can be successful business women and still dress like a woman.”<sup>155</sup> Several consultants argued that wearing a dress or skirt improved their business opportunities, calling the dress code “dress[ing] for success.”<sup>156</sup> Kendra, who believed the company permitted pants, compared Mary Kay’s expectations favorably to those of her full-time employer. Her full-time job required a uniform, and she described herself as “fed up” with wearing the same pants and blouse forty hours every week. “With Mary Kay you can dress pretty and dress nice and businesslike . . . and I want more of that, [and] my husband wants to see me doing more of that.”<sup>157</sup> Whereas Kendra’s regular work uniform (black pants, a green smock, and a black or white shirt) served to remind customers that she was a working-

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<sup>153</sup> Several of the consultants and directors I interviewed alluded to consultants who resisted the dress code; certainly the enthusiasm is not shared by everyone. “Sandra,” interview.

<sup>154</sup> “Gretchen,” interview.

<sup>155</sup> “Laura,” interview.

<sup>156</sup> Ibid.; “Diane,” interview.

<sup>157</sup> “Kendra,” interview.

class employee available to serve them, her Mary Kay attire was supposed to remind observers (including her husband) that she was a respectable “lady.”

### **Making Sense of Mary Kay’s Philosophy**

Ash did not just reject the term “feminism” for its association with lesbianism, “masculine” appearance, and “aggressive” manners. She disagreed with the belief, shared by most feminists, that gender norms contributed to women’s oppression. Ash wanted women to succeed at business, but she wanted them to work within the rules of the gender system. Ash deftly used normative femininity to her advantage, skillfully playing on gender expectations to successfully make money in a male-dominated capitalist system. And she strived to teach other women how to do the same thing. For example, she counseled her consultants on succeeding in business: “Men will often give a woman a little extra assistance. And a woman who dresses attractively gives herself an even greater edge.”<sup>158</sup> Ash thought that, by teaching women how to benefit from normative beauty culture, she *was* enriching women’s lives.

Mary Kay Ash believed that her consultants wanted the business opportunities fought for by feminists, without the “unladylike” attire or “deviant” sexuality she associated with feminism. Ash advocated equal opportunities for women as long as those opportunities did not interfere with her code of feminine aesthetics or her conservative and Christian beliefs. By combining liberal feminist rhetoric and conservative social values, Ash found a business style that appealed to large numbers of conservative Protestant women, particularly those living in the Sunbelt. Many consultants found ways around Mary Kay’s aesthetic, gender, and religious prescriptions, and focused solely on the company’s female-centric structure to carve out a business opportunity for

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<sup>158</sup> Ash, *Mary Kay*. 1<sup>st</sup> ed., 109.



themselves. Despite the ambivalent relationship between Mary Kay's philosophy and feminism, Ash's financial success and business acumen did enrich many women's lives.

Mary Kay Cosmetics offers a uniquely conservative, woman-centered business environment through which to investigate intersections between feminism and beauty marketing. As we have seen, feminism did influence the career opportunities and business practices of even the most conservative female beauty marketers, although the extent of this influence disappointed many feminists. The following chapter will move away from an investigation of women's careers within beauty culture to return to the discussion of the ways marketers defined and promoted "beauty" to late-twentieth-century consumers. Like chapter two, the following chapter will focus on the image of beauty promoted in women's magazines. However, it will investigate a form of beauty "marketing" much subtler than perfume advertising. Chapter four will explore the ways that beauty advice writers promoted normative beauty standards and a culture of consumption to women they defined as "liberated." Just as with perfume advertising and Mary Kay sales strategies, late-twentieth-century social activism indelibly affected advice writers' approaches to beauty. As we will see, beauty writers joined Mary Kay Ash and perfume advertisers in using feminist and Black Nationalist rhetoric to reinforce existing beauty cultural practices.

## CHAPTER IV

### “I’M DOING IT FOR ME”: BEAUTY ADVICE FOR A FEMINIST AUDIENCE

*“One of capitalism’s great strengths—perhaps its greatest—is its ability to co-opt and domesticate opposition, to transubstantiate criticism into a host of new, marketable products.”<sup>1</sup>*

Susan Douglas, *Where the Girls Are*, 1994

More than most beauty marketers, late-twentieth-century beauty advice writers deliberately engaged with feminism and Black Nationalism. These authors regularly echoed feminists and Black Nationalists by critiquing normative beauty standards in their writings. Whereas Mary Kay Cosmetics particularly attracted conservative Christian women living in the Sunbelt, writers for women’s magazines and authors of nonfiction books generally identified themselves as politically liberal. However, like Mary Kay sales consultants and perfume advertisers, beauty advice writers’ jobs required them to promote beauty products. While many of these authors argued that women deserved a flexible and inclusive beauty culture, they also urged their readers to view participation in beauty culture as an ongoing obligation of womanhood. In order to compromise their

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<sup>1</sup> Susan Douglas, *Where the Girls Are: Growing Up Female With the Mass Media* (New York: Three Rivers Press, 1994), 260.

feminist beliefs with their professional careers, beauty advice writers in the late-twentieth-century shifted the standard rationale for why women should beautify.

In a 1965 article listing no fewer than “120 Ways to Please a Man,” *Good Housekeeping* writers explained how wives could keep their husbands’ sexual and romantic interest through gentle manners, attention to housework, and most especially, attractive appearances. The editors assumed that women would be motivated to look their “best” in order to meet their husbands’ exacting standards. For example, tip number forty-nine prodded readers: “It’s easy to stay slim when there’s a reason—he likes you that way.”<sup>2</sup> The column urged women to maintain a high level of self-scrutiny, since “Men find certain feminine ‘sins’ hard to forgive.” The authors ask: “Are you guilty of lipstick on your teeth or smudges beyond your lip line? A slip or strap that shows? Fussing when the wind whips your hair? Nervously twirling curls?”<sup>3</sup> By using terms such as “sin” and “guilt,” *Good Housekeeping* staff writers equated women’s failure to meet their husbands’ standards of beauty to a criminal act or a religious transgression. And the article implied that the most important reason women would beautify was to please their husbands.

However, thirty years later, beauty advice writers encouraged women to beautify for very different reasons. Rather than recommending grooming to catch or keep men, advice writers primarily connected beautification to self-gratification. In 1993, Ellen Welty detailed her makeover story in *McCall’s* magazine. “To these guys, [Richard Guy and Rex Holt, who provided her professional makeover] beauty is far more than skin-deep. They analyze the woman’s insecurities as well as her wardrobe flaws; they instill

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<sup>2</sup> “120 Ways to Please a Man,” *Good Housekeeping* 161 (October 1965): 114.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

confidence in her as well as give hairstyle tips.” Despite their claims to a “deeper,” more emotionally satisfying approach to beautification, Holt and Guy concentrated on instructing Welty on how to apply makeup, style her hair, and improve her posture. She was encouraged to do all this, ostensibly, for her own sense of self-worth. Welty explained that, at first, her husband was ambivalent about her makeover. “But after a day with Guy and Holt concentrating on what makes *me* look and feel good, I was in the mood to tune him out.” Of course, while the *primary* motivation for makeovers might have changed, “looking good” was still a means of attracting or pleasing men. Although Welty insisted that she undertook this makeover for her own gratification, in the end, she described her new wardrobe, makeup, and hairstyle as having an added bonus of impressing her husband. She explained that within a few days, her husband began to appreciate and enjoy her new look.<sup>4</sup>

This chapter focuses on beauty advice in nonfiction books and women’s magazine columns. Between 1960 and 2000, women’s magazines and beauty advice books “instructed” readers on the “correct” application of cosmetics, the “best” ways to put together an outfit, and the “basics” of hair and skin care.<sup>5</sup> Over this forty-year period, much of the advice women received remained the same. “Looking good,” particularly by the standards of women’s magazines and beauty advice books, has consistently required

<sup>4</sup> “It Changed My Life,” *McCall's* 121 (November 1993): 116, 119.

<sup>5</sup> Much of the research for this chapter was organized through a search through the *Reader's Guide to Periodical Literature* (Minneapolis: H. W. Wilson Co., 1905-). I used the index to start my search for articles on beauty in women’s magazines. I used the index to search range of magazines, including *Mademoiselle* and *Glamour* (which target women ages 18 to 34) and *Seventeen* (which targets girls in middle school and high school) to find articles appealing to a younger audience. For the advice offered to adult women, I turned to magazines such as *Ladies' Home Journal* and *Redbook*. I examined *Ebony* and *Essence* (starting in 1970) for beauty advice for African American women. Finally, I looked for advice that was meant to target wealthy women interested in high fashion in *Vogue* and *Harper's Bazaar*. Frequently, these magazines would have articles about the most popular beauty advice books of the time, so I would use that as a starting place for supplementing the beauty advice in women’s magazines. For a discussion of each magazine’s target audience, see Ellen McCracken, *Decoding Women's Magazines: From Mademoiselle to Ms.* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1993).

women to expend lots of effort and purchase lots of products. However, the *reasons* for beautification advanced by these writers have responded to social change. In the 1960s, white beauty advice writers encouraged their readers to look good to attract men. African American advice writers also promoted beautification as a means to win male heterosexual interest, but additionally, they described grooming as a means for projecting a “respectable” image to white observers. Beginning in the 1960s, black nationalists and feminists challenged the racism of the dominant aesthetic standards and critiqued the sexism inherent in normative beauty culture. In response, beauty advisers adjusted their advice in small, but meaningful ways. Mainstream “women’s” magazines gradually included some beauty advice for women of color, and beginning in 1970, *Essence* magazine and a host of books contributed to a flood of beauty advice targeting black female readers. Beauty advice writers still subtly linked beautification to attracting a “male gaze.” However, due in part to the awareness of feminist critique of normative beauty culture, these writers avoided dispensing beauty advice that assumed all women vied to meet a normative, socially imposed beauty standard. Therefore, more advisers have suggested that women should beautify for “themselves.” In recent decades, beauty advisers have pitched beautification to black and white women as a means to improve professional opportunities or as a form of “therapy.”

Like perfume advertisers and Mary Kay Cosmetics recruiters, beauty advice writers appropriated feminist and Black Nationalist language and imagery in order to make their advice seem more “progressive.” Beginning in the 1970s, African American advice writers, such as those writing for *Essence* magazine, encouraged their readers to understand beautification as a demonstration of black pride. Advice writers for

magazines such as *Vogue* and *Glamour* suggested that women who devoted time (and money) to applying makeup, exercising, dieting, or shopping for fashionable clothes were demonstrating their independence and personal liberation. Some advice writers, such as exercise authorities Jane Fonda and Susan Powter, explicitly identified as “feminists,” and tied their advice to female empowerment. By using feminist rhetoric to make the labor and cost of beautification seem “liberating,” beauty advice writers obscured and depoliticized feminists’ critiques of normative beauty culture. It is possible to evaluate the language of “liberation” in beauty instruction as a sign of the effectiveness of feminism, and not merely an indication of its cooptation. Beauty advisers were simultaneously sustaining and undermining feminism by appropriating rhetoric from the movement to frame and support the imperative for beautification. Women reading beauty advice columns were regularly reminded that female empowerment was a worthy goal. Unfortunately, they were encouraged to pursue that power by conforming to sexist, racist, and heterosexist beauty standards.

Regardless of the reasons for beautification, women’s beauty advice consistently strived to generate feelings of insecurity and anxiety in readers, promising relief through the purchase of beauty products. Advice writers shared a vested interest in promoting *commercial* beauty culture. The foremost motive for most beauty advice columns in women’s magazine was to promote the products advertised within the magazine.<sup>6</sup> Magazine writers highlight specific products in their articles, or at least present a generally positive attitude about beauty culture, to secure the lucrative advertising

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<sup>6</sup> Critics of this practice include Gloria Steinem, “Sex, Lies, and Advertising” in *Moving beyond Words* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1994), 130-68; McCracken, *Decoding Women’s Magazines*; and Jean Kilbourne, *Can’t Buy My Love: How Advertising Changes the Way We Think and Feel* (New York: Touchstone, 2000).

contracts that fund their publications.<sup>7</sup> Similarly, beauty advice book authors are not without a profit motive. They are frequently celebrities attempting to capitalize on their name recognition and build their public image, while earning profits through book sales, or by endorsing and publicizing beauty products, work-out gear, or diet products in their books. By creating a genre of beauty advice literature depicting grooming as a means of self-gratification, beauty advice writers have made it easier for marketers to pitch beauty products as luxuries. Despite the obvious commercial motives of advice writers, these authors present their work as an aesthetic service.

By advising women on cosmetics, wardrobe, and hairstyles, beauty advice writers both reflected the aesthetic norms of the time, while simultaneously shaping those norms. Advice columns and books effectively laid out the “rules” of beauty for their readers. Models and celebrities claimed authority as beauty writers by pointing to their own reputation as beautiful women, often by illustrating their books with their own photos. Makeup artists, designers, and beauty and fashion editors for women’s magazines claimed authority through careers spent evaluating the beauty of others. Women’s magazines frequently did not identify the author of beauty advice articles, implying that their advice was formed by a consensus among the magazine staff. However, photos of beautiful models almost always accompanied these columns. The pictures served to demonstrate the advantages of following the magazine’s advice. By identifying with sophistication and beauty, advice writers claimed the authority to define the attitudes and expectations of “regular” women in regards to beauty.

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<sup>7</sup> McCracken, *Decoding Women's Magazines*, 42.

### “Always Ask a Man”: 1960s Justifications for Beautification

Beginning in the early 1960s, Helen Gurley Brown, a former advertising copywriter, began a four-decade career writing distinctive beauty advice literature in both books and magazines. In 1962, Brown offered advice to single women with her book, *Sex and the Single Girl*. By April 1963, the book had sold 150,000 hardcover copies and made it onto the nonfiction bestseller lists.<sup>8</sup> Brown’s description of the unmarried woman as “the newest glamour girl of our times” helped alter the way Americans looked at single women. Brown presented single women as more interesting and attractive than their married counterparts, defying the stereotype of single women as lonely, unwanted old maids that predominated in many women’s magazines of the day.<sup>9</sup>

As her title made clear, one thing the single “girls” would be doing was having sex, and in Brown’s view, they would only have sex with men.<sup>10</sup> In fact, Brown recommended that single women date as many men as they could, in order to have the most fun possible while they were single. While attracting these men did not require great personal beauty (Brown reassured readers, “I’m not beautiful or even pretty”), it did require that women cultivate their appearance to look interesting, “sexy,” and stylish. Brown established her authority as advice-giver by explaining that, before her marriage to the movie producer David Brown, she had been “The Girl” to an “ad tycoon, a motivational research wizard, two generals, a brewer, a publisher, a millionaire real estate

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<sup>8</sup> Melissa Hantman, “Helen Gurley Brown,” *Salon.com* [http://dir.salon.com/people/bc/2000/09/26/contest\\_winner\\_brown/index.html](http://dir.salon.com/people/bc/2000/09/26/contest_winner_brown/index.html) [accessed July 11, 2004]. “1960s Bestsellers,” *People Entertainment Almanac*, <http://www.caderbooks.com/best60.html> [accessed July 13, 2004].

<sup>9</sup> A year after Brown released *Sex and the Single Girl*, Betty Friedan described the pressures for women to marry young and stay married as part of the “feminine mystique.” Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique* (New York: Norton, 1963), 25. Helen Gurley Brown, *Sex and the Single Girl* (New York: Bernard Geis Associates, 1962), 5.

<sup>10</sup> Brown, *Sex and the Single Girl*, 4.



developer, and two extremely attractive men who were younger than [her].”<sup>11</sup> Brown offered several chapters of advice on diet and exercise, fashion, and makeup to direct single, white, middle-class women in their search for heterosexual romances.

Brown defined a “sexy” and “feminine” appearance through a woman’s adherence to white, middle-class, heterosexist norms of beauty. While she democratically promised that any woman “who enjoys sex” was sexy, she also recommended that women keep their hair clean, wear their hair long, shave their legs and underarms, wear lingerie but not girdles, keep a slim figure, attend to dental hygiene, get a manicure, and own a little black dress.<sup>12</sup> Brown also recommended flirting with and “adoring” men. Brown tried to simplify her advice by saying, “femininity is a matter of accepting yourself as a woman.” However, she clearly viewed “womanhood” as including extensive obligations to personal grooming and adornment.<sup>13</sup> Brown advised attention to physical fitness, hygiene, and wardrobe solely on the basis of attracting male sexual interest. For example, she recommended that a woman exercise to keep her “fanny cute and asking to be patted,” not necessarily to improve her health.<sup>14</sup>

Throughout the 1960s, advice writers such as Brown and those writing for women’s magazines described an attractive appearance as one that conformed to an upper-class white aesthetic. Style magazines such as *Vogue* and *Harper’s Bazaar*, for instance, depicted beauty as the preserve of the wealthy, and they implied that rich, white women set the beauty standards for all American women. A *Vogue* article entitled “Beauty Register,” portrayed ten “society” women as authorities on attractiveness. It

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 13.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 65, 78-86.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 86.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 180.

offered readers an opportunity to “spy” on the beauty routines of the women who dominated the social register. These routines included biweekly neck, shoulder, and foot massages; weekly facials with a “skin doctor”; and tennis, riding, and golf for exercise. Perhaps more enviably, the leisured women advised taking daily naps.<sup>15</sup>

By linking beauty and wealth, advice writers upheld cultural understandings of attractiveness as a measure of a woman’s “worth.” As early as 1899, when economist Thorstein Veblen suggested that middle- and upper-class women wore impractical corsets and trailing skirts as a tactic for signaling their freedom from work, and thereby, their economic privilege, social critics have noted that beauty serves as a form of social currency for women.<sup>16</sup> Attractiveness raises a woman’s status much as wealth or career raises a man’s status. Women’s magazines wholeheartedly encouraged readers to improve their opportunities in life by improving their appearance. For example, the title of one 1966 *Redbook* feature summed up the link between a woman’s beauty and her social standing with an economic metaphor, “Your Looks Are Your Fortune.”<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Part of the explanation for the connection between beauty and wealth is found in the advertising strategies employed by the magazines. *Vogue* and *Harper’s Bazaar*, “haute couture” magazines, earned their profits by selling advertising space at high costs, not by selling subscriptions. In order to justify high-priced advertisement space, haute couture magazines have crafted an image of exclusivity. They developed editorial content and advertising as if for an audience of the super-rich, and kept the price of a subscription high. These policies have not necessarily limited readership to the well-to-do, and according to the literary critic Ellen McCracken, many working- or middle-class women read haute couture magazines for the “utopian” experience of seeing out-of-reach products. However, these magazines did suggest (to marketers and readers) that the magazine’s audience was an exclusive one. Advertisers purchasing ad space in an haute couture magazine believed they were promoting their products to those most able or most willing to purchase “prestige” products. By crafting the editorial content of haute couture magazines to appeal to the wealthy, advertisers could assume their products would be associated with “fine living.” In order to maintain this illusion of high status, fashion magazines depicted style and beauty as qualities that only the wealthiest women could enjoy. See McCracken, *Decoding Women’s Magazines*, 84, 164-5.

<sup>16</sup> Thorstein Veblen, *The Theory of the Leisure Class: An Economic Study of Institutions* (New York: Macmillan Company, 1899).

<sup>17</sup> “Your Looks are Your Fortune: A Quiz About Beauty,” *Redbook* 127 (August 1966): 78-79, 102.

While women were supposed to meet a white, upper-class aesthetic, it was the men in their lives who would evaluate their conformity to this standard.<sup>18</sup> Of course, beauty writers claimed to speak for those men when they dispensed advice. Arlene Dahl, a model, actress, and “beauty columnist,” began her advice book by stating: “I like men. And I like men to like me—so I dress for them.” The title of her advice book, *Always Ask a Man*, summarized her premise.<sup>19</sup> Dahl dismissed the idea that women would beautify to impress one another or for personal fulfillment: “This book is not intended for women who want to be beautiful for beauty’s sake. Such beauty serves no purpose . . . other than self-satisfaction, if that can be considered a purpose.” Indeed, Dahl asserted that “what one man thinks is usually a pretty good indication of what most men will think on a given subject” and that women should consider their appearance “Objectively,” or, “through a man’s eyes.”<sup>20</sup> Dahl, like many beauty advice writers of the 1960s, suggested that all men shared a single idealized notion of beauty, regardless of their own racial, ethnic, or class background or personal taste.

Because women were evaluated by this universal standard of beauty, men presumably vied to date or marry the woman who came closest to measuring up. In the pages of women’s magazines, husbands explained that if they married attractive women, their peers assumed they were more successful. As wives, therefore, women should always do their best to look attractive, because their unattractiveness reflected poorly on their husbands. In an article entitled “How about Doing My Wife Over?,” five husbands

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<sup>18</sup> The author of a makeover article in *Ladies’ Home Journal* explained, “Your husband (or beau) may be more aware of what a little extra beauty care and glamour can do than are you.” Dawn Crowell Ney, “How About Doing My Wife Over?” *Ladies’ Home Journal* 78 (June 1961): 57, 58.

<sup>19</sup> Dahl, *Always Ask a Man: Arlene Dahl’s Key to Femininity* (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1965), ix.

<sup>20</sup> Dahl, *Always Ask a Man*, xi, 2.

expressed frustration with wives they felt “could do much better.” After the magazine redid the wives’ hair, makeup, and wardrobes, one husband confided, “I’m always flattered when other men turn around to look at my wife. Now I’m sure they will!”<sup>21</sup> Of course, while some white beauty advice writers suggested that *all* men idealized white women as the most beautiful, racial codes throughout the country made it dangerous for black men to court white women. Ultimately, white men’s status was partly derived from their exclusive access to the “more beautiful” white women.

Throughout the 1960s, mainstream magazines that were ostensibly for “women” readers almost exclusively depicted white women within their pages. Many women of color did read these magazines, despite the magazines’ portrayal of “beauty” as the preserve of white, well-to-do women. In 1970, *Good Housekeeping*, *Ladies’ Home Journal* and *McCall’s* were each estimated to have over one million non-white readers.<sup>22</sup> Most magazines that targeted female readers failed to address any women of color in their beauty advice articles. Beauty advice writers consistently depicted “beautiful women” as white: for example, it was not until 1968 that *Glamour* featured an African American woman on its cover, and *Vogue* did not feature an African American woman on its cover until 1974.<sup>23</sup>

While beauty advice writers for national “women’s” magazines suggested that men universally idealized white, upper-class women as beautiful, African American men and women disputed this racist assumption. As we saw in chapter one, Black Nationalists

<sup>21</sup> Ney, “How About Doing My Wife Over?” 56-9.

<sup>22</sup> McCracken, *Decoding Women’s Magazines*, 224.

<sup>23</sup> Sammie Johnson and Lindsey Kressin, “The Face on the Cover: Racial Diversity in Fashion Magazines 1996-2000,” (Association for Women in Communications Annual Professional Conference, Denver, Colorado, October 9-12, 2002,) <http://www.womcom.org/Johnson.doc> [accessed February 20, 2005]; Maxine Leeds Craig, *Ain’t I a Beauty Queen? Black Women, Beauty, and the Politics of Race* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 166.

challenged dominant white aesthetics and claimed space for Afro-centric styles, including African-style prints, dashikis, and “natural” hairstyles. Expressing pride in a distinctively “black” appearance was a revolutionary act in the early 1960s. Black periodicals advertised an array of beauty products that promised consumers lighter-colored skin and straighter hair.<sup>24</sup> During the early 1960s, popular black periodicals such as *Jet* and *Ebony* implied that women who adopted an “Afro” hairstyle were *political* activists, and described them as neither sexy nor pretty.<sup>25</sup> For example, in 1961, *Ebony* commented, “Abbey Lincoln, a singing star, abandoned the sex-siren role and adopted an *au naturelle* hairstyle.”<sup>26</sup> *Jet* described jazz musician Melba Liston’s 1961 unstraightened hairstyle as “her gimmick”: “She allowed her hair to revert to its natural state to express her ‘nationalist’ views.”<sup>27</sup> It was not until the mid-to-late 1960s that African American periodicals and advertisements in those magazines first began to feature black women wearing Afros. Even then, these magazines continued to include fashion layouts featuring black women with straightened hair and advertisements for skin bleaches and hair straighteners.

Many African American beauty advice writers lauded Black Nationalists and civil rights advocates for celebrating black aesthetics in the 1960s. However, these advice writers depicted the discussion of black pride as one about politics, not beauty, and suggested that, before making decisions about their appearance, black women should also consider the advice of beauty experts. Elsie Archer, an advice writer and fashion editor for *Ebony*, offered beauty guidance to middle- and working-class black girls in her 1968

<sup>24</sup> For just one of hundreds of examples, see the “Raveen” advertisement, *Jet* (March 30, 1961): 2.

<sup>25</sup> Craig, *Ain’t I a Beauty Queen?*, 87.

<sup>26</sup> “The Soul of Soul,” *Ebony* (December 1961): 116.

<sup>27</sup> “Hairdo of the Week,” *Jet* 20 no. 22 (September 21, 1961): 28.

book *Let's Face It: The Guide to Good Grooming for Girls of Color* at the height of the discussion of black pride. Archer responded to the growing popularity of the Afro hairstyle by encouraging African American girls to consider the style. However, she insisted, "every face and personality type cannot and should not wear the Afro... no matter what you're trying to prove."<sup>28</sup> Archer suggested that black girls consider wigs or straightened hair should either look "better," saying, "Today, the secret is out and hair straightening is in and there's nothing to be ashamed of. Everybody's doing it!"<sup>29</sup> By suggesting that girls might be "ashamed" of straightened hair, Archer hinted that Black Nationalists who promoted Afro-centric styles wrongly pressured black girls and women to conform to their politicized aesthetic. She used the language of "equal rights" to suggest that black girls with straightened hair deserved the same liberties as those with Afros, saying, "Your hair has a right to its own personal beauty, even though it may be pressed hard and straight."<sup>30</sup> She offered reassurance to girls who might wish to buck politically driven aesthetics in favor of what she hinted was a new and fashionable trend ("everybody's doing it").<sup>31</sup>

In many ways, beauty writers advised black girls to beautify for similar reasons as white girls: to attract boys. Archer explained, "You may as well face up to it—it is the boys you want to please. Boys are choosey."<sup>32</sup> Like white beauty advice writers, Archer devoted a significant portion of her book to explaining the "looks" and behaviors black

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<sup>28</sup> Elsie Archer, *Let's Face It: The Guide to Good Grooming for Girls of Color*, rev. ed (New York: J. B. Lippincott Company, 1968), 71.

<sup>29</sup> Archer, *Let's Face It*, 57.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 61.

<sup>31</sup> Similarly, Archer recommended that black girls avoid skin bleaches; however, her explanation for this advice was that "there hasn't been a cream on the market yet to turn dark skin white." Archer did not comment on the political implications of bleaches, nor did she suggest that girls should be proud of their skin color rather than attempt to lighten it; she merely told her readers that bleaches would not work. *Ibid.*, 79.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 155.

boys preferred. And like white beauty advice writers, she described dating as a competition that was “won” by the most normatively attractive girls. When they won male heterosexual attention, readers were told it was normal to enjoy their victory: “You feel even better when the girls look at you admiringly and with envy.”<sup>33</sup>

According to Archer, however, black girls had an additional motive for “looking good”: white observers were constantly judging their appearance and their behaviors. Archer warned the young readers of *Let's Face It* that they were representatives of their race, whether they liked it or not, and they needed to present a “respectable” image. Historian Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham has described how, between 1880 and 1920, middle-class black women had encouraged working-class blacks to conform to middle-class values by practicing “refined manners” and “Victorian sexual morals” in hopes that “‘respectable’ behavior in public would earn their people a measure of esteem from white America.”<sup>34</sup> Archer demonstrated similar concerns about respectability when she advised young black girls on good grooming. For example, she offered lengthy advice on how to dress for and behave in an expensive restaurant. She explained,

You can go anywhere. Sit-ins, stand-ins, marches, demonstrations, and other fights have given you the opportunity for entrance into any of the finest . . . but never without good manners. When you find you're the only ‘one’ in the place, all eyes are on you. You won't be nervous if you know how to conduct yourself. Don't let us down, it's up to you to help keep the welcome sign out on all doors.<sup>35</sup>

Archer placed the responsibility for earning white esteem firmly on the shoulders of her young readers. She explained that white observers would always turn a critical eye to black girls and women. Archer responded to a racist society that characterized black

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<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 38.

<sup>34</sup> Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent: The Women's Movement in the Black Baptist Church, 1880-1920* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1993), 14.

<sup>35</sup> Archer, *Let's Face It*, 166.

women as “dirty” and “hypersexual,” implying that, because of the power whites had over black girls, black girls should be prepared to endure a lifetime of scrutiny.<sup>36</sup> Not only did African American women have to contend with white employers who frequently expressed these racist stereotypes, but also, even more insidiously, some white men employed this racist ideology to justify raping black women.<sup>37</sup> Maxine Leeds Craig has argued that, through the 1960s, many African American women straightened their hair in part to demonstrate their sexual respectability.<sup>38</sup> Indeed, Archer recommended that black girls demonstrate their self-respect—to themselves and white observers—by conscientiously bathing and deodorizing, washing, mending, and ironing their clothing, and even by straightening their hair. She treated grooming as a venue for demonstrating black respectability.

*Jet* and *Ebony* writers joined in the celebration of Afro-centric styles in the 1960s; however, like Archer, they did so irregularly, and with some hesitation. In some ways, these periodicals continued to promote normative white aesthetics (straightened hair and white, middle-class fashions) for black women who sought to look “beautiful,” suggesting that Afro-centric styles were better suited for readers who wanted to make a political statement. Maxine Leeds Craig has noted that, in the late 1960s, many black and white observers critiqued black women wearing the Afro as “masculine.”<sup>39</sup> Indeed, some African Americans conceptualized Afro-centric aesthetics as a political symbol that should be reserved for *male* Black Nationalists. For example, in a December 1967 cover

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<sup>36</sup> Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* (New York: Routledge, 1991), 170-179.

<sup>37</sup> Darlene Clark Hine, “Rape and the Inner Lives of Black Women in the Middle West,” *Signs* 14 no. 4 (1989): 912–920. Archer was definitely aware of the high numbers of African American women who worked outside the home. Elsie Archer, “How to Sell Today’s Negro Woman,” *Sponsor* 20 (July 25, 1966): 49.

<sup>38</sup> Craig, *Ain’t I a Beauty Queen*, 31-34.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 125.



story, “Natural Hair, New Symbol of Race Pride,” *Ebony* editors only featured African American *men* wearing this “new symbol of race pride.” On the other hand, midway through the article, an advertisement for Raveen hair products appeared, for “the woman who wears her hair in the natural style—the ‘IN’ style that’s new, modern.”<sup>40</sup> While a distinctively “black” aesthetic style gained increasing support from African American beauty advisers and beauty marketers in the late-1960s, this support, especially when it came to the ideal black *female* beauty, continued to be sporadic.

### **“Liberated Beauty”: 1970s Beauty Advice**

During the 1970s, the cosmetics market and the beauty advice writers who supported that market responded to the aesthetics promoted by Black Nationalists in the previous decade. Advertisements in mainstream women’s magazines began to market cosmetics, perfumes, and clothing to African American women. For African American women, this shift was significant. With the inclusion of black women in cosmetics or fashion advertisements, marketers suggested to black and white consumers that black women numbered among the (select) population of normatively defined “beautiful” women. Ironically, many black-owned companies found themselves unable to compete with larger cosmetics companies when they added product lines that appealed to African American women. For African American beauty entrepreneurs, the incursion of white-owned companies into the black cosmetics market was not necessarily a welcome one, since it cut into profits.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> “Natural Hair, New Symbol of Race Pride” advertisement and “Raveen” advertisement, *Ebony* (December 1967): 142.

<sup>41</sup> Ayana Byrd and Lori Tharps, *Hair Story: Untangling the Roots of Black Hair in America* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2001), 72-73. Susanna Walker, “Black is Profitable: The Commodification of the Afro, 1960-1975,” from *Beauty and Business: Commerce, Gender, and Culture in Modern America*, ed. Philip Scranton (New York: Routledge, 2001).

When white marketers began to recognize African American women as consumers of beauty products, the range of hair, cosmetic, and products marketed to black women expanded. African American beauty advice writers commended the new products available to the black female consumer.<sup>42</sup> Makeup artist Alfred Fornay Jr., writing for *Ebony* magazine, declared approvingly that the color of a consumer's skin no longer limited her access to cosmetics: "The modern black woman has at her fingertips every conceivable kind of hair preparation, facial cosmetic and personal care item needed."<sup>43</sup> Now that African American women had access to an array of cosmetics and toiletries, beauty advice writers increasingly pressured their readers to use them. Beauty advice writers explained that they fully expected black women to express "insatiable demand for beauty information."<sup>44</sup> As we shall see, black women encountered a growing quantity of "beauty advice" in magazines and books.

One of the most visible signs of the explosion of the black beauty industry was the creation of a new magazine for black female consumers. In 1970, four African American businessmen founded *Essence* magazine, in part, for black women who wished to see a distinctively black aesthetic in a woman's magazine. However, another primary goal of *Essence* publishers was to find ways to market products, especially beauty products, to black female consumers. The publisher described the ideal reader as "the young, inquisitive, acquisitive black woman."<sup>45</sup> *Essence* editors exerted pressure on advertisers to expand the normative aesthetic to include women of color, and rejected

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<sup>42</sup> Melba Miller, *The Black is Beautiful Beauty Book* (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1974), 24. Ray Voegelé, *Beauty Secrets for the Black Woman* (New York: Cornerstone Books, 1970).

<sup>43</sup> Alfred Fornay Jr., "The Beautiful Black Woman: Five Basic Ways to Become One," *Ebony* 32 (February 1977): 138.

<sup>44</sup> La Verne Powlis, *The Black Woman's Beauty Book* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1979), 1.

<sup>45</sup> McCracken, *Decoding Women's Magazines*, 224, originally cited in Philip H. Dougherty, "Advertising: A Magazine for Negro Women," *New York Times*, 11 February 1970, 71.

advertisements that exclusively depicted white models without justification.<sup>46</sup> However, while the magazine offered black women a source of beauty advice that recognized “black” features as “beautiful,” the beauty advice articles and the advertisements within its pages implied that “beauty” required black women to purchase lots of products and expend significant effort.

Beauty advice writers celebrated the success of African American aesthetics, but simultaneously warned black readers that beauty had its price. Advice writer Melba Miller, author of the aptly named *The Black is Beautiful Beauty Book*, rejoiced, “We have finally arrived! Now you can walk down the street and see every possible example of black beauty. Big afros, close-cropped ones, cornrows, curls, straight, everything and anything.”<sup>47</sup> While African American women were advised to enjoy “today’s new aesthetic,” they were warned not to become “lazy” about hair care.<sup>48</sup> La Verne Powlis, author of *The Black Woman's Beauty Book*, warned that, while natural hairstyles were now acceptable, “visiting a salon regularly is not a luxury, it’s a necessity, your investment toward having lovely, healthy hair.” She recommended that readers visit a salon at least once a month.<sup>49</sup>

Despite the recognition of black women as beautiful during the 1970s, beauty advice in black magazines frequently reverted to white aesthetic ideals. In an *Ebony* article entitled “Useful Beauty Tips from Beautiful Women,” readers were presented with very mixed messages. The magazine included photos of television actress Gail Fisher with braided and bejeweled hair and Supremes’ singer Mary Wilson with an Afro, but the

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<sup>46</sup> Mary Ellen Zuckerman, *A History of Popular Women's Magazines in the United States, 1792-1995* (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1998), 229-230.

<sup>47</sup> Miller, *The Black is Beautiful Beauty Book*, 48.

<sup>48</sup> Powlis, *The Black Woman's Beauty Book*, 13; Miller, *The Black is Beautiful Beauty Book*, 55.

<sup>49</sup> Powlis, *The Black Woman's Beauty Book*, 14.

article only commented on their efforts to care for their skin and control their weight—the caption explained that Fisher ate “just one complete meal a day” to “keep down those extra pounds.” On the other hand, Jayne Kennedy (“the former ‘ding-a-ling girl’ on *The Dean Martin Show*”) was described as a “natural beauty” and praised particularly for her long, wavy hair. Like most of the celebrities described in this article, Kennedy “always watche[d] her diet” and followed an elaborate beauty routine to keep her hair—one of her “best features”—looking nice. In addition to her long, wavy hair, Kennedy had traditionally Eurocentric features: a narrow nose, thin lips, and light brown skin. Conveniently placed next to Jayne Kennedy’s photo, readers found an advertisement for “Ultra Bleach & Glow,” a “skin tone cream” they could purchase, on sale in the “big family size jar.”<sup>50</sup>

In the 1970s, white women also found that their advisers were acknowledging social changes—particularly the development of a popular feminist movement—in their writing. However, as with the advice in African American magazines and books, changes in the tenor of beauty advice to white women were intermittent and commercially motivated. Whereas advice writers in the 1960s described beautification as a heterosexual imperative, in the 1970s, they connected beauty rituals to “opportunities for growth and self-realization.” In a “round-table discussion” in *Ladies’ Home Journal* in 1974, three women discussed their experiences with gender oppression and related their plans to return to college or start careers. After briefly describing their plans to cope with the “new directions” in which they were headed, the magazine helped the women “discover new looks for their new roles in life.” Unlike African American beauty advice writers, who had described grooming as necessary for getting work in the 1960s, the

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<sup>50</sup> “Useful Beauty Tips from Beautiful Women,” *Ebony* 30 (October 1975): 84-86, 90.

*Ladies' Home Journal* described careers as a “new role” for white female readers in the 1970s. By emphasizing the “newness” of work outside the home for white women, the contributors subtly suggested that women were engaged in significant social change and that the audience of the magazine was largely white middle- and upper-class women. Of course, the article did not mention “feminism.” Instead, it implied that beautification would offer psychological benefits and expanded opportunities for women in “new roles.” The author (probably Maureen Lynch, the *Journal's* health and beauty editor who conducted the roundtable discussion) preempted feminist critics who might question the emphasis on physical appearance by reminding readers, “in a world where appearances still count, [the American woman] cares increasingly about her own looks. With some guidance, she now has the imagination and determination to change for the better—both the outer and the inner woman.”<sup>51</sup>

During the 1970s, beauty advice writers frequently connected personal makeovers to a feminist agenda. Many beauty advice columnists, for instance, appropriated feminist language, and suggested that their advice would “liberate” those readers who followed it. *Mademoiselle* used a “help-yourself quiz” to generate “a little self-consciousness raising” to encourage readers to live up to their “beauty potential.” However, this type of consciousness-raising was very different from the sessions popularized by feminists: the quiz had readers evaluate themselves on issues such as “are you getting the most out of your hair?” and “are you the body you should be?”<sup>52</sup>

<sup>51</sup> “Change for the Better,” *Ladies' Home Journal* 91 (September 1974): 113.

<sup>52</sup> “They Lived Up to Their Beauty Potential... and So Can You!” *Mademoiselle* 77 (October 1973): 142-5.

In a 1975 *Vogue* article, author Joanna Brown celebrated the accomplishments of the women's movement in replacing "that old-fashioned stereotype BEAUTY" with "liberated beauty."

Liberated beauty is never a stereotype since it's beauty that *does*, rather than beauty that *is*. There's nothing plastic or frozen about liberated beauty because it's the kind that comes from your whole self, not merely a pleasing configuration of features. It's a quality of life, not looks. What you were given is only where you start—the beauty you create yourself.<sup>53</sup>

While Brown peppered her article with language that echoed that used by feminists, her article's primary purpose was to define the *limits* of liberation when it came to women's appearances. Brown filled five pages with advice on maintaining one's appearance, explaining "the price of freedom" is "eternal vigilance." For example, she reminded her readers to "stay lean," warning them against "letting the new body freedoms ruin [their] shape." She warned, "Let's not allow bra-less breasts to sag, ungirdled buttocks to get flabby, or sandal-shod feet to collapse. Maintaining our bodies **does** take consistent effort, but that's what liberated beauty is all about."<sup>54</sup> With her references to "bra-less breasts" and "sandal-shod feet," Brown evoked the stereotype of a feminist wearing Birkenstocks and burning her bra. Brown reminded readers that, regardless of the appealing rhetoric of the women's movement, readers still needed to devote "consistent effort" to beautification for fear of looking like "deviant" political radicals. Furthermore, Brown warned readers that now that they were "liberated" from external constraints (girdles, bras, and tight shoes), they would need to replace these restricting garments with strict self-discipline. With her references to "vigilance" and

<sup>53</sup> Joanna Brown, "Liberated Beauty," *Vogue* 165 (June 1975): 126.

<sup>54</sup> For similar advice on "hair liberation," "fragrance freedom," and "individualize[d]" makeup, see "America's Independent Beauty," *Harper's Bazaar* 109 (February 1976): 88-97. Brown, "Liberated Beauty," 131.

“self-maintenance,” Brown perfectly illustrates feminist theorist Susan Bordo’s analysis of the development of a regime of internalized discipline of the female body in late-twentieth-century beauty culture.<sup>55</sup>

The growing focus on women in the paid labor force in the 1970s and 1980s is another example of how beauty advisers employed the feminist message. Beauty advice writers, responding to the rising number of white middle-class women in the workforce, implied that “liberated” women who sought professional advancement would best improve their opportunities by improving their appearances. In 1977, John T. Molloy, a self-proclaimed “wardrobe engineer,” followed up his first advice book, *Dress for Success* (1975), with *The Woman’s Dress for Success Book*. Molloy suggested that his advice responded to women’s expanding involvement in the work world: “American women want to get ahead. They want to sit in the boardroom and in the president’s chair. And they are headed in that direction.”<sup>56</sup> But regardless of their “drive, ambition, intelligence, and education,” Molloy warned women they wouldn’t “get ahead” without the “right clothing.”<sup>57</sup> Molloy promised that, by wearing a “business uniform,” women could create a serious, respectable, “upper middle class” image for themselves, which he argued would improve their professional opportunities.<sup>58</sup>

Molloy’s advice both reflected and rejected a feminist critique of gendered beauty norms. Like many feminists, Molloy viewed the sexual objectification of women as a

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<sup>55</sup> Susan Bordo, “Braveheart,” *Twilight Zones: The Hidden Life of Cultural Images from Plato to O. J.* Berkeley (University of California Press, 1997); “‘Material Girl’: The Effacements of Postmodern Culture,” in *Body and Flesh: A Philosophical Reader* (Malden, Mass: Blackwell Publishers, 1998).

<sup>56</sup> John T. Molloy, *The Woman’s Dress for Success Book* (Chicago: Follett Publishing Company, 1977), 19.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, 28. Molloy evaluated the “right” clothing by polling men in the position to affect women’s careers. He reassured readers who might object to his focus on men’s opinions, “*This is not sexist. It is a stark reality that men dominate the power structure—in business, in government, in education. I am not suggesting that women dress to impress men simply because they are men*” (32).

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, 22, 34.

key roadblock to their success. While men were guilty of treating women as “sex objects,” Molloy accused women of clinging “to the conscious or subconscious belief that the only feminine way of competing is to compete as a sex object and that following fashion trends is one of the best ways to win.”<sup>59</sup> Molloy maintained that “despite the rhetoric of the feminist movement,” women “continue to view themselves as sex objects.” He presented women with two options in terms of self-presentation: “Bedroom or Boardroom—Your Choice,” suggesting it was entirely women’s choice as to whether or not they were objectified.<sup>60</sup> Unlike feminists, Molloy suggested that limiting sexual objectification in the workplace was merely a matter of wearing a business uniform that made women appear upper-middle-class, and therefore, “respectable.”

Molloy’s business uniform privileged “masculine” aesthetics as well as white, upper-middle-class aesthetics. Molloy argued that the uniform would draw attention away from the female body and subtly evoke the “professionalism” of the male business suit. While Molloy adamantly declared that his business uniform was not an “imitation man look,” he suggested that, for women to achieve success in a male-dominated business world, they needed to conform to a male standard of dress.<sup>61</sup> By recommending a *skirted* suit for the female business uniform, Molloy encouraged women to visually confirm that they were heterosexual. But, according to Molloy, by wearing dark-colored suit jackets and forgoing jewelry, perfumes, and visible cosmetics, women would indicate their conformity to a male-dominated professional world.

Molloy’s business uniform “solution” implied that the sexual discrimination women faced in the workplace was of their own making, or at least that it could be

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<sup>59</sup> Ibid., 21.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid., 28.



addressed simply by changing their clothing styles. By emphasizing that their career hinged upon their choice of wardrobe, Molloy put the responsibility for change on professional women's shoulders and not on the sexism of the business world. While Molloy's advice glossed over the insidious nature of sexism in the workplace, he did offer useful advice for the career woman seeking professional advancement. He wrote with the intent of expanding women's economic opportunities, and like liberal feminists, he assumed his readers would see professional advancement as a boon for women. Indeed, both his books convincingly described the necessity of conforming to a conventionally male "professional" standard of dress for advancement, whether the professional was male or female.

During the 1970s, beauty advice writers frequently exhorted women to adapt to sexual discrimination in the workplace by altering their professional attire, makeup, and hairstyles. As the *New York Times Magazine* explained, "For the working woman, beauty is a serious investment."<sup>62</sup> Beauty advisers implied that a "professional" appearance required time and effort. For women, a "professional" appearance was synonymous with an "attractive" appearance. According to *McCall's* magazine, "It may be unfair but it seems to be true—an attractive appearance can help you get a better job." However, women should not be "raving beaut[ies]," since "researchers report that employers shy away from hiring anyone too distracting."<sup>63</sup> In other words, while attractiveness could get women in the door, employers turned "beauties" away because they interpreted their good looks as a threat to the predominantly male workforce. These employers discriminated against the "beauties" for fear that male employees would seek

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<sup>62</sup> "The Right Face for the Right Job," *New York Times Magazine* (October 9, 1977): 100.

<sup>63</sup> "It Pays to Look Your Best," *McCall's* 106 (November 1978): 140.

sexual relationships or even sexually harass normatively beautiful female employees, and employers sought to protect their *male* employees from these “distractions” by hiring women who looked “attractive,” but not too attractive.

Although the emphasis on women’s professional life appears to be a departure from the heterosexual imperatives of earlier beauty advice, readers were frequently reminded that male employers and co-workers were still in the position to evaluate female aesthetics. According to one *Ladies’ Home Journal* makeover article, Congressman Stewart McKinney wrote to the magazine’s beauty editors asking, “Can You Please Come to Washington?” He described his female employees as “five girls, ranging in age from mid-twenties to early forties,” all eager for a makeover. The article depicted the transformation of McKinney’s staff, and concluded with a group photograph featuring the five (adult) “girls” posed around their boss. The caption beneath the photo quoted McKinney as saying, “Too many offices are male kingdoms. Everyone in this office is given his own head, so there’s no discrimination by age or sex. There are some really sharp women on Capitol Hill.” However, McKinney “offered a few pronouncements on the way he likes women to look.” And after “approvingly” looking at his female staff, McKinney commented, “Politics certainly attracts some beautiful women.” McKinney and the editors of *Ladies’ Home Journal* reminded readers that male employers would evaluate female employees on their appearance in addition to their performance on the job.<sup>64</sup>

Magazines generally responded to the increasing numbers of middle-class women in the paid workforce by offering more beauty advice to career women. By the mid-1970s, middle- and upper-class professional women could find beauty advice in the

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<sup>64</sup> “Can You Please Come to Washington?” *Ladies’ Home Journal* (January 1974): 94-7.

magazine *Working Woman*. This magazine, introduced in 1976, was meant to appeal to “women who want to get ahead in business . . . those who are considered upwardly mobile and achievers.”<sup>65</sup> While the publishers chose to omit low-paid women from its target audience, many low-income women numbered among its readers, enjoying the opportunity to “imaginatively transform their circumstances while reading the magazine.”<sup>66</sup> Women’s magazines such as *Essence* and *Ladies’ Home Journal* increasingly featured makeovers for the professional woman, in addition to the homemaker.<sup>67</sup> All of these magazines reshaped their beauty advice features to offer women who worked outside the home new reasons for purchasing the beauty products advertised within their pages. And, just as in the 1960s, these articles continued to depict “beauty” as a privilege enjoyed by middle- and upper-class women—the consumers editors presumed could best afford those products.

Beginning in the 1970s, women’s magazines provided a forum for debating the restrictive beauty norms idealized in their own “beauty” and “fashion” sections. Magazines from *Seventeen* and *Mademoiselle* to *Redbook* and *Vogue* featured articles in the mid-1970s that challenged readers to rethink beauty stereotypes, arguing that women as a group suffered because beauty standards were exclusive, rigid, and demanding. Judith Viorst, for example, critiqued the “enormous pressure” placed upon women to look young, attractive, and stylish in the *Redbook* article “To Be, or Not to Be . . . Beautiful.” Viorst argued that women internalized the pressure to “be beautiful,” and

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<sup>65</sup> McCracken, *Decoding Women’s Magazines*, 209.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, 210.

<sup>67</sup> “Beauty Works!” *Essence* 9 (March 1979): 60-3; “Can You Please Come to Washington?” *Ladies’ Home Journal* (January 1974): 94-7.

“submit[ted] to” beauty norms in an attempt to win love, success, and self-esteem.<sup>68</sup>

However, Viorst did not advise women to collectively work to change or reject beauty standards. Instead, commenting, “I’m quite convinced that something would be lost if we ever gave up caring how we look,” Viorst recommended that women look on the bright side of these cultural expectations: “it’s sexy, it’s esthetic, it’s a sport, and apart from all the anxiety, it’s fun” to pursue beauty.<sup>69</sup> Ultimately, Viorst suggested that, while it would be ideal for a woman’s “credentials” to come from her work, intelligence, and heart, a complete reevaluation of beauty culture was not only unlikely, but undesirable.

Women’s magazines frequently paired critiques of beauty culture with reminders that beautiful women enjoyed special privileges, and unattractive women faced harsh consequences. Amy Gross’s *Mademoiselle* article, “Notes On Not Being Gorgeous,” encouraged readers to question normative beauty culture and to appreciate their own unique beauty; yet, her article was paired with a one-page piece that contradicted this message, entitled, “Excuse Me, Miss . . . But What’s It Like Being Pretty?”<sup>70</sup> For this photo-studded montage, *Mademoiselle* editors “accosted attractive young women on Fifth Avenue” to ask them if “being pretty [made] life easier.” Many of the “attractive” women queried by the editorial staff admitted that good looks helped advance their careers and social lives. However, many also commented on the dangers that attractiveness posed in these realms, pointing to their sexual objectification by employers and boyfriends.

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<sup>68</sup> Judith Viorst, “To Be, Or Not to Be . . . Beautiful,” *Redbook* 147 (August 1976): 188.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, 190.

<sup>70</sup> Amy Gross, “Notes on Not Being Gorgeous,” *Mademoiselle* 81 (October 1975): 150; “Excuse Me, Miss . . . But What’s It Like Being Pretty?” *Mademoiselle* 81 (October 1975): 151.

Despite these sobering comments, the editors focused on the positive, concluding, “all in all . . . it’s pretty nice, being pretty.”<sup>71</sup>

Susan Sontag submitted beauty norms to a rigorous critique in articles such as “A Woman’s Beauty: Put-Down or Power Source?” and “Beauty: How Will It Change Next?” written for *Vogue* in 1975. Sontag praised feminists for being “rather tough on the traditional hard sell of beauty to women,” arguing that beauty had too long served as “a class system, operating within the sexist code.”<sup>72</sup> Sontag’s critique of beauty seems strikingly out-of-place in *Vogue*; however, like Judith Viorst, Sontag did not suggest that women abandon the pursuit of beauty. Instead, Sontag called for the expansion and flexibility of beauty norms, and she argued that “expensively produced magazines that articulate and promote fashion” offered a forum for a variety of presentations and definitions of beauty.<sup>73</sup> In the end, Sontag and Viorst both were able to rail against rigid, exclusive beauty norms and still imply that women’s magazines were not part of the problem, but rather had the potential to be part of the solution. By including these critiques within their pages, women’s magazines managed to simultaneously articulate a critique of beauty culture, and reaffirm their importance as sources for beauty advice to the female reader.

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<sup>71</sup> “Excuse Me, Miss . . . But What’s It Like Being Pretty?” 151. See Susan Graves, “Perils of being Beautiful,” *Seventeen* 35 (December 1976): 102-3, for an article describing the emotional difficulties attractiveness posed for women. Ultimately, like in the *Mademoiselle* article, the author concludes that the benefits of beauty outweigh the disadvantages.

<sup>72</sup> Susan Sontag, “Beauty: How Will It Change Next?” *Vogue* 165 (May 1975): 116, 174, and “A Woman’s Beauty: Put-Down or Power Source?” *Vogue* 165 (April 1975): 118–119.

<sup>73</sup> Sontag, “Beauty: How Will It Change Next?” 174.

### **“A Basic Female Instinct to Spiff Up?”: Justifications for Beauty Advice in the 1980s**

In 1980, *Glamour* editors asked readers, “On a Scale of 1 to 10, How Rational Are You about Your Looks?” While the editors hinted that individual women were “irrationally” concerned about beauty, they chastised these “gloomy” women, saying, “Society has reexamined its thinking. If you haven’t reexamined yours, isn’t it about time you did?”<sup>74</sup> Readers who flipped through *Glamour* might wonder how much the magazine had “reexamined” its approach to beauty. Beauty advice still appeared in abundance, and the pictures still predominantly featured white, slender, expensively dressed women. Readers were still advised to improve their appearances to impress men, even if these men now included employers along with potential heterosexual partners. *Glamour* readers were unlikely to find motivation from their magazine for a reexamination of attitudes about beauty. Essentially, the editors implied that the impetus to look beautiful was an individual, internal anxiety, and not a social pressure that women faced together. Readers needed to change their “attitudes,” not question cultural constructs.

Despite *Glamour*’s reassurance that beauty culture had changed, expensively dressed, slender white women still predominated in beauty advice books and articles. A growing number of women slipped below the poverty line; nevertheless, beauty advisers intensified the connection between wealth and beauty, leaving lower-income women and girls anxious about both their looks and their social status.<sup>75</sup> Wealthy and socially elite white women released a slew of beauty advice books during the eighties, advising readers

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<sup>74</sup> “*Glamour* Editorial: On a Scale of 1 to 10, How Rational Are You about Your Looks?” *Glamour* 78: (July 1980): 56.

<sup>75</sup> Sara Evans, *Born For Liberty* (New York: Free Press Paperbacks, 1997), 310-311.

on formal attire, jewelry, and expensive perfumes.<sup>76</sup> High fashion magazines like *Vogue* and *Harper's Bazaar* encouraged women to buy clothing and accessories that cost thousands of dollars. And *Mademoiselle* instructed readers on “what’s mass” versus “what’s class,” in an article entitled “Be a Snob!”<sup>77</sup> Beauty advisers in the 1980s followed the example of their predecessors by linking wealth and beauty; however, during a decade so receptive to conspicuous consumption, they were able to more explicitly define beauty as a preserve of the rich.

African American women were especially unlikely to view beauty culture as more “rational” in the 1980s. They continued to appear sporadically at best in mainstream “women’s” magazines, and images of white, upper-class women prevailed in beauty advice literature. Beauty articles in *Essence*, on the other hand, linked beautification and the purchase of beauty products to a demonstration of racial pride. A 1982 photo-shoot promoting summer clothing offers a good example of this connection. The magazine described the location of the shoot—Florida specifically, and the South in general—as the “birthplace of our heritage, keeper of our culture.” One photo depicted a woman blissfully rubbing sun block into her skin. The caption reminded readers, “We’ve hunted game in the grasslands of the Congo, picked mangoes in the blue hills of Jamaica and harvested cotton in the rich and fertile soil of Mississippi, Alabama and the Carolinas.” In the same caption, readers, or “Worshippers of the Sun,” were exhorted to “protect tender skin” with “oil-free Sun Block 8 SPF...from Clinique.” Readers were complimented on their “noses that testify to the pride and dignity of a people,” and

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<sup>76</sup> Cristina Ferrare de Lorean, *Style* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1984); Marisa Berenson, *Dressing Up: How to Look and Feel Absolutely Perfect for any Social Occasion* (New York: G. P. Putnam’s Sons, 1984); Sophia Loren, *Women and Beauty* (New York: William Morrow and Co, 1984).

<sup>77</sup> “Be a Snob!” *Mademoiselle* 93 (April 1987): 226–229.

simultaneously encouraged to purchase a Revlon lipstick for “lips that blossom like flowers in the sun.”<sup>78</sup>

While women’s advice writers continued to suggest that beautification was “liberating,” and therefore a worthwhile investment of time and money, they rejected aesthetic styles they associated with feminism. Beauty advisors particularly castigated the “success suit” promoted by John Molloy during the mid-1970s. In a 1981 *Glamour* makeover article entitled “Dressing for the Job,” editors used photos and interviews to demonstrate professional women’s “success formula,” which essentially involved wearing a variety of moderately priced pantsuits, blazers, and jackets.<sup>79</sup> Joy, a journalist, admitted she had previously stuck to “the ‘success suit’ image,” partly because of her feminist beliefs: “I was very affected by the women’s movement, which was stridently anti-artifice, anti-fixing ourselves up,” she explained. But *Glamour* helped her change her wardrobe and her “strident” attitude: “Beauty is beauty, male or female, and I want to feel as happy about myself as I can.”<sup>80</sup> In another article advising women interviewing for new jobs, *Glamour* editors cautioned, “DON’T compromise your femininity . . . . prospective employers [are] not receptive to hard-edged, mannish-looking clothes, slicked-back hair and little or no makeup.”<sup>81</sup> *Glamour* threatened women who might “compromise their femininity” that they would appear “hard” and “mannish,”—pejorative language that evoked the dominant cultural stereotype of a lesbian and a feminist—and would not be hired because of this association. While Molloy had argued

<sup>78</sup> “Our Place in the Sun,” *Essence* 13 (July 1982): 78-89. See “Ten Most Important Beauty Tips for Black Women,” *Ebony* 35 (January 1980): 68 for another exhortation to beautify billed as racial pride.

<sup>79</sup> One shopping guide had prices ranging from \$36 to \$116. “Dressing for the Job,” *Glamour* 79 (January 1981): 118-121.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>81</sup> “On the Job: Looks that Increase Your Potential,” *Glamour* 78 (August 1980): 230-231.



that the skirted business uniform was not “an imitation man look,” 1980s beauty advice writers equated late-1970s “dress for success” styles with feminism, and therefore, a loss of femininity.

Beauty advice writers suggested that women who succeeded in male-dominated professions were especially likely to look “mannish.”<sup>82</sup> *Redbook* helped members of the Detroit Society of Women Engineers “look more up-to-date but still businesslike, [and] prettier but still professional” in the article, “From Uptight to Just Right!” The magazine characterized the engineers’ original looks as “stuffy,” “style-shy,” “old-fashioned,” “too casual,” “plain,” and “severe.” *Redbook* explained that these engineers had neglected their appearance and looked “uptight” and unattractive, and invited readers to “see the difference our do-overs make.”<sup>83</sup> Beauty advice writers implied that ambitious career women, especially those who were successful in male professions, were inherently unfeminine, unapproachable, and pushy. Therefore, readers needed to be especially careful that, upon entering the business world, they proved their femininity and heterosexuality by wearing cosmetics such as eye shadow, lipstick, and blush, and getting their hair professionally cut and styled.

Beauty advice writers in the 1980s increasingly warned their readers that failure to conform to beauty standards could result in poor mental health. In her history of the women’s movement, historian Ruth Rosen described the development of “therapeutic feminism” in the late 1970s and 1980s, when growing numbers of Americans combined the ideal of female empowerment with popular psychology’s emphasis on personal

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<sup>82</sup> Helen Gurley Brown, *Having It All* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1982), 46, 47, 50.

<sup>83</sup> “From Uptight to Just Right!” *Redbook* 171 (September 1988): 180–183.

development.<sup>84</sup> In the 1980s, women's magazines employed therapeutic language to imply that women's anxieties about beauty amounted to psychological problems they could overcome with the right attitude. Psychiatrist Theodore Isaac Rubin, writing for *Ladies' Home Journal* in 1981, suggested that the pressures to conform to the current fashions could cause "crippling self-criticism and distorted self-perception." While Dr. Rubin blamed "society" for these pressures, the responsibility for adjustment fell entirely on the readers. He warned readers against "excessive preoccupation with looks," suggesting that such preoccupation could lead to "low self-esteem." But he also warned women not to neglect their looks, since "doing what we can to make ourselves appealing helps make us pleasing to others and can even ease some of life's struggles." Since "skillfully applied makeup and carefully chosen clothes" allowed "just about anyone" a shot at beauty, readers should make the most of their appearance. But they should not "brood" or "obsess" over their own flaws. This left readers with the difficult task of determining what exactly qualified as "excessive preoccupation" versus "healthy attention to fitness and grooming."<sup>85</sup>

When women's magazines weren't counseling women to adopt a "rational" attitude about beauty, they were suggesting that anxiety and obsession were "natural" emotions for women when it came to their appearance. Michaele Weissman asserted, "No woman ever thinks her hair is right" in a 1982 article for *Mademoiselle*. Weissman, like the editors of *Glamour* and Dr. Rubin, assumed that readers were "obsessed" with

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<sup>84</sup> Ruth Rosen, *The World Split Open: How the Modern Women's Movement Changed America* (New York: Viking, 2000), 315-316.

<sup>85</sup> Theodore Isaac Rubin, M.D., "Putting Looks in Perspective," *Ladies' Home Journal* 98 (May 1981): 50. For examples of girls' magazines encouraging readers to adopt the right "attitude" about beauty, see "Beauty Confidence: How to Get It," *Teen* 31 (April 1987): 112; "Come Face to Face with Your Identity," *Teen* 24 (February 1980): 62-3.

their appearances, joking, “we talk hair care the way the Puritans talked theology—as if our souls depended on the outcome.” Weissman did not advise women to relax, however. Instead, she implied that “hair anxiety” was an inevitable part of womanhood.<sup>86</sup> In an article entitled, “I’d Rather be Pretty, Smart: Check One,” Aimee Lee Ball debated the merits of beauty versus intelligence for women in 1984. Ball asserted, “It is no good being *just* pretty or *just* smart or *just* anything.” Yet, while Ball saw many advantages to intelligence, she confessed, “I am a feminist and a self-supporting college graduate, and I want to be a blonde bimbo.” She ascribed her desire to look “pretty” to “a basic female instinct to spiff up.”<sup>87</sup> Weissman and Ball acknowledged the damage that beauty culture could do to a woman’s “self-esteem.” They described their attitudes about their own appearances with psychological terms that conjured up neuroses. However, they implied that women did not merely endure the pressures of beauty culture; they reveled in them. Beauty advisers in the 1980s reacted to the feminist critique of culturally constructed beauty norms by countering that it was “a basic female instinct” to beautify.

As more white, middle-class women entered the paid workforce and shouldered the burden of the double day, and as 1980s therapeutic feminism became more prevalent, women’s magazines regularly advised readers on the best ways to handle stress. Rather than address the inequalities of the double day in a society that expected women to “do it all,” magazines focused on the effects this stress had on women’s appearances. According to beauty advice writers, stress threatened to “spoil” women’s looks by limiting or disrupting their sleep, causing break-outs, or contributing to bad habits such as nail biting or lip biting. *The Ladies’ Home Journal* offered readers “quick fixes” to treat

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<sup>86</sup> Michaele Weissman, “Are You Tired of Hating Your Hair?” *Mademoiselle* 88 (September 1982): 180-181.

<sup>87</sup> Aimee Lee Ball, “I’d Rather Be Pretty/Smart: Check One,” *Mademoiselle* 90 (August 1984): 170-171.

beauty problems caused by stress. But the magazine warned readers that they must “learn to deal with the stress” to limit the damage this anxiety did to their appearance.<sup>88</sup> Articles with titles such as “Get Your Good Looks Back,” cautioned that stress and exhaustion contributed to unattractiveness. The article advised readers to indulge in beauty treatments. Beautification, the article explained, was both a means of stress relief and clever time-management, since pampered readers could “go from burned-out to knockout . . . fast” with the right routines.<sup>89</sup> *Redbook* asked women if they were “feeling frazzled and looking a little blah lately?”<sup>90</sup> Staff writers recommended that readers take extra care of their skin and hair, exercise, paint their nails, give themselves facials, wax their legs, or slough their skin to “unwind” and prevent stress from damaging their looks. Again, *Redbook* writers implied that beauty routines relieved stress, rather than added to it.

Some beauty advice writers did acknowledge that beauty routines were often time-consuming and exhausting additions to women’s busy days. The Mary Kay “beauty experts” noted, “looking good takes motivation and effort.” However, they still insisted women make beauty a priority: “The key is not to think of this time as just an indulgence. Instead consider it an important part of your life, necessary to keep you functioning in peak condition.” Paradoxically, these “experts” asserted, “The first step is the hardest: making a commitment to yourself for yourself.”<sup>91</sup> Beauty advice writers for *Glamour* and *Mademoiselle* recommended that women take a “rest” or “vacation” from beauty by

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<sup>88</sup> Lois Joy Johnson, “How Stress Affects Your Looks,” *Ladies’ Home Journal* 102: (September 1985): 126–127.

<sup>89</sup> “Get Your Good Looks Back,” *Mademoiselle* 92 (November 1986): 196–199.

<sup>90</sup> “You Deserve a Beauty Break,” *Redbook* 164 (April 1985): 84–87.

<sup>91</sup> The Beauty Experts at Mary Kay Cosmetics, *The Mary Kay Guide to Beauty* (Reading, Massachusetts: Addison-Wesley, 1983), 6, 8.

“cutting down or changing a few of the routines you’ve become a slave to.”

*Mademoiselle* suggested temporarily switching to natural alternatives from traditional beauty products, for example, substituting cornstarch for deodorant or licorice sticks for mouthwash, along with catching up on sleep and changing the exercise routine. *Glamour* recommended yoga, soothing body lotions, and delegating beauty “chores” to a professional. However, both magazines still advised women to maintain a beautiful appearance. *Glamour* writers promised their advice could produce “less-is-more good looks” and *Mademoiselle* summarized its advice as “how to let yourself go—a little or a lot—and look more radiant than ever.”<sup>92</sup> The imperative of beauty did not cease; however, the advice implied that beauty could be derived through stress-free “tricks.”

While 1980s beauty advice writers linked grooming to stress-reduction, just as in previous decades, beauty advisers really intended to inspire a degree of anxiety in their readers, in hopes that they would consider purchasing the products promoted by beauty marketers. *Glamour*’s “21 of the Worst Beauty Goofs” cautioned women to protect themselves from bad breath, overdressing, callused feet or hands, smeared lip gloss, perspiration, and similar faux pas.<sup>93</sup> *Teen* and *Seventeen* introduced younger girls to a plethora of anxieties with articles such as “17 Beauty Blunders You May Be Making,” “Beauty Blunders: Right Those Wrongs,” and “Do You Look as Good as You Should?”<sup>94</sup> Advice columns frightened teenagers by noting that beauty determined popularity with

<sup>92</sup> “Take a Vacation From Beauty,” *Mademoiselle* 87 (August 1981): 114–115; “Indulge! Take a Beauty Rest,” *Glamour* 85 (April 1987): 314–317.

<sup>93</sup> “21 of the Worst Beauty Goofs,” *Glamour* 78 (August 1980): 226–229.

<sup>94</sup> “17 Beauty Blunders You May Be Making,” *Seventeen* 45 (March 1986): 63–64, “Beauty Blunders: Right Those Wrongs,” *Teen* 28 (July 1984): 56–59; “Do You Look as Good as You Should?” *Teen* 26 (October 1982): 62–64. See also “Personal Appearance: How to Score High,” *Teen* 27 (November 1983): 64–67 and “Beauty Goals,” *Seventeen* 39 (January 1980): 92–97.

articles such as “School Beauty Rules” and “Beauty: What’s In, What’s Out.”<sup>95</sup> Beauty advisers frightened baby boomers with tales of the wrinkles, sagging flesh, and graying hair that awaited them if they did not pay attention to beauty while young. Helen Gurley Brown said she was fighting age like “typhoid,” and recommended readers consider cosmetic surgery and silicone injections.<sup>96</sup>

Two decades earlier in *Sex and the Single Girl*, Brown had also encouraged women to consider cosmetic surgery; however, then she had acknowledged that the procedures were too pricy for most women—especially single women—to afford.<sup>97</sup> During the 1980s, women were increasingly willing to pay for cosmetic surgery, despite high prices. Cosmetic surgery was the fastest growing medical specialty, and by 1988 the number of patients had doubled since the beginning of the decade. Most cosmetic surgery patients were women, and many of these women went into debt to pay for the procedures.<sup>98</sup>

Sociologist Deborah Sullivan and historian Elizabeth Haiken attribute the growing demand for cosmetic surgery largely to the “cultural construction of appearance as a medical problem” in 1980s women’s magazines.<sup>99</sup> According to Sullivan, “physicians regard women’s magazines as one of the most important sources of the public’s ideas about cosmetic surgery.”<sup>100</sup> Sullivan and Haiken agree that women’s

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<sup>95</sup> “Beauty: What’s In, What’s Out,” *Seventeen* 42 (September 1982): 166–169 and “School Beauty Rules,” *Teen* 33 (August 1989): 114–115.

<sup>96</sup> Brown, *Having It All*, 178, 440.

<sup>97</sup> Brown, *Sex and the Single Girl*, 221.

<sup>98</sup> Cited in Susan Faludi, *Backlash: The Undeclared War against American Women* (New York: Crown Publishers, 1991), 217–218.

<sup>99</sup> Deborah Sullivan, *Cosmetic Surgery: The Cutting Edge of Commercial Medicine in America* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2001), 155.

<sup>100</sup> Sullivan, *Cosmetic Surgery*, 155.

magazines' discussions of these procedures were "largely reassuring."<sup>101</sup> Because these magazines had a history of featuring beauty advice, articles about cosmetic surgery seemed to offer just one more (rather expensive) technique for women seeking to look their best.<sup>102</sup> Throughout the 1980s, beauty advice writers argued women's careers, relationships, and especially mental well being all depended on them looking their "best." While women could wear cosmetics, change their hairstyles, or diet and exercise to look "better," advisors implied that, should they continue to feel insecure after these efforts, they might need surgery. Beauty advice writers reassured hesitant women that surgery was morally and socially acceptable, and possibly even psychologically necessary, and they offered information on the available procedures, prices, and best means of finding a surgeon.<sup>103</sup> However, advice writers warned women not to seek cosmetic surgery for "inappropriate reasons." "Readers are instructed to do it for themselves, not for others."<sup>104</sup>

Reassuring articles about cosmetic surgery were not new; in 1964, *Vogue* told readers, "Like it or not, approve it or not, women are moving toward more and more drastic beauty treatments." The article assessed procedures ranging from silicone injections and implants to "arm or leg lift by means of plastic surgery," and described several as "promising."<sup>105</sup> Beginning in the 1980s, articles appeared more frequently, and they were accompanied by advertisements. Through the late 1970s, the American Medical Association had prohibited the advertising of medical services in order to

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<sup>101</sup> Elizabeth Haiken, *Venus Envy: A History of Cosmetic Surgery* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1997), 258.

<sup>102</sup> Sullivan, *Cosmetic Surgery*, 159.

<sup>103</sup> *Ibid.*, 161, 164.

<sup>104</sup> *Ibid.*, 177.

<sup>105</sup> "Drastic Beauty Treatments," *Vogue* 144 (August 15, 1964): 112–113.

prevent advertisers and physicians, especially cosmetic surgeons, from prompting customers to seek unnecessary medical procedures. Under the Reagan administration, the Federal Trade Commission overturned this ban, and cosmetic surgeons began to solicit prospective patients. By 1988, forty-eight percent of board-certified plastic surgeons advertised in at least the Yellow Pages, and many advertised in newspapers and magazines, as well.<sup>106</sup> By the 1990s, many advertisements and articles about cosmetic surgery highlighted financing plans that would permit consumers with limited economic means to afford the surgery.<sup>107</sup>

Beauty culture was becoming more demanding and riskier for women. While beauty writers had always urged women to keep their bodies slim, in women's magazines and advice books in the 1980s, the pressure to exercise and diet was more pronounced. In many ways, this increasing emphasis on slenderness reflected the successes of 1970s feminists' in creating athletic opportunities for girls and women. After the passage of Title IX in 1972, schools gradually began to devote funds to girls' sports. Only one out of every twenty-seven high school girls participated in sports in 1971, by 1996, one out of every three did.<sup>108</sup> American girls and women found both medical and beauty "experts" universally encouraging them to exercise and play sports, and for the first time in history, there were resources available to female students who wished to do so.<sup>109</sup> In the 1980s, girls enjoyed a whole range of athletic opportunities denied to their mothers' generation; however, they found that these opportunities came at a price. Americans began to regard

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<sup>106</sup> Sullivan, *Cosmetic Surgery*, 134–138.

<sup>107</sup> *Ibid.*, 152.

<sup>108</sup> Estelle Freedman, *No Turning Back: The History of Feminism and the Future of Women* (New York: Ballantine Books, 2002), 226.

<sup>109</sup> Whereas Eileen Ford recommended girls who wanted to model exercise a mere ten minutes a day in 1968, *Teen* recommended exercising for at least thirty minutes a day, three days a week in 1988. Eileen Ford, *Eileen Ford's Book of Model Beauty* (New York: Trident Press, 1968), 21; "Test Your BQ," *Teen* 32 (October 1988): 82–83.



athleticism, physical strength, and “fitness” as ideals for “healthy” and “attractive” women. Women and girls’ ability to meet these ideals was evaluated on their ability to achieve a “sculpted, fatless body.”<sup>110</sup> By the early 1980s, women and girls endured increasing scrutiny as beauty advice writers, doctors, coaches, and even casual observers judged their physical “fitness” almost entirely by their body size. In a culture that already harshly evaluated women for their appearances, this emphasis on “health” and “fitness” heightened existing pressures for women to keep their bodies slender.

Anxiety over maintaining a slender, toned body was partly responsible for the prevalence of eating disorders among young women in the 1980s.<sup>111</sup> Joan Jacobs Brumberg, author of a history about eating disorders, explained that, during the early 1980s, the media discovered that a growing number of white, upper- and middle-class girls were fasting, binging, and purging, oftentimes restricting their calorie intake until they literally wasted away and died of starvation. Brumberg connected the rise of eating disorders to the cultural expectation that girls and women would achieve a “perfect” body by eliminating all body fat. She explained that society taught all women, and especially white middle-class girls, to view their bodies as their “best vehicle for making a statement.”<sup>112</sup> Indeed, as this dissertation has shown, since the late 1960s beauty marketers had suggested that women who wished to experience “liberation” or wanted to express their “pride” or “individuality” should do so through their participation in beauty culture. In a society that primarily evaluated women based on their appearances, a

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<sup>110</sup> Susan Cahn, *Coming On Strong: Gender and Sexuality in Twentieth-Century Women’s Sport* (New York: The Free Press, 1994), 274.

<sup>111</sup> Joan Jacobs Brumberg, *Fasting Girls: The History of Anorexia Nervosa* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1988).

<sup>112</sup> *Ibid.*, 267.

growing number of young women understood beauty culture as a competitive arena, and sought to excel by dangerously “controlling” their diet and reducing their body size.

Despite the public’s awareness that young women were suffering and dying from eating disorders in the 1980s, articles on weight loss continued to be a standard feature in women’s magazines, and photo layouts continued to feature extremely slender models. Advice writers presented their audience with mixed messages about proper eating habits. Some advisers conscientiously encouraged readers to pay attention to their bodies’ nutritional needs, but others promoted dangerous eating habits in pursuit of a “beautiful” slender body. Beauty advice writers recommended things like “the pineapple diet” (a diet solely of fruits), “the pizza diet,” and the “Emergency Diet” (alternately fasting or consuming only liquids).<sup>113</sup> Cristina Ferrare de Lorean admitted that a three-day “Emergency Diet” of mostly liquids would cause headaches, but “that’s a symptom of the toxins leaving the body.” She reassured readers, this “won’t kill you.”<sup>114</sup> Along with recommending dangerous starvation diets, Ferrare de Lorean also joked about her own binge eating.

Women’s advice columns promised women and girls “body confidence,” “psychological strength,” and “self-esteem,” through diet and exercise.<sup>115</sup> However, glossy photos of attractive, trim models reminded readers that good looks were the primary benefit of exercise and dieting. An article entitled “Tap Your Beauty Potential” provides a typical example of a 1980s “fitness” makeover. “Amy” lost nearly twenty-

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<sup>113</sup> “The Pineapple Diet,” *Harper’s Bazaar* 120 (May 1987): 173; “The Pizza Diet,” *Harper’s Bazaar* 120 (June 1987): 106; de Lorean, *Style*, 84.

<sup>114</sup> de Lorean, *Style*, 84.

<sup>115</sup> “Body Confidence: How to Get It, How to Use It,” *Glamour* 86 (August 1986): 266–271. During the 1980s, publishers introduced a flurry of new fitness and diet magazines, such as *Slimmer*, *Shape*, and *Fit*, which offered women exercise plans and recipes for low calorie or low fat foods. McCracken, *Decoding Women’s Magazines*, 288.

five pounds over four months from diet and exercise. *Mademoiselle* gushed: “She changed her shape, her looks, her life—everything! She’s made the most of what she’s got, and so can you.” Amy’s measurements, photos showing her exercising, and a plug for her workout clothes were included in the article.<sup>116</sup> In *Mademoiselle* in 1981, an article entitled “Be a Winner: Look and Feel Your Best,” reassured women that sweating “makes you cleaner, cooler, even sexier.” While the article encouraged women to “win” in “active sports,” it also reminded them that they needed to look good too. The article suggested appropriate cosmetics and toiletries for athletes, warning, “When you’re running, your makeup shouldn’t. Avoid smears by using a waterproof mascara such as L’erin Long and Lovey Mascara. Or have your eyelashes dyed at a skin-care salon—it costs under \$10 and eliminates the need for mascara.”<sup>117</sup>

In 1981, Jane Fonda accelerated the aerobics exercise craze with the release of *Jane Fonda’s Workout Book*.<sup>118</sup> Fonda explicitly tied “fitness” to feminist politics and social radicalism. Fonda had identified with anti-establishment causes since the late-1960s, when she began supporting the Black Panthers, anti-war activists, and feminist causes. In 1972, Fonda traveled to Hanoi, Vietnam, denounced the war, and allowed herself to be photographed on a North Vietnamese anti-aircraft gun, thus earning the nickname “Hanoi Jane” and the opprobrium of many Americans. That same year, she released a critique of the Vietnam War entitled *They Have Tried To Make Vietnam a Faceless Country for Us, But it Has a Face* through the Chicago Women’s Liberation

<sup>116</sup> “Tap Your Beauty Potential,” *Mademoiselle* 89 (March 1983): 156–161.

<sup>117</sup> “Be a Winner: Look and Feel Your Best,” *Mademoiselle* 87 (April 1981): 214–215.

<sup>118</sup> According to Fonda, the *Workout Book* was number one on the *New York Times* Bestseller List for “a record twenty-four months.” Jane Fonda, *My Life So Far* (New York: Random House, 2005), 393.

Union, focusing particularly on the effects of the war on her Vietnamese “sisters.”<sup>119</sup> As she explained in the *Workout Book*, “Everyone knows I’m an activist.”<sup>120</sup>

However, Jane Fonda was also known as a Hollywood insider. As the daughter of film legend Henry Fonda, she had connections in the movie business. And as a slender, normatively attractive, white woman, she was cast in numerous movies during the 1960s, including *Barbarella*, which depicted her as an ideal beauty and sex symbol. In her *Workout Book*, Fonda described her conversation with a feminist friend who asked her about these roles. In the 1960s, Fonda explained, she did not yet understand “the personal cost of being turned into a sexual object.”<sup>121</sup> However, by 1981, Fonda was very critical of “a culture that says thin is better, blond is beautiful and buxom is best.” She used the prologue of her *Workout Book* to offer critiques of beauty culture, voicing the same concerns that were raised by the feminists who protested the Miss America Pageant in 1968: “The message that came [growing up] was clear: men were judged by their accomplishments[,] women by their looks.”<sup>122</sup> As a woman pursuing success in the image-conscious film business, Fonda acknowledged that she had engaged in dangerous dieting, a “binge-and-vomit cycle,” “all in pursuit of someone else’s standard of how she should look.”<sup>123</sup> Fonda compared her own struggles with beauty culture to the experiences of Vietnamese women who had eyelid surgery to look more “American,” (either to earn more money as prostitutes for American soldiers or to conform to Western aesthetic ideals). “The women of Vietnam had become victims of the same *Playboy*

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<sup>119</sup> Jane Fonda, “They Have Tried to Make Vietnam a Faceless Country for Us, But it Has a Face” (Chicago: Chicago Women’s Liberation Union, 1972).

<sup>120</sup> Jane Fonda, *Jane Fonda: Workout Book* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1981), 228.

<sup>121</sup> *Ibid.*, 18.

<sup>122</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.

<sup>123</sup> *Ibid.*, inside cover, 14.

culture that had played havoc with me.” Nevertheless, Fonda acknowledged her responsibility for the creation of a Western normative beauty standard, admitting, “I myself had played an unwitting role as a movie star and sex symbol in perpetuating the stereotypes that affected women all over the world.”<sup>124</sup>

While Fonda was critical of beauty norms that demanded starvation and cosmetic surgery from women, she optimistically declared that, in 1981, women were on the cusp of revolution. According to Fonda, women could win power through exercise. She celebrated 1980s women for “rejecting the equation of femininity with weakness at every level, including the physical.” By becoming physically stronger, she pledged, women could expand their economic opportunities, improve their health, and fend off rape and violence more effectively.<sup>125</sup> Echoing beauty advisors who linked “beauty” to female mental health, Fonda promised that exercise would fundamentally change women for the better: “You will like yourself more and you will enjoy loving more. The color of the leaves will please you more. So will the feel of crisp cool air on your skin. You’ll be attentive to little changes in nature that you used to pass right by. Best of all, you may rediscover the child in you who was lost along the way.” While she admitted that fitness didn’t automatically translate into “a progressive, decent kind of person,” Fonda assured readers, “one’s innate intelligence and instinct for good can be enhanced through fitness.”<sup>126</sup>

Fonda was aware that many of her readers were primarily concerned with beauty when they purchased her *Workout Book*. Fonda, convinced that physical strength and good health were central to women’s liberation, argued that a generation of strong

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<sup>124</sup> Ibid., 20.

<sup>125</sup> Ibid., 46–47.

<sup>126</sup> Ibid., 49.

women would compel society to re-evaluate beauty norms. “We refuse to be afraid that we will no longer be considered attractive and acceptable when we are strong. We now recognize the strong, healthy woman who has fulfilled her physical potential, as beautiful.”<sup>127</sup> Fonda implied that feminism created a new standard of beauty: one that idealized female strength and health, and empowered rather than undermined women. By depicting a diversity of women exercising in her book, Fonda suggested that the new aesthetic was a more democratic standard of beauty. Her *Workout Book*, for instance, featured Janice Darling, an African American actress who survived an accident that left her with just one eye. While Fonda is depicted on the book’s cover (wearing a leotard, posed mid-exercise) and sporadically throughout the book, the *Workout Book* promoted alternative role models by showing women of a variety of ages and racial backgrounds, and by featuring a woman wearing an eye-patch. Furthermore, Fonda asked readers, “Please remember that your goal is not to get pencil thin or to look like someone else.”<sup>128</sup>

Did readers really strive for physical strength, or were their goals weight loss and emulation of a Hollywood ideal? Readers certainly might have a variety of responses to Fonda’s *Workout*, and, despite Fonda’s explicitly feminist intentions, the *Workout Book* offered multiple ways of understanding exercise. Fonda’s authority as an exercise instructor came solely from her status as an attractive, successful Hollywood beauty; she did not claim credentials from a background in physical education. Fonda may have sought a more democratic beauty ideal by sharing the stage with a diversity of women; however, the *Workout Book* only showed thin, physically fit women doing her workouts. Fonda recommended her workout as a means to accomplish a more attractive appearance

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<sup>127</sup> Ibid., 47.

<sup>128</sup> Ibid., 64.

and feminist change.<sup>129</sup> Yet, Fonda's *Workout* accommodated rather than challenged normative beauty standards. Her advice did not significantly alter the instruction women had been receiving from beauty writers for decades: she essentially told women to maintain normatively attractive bodies. At best, Fonda's *Workout Book*, and the endless stream of fitness videos she released after it, which came without extensive explanation of their feminist purpose, helped reshape the beauty hierarchy around physical strength.

Fonda imbued aerobic exercise with meaning beyond personal accomplishment by insisting that developing personal strength and fitness were feminist acts. Like the feminists who fought for Title IX, Fonda sought to provide American women with opportunities to get adequate exercise and live healthy, physically active lifestyles. On a personal level, however, exercise accomplished an individual achievement, not collective social change. While second-wave feminists understood women's "personal" lives to have political resonance, they did not view the responsibility for social change to rest entirely on individual women. Instead, feminists encouraged women to work collectively to change the world around them. Fonda hoped to empower women by advising them to work out and improve their own bodies, and to a degree, she did offer individual women a sense of control over their own bodies and an opportunity to build their physical strength. Yet, by recommending exercise as a means of self-empowerment, Fonda encouraged women to channel their energy into finding "personal" solutions to the universal problems of female disempowerment. Furthermore, by describing physical fitness as a feminist goal, Fonda implied that the woman who did not exercise was *not* empowering herself.

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<sup>129</sup> Ibid., 10.

Fonda's workout videos ultimately sold millions of copies.<sup>130</sup> Along with an array of exercise videos by Fonda and her imitators, women could watch (and exercise to) a variety of television programs, such as *The Jack LaLanne Show*, *The Richard Simmons Show*, and *Denise Austin's Daily Workout*.<sup>131</sup> Exercise advisors on television programs and videos encouraged women to keep their bodies toned and slender, and most videos and television shows featured slender, sculpted women in skintight clothing demonstrating how "fit" women should look. By 1994, television exercise programs were numerous enough to fill a twenty-four hour workout channel, "Cable Health Club."<sup>132</sup> Critics pointed out that exercise videos and television programs were frequently "done with obvious haste and low budgets"; nevertheless, they were a profitable business, particularly when consumers would purchase an array of exercise accessories marketed by their favorite exercise guru.<sup>133</sup> Clothing marketers quickly found means to profit off the exercise craze of the early 1980s, but they also helped inspire crazes such as aerobics and "step aerobics." For example, in 1982, Reebok introduced the first athletic shoe designed especially for women, and in 1986, they introduced "step aerobics" shoes. Marketers encouraged female athletes (and non-athletes) to buy sweat suits, spandex, and leg warmers for their workouts, and all of these "workout clothes" became popular styles

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<sup>130</sup> The first of these videos, *Jane Fonda's Workout* (1982), sold seventeen million copies, and, according to Fonda, is the bestselling video of all time. Fonda, *My Life So Far*, 394.

<sup>131</sup> Judy Klemesrud, "Behind the Bestsellers: Richard Simmons," *New York Times*, 15 February 1981, BR9. Donald Katz, "Jack LaLanne is Still an Animal," *Outside* (November 1995), [http://outside.away.com/outside/magazine/1195/11f\\_jack.html](http://outside.away.com/outside/magazine/1195/11f_jack.html) [accessed April 15, 2005]; "About Denise," *Denise Austin*, <http://www.deniseaustin.com/free/aboutdenise.asp> [accessed April 15, 2005].

<sup>132</sup> Lindsey Gruson, "No Sweat," *New York Times*, 16 January 1994, V1.

<sup>133</sup> William Stockton, "Exercising Safety With Home Videos," *New York Times*, 22 February 1988, C11.



in the 1980s.<sup>134</sup> Everywhere women looked, they encountered advice on the necessity of keeping their bodies physically “fit” and normatively attractive.

### **“Freedom is Defining Your Own Beauty”: 1990s Beauty Advice**

Throughout the 1990s, beauty advice writers continued to heighten women’s anxieties about “measuring up” in terms of their looks. Articles such as “Are You Like Everyone Else?” explicitly asked girls to compare their own looks to those surveyed by *Teen* magazine.<sup>135</sup> Another issue of *Teen* asked readers, “Are you a Beauty Rookie or Beauty Pro?” The magazine offered teens tips on how to “go pro” with their makeup application.<sup>136</sup> *Redbook* asked adult readers “Are You Making the Most of Your Looks?” The editors warned, “We may think we know what works for us, beautywise. But sometimes we’re simply hanging on to old habits and outdated notions about makeup, hair, or skincare—and making small but critical errors that undermine our looks.” A team of “experts” promised to help incompetent readers.<sup>137</sup> If readers were not already anxious about their looks, they might become so by reading women’s magazines or turning on their televisions. And the beauty advisers encouraged “anxious” readers to rely on their advice—and the products they promoted—for assistance in resolving beauty problems.

Just as they had in the 1980s, beauty advisers commonly framed their advice with therapeutic language and promised readers that a change in appearance would effect a change in attitude, opportunity, and mental health. Susan Powter—author of the diet and

<sup>134</sup> Reebok Company History, *Reebok*, <http://www.reebok.com/uk/about/history/1980.htm> [accessed on August 23, 2004].

<sup>135</sup> “Are You Like Everyone Else?” *Teen* 39 (October 1995): 72–74.

<sup>136</sup> “Are You a Beauty Rookie or a Beauty Pro,” *Teen* 40 (February 1996): 72–75. See also “What’s Your Beauty Rating?” *Teen* 34 (January 1990): 68–69.

<sup>137</sup> “Are You Making the Most of Your Looks? A Beauty Quiz,” *Redbook* 185 (September 1995): 110.

fitness book *Stop the Insanity!* and the star of a women's television fitness program and an infomercial selling fitness video and audio tapes, calipers, and an eating guide—appealed to readers as an “everywoman” who'd overcome obesity, divorce, poverty, and was now prepared to battle a “dishonest” diet and exercise industry.<sup>138</sup> Powter described herself as a “feminist” and an opponent to normative beauty culture.<sup>139</sup> This approach allowed Powter to ally herself to women skeptical of beauty advisers.

Why do we all have such warped body images? . . . Every magazine you read, everything you watch and listen to on TV—everything you see and hear—tells you what you should look like. You know that. You have a choice here. You can sit around and get angry about the responsibility of the media, the medical community, and the diet and fitness industries for your negative self-image, you can buy whatever it is they have to sell you and continue to live in the pain of trying to live up to standards that are impossible to attain, or you can choose not to believe it, turn it off, close the magazine—or better yet, not buy it, choose not to live by a standard that we all know is stupid and unattainable, and get well.<sup>140</sup>

Powter demonstrated her refusal to succumb to normative beauty standards by shaving her head. However, Powter claimed that she wrote her book to help women learn to exercise and cut out fattening foods from their diets (although she did not define this process as “dieting,” but rather, “getting well”) to improve their health *and* to look good.<sup>141</sup> Powter assumed that all overweight women would want to lose weight to look more “attractive.” She admitted to having cosmetic surgery, and claimed she had lost weight “to look better than [her] ex-husband's girlfriend.”<sup>142</sup> Powter offered women a combination of feminist criticism of normative beauty standards, and a plan for meeting those standards. Powter promised consumers that, by following her fitness and diet

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<sup>138</sup> “Fit and Lean: The Antidote to Insanity,” *The New York Times*, 4 April 1993, V4.

<sup>139</sup> Susan Powter, *Stop the Insanity!* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1993), 261.

<sup>140</sup> *Ibid.*, 25.

<sup>141</sup> *Ibid.*, 13.

<sup>142</sup> Powter adamantly declared, “I am not living up to any image because the male-dominated world tells me to do so . . . I had my stomach done for me.” *Ibid.*, 15, 277.

program, they could bypass the beauty advisers who, according to her, set women up for failure.<sup>143</sup>

Delta Burke, who competed in the Miss America pageant and starred in the television shows, *Designing Women* and *Delta*, wrote *Delta Style: Eve Wasn't a Size 6 and Neither Am I* with an authorial voice similar in many ways to Susan Powter. Burke peppered her book with photos of herself as a young beauty queen and television star, and also as a woman who had gained a significant amount of weight, but was comfortable with her body size. Powter, too, chronicled her transformation with photos; however, she illustrated and described her transformation from a “morbidly obese” single mother to a muscular and slender fitness guru.<sup>144</sup> Burke, like Powter, promised readers “personal empowerment—for body and soul” when they followed her beauty advice.<sup>145</sup> And like Powter, Burke implied that she was offering an alternative to normative styles of beauty: “We have to free young girls from the rules and constraints set by commercial image makers and give them some breathing room to let their own, unique beauty evolve from the inside out. It’s time to balance the scales of beauty justice. It’s time for a little fashion equality.”<sup>146</sup> Indeed, unlike Powter, Burke defended bigger-sized women as attractive. Nevertheless, four of the six chapters of the book advised readers on clothing,

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<sup>143</sup> Women and girls were more strongly urged to exercise and diet in the 1990s than they had ever been before. Beauty advisers continued to waver between encouraging girls and women to exercise for the health benefits and for appearance benefits. *Teen* encouraged readers to join competitive sports such as track, softball, and tennis. However, it broke down the “body benefits” for each sport, listed the beauty products that were “gym bag essentials,” and warned against “beauty hazards” such as acne, body odor, and sunburns. The amount of time they were recommended to spend exercising continued to rise in the 1990s. *Teen* recommended 20–30 minutes four to five days a week in 1991. “Rev Up!” *Teen* 35 (January 1991): 73. “Go, Girl Fitness and Beauty Attitude,” *Teen* 39 (September 1995): 118–20. Powter, *Stop the Insanity!* 101.

<sup>144</sup> In photos demonstrating exercise techniques, Powter posed beside a 310-pound woman in workout clothes, providing the reader with a visual reminder of her accomplishment. Powter, *Stop the Insanity!* 74.

<sup>145</sup> Delta Burke, with Alexis Lipsitz, *Delta Style: Eve Wasn't a Size 6 and Neither am I* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1998), xxi.

<sup>146</sup> *Ibid.*, 91.

skin care and cosmetics, “big” hair, and shopping. Ultimately, readers were still urged to beautify themselves, but Burke suggested they’d beautify for personal enjoyment.<sup>147</sup>

Powter and Burke are examples of how beauty advisers were popping up in many more places than bookstores and women’s magazines.<sup>148</sup> As early as the 1980s, women were offered beauty advice on television programs and videos, and, by the 1990s, on the Internet. Even if women chose not to read Burke and Powter’s books, they likely saw them promoting their books and their beauty advice on television programs or in magazines. Beauty advisers saturated 1990s popular media. For example, makeup artist and cosmetics executive Bobbi Brown offered women beauty advice on TV, in magazines and books, and on the Internet: she was the beauty editor of the *Today Show* on NBC, a columnist for *Prevention* magazine, and an online columnist for *Ladies’ Home Journal*.<sup>149</sup> Supermodel Tyra Banks, author of the advice book *Tyra’s Beauty*, has appeared on endless magazine covers and in articles within those magazines, in movies, on awards shows, and on television as the host of *America’s Next Top Model*.<sup>150</sup> Beauty advice became simply inescapable in the 1990s.

The success of Tyra Banks, an African American model, and Bobbi Brown, a Jewish American cosmetics expert, suggests that the beauty advice business became more attentive to racial and ethnic diversity in the 1990s. Both Banks and Brown encouraged

<sup>147</sup> Ibid., 118.

<sup>148</sup> Women’s magazines continued to command massive audiences in the 1990s. In 1993, *Cosmopolitan* had a circulation of 2,705,224, *Glamour* 2,133,712, *Ladies’ Home Journal* 5,138,168, and *Good Housekeeping* 5 million. By comparison, *Ms.* had a circulation of 250,000 in the same year. *Women’s Periodicals in the United States: Consumer Magazines*, ed. Kathleen Endres and Therese Lueck (Westport, Conn: Greenwood Press, 1995): 57, 113, 130, 180, 242.

<sup>149</sup> Bobbi Brown and Annemarie Iverson, *Bobbi Brown Teenage Beauty: Everything You Need to Look Pretty, Natural, Sexy and Awesome* (New York: Cliff Street Books, 2000). See *Bobbi Brown Cosmetics* website, <http://www.bobbibrowncosmetics.com/templates/aboutbobby/aboutbobby.tmpl?STORY=inmix&> [accessed April 16, 2005].

<sup>150</sup> Tyra Banks and Vanessa Thomas Bush, *Tyra’s Beauty: Inside and Out* (New York: Harper Collins, 1998). “Tyra Banks,” *Internet Movie Database* <http://www.imdb.com/name/nm0004723/> [accessed April 16, 2005].

women to cultivate individuality and self-confidence, rather than “cookie-cutter beauty,” and their books included extensive advice for women of color.<sup>151</sup> Indeed, by the 1990s, beauty advisers writing for African American women claimed victory over the racial prejudices of beauty culture. In an article entitled “Freedom is Defining Your Own Beauty,” *Essence* congratulated readers, saying, “You are a divine original, with unlimited possibilities.” 1990s women could point to “hard-won, newly claimed, joyfully expressed **freedom**: freedom to be exactly who we are and to show it by how we style our hair, adorn our bodies, apply cosmetics and scent warm pulse points.” Black women could express their individual style and taste with aesthetic choices, according to *Essence*. “Headline news! Hair isn’t political anymore: How you wear it is your choice, and yours alone.” While the pages of black periodicals, including *Essence*, regularly discussed the racial prejudice, violence, and economic inequalities that African American women faced in the 1990s, beauty writers suggested that, when it came to aesthetics, women were “released” from the yoke of racism and sexism. Of course, their readers should still consider the advice of beauty experts. The same passage recommended, “Let your stylist be your guide. She or he can also advise you on the array of great products to support your new look.”<sup>152</sup>

The beauty advisers writing for mainstream “women’s” magazines trumpeted the arrival of “Multicultural Beauty” in the 1990s.<sup>153</sup> Throughout the decade, proponents of multiculturalism sought to recognize and celebrate a variety of ethnicities and races simultaneously, and as this term gained currency in the early 1990s in broad discussions of culture, some beauty marketers suggested that beauty advice that genuinely appealed

<sup>151</sup> Brown and Iveron, *Bobbi Brown Teenage Beauty*, 12.

<sup>152</sup> “Freedom is . . . Defining Your Own Beauty,” *Essence* 26 (May 1995): 23–26.

<sup>153</sup> “Multicultural Beauty,” *Vogue* 183 (June 1993): 128.

to women of many cultures would earn the greatest possible revenue. In “The New Idea of Beauty,” *Glamour* writers explained that modeling agencies were hiring more women of color because of consumer demand: “Today, diversity is essential to any agency’s bottom line.”<sup>154</sup> While many consumers found multiculturalism appealing, some conservatives interpreted this celebration of diversity as an attack on white Western values. On the other hand, critics on the left pointed to the tendency of multiculturalism’s proponents to gloss over difference and to imagine that a simplistic celebration of “diversity” could compensate for centuries of normative white society’s cultural devaluation of minorities.

While beauty marketers hyped “multiculturalism” abstractly, the photos that accompanied 1990s beauty advice did little to celebrate true diversity in practice. Much of the touted “progress” amounted to little more than tokenism. Faye Wattleton, former president of Planned Parenthood Federation of America, confirmed the limitations of 1990s beauty culture in her article, “I am a Black Woman. I Do Not Want to Look White.” Wattleton described how she had to resort to carrying her own “home-mixed foundation” to photo shoots to avoid having her skin “lightened” by makeup artists. She also quoted Bethann Hardison, an advocate for equity for black models, as saying “Just because you acknowledge black women as a potential market, it doesn’t mean you appreciate their beauty . . . . The products are there, but you don’t see the imagery. I’m talking in terms of ratio, and of images in editorial and advertising.”<sup>155</sup> Between 1990 and

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<sup>154</sup> “The New Idea of Beauty,” *Glamour* 94 (May 1996): 220–225.

<sup>155</sup> Faye Wattleton, “I am a Black Woman. I Do Not Want to Look White,” *Harper’s Bazaar* no. 3402 (May 1995): 54.

2000, only two African American women appeared on the cover of *Vogue*.<sup>156</sup> Asian American, Latina, and Middle Eastern women appeared just as infrequently. Between 1996 and 2000, no Asian women appeared on the covers of *Glamour*, *Cosmopolitan*, or *Vogue*, out of a sample of one hundred and eighty covers.<sup>157</sup>

Nevertheless, women of color were strongly advised to purchase cosmetics and toiletries, regardless of marketing that neglected their interests. Alfred Fornay, a former creative director of Revlon's "Polished Amber" collection and a marketing manager for Clairol, wrote *The African-American Woman's Guide to Successful Make-up and Skin Care* to encourage more black women to use cosmetics. Along with the limited product choices offered by white-owned cosmetic companies, Fornay blamed African Americans' religious conservatism and their subsequent association of cosmetics with sexual "impurity" for limiting the use of cosmetics by black women. Fornay had no such prejudices. He asserted, "African-American women are beautiful. Some women of color are born beautiful, but a much larger percentage have made themselves even more beautiful thanks to a skillful use of cosmetics."<sup>158</sup>

Beauty advice for both black and white women overtly linked mental and emotional health to physical fitness and beautification. With the assistance of trainer Bob Greene, talk-show host Oprah Winfrey encouraged readers to *Make the Connection* between "fitness" and happiness through a bestselling book, on her television program, and on the website *Oprah.com*.<sup>159</sup> Greene and Winfrey explained that Oprah had used

<sup>156</sup> Leslie Patterson, "Why White Women Rule," *Byron Shire Echo* (December 21, 2004): 22 <http://www.echo.net.au> [accessed February 20, 2005].

<sup>157</sup> Johnson and Kressin, "The Face on the Cover: Racial Diversity in Fashion Magazines 1996-2000."

<sup>158</sup> Alfred Fornay, *The African-American Woman's Guide to Successful Make-up and Skin Care* (Los Angeles: Amber Books, 1998), xv, 85, 133.

<sup>159</sup> Beginning in 2000, women could also look for beauty advice in Oprah's magazine, *O*. Oprah's celebrity status garnered her a tremendous readership. Within months of initial publication, 1.9 million women

food to “cope” with stress. But now, Greene cooed over Winfrey’s physical accomplishments: “She now has control over her life, and you can too!” Greene and Winfrey asked readers to evaluate their emotional state before eating, to avoid making Oprah’s mistakes.<sup>160</sup> In an *Essence* article, Elsie Washington described beauty rituals as well-deserved escapism. “We have more than earned pampering,” she told readers. The text, placed within a photo-montage of women meditating on a beach, playing on the lawn of a large country home, and wrapped in towels in a spa-like environment, compared beautification to a religious experience. “Just as we touch spirit with prayer and caress the inner body with invigorating tonics, we need to cleanse, tone and anoint our outer bodies with tender loving care.”<sup>161</sup> These articles suggested that readers look at beautification as spiritual and emotional healing, rather than an attempt to meet societal expectations of beauty.

At the beginning of the twenty first century, beauty advice has become an ongoing, insidious part of women’s day-to-day lives. As women confront anxieties over body size and the possibilities and risks of cosmetic surgery, advice about “looking good” has become more troubling. In the 1990s, beauty “experts” in women’s magazines made over “ordinary” women by giving them new hairstyles, clothes, and cosmetics.<sup>162</sup> In

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subscribed to this magazine, considerably more than established competitors such as *Vogue*, *Glamour*, *Essence*, and *Good Housekeeping*. Noliwe Rooks, *Ladies’ Pages: African American Women’s Magazines and the Culture that Made Them* (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers, 2004), 141-142. “Mind and Body: Bob Green,” Oprah.com [http://www2.oprah.com/health/bob/health\\_bob\\_main.jhtml](http://www2.oprah.com/health/bob/health_bob_main.jhtml) [accessed April 15, 2005].

<sup>160</sup> In one passage, Greene described the tasks ahead of readers: “Only when you have self-awareness can you achieve self-acceptance. Only when you accept yourself can you experience self-love. And when you are capable of self-love, you learn to love. To express love is our ultimate goal. And you thought you bought a weight-loss book! You did. But this is the path that leads you to the connection.” Bob Greene and Oprah Winfrey, *Make the Connection: Ten Steps to a Better Body—and a Better Life* (New York: Hyperion, 1996), 38, 46, 57, 88.

<sup>161</sup> “Time Out: The Ultimate Guide to being Good to Yourself,” *Essence* 26 (February 1996): 12.

<sup>162</sup> “Faces of Victory,” *Redbook* 177 (July 1991): 98-102; “Makeovers in Mommy-time,” *Redbook* 176 (March 1991): 124-7; “Native American Beauty Makeovers,” *Good Housekeeping* 20 (January 1990): 90.



2005, women can watch “ordinary” women get “extreme” makeovers on their television sets. Programs such as *Extreme Makeover* (ABC), *The Swan* (Fox), and *I Want a Famous Face* (MTV) depict women (and a much smaller number of men) undergoing extensive cosmetic surgery in order to achieve a “beauty by the numbers.”<sup>163</sup> Gender and media scholar Brenda Weber argues that makeover shows promise a “democratization” of beauty, saying, “we get the sense that all of us—with the aid of payment plans and credit cards—are eligible for empowerment through plastic surgery.”<sup>164</sup> Weber suggests that, by remaking “ordinary” women and men into normatively beautiful “celebrities,” makeover shows remind viewers that they are all subject to a critical gaze: “Whether scrutinized for our freakish ugliness or admired for our glamorous appearance, we are all objects of the gaze, intensely self conscious that there are seeing eyes (or cameras) on us at all time, even when those eyes are our own.”<sup>165</sup> Awareness of this gaze, understandably, provokes considerable anxiety, and anxious women and men are encouraged to see the solution to all of their problems and the fulfillment of all their desires in the pursuit of beauty: “In the way of the most powerful and cunning of cultural texts, *Extreme Makeover* offers what cultural narratives have long made us believe in and desire—coherence, acceptance, self-improvement, and equality. All of this, it suggests, can be purchased through the currency of beauty.”<sup>166</sup>

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<sup>163</sup> Shows such as *What Not to Wear* (TLC) and *Head 2 Toe* (Lifetime) show less “extreme” makeovers for viewers squeamish about cosmetic surgery. Brenda Weber, “Beauty, Desire, and Anxiety: The Economy of Sameness in ABC’s *Extreme Makeover*,” *Genders* 41 (2005), [http://www.genders.org/g41/g41\\_weber.html](http://www.genders.org/g41/g41_weber.html) [accessed April 15, 2005].

<sup>164</sup> Weber, “Beauty, Desire, and Anxiety,” 20.

<sup>165</sup> *Ibid.*, 37.

<sup>166</sup> *Ibid.*, 49.

### **Changing the Way We Understand Beauty?**

Beauty advisers still link beautification to attracting and keeping male heterosexual interest, of course. However, in the twenty-first century, writers have promised that beauty can serve as a panacea for all women's problems. According to beauty advice writers, women can secure their own mental health, independence, and even social justice by buying a new perfume, getting their hair styled, or dieting. Beauty writers continue to promote expensive beauty products and a narrow, unattainable standard of beauty; however, they offer different motivations for looking good in the wake of feminist activism. Since the 1970s, an array of beauty experts such as Susan Powter, Oprah Winfrey, Jane Fonda, and a host of magazine beauty advice columnists have encouraged women to look good "for themselves," implying that they no longer needed to please a critical male gaze. By emphasizing the personal motivations for beautification, and by describing beautification as a progressive, liberating experience, advisers imply that women can make these decisions with no societal pressures whatsoever. Beauty advisers have successfully created and perpetuated the myth that American women *choose* to pursue beauty chiefly for their own personal satisfaction.

Feminists did not idly stand by as beauty marketers raised the stakes for American women struggling to conform to normative standards of beauty. Activists in the 1990s decried the growing pressures facing American consumers; however, they also struggled with the complicated legacies of feminism and Black Nationalism. In chapter five, we will trace feminist efforts to respond to the changing nature of beauty culture in the 1990s. As we will see, activists in the nineties were no more united in their approach and their values than were their predecessors. However, like the women and men who had

struggled during previous decades, these feminists agreed that normative beauty culture disempowered and divided American women.

CHAPTER V  
NINETIES FEMINISTS RESPOND TO BEAUTY CULTURE

*“To look however we want to look—  
and to be heard as we deserve to be heard—we will  
need no less than a feminist third wave.”<sup>1</sup>*

Naomi Wolf, *The Beauty Myth*, 1991

In her 1991 bestseller, *Backlash: The Undeclared War against American Women*, feminist journalist Susan Faludi argued that during the 1980s, antifeminists had mobilized to dismantle the accomplishments of second-wave feminists. In part, Faludi attributed the responsibility for “backlash” against feminism to sexist and profit-hungry beauty industry leaders. Faludi explained that beauty marketers had always “aggravat[ed] women’s low self-esteem and high anxiety about a ‘feminine’ appearance” in order to keep the profits rolling in. According to Faludi, second-wave feminists had challenged beauty marketers’ profit “formula” by critiquing normative beauty culture and encouraging women to reject marketers’ standards of beauty. Striking back, 1980s beauty marketers engineered “a return to femininity,” promoting especially artificial and unattainable beauty standards. Faludi suggested that, by ceaselessly idealizing

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<sup>1</sup> Naomi Wolf, *The Beauty Myth: How Images of Beauty are Used against Women* (New York: William Morrow and Co., Inc., 1991), 274.

“feminine” beauty, marketers undermined women’s confidence and drove them to adopt increasingly disempowering (and expensive) habits.<sup>2</sup>

Faludi’s contention that beauty culture was a site of antifeminist backlash—virtually the same argument advanced by feminist author Naomi Wolf the same year in *The Beauty Myth*—resonated with many women at the beginning of the nineties. This notion of “beauty backlash” captured both the growing power of beauty marketers and the disempowerment of female consumers within nineties beauty culture. At the onset of the 1990s, beauty was a lucrative business. The diet industry was generating \$33 billion annually, the cosmetics industry \$20 billion, and the cosmetic surgery industry \$300 million.<sup>3</sup> American women faced mounting pressures to meet unrealistic standards of beauty, and some turned to dramatic and dangerous means in an attempt to do so. In 1989 alone doctors had diagnosed 10,000 bulimia cases and 11,000 anorexia cases, and ninety to ninety-five percent of the individuals who suffered from eating disorders were female.<sup>4</sup> African American women not only continued to straighten their hair, they also lightened the color of their skin, despite studies that linked skin bleaches to skin cancer.<sup>5</sup> Over the previous thirty years, an estimated 1.3 million American women had had “cosmetic” breast augmentations, and the numbers of women seeking cosmetic surgery were increasing rapidly.<sup>6</sup> Women did not make these choices in a vacuum. Marketers

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<sup>2</sup> Susan Faludi, *Backlash: The Undeclared War against American Women* (New York: Crown Publishers, 1991), 199, 201-202.

<sup>3</sup> Naomi Wolf, *The Beauty Myth: How Images of Beauty are Used against Women* (New York: William Morrow and Co., 1991), 17.

<sup>4</sup> Dixie Farley, “Eating Disorders Require Medical Attention,” *FDA Consumer* 26 no. 2 (March 1992): 27.

<sup>5</sup> Warren Leary, “Mislabeling and Health Risks Tied to Skin Lightener Creams,” *New York Times*, 26 February 1992, C13.

<sup>6</sup> For a careful discussion of the risks of breast augmentation, with attention given to a number of women who attribute autoimmune-related illness to implants, see Susan Zimmerman, *Silicone Survivors: Women’s Experiences with Breast Implants* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1998). Controversies over silicone implants led the FDA to ban these implants in favor of saline-filled implants, (making an exception

were advertising bleaches, cosmetic surgery procedures, and dangerous diet drugs on television, in newspapers, and especially in women's magazines.<sup>7</sup> And despite decades of feminist protest against sexist and racist beauty standards, women were still advised to view their appearance as their primary means of empowerment and self-expression.

Nineties feminists agreed that beauty culture demanded an ongoing feminist critique; yet, past experience had shown that beauty culture was a particularly difficult system to change, especially during a period of intense antifeminist backlash. Critics continued to label feminists as “bra-burners,” suggesting they were radically opposed to the appreciation of beauty by any standards because they were themselves “ugly.”<sup>8</sup> As we shall see, this backlash played a significant role in shaping and limiting feminist debate in the 1990s. In addition to external opposition, feminists experienced internal ideological differences similar to those faced by their predecessors in the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s. Nineties feminists strived—and frequently failed—to unite women who experienced oppression from beauty culture in very different ways.<sup>9</sup> White, middle-class feminists

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for “reconstructive” surgery—i.e. women who have lost a breast to cancer) in the early 1990s. The danger of silicone implants is still hotly disputed. Of course, whether or not autoimmune disorders are related to implants, a high percentage of women who have undergone breast augmentation (either saline or silicone) have experienced capsular contracture, a painful hardening of the breast around the implant. Dean Arden Field and Sandra Miller, “Cosmetic Breast Surgery,” *American Family Physician* 45, no. 2 (February 1992): 711.

<sup>7</sup> In 1989 alone, women's magazines had made \$650 million on “toiletries/cosmetics” advertisements. Wolf, *The Beauty Myth*, 65. Deborah Sullivan, *Cosmetic Surgery: The Cutting Edge of Commercial Medicine in America* (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2001), 140-144.

<sup>8</sup> For a very recent example of this type of derogatory critique, see Linda Scott's “pointed attack on feminism's requisite style of dress,” *Fresh Lipstick*. Scott comments, “Today feminist writers angrily dismiss such ‘ugly feminist’ images as a fabrication of the patriarchy. This position, however, is not honest. For better or worse, the leaders of the women's movement have often been plain and prudish. Many were active in initiatives designed to control the behaviors of others. Failing to acknowledge these facts only makes feminism look defensive, insensitive, and hypocritical.” Linda Scott, *Fresh Lipstick: Redressing Fashion and Feminism* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2005), front flap, 86.

<sup>9</sup> Many white, middle-class feminists, including both Susan Faludi and Naomi Wolf, repeated previous feminists' mistakes by ignoring the importance of race and class when they talked about “women's” experiences with beauty culture. Faludi's definition of “women” tended to be white and well-to-do women. Her discussion of the impositions of beauty culture, for instance, focused largely on the experiences of wealthy women. By focusing on topics such as the latest runway fashions and the growing prevalence of

continued to marginalize women of color and poor women. Liberal and radical feminists disagreed as to whether it was best to reform and adapt to beauty culture, or challenge and reconstruct it entirely. However, nineties feminists agreed with one another and earlier feminists that, in its current form, beauty culture was the source for sexist, racist, and heterosexist oppression. Like earlier feminists, nineties feminists agreed that women exercised “choices” within beauty culture, and that women who made unconventional choices were “punished” (or at least criticized) for nonconformity. And like earlier feminists, nineties feminists approached beauty culture as a personal *and* a political problem, but also as a potential resource for political resistance.

### **Third-Wave Feminism**

In the early 1990s, members of Generation X responded to antifeminist backlash by calling for a “third wave” of feminism, in which activists born after the protests of the 1960s would unite to revitalize the women’s movement.<sup>10</sup> The young women and men who identified themselves as third-wave feminists worked to dispute the conservative contention that the nineties marked a “postfeminist” era, when feminism was no longer necessary. Third-wavers’ efforts to create a distinct social movement based on generational and feminist politics did not meet with wholehearted support, even within the feminist community. Some second-wave feminists disagreed that feminism required

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cosmetic surgery, Faludi prioritized the beauty concerns of elite women. On the other hand, she did not discuss topics that illuminated backlash against women of color or working class women, such as the struggle throughout the 1980s by African American women for the right to wear “ethnic” hairstyles to work. There were numerous lawsuits during the 1980s over the rights of African American women to wear braids to work and school. See Ayana Byrd, *Hair Story: Untangling the Roots of Black Hair in America* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2001), 105. For a discussion of Wolf and race, see below.

<sup>10</sup> Feminist Naomi Wolf used this term to propose solutions to *The Beauty Myth* in 1991. Third-wave feminists began to distinguish themselves publicly from other feminists in the early 1990s, when Rebecca Walker (daughter of feminist author Alice Walker) founded The Third Wave Foundation (1992) to encourage political activism in women between the ages of fifteen and thirty, beginning with the organization of a voter-registration drive. For the purposes of this project, I identify feminists as participants in the third-wave if they themselves do so. Wolf, *The Beauty Myth*, 274.

revitalization or redirection, or they worried that third-wave feminists were taking for granted the struggles of the previous three decades.<sup>11</sup> Many feminists, both young and old, pointed to problems caused by categorization of feminists based on their ages.<sup>12</sup> Lisa Jervis, cofounder and publisher of *Bitch* magazine, described the “waves” as “an illusion,” and argued that generational labels were “divisive and oppositional,” because they led observers to focus on the differences between feminists, rather than their shared values and priorities. Jervis explained that, while she was born “in 1972, right smack in the demographic that people think about when they think about the third wave,” she did not believe that her age could adequately predict her politics. Rather than identifying herself as “second” or “third” wave, Jervis, like many activists, focused on her identity as a *feminist*.<sup>13</sup>

The feminists who did identify as “third wavers” argued that, in the 1990s, the women’s movement had entered a new stage. Third wavers asserted that, because they lived in a supposedly “postfeminist” era, they experienced oppression differently than feminists had three decades earlier. Their options and preferences for resistance had changed over time to fit their unique experiences. According to historian Sara Evans, this generation “grew up believing they could do anything”; however, they also “came of age

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<sup>11</sup> Sara Evans, *Tidal Wave: How Women Changed America at Century’s End* (New York: The Free Press, 2003), 231.

<sup>12</sup> Leandra Ruth Zarnow, “From Sisterhood to Girlie Culture: Closing the Great Divide Between the Second and Third Wave Cultural Agenda,” (paper presented at the 13<sup>th</sup> Berkshire Conference on the History of Women, *Sin Fronteras: Women’s Histories, Global Conversations*, Claremont, California, June 5, 2005).

<sup>13</sup> Jervis’s criticisms reflect real problems feminists encountered when they attempted to generalize about feminist identities. She summarized the stereotypical generalizations made by critics of both waves: “Older women drained their movement of sexuality; younger women are uncritically sexualized. Older women won’t recognize the importance of pop culture; younger women are obsessed with media representation. Older women have too narrow a definition of what makes a feminist issue; younger women are scattered and don’t know what’s important.” Jervis argued that all of these generalizations were inaccurate, yet they hampered feminist activism and limited intergenerational cooperation. Lisa Jervis, “The End of Feminism’s Third Wave,” *Ms.* (winter 2004), <http://www.msomagazine.com/winter2004/thirdwave.asp> [accessed January 21, 2005].



when feminism was visible primarily as a stereotype.”<sup>14</sup> Historian Catherine Orr concurred, explaining that, because they grew up with both the advantages won by second-wave feminists and the stigma that has plagued self-identified feminists, third-wavers experienced and articulated feminism differently than their foremothers.<sup>15</sup>

Widespread antifeminist backlash hampered feminist debate over beauty culture in the 1990s. For example, self-identified “feminist” Karen Lehrman insisted that “orthodox” feminists were out-of-touch with “real” women, charging: “contemporary feminist theory is in desperate need of being updated for the real world.”<sup>16</sup> Lehrman, a writer for *The New Republic*, argued that feminist tracts such as *The Beauty Myth* ignored women’s “autonomy” and perpetuated “the idea of women as victims” by focusing on the sexism of beauty culture.<sup>17</sup> In her own work, Lehrman castigated “naysaying feminist theorists” who viewed beauty as “a myth, an arbitrary cultural convention, an ideological fabrication.”<sup>18</sup> She suggested that, by critiquing normative beauty standards, Naomi Wolf, Susan Bordo, and other “orthodox” feminists discouraged individual women from taking responsibility for their own bodies and their own behavior. Lehrman insisted that feminist criticism of beauty culture served as “pseudo-paternalism,” allowing women to “excuse” everything from overeating to anorexia to feelings of inadequacy about their appearance. She suggested that individual women were better off if they personally reckoned with beauty culture than if they collectively critiqued that culture. According to

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<sup>14</sup> Evans, *Tidal Wave*, 230.

<sup>15</sup> Catherine Orr, “Charting the Currents of the Third Wave,” *Hypatia* 12 (summer 1997): 42.

<sup>16</sup> Karen Lehrman, *The Lipstick Proviso: Women, Sex, and Power in the Real World* (New York: Doubleday, 1997), 3.

<sup>17</sup> Lehrman, *The New Republic* 205, no. 1 (July 1, 1991): 43.

<sup>18</sup> Lehrman, *The Lipstick Proviso*, 68.

Lehrman, “You could argue that it is far more of a feminist act to take care of your health than to, say, go to a political rally.”<sup>19</sup>

Lehrman based her perception of the feminist critique of normative beauty standards entirely on antifeminist stereotypes. For example, she claimed that feminists hoped to impose “shapeless androgynous clothing—or equally desexualized earth mother attire” on all women.<sup>20</sup> She also charged feminists with “trying to stop women from wanting to be beautiful.”<sup>21</sup> Lehrman characterized feminist critiques of a sexist beauty cultural system as a patronizing assault on women’s “autonomy.” While a small number of feminists had expected women to demonstrate their feminism through rejection of normative beauty standards, most feminists (such as Naomi Wolf and Susan Bordo, for instance) critiqued the sexism of the beauty cultural system and defended individual women’s choices within that system. Ironically, Lehrman repeated the rhetoric and ideology of “naysaying feminist theorists” when she described beauty cultural practices such as cosmetic surgery, tanning, and eating disorders as “harmful.”<sup>22</sup>

By rewriting history to portray feminists as rigid, antibeauty harridans, antifeminist “feminists” such as Lehrman made it very difficult for third-wave feminists to embrace and extend their predecessors’ critique of beauty culture. Given the virulence of the attack on feminists in the 1990s, third-wave feminists shaped their agenda on beauty culture to respond to and refute antifeminism. Because they had grown up hearing antifeminists and some feminists themselves assert that the movement was “antibeauty,” third-wave feminists confidently described themselves as more flexible than second-wave

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid, 77, 90.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid, 92–93.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid, 82.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid, 82, 92–93.

feminists; they promised to challenge the sexism of normative beauty standards *and* protect women's right to adhere to those standards.<sup>23</sup> Rebecca Walker's third-wave anthology, *To Be Real: Telling the Truth and Changing the Face of Feminism* (1995), set out to overthrow the "strictly defined and all-encompassing" understanding of acceptable feminist behavior she believed plagued individual feminists.<sup>24</sup> Walker promised that her generation would "debunk the stereotype that there is one lifestyle or manifestation of feminist empowerment, and instead offer self-possession, self-determination, and an endless array of non-dichotomous possibilities."<sup>25</sup> The contributors to the anthology ambitiously (even idealistically) set out to collectively protest the inequalities perpetuated by beauty culture without critiquing the women who found empowerment or enjoyment within beauty culture as it was currently constructed.

Self-identified third-wave feminists often implied that they were better equipped to handle the sexism of beauty culture because second-wave feminists had educated their generation about sexism. In *Manifesta: Young Women, Feminism, and the Future*, Jennifer Baumgardner and Amy Richards asserted, "objectification is no longer our biggest problem" (implying that earlier feminists *had* viewed objectification as their "biggest problem"), and explained that, among media-savvy members of their own generation, "consciousness of sexist imagery has changed for the better." They agreed that their generation still needed to challenge normative beauty culture; however, they hinted that their activism would be significantly different than earlier feminists', because

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<sup>23</sup> Jennifer Baumgardner and Amy Richards, *Manifesta: Young Women, Feminism, and the Future* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2000), 192; Leslie Heywood and Jennifer Drake, *Third Wave Agenda: Being Feminist, Doing Feminism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 52; Jeannine De Lombard, "femmenism," Naomi Wolf, "Brideland," and interview with Veronica Webb, "How Does a Supermodel Do Feminism?" in *To Be Real: Telling the Truth and Changing the Face of Feminism* (New York: Anchor Books, 1995).

<sup>24</sup> Rebecca Walker, *To Be Real*, xxxi.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, xxxiv.

they had learned about feminist critiques of beauty culture at a formative young age.

While Baumgardner and Richards did not suggest that beauty culture, especially in the hands of beauty marketers, had become less oppressive, they implied that women's ability to negotiate within that culture was improved by the empowered women they had as role models.

Third-wave feminists described certain types of participation in beauty culture as empowering, as long as that participation was by choice, and as long as these aesthetic choices were paired with feminist politics. Many third-wave feminists described their own engagement with normative beauty culture as a subversive, or at least an ironic, political statement.<sup>26</sup> Baumgardner and Richards argued that second-wave feminists had created a more gender "conscious" society, permitting more women to *choose* whether to conform to normative beauty standards and make a feminist statement simply by exercising this choice. Baumgardner and Richards pointed to Madonna, Roseanne, Missy Elliott, and "soccer pinup" Brandi Chastain as examples of women who "parlayed their sexual selves into power in feminist ways. These women aren't exploited."<sup>27</sup> Because these female icons were playing with conventional notions of beauty—alternately conforming to normative standards and defying those standards—Baumgardner and Richards argued that these "conscious" women were not "exploited" by beauty culture.

### **Girlie Feminists**

"Girlie" feminists—a distinct group of young feminists who emerged during the 1990s—enthusiastically defined beauty culture as an empowering system for individual women. Unfortunately, their perceptions of earlier feminist critiques of normative beauty

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<sup>26</sup> Jan Breslauer, "Stacked Like Me," *Playboy* 44 (July 1997): 64–68; Jeannine DeLombard, "Femmenism," 26–30.

<sup>27</sup> Baumgardner and Richards, *Manifesta*, 102–103.

culture were shaped by antifeminist backlash. Debbie Stoller (the girlie feminist introduced in chapter one) acknowledged that previous generations of women had faced oppressive social pressures to look and act “feminine.” However, she credited second-wave feminists with securing her own generation’s beauty freedom: “We had what no other generation of women before us did: a choice. And we intended to keep it.”<sup>28</sup> Stoller and Marcelle Karp, co-founders and editors of the girlie feminist magazine *Bust*, argued that male-dominated society objectified women’s bodies “only if the girls let them.”<sup>29</sup> Clearly, girlie feminists were skeptical of the need for collective feminist action to critique normative beauty standards. Stoller and Karp’s comments smacked of postfeminist rhetoric. They suggested that, at least when it came to beauty culture, women were free to conform to existing norms or reject those norms, and they downplayed the consequences for nonconformity. Girlies still saw the need for feminism; however, they did not set out to challenge the *sexism* of the beauty cultural system. Instead, they saw their primary objective as preserving women’s right to participate in beauty culture however they chose.

Debbie Stoller viewed beauty culture as the locus of third-wave feminist activism. She explained that third wavers were using their bodies and their appearances to express feminist power, employing fashionable clothes and makeup as “armor.”<sup>30</sup> According to Stoller, feminists donned their “armor” first to preserve and celebrate the female-centric nature of beauty culture, and only secondarily to object to the ways this culture disempowered women. She encouraged young women to reclaim “traditionally girlie”

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<sup>28</sup> Debbie Stoller and Marcelle Karp, eds., *The Bust Guide to the New Girl Order* (New York: Penguin Books, 1999), 44.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 45.

rituals and objects—including “ultrafemmy fashion”—that, she argued, had been “marginalized” in recent decades.<sup>31</sup> Stoller suggested that, while mainstream culture was partly responsible for this devaluation, second-wave feminists were also to blame. Where aesthetics were concerned, Stoller argued that second-wave feminists were guilty of adopting a male standard, commenting, “It was the unspoken understanding [among feminists] that no woman could expect to be taken seriously unless she dressed like a man.” According to Stoller, the challenge for girlie feminists was to carve out a space for women to enjoy beauty culture, without necessarily adopting marketers’ interpretation of what beauty culture should mean. Stoller imbued women’s participation in normative beauty culture with subversive potential, explaining, “Every item in our wardrobes was chosen to convey our unwillingness to conform to traditional ideas about gender and sexuality.”<sup>32</sup>

Girlie feminists adapted beauty culture to their own political purposes, arguing that as a female-centric tradition, beautification allowed women to express distinctively *female* values and power. Jennifer Baumgardner and Amy Richards defined girlie feminism as “feminism for a culture-driven generation.”<sup>33</sup> By celebrating and politicizing beauty culture, girlies focused on an issue that could be particularly fun for girls and women who had grown up reading and criticizing mainstream women’s magazines. After Stoller and Karp introduced *Bust* magazine in 1993, it soon became the most widely circulated magazine among girlies. In many ways, its format and content resembled mainstream women’s magazines. *Bust* regularly advised readers on ways to

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<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 46.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 44–46.

<sup>33</sup> Baumgardner and Richards, *Manifesta*, 180.

“play” with beauty culture (alternative music and art, sex advice, and do-it-yourself crafts were other featured topics).<sup>34</sup>

Girlies tried to reinvent and popularize feminism in the face of antifeminist backlash, to make it something that would appeal to the average fifteen-year-old American girl.<sup>35</sup> They argued that feminism needed to be repackaged to make it more palatable to the aesthetic tastes of a media-saturated Generation X. While observers might reasonably question the effectiveness of using your “wardrobe” to battle sexism, girlies offered the movement a way to compete with conservative critics who characterized the movement as “antibeauty.” Unfortunately, in their efforts to make feminism and their magazine more popular, the editors of *Bust* tended narrow their vision of female empowerment to focus primarily on white, middle-class, heterosexual women’s interests. For example, by emphasizing the pleasure that could be derived from “playing” with normative beauty standards, Stoller and Karp assumed that their readers had access to a “wardrobe” that offered them aesthetic pleasure.

Girlie feminism did little to counter antifeminist backlash or the growing disempowerment many women experienced within beauty culture. Stoller’s discussion of second-wave feminists reinforced antifeminist stereotypes of “mannish” feminists. And like beauty marketers who promised that cosmetics and diets “liberated” consumers, Stoller was vague about how or why “ultrafemmy” appearances empowered women. Finally, Stoller and other girlies encouraged women to enjoy beauty culture without

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<sup>34</sup> For example, see *Bust* magazine, or the articles in Stoller and Karp, *The Bust Guide to the New Girl Order*.

<sup>35</sup> Girlies argued that the movement needs reinvigoration, and they suggest that a new aesthetic approach is an important part of responding to backlash. For example, Stoller and Karp credited cultural icons like Madonna and Courtney Love with reinvigorating a feminist movement that had quagmired in women’s studies departments, which they accused of teaching college coeds that “being fashionable and feminist was a conflict of interest” Stoller and Karp, *The Bust Guide to the New Girl Order*, 44.

devoting enough attention to the ways that culture disempowered the women within it. In the process of “celebrating” girlie culture and defending women’s right to choose how to participate within beauty culture, Stoller and girlies inadvertently defended the sexist, racist, and classist beauty cultural system itself.

Stoller and her sister girlie feminists faced considerable criticism from within and outside the movement for their uncritical celebration of normative beauty culture. Antifeminists have castigated all younger feminists, but girlies in particular, as “narcissistic.” In a 1998 *Time* magazine article, Ginia Bellafante quipped: “Want to know what today’s chic young feminist thinkers care about? Their bodies! Themselves!” Bellafante specifically pointed to Stoller’s *Bust* magazine as an example of the “adolescent” turn she believed feminism had taken in the 1990s.<sup>36</sup> Feminists, on the other hand, expressed appreciation for girlie feminists’ intentions, but disagreed with at least some of their tactics. Third-wave feminists worried that girlie feminists were permitting their movement to be co-opted by beauty marketers. While girlies claimed to be using popular culture and beauty culture for empowerment, observers wondered whether the girlies were themselves being used—by marketers seeking to imprint beauty products with a “progressive” image, for example.<sup>37</sup> Jennifer Baumgardner and Amy Richards agreed that beauty culture could be empowering for some women, but they cautioned girlie feminists not to allow their emphasis on the material—consumer culture, the media, and physical beauty—to distract them from articulating a political message. In their

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<sup>36</sup> Of course, Bellafante acknowledged that *Bust* deliberately appealed to a young audience. It is ironic that Bellafante would critique the magazine’s “immaturity,” given the age range of its intended audience. Ginia Bellafante, “Feminism: It’s All about Me!” *Time* (June 29, 1998): 54–62.

<sup>37</sup> Stoller and Karp, *The Bust Guide to the New Girl Order*, 272.



words: “without a body of politics, the nail polish is really going to waste.”<sup>38</sup> Certainly, it is difficult to identify a “body of politics” motivating girlie aesthetic choices, since they have ardently defended *all* aesthetic choices as consistent with individual expression and feminist activism.<sup>39</sup>

### **The Challenges of Critiquing Beauty Culture in the 1990s**

As in previous decades, most nineties feminists strived to acknowledge female agency within beauty culture without minimizing the real oppressions that culture imposed on women. Unlike the girlies, most feminists argued that beauty culture had gotten *more* oppressive since the 1960s, and they concentrated on analyzing and changing beauty culture rather than uncritically celebrating it. Naomi Wolf and Susan Faludi described the 1980s and 1990s as a time of “beauty backlash” and pointed to the booming cosmetic surgery industry and the rise of eating disorders as evidence of female disempowerment. Third-wave anthologies described anorexia, racist beauty standards, and fat oppression as significant impediments to female power.<sup>40</sup> Third-wave feminist Ophira Edut edited *Adiós Barbie: Young Women Write about Body Image and Identity*, an anthology devoted entirely to beauty cultural issues. Many feminists agreed with Edut when she described anxieties about body size as “a national crisis among young women.”<sup>41</sup>

Nineties feminists adopted many of the techniques of their predecessors to respond to this beauty cultural “crisis.” Like radical feminists of the early 1970s, some

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<sup>38</sup> Baumgardner and Richards, *Manifesta*, 166.

<sup>39</sup> For example, Marcelle Karp has asserted that “breasts empower us,” and suggested that the choice to get breast augmentations, for instance, is not inconsistent with feminism. Stoller and Karp, *The Bust Guide to the New Girl Order*, 3.

<sup>40</sup> See Barbara Findlen, *Listen Up: Voices from the Next Feminist Generation* (Seattle: Seal Press, 1995).

<sup>41</sup> Ophira Edut, *Adiós Barbie: Young Women Write about Body Image and Identity* (Seattle: Seal Press, 1998), xix-xx.

third-wave feminists critiqued normative beauty culture through their own aesthetic choices, demonstrating their personal scorn for normative beauty standards with their bodies. Girlies wore “ultrafemmy” clothing and hairstyles to defy the stereotype that all feminists conformed to a male standard. Nomy Lamm, a third-wave feminist campaigning against fat oppression, insisted, “by being a totally unabashed fat freaky diva, I am ‘subverting the dominant paradigm,’ as the college activists say.”<sup>42</sup> In addition to writing about normative beauty standards for feminist anthologies and magazines, Lamm spoke to audiences across the country to encourage women to love their bodies, whatever their size.<sup>43</sup> In feminist anthologies, third-wavers described shaving their heads, recovering from anorexia, or wearing boots as powerful “feminist” acts.<sup>44</sup> Not only did many of these “personal” decisions permit activists to visually reject normative beauty standards, but by writing about them in the context of a feminist anthology, feminists were able to offer encouragement to a broader audience of readers struggling with beauty culture, as well.

In addition to writing and speaking out against the sexism of the beauty cultural system, feminists have organized to collectively protest sexist beauty standards. Since 1998, NOW has sponsored a “Love Your Body Day,” meant to challenge “advertisers, Hollywood and the fashion, cosmetics and diet industries,” which they accuse of “working very hard to make us believe that no parts of our bodies are acceptable.”<sup>45</sup> They encouraged women to organize international “No-Diet Day” actions, boycott

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<sup>42</sup> Nomy Lamm, “Fishnets, Feather Boas, and Fat,” in *Adios, Barbie: Young Women Write about Body Image and Identity*, ed. Ophira Edut (Seattle: Seal Press, 1998).

<sup>43</sup> Nomy Lamm, <http://www.nomylamm.com/> [accessed May 3, 2005].

<sup>44</sup> See Anastasia Higginbotham, “Chicks Goin’ at It,” Abra Fortune Chernik, “The Body Politic,” and Jennifer Reid Maxcy Myhre, “One Bad Hair Day Too Many, or the Hairstory of an Androgynous Young Feminist,” all in *Listen Up*, ed. Findlen.

<sup>45</sup> NOW’s Love Your Body Day website, <http://www.nowfoundation.org/health/lybdkit/index.html> [accessed November 18, 2004].

advertisers that degrade or objectify women, and picket beauty pageants. They also proposed that women “throw away or burn the following items: bathroom scales, diet books, tapes or videos, calorie counters, tape measurers, make-up, high heels, one-size-fits-all clothing, [and] advertizing (sic) that objectifies women.”<sup>46</sup> Other feminist groups developed website and poster campaigns calling attention to the standardization and objectification of women’s bodies in advertisements. About-Face and FemmeRevolution are two examples of the growing interest in female beauty standards. These web groups targeted advertisements that present women as emaciated, drugged-out, victims of violence, sexually or physically vulnerable, or as mere body parts, without humanity. Furthermore, they critiqued advertisers for their exoticization or marginalization of women of color.<sup>47</sup> In other words, the issues and tactics of 1990s feminists distinctly resembled the activism of the second wave.

Third-wave feminists viewed the theories and the tactics of second-wave feminists as their model. They worried, however, that they would repeat the mistakes of second-wave feminists when they critiqued normative beauty standards. Specifically, they believed that many second-wave feminists, especially white, heterosexual, middle-class feminists, had failed to pay enough attention to race, class, and sexuality when generalizing about “women’s” experiences with beauty culture. They also agreed that, while second-wave feminists had worked to offer women a more “natural,” inclusive standard of beauty, they had created and evaluated themselves by a new set of standards. Some activists within the movement (and *many* critics outside the movement) had

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<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

<sup>47</sup> See [www.about-face.org](http://www.about-face.org) and <http://femmerevolution.8m.com/> for About Face and Femme Revolution websites [accessed November 18, 2004].

expected “true” feminists to adopt androgynous styles, refuse to purchase beauty products, and rebel against normative beauty standards.

Third-wavers’ critiques of second-wave feminists for their approach to beauty culture provoked considerable tensions between the generations. Second-wave feminists did not necessarily appreciate third-wave criticisms about their approach to beauty. While chapter one illustrates that many feminists *did* make these mistakes, third-wave feminists—who had grown up during an era when antifeminist stereotypes proliferated in the media—sometimes sounded like antifeminists, especially when they accused the second-wave of limiting women’s choices and imposing a “mannish” style on women.<sup>48</sup> Cathryn Bailey, a women’s studies and philosophy professor, explained, “antifeminist stereotypes not only influence those hostile to feminism but may also work insidiously on feminists, especially developing feminists.”<sup>49</sup> Given the prevalence of antifeminist hostility toward any feminists who dared to challenge normative beauty standards, many feminists were disturbed by third-wave feminists’ critiques, suggesting that they merely reinforced antifeminist stereotypes.<sup>50</sup> Bailey defended third-wavers, arguing that the movement required ongoing feminist evaluation and explication, especially if it was going to appeal to young women and men who had grown up with antifeminist rhetoric. However, she urged third-wave feminists to study feminist history, credit second-wave activists for their accomplishments, and to acknowledge the ways antifeminism had shaped their own perceptions of feminism.<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> Stoller’s criticisms of second-wave feminists sounded very similar to an antifeminist attack. Stoller and Karp, *The Bust Guide to the New Girl Order*, 44.

<sup>49</sup> Cathryn Bailey, “Making Waves and Drawing Lines: The Politics of Defining the Vicissitudes of Feminism,” *Hypatia* 12 no. 3 (summer 1997), 17.

<sup>50</sup> Jervis, “The End of Feminism’s Third Wave.”

<sup>51</sup> Bailey, “Making Waves and Drawing Lines.”

Third-wave feminists made engagement with beauty culture a significant part of their agenda. The editors of *Third Wave Agenda* (the first book-length academic analysis of third-wave feminism), third-wave feminists Jennifer Drake and Leslie Heywood, argued that the politics of the nineties were chiefly about representation, not “reality.” And the best way to challenge representation, in their eyes, was to challenge the mass media. “Since we understand the ‘real’ as an effect of representation and understand that representational effects play out in material spaces and in material ways, we take critical engagement with popular culture as a key to political struggle.”<sup>52</sup> Catherine Orr explained that, for third-wave feminists, “an embrace of popular culture is tantamount to a kind of populism.” According to Orr, third-wave feminists viewed the academy as the locus of feminist activism in the 1980s and 1990s, but also as elitist and inflexible. As third wavers, they turned to popular culture as a more engaging and accessible venue for critiquing patriarchy. Drake and Heywood admitted, “we’re pop-culture babies, we want some pleasure with our critical analysis.”<sup>53</sup> Finally, they suggested that popular culture provided a comfortable site for protest for a group of feminists who could not articulate a shared utopian vision. They described their movement as fractious and complex, and believed that critiques of the cultural world offered at least the illusion of a shared party line.<sup>54</sup>

Third-wave feminists have worried that their emphasis on sexism within popular culture seems trivial compared to other activist agendas. Third wavers were particularly concerned that other feminists would not understand the necessity of defending (or, in the case of the girlies, celebrating) women’s personal choices within beauty culture. In part,

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<sup>52</sup> Heywood and Drake, *Third Wave Agenda*, 51.

<sup>53</sup> Orr, “Charting the Currents of the Third Wave,” 41; Heywood and Drake, *Third Wave Agenda*, 51.

<sup>54</sup> Heywood and Drake, *Third Wave Agenda*, 52.

these anxieties were spurred by criticisms that third-wave feminists faced from antifeminist critics such as Ginia Bellafante, who charged all nineties feminists with ignoring “the complicated, often mundane issues of modern life” (she specifically mentioned the glass-ceiling) in favor of “the culture of celebrity and self-obsession.”<sup>55</sup> Whereas second-wave feminists had to defend the relevance of their activism to hostile New Left men, third-wave feminists expressed a sense of pressure to “measure up” to what they understood to be the standards of their second-wave foremothers. Third-wave feminists have ardently defended tactics “that don’t look ‘activist’ enough to second wave feminists . . . . [E]xploring different activist practices doesn’t mean we’re not feminists.”<sup>56</sup>

Throughout the 1990s, third-wave feminists justified their pop-culture emphasis by relying on the expanding realm of feminist cultural theory developed by philosophers such as Susan Bordo and bell hooks.<sup>57</sup> These theorists have argued that culture is perhaps *the* fundamental building block for sexism and racism, and any attempt to effect political change will require a confrontation with culture first. Both Bordo and hooks turned to the politics of appearance in their critiques of racism and sexism. Bordo’s analysis in works such as *Unbearable Weight* boils down to one overriding concern with beauty culture: she is worried that this culture has created a Foucaultian regime of self-discipline, where women constantly discipline their bodies in an effort to adhere to norms of whiteness, wealth, and sexual propriety. Her work connects eating disorders, cosmetic

<sup>55</sup> Ginia Bellafante, “Feminism: It’s All about Me!” *Time* (June 29, 1998): 57.

<sup>56</sup> Heywood and Drake, *Third Wave Agenda*, 1997, 4.

<sup>57</sup> Other theorists who have influenced third-wave feminist beauty philosophy include Iris Young, “Women Recovering Our Clothes” and “Breasted Experience: The Look and the Feeling” in *Throwing like a Girl and Other Essays in Feminist Philosophy and Social Theory* (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1990); Kathy Davis, “Remaking the She-Devil: A Critical Look at Feminist Approaches to Beauty,” *Hypatia* 6 no. 2 (1991): 21–43; and Sandra Lee Bartky, “Narcissism, Femininity, and Alienation,” *Social Theory and Practice* 8 no. 2 (1982): 127–144.

surgery, and skin bleaching to a patriarchal culture that makes the female body into a battleground, the site of contestation between the female self and a misogynistic culture.<sup>58</sup>

Hooks called on feminists to explore the connection between aesthetics and materialism. She chastised “progressive feminist thinkers” who “critique the dangers of excessive materialism without discussing in a concrete way how we can balance a desire for beauty or luxury within an anticapitalist, antisexist agenda.”<sup>59</sup> Hooks argued that the movement had long been trapped by a futile argument between radical feminists who equated “living simply . . . with a vulgar antimaterialism or antiaestheticism that privileged living without attention to beauty, to decoration, either of one’s person or one’s space” and the unlimited “materialism” championed by some liberal feminists who encouraged women to beat capitalist men at their own game.<sup>60</sup> Ultimately, hooks insisted it was possible for feminists to fulfill their “passion” for beauty and luxury without reinforcing “structures of domination.”<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> Bordo, *Unbearable Weight* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993).

<sup>59</sup> bell hooks, “Beauty Laid Bare: Aesthetics in the Ordinary,” in *To Be Real: Telling the Truth and Changing the Face of Feminism*, ed. Rebecca Walker (New York: Anchor Books, 1995), 162.

<sup>60</sup> She specifically referenced Naomi Wolf. Wolf described “the new female power and how to use it” in her book *Fire with Fire*. Wolf encouraged women to reject “victim feminism” in favor of “power feminism,” by embracing the electoral process, the mass media, and the acquisition of money. hooks, “Beauty Laid Bare,” 162-163. Wolf, *The Beauty Myth*. Naomi Wolf, *Fire with Fire: The New Female Power and How it Will Change the 21st Century* (New York: Random House, 1993). Wolf’s “power feminism” quickly became a hot topic of debate among third-wave feminists. Nan Bauer Maglin and Donna Perry compiled a book of critical essays meant to explore and expose the binary that Wolf set up in *Fire with Fire*. “Bad Girls”/“Good Girls”: *Women, Sex, and Power in the Nineties* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1994) is a collection of essays meant as a “true” feminist response to Wolf, Camille Paglia, and Katie Roiphe, three influential self-identified feminists who Maglin and Perry characterize as postfeminist detractors. Third-wave feminists Leslie Heywood and Jennifer Drake critiqued “postfeminists” for neglecting the very real social structures that made it necessary for feminists to work together. They argued that, unlike “postfeminist” detractors, third-wave feminists understood a collective critique of normative beauty standards as a priority for the women’s movement. Heywood and Drake, *Third Wave Agenda*, 1-3. Also see the “Special Issue: Third Wave Feminisms,” *Hypatia* 12 no. 3 (summer 1997); Alyson Cole, “‘There Are No Victims In This Class’: On Female Suffering and Anti-‘Victim Feminism,’” *NWSA Journal* 11 (spring 1999): 72.

<sup>61</sup> hooks, “Beauty Laid Bare,” 163.

Naomi Wolf, the author of *The Beauty Myth*, faced due criticism from hooks and many other feminists for reinforcing structures of domination through her uncritical acceptance of class and racial privilege. Wolf's popular tract connected beauty culture to antifeminist backlash, describing coercive beauty standards as patriarchy's replacement for the feminine mystique. Her objection was not to the desire to look beautiful, but rather to the standardization of beauty and the lack of *choice* she felt women had regarding beauty culture. Wolf implied that while individual women must choose to reduce the importance they placed on their own appearance, feminist protest of sexist beauty marketing and "lookism" in the work world (which Wolf described as "professional beauty qualifications" required solely of female employees) was essential for change as well. Wolf failed to adequately incorporate race or class into her analysis of beauty; for example, she spent a disproportionate amount of time on cosmetic surgery, a beauty tool out of most working-class women's financial reach, and offered almost no discussion of the racial implications of hair straightening, skin bleaching, or the exoticization of nonwhite women.<sup>62</sup> Wolf's exclusive focus on white, middle-class beauty cultural issues disappointed many third-wave feminists. For example, Veronica Chambers, an African American womanist writing in an anthology of third-wave

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<sup>62</sup> Unfortunately, cosmetic surgery has become more common among African American women since Naomi Wolf first published *The Beauty Myth*. African American women turning to surgery tend to do so in order to reduce their body size. The top three procedures, as of 2004, were tummy tucks, breast reductions, and liposuction. Caucasians, on the other hand, more frequently have nose reshaping, liposuction, and breast augmentation. Allison Samuels, "Smooth Operations," *Newsweek* (July 5, 2004): 48-49. For a discussion of the pressures on middle-class black women to maintain slender bodies, see Margaret K. Bass, "On Being a Fat Black Girl in a Fat-Hating Culture," in *Recovering the Black Female Body: Self-representations by African American Women*, ed. Michael Bennett and Vanessa Dickerson (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2001), 222-230.



feminism, characterized Naomi Wolf's ignorance of race in *The Beauty Myth* as "betrayal feminism."<sup>63</sup>

While third-wave feminists hoped to correct the mistakes of earlier feminists who generalized about beauty culture based on their own white, middle-class privileged background, too many feminists fell short of this goal. Black women have expressed disappointment at white feminists' continuing failure to adequately discuss nonwhite women's experiences when it came to beauty. In the feminist anthology, *Colonize This!: Young Women of Color on Today's Feminism*, Sirena Riley wrote about "The Black Beauty Myth." Riley acknowledged that, during the 1990s, research had shown black women to exhibit less anxiety about body size than white women. However, Riley warned feminists that there were significant exceptions to this generalization, pointing to her own experiences with eating disorders as an example of this exception. Riley linked black women's anxieties about body size to race and class prejudice: "The demonization of fat and the ease of associating black women with fat exposes yet another opportunity for racism." Riley suggested that black women faced mounting pressures to meet unattainable beauty standards, but these pressures came in different forms than white women's experiences with beauty. "Just because women of color aren't expressing their body dissatisfaction in the same way as heterosexual, middle-class white women, it doesn't mean that everything is hunky-dory and we should just move on." She urged white feminists to "include women of color in a larger discussion of body image."<sup>64</sup>

Some feminists have made diversity and multiculturalism a primary part of their agenda when critiquing normative beauty culture. Third-wave anthologies such as

<sup>63</sup> See Chambers, "Betrayal Feminism," *Listen Up*, ed. Findlen.

<sup>64</sup> Sirena Riley, "The Black Beauty Myth," *Colonize This!: Young Women of Color on Today's Feminism*, ed. Daisy Hernández and Bushra Rehman (New York: Seal Press, 2002), 369.

Rebecca Walker's *To Be Real: Telling the Truth and Changing the Face of Feminism* (1995) and Ophira Edut's *Adiós Barbie: Young Women Write about Body Image and Identity* (1998) included a diverse group of women and girls writing about beauty culture from an array of perspectives. Edut, along with Tali Edut and Dyann Logwood, co-founded the women's publication *HUES Magazine: A Woman's Guide to Power and Attitude* in hopes of "bring[ing] women together across 'boundaries.'"<sup>65</sup> The editors of *HUES* explained that they "wanted to see multiculturalism finally done right in a women's movement."<sup>66</sup> They also wanted a women's magazine that featured a diversity of women on its cover and within its pages and that projected healthy body image, sisterhood, and self-esteem to *all* of its readers. Unfortunately, *HUES* only ran from 1992 until 1999, when it ceased publication due to lack of funding.<sup>67</sup>

Clearly conservative backlash has taken its toll on the feminist critique of beauty culture. In *Third Wave Agenda*, Tali Edut, Dyann Logwood, and Ophira Edut explained that, while they viewed themselves as feminists, they found that they needed to "package feminist ideals . . . in a way that would speak to more than just a small segment of the female population." Therefore, they chose their "terminology" carefully, calling their magazine *HUES Magazine: A Woman's Guide to Power and Attitude*, opting not to identify it as a "feminist" magazine. They felt they were "spoon-feeding feminism to the fearful, as opposed to ramming it down people's throats."<sup>68</sup> Ophira Edut's anthology on body image, *Adiós Barbie*, followed the same tact. While most of the essays in this

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<sup>65</sup> Tali Edut, with Dyann Logwood and Ophira Edut, "HUES Magazine: The Making of a Movement," *Third Wave Agenda*, 93-94.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, 93.

<sup>67</sup> "HUES: The Story of a Magazine I Used to Publish," Ophira.com <http://www.ophira.com/portfolio/hues.html> [accessed May 3, 2005].

<sup>68</sup> Edut, Logwood, and Edut, "HUES Magazine," 94.

anthology spoke to women's empowerment, critiqued normative beauty culture as racist and sexist, and promoted sisterhood, very few essayists explicitly identified themselves as feminists.<sup>69</sup> Amy Richards' essay "Body Image: Third Wave Feminism's Issue?" called for a "feminist" response to normative beauty culture. Fittingly, Richards warned young feminists, possibly the other essayists in *Adiós Barbie* who emphasized *personal* empowerment through aesthetics without reference to a collective feminist movement, "We have to be careful not to fall into the trap of only having our bodies and our images speak for who we are."<sup>70</sup> Richards encouraged feminists, including those concerned with body image issues, to enter the realm of traditional politics. While Richards agreed that personal aesthetic expression "can catalyze our dormant or displaced activism" because of the topic's cultural and political relevance, she was concerned that young feminists were "being misinterpreted as all image, no substance—as having no collective agenda."<sup>71</sup>

### **Opting Out of Beauty Culture?: Staging Resistance from Within the System**

Many nineties feminists have worked hard to advance a collective agenda that connects their frustration with beauty culture to a critique of a corrupt capitalist system. Marcia Ann Gillespie, the editor-in-chief of *Ms.* magazine, denounced a racist beauty culture for "adhering to a standard that too often merely dips Barbie in light chocolate." Gillespie connected the oppressive nature of beauty culture directly with its capitalist engine: "how do you keep a capitalist-consumer culture afloat if people are not kept in a perpetual state of wanting, of feeling insecure?"<sup>72</sup> Gillespie implied that the profit motive

<sup>69</sup> Edut, *Adiós, Barbie*.

<sup>70</sup> Amy Richards, "Body Image: Third-wave Feminism's Issue?" *Adiós Barbie*, 199.

<sup>71</sup> Richards, "Body Image," 198, 199.

<sup>72</sup> Marcia Ann Gillespie, "Mirror, Mirror," *Essence* (January 1993): 73–74.

driving capitalism feeds off sexism and racism, and suggested that feminists must analytically address the economic system in order to eliminate the racism of beauty culture. In contrast, third-wave feminist Alisa Valdes found that a critical examination of beauty culture did not offer her any solution to the problems posed by capitalism. Valdes confronted “a big, two-sided problem” when she found she could make a very good income as an aerobics instructor but she could not make money pursuing her true career goal, being a professional journalist for a progressive, feminist publication. While she admits “the gym was one of the few places on earth where I actually felt I possessed an irrefutable degree of power,” she also felt guilty for colluding with an industry she believed damaged women’s self esteem: “I had betrayed my gender.” When economic considerations forced Valdes to give up writing for full-time aerobics instructing, she attempted to come up with a “femifitness philosophy,” viewing aerobics as a way to “strengthen” women’s bodies and minds.<sup>73</sup> But Valdes was also frustrated with the influence the larger sexist beauty culture had on women in the gym, especially as most of her students were enthralled by normative beauty standards and were more concerned about looking skinny than becoming strong.

Valdes’s “big, two-sided problem” is essentially the same problem that has divided feminists across the period of this study. Valdes debated whether she should participate in—and even profit from—a beauty industry that she believed to be sexist. Like many feminists struggling to opt out of beauty culture, Valdes found she had little choice in the matter. Feminist theorists like Susan Bordo have explained that it is simply impossible to stand outside culture, to reject sexism, capitalism, or normative beauty

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<sup>73</sup> Alisa L. Valdes, “Ruminations of a Feminist Aerobics Instructor,” in *Listen Up*, ed. Findlen, 12, 14, 15, 18.

standards.<sup>74</sup> No matter how much they try, feminists cannot achieve “pure” lifestyles outside beauty culture, and they certainly cannot—and usually do not—expect this purity of one another. Nevertheless, critics and supporters alike continue to assume that all feminists were antibeauty, and that “good” feminists must demonstrate their politics by refusing to participate in beauty culture.

This stereotype originated with radical feminists who did, to some degree, police the appearances and lifestyles of their membership. Like Black Nationalists, radical feminists sometimes pointed to participation in normative beauty culture as evidence of false consciousness: a brainwashing by a sexist, racist, and capitalist culture. And basically, they were right—a sexist, racist, and capitalist culture has misshaped multiple generations’ understandings of “beauty.” However, the feminist movement at large—especially radical feminists—worked to expand women’s aesthetic options, not restrict them. Black Nationalists and radical feminists wanted to offer women a more “natural” way of enjoying beauty, and they did not want women to be constantly evaluated by standards set by racist and sexist beauty marketers. Unfortunately, even nineties feminists have not entirely shaken the idea that their foremothers were bra burners opposed to beauty. As we have seen, the media’s characterization of second-wave feminists as “bra burners” has done much to alienate second-wave feminists from third-wave feminists. Why has this stereotype clung to the women’s movement with such tenacity?

The opprobrium feminists have faced for critiquing beauty culture makes it evident that their critique was relevant and on target. A movement of *women* challenging

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<sup>74</sup> Susan Bordo, *Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture and the Body* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 30.

normative beauty standards poses a significant threat to beauty marketers and beauty norms, since an array of businesses depend on women to consume beauty products. Furthermore, by challenging normative beauty standards and the marketing styles of beauty products, feminists (deliberately) challenged one of the primary markers of gender difference. Backlash to feminist beauty criticism was inevitable, given the entrenched nature and cultural relevance of normative beauty culture.

Public antipathy to the feminist critique of normative beauty standards has done much to hamper the movement. Recently, Gloria Steinem lamented the misunderstandings that keep the generations apart, saying “the popular stereotype of a feminist gradually excluded any woman who enjoyed sex, or even looked sexual . . . [but] feminism has always stood for the right to bare, decorate, cover, enjoy, or do whatever we damn please with our bodies—and to do so in safety.”<sup>75</sup> But Steinem also encouraged young feminists to challenge the movement, and to nurture it through change. Steinem and other second-wave feminists have bristled at their identification as antibeauty. This identification is ill founded, and it is clear that feminists have paid a high price for their critique of beauty. Today, young feminists push the narrow, normative beauty standards advanced by advertisers into the political arena once again, leaving us to wait and hope that their message is better received, or at least better understood.

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<sup>75</sup> Gloria Steinem, in *To Be Real*, xvi.

## CONCLUSION

*“My body is fucking beautiful, and every time I look in the mirror and acknowledge that, I am contributing to the revolution.”<sup>1</sup>*

Nomy Lamm, “It’s a Big Fat Revolution,” 1995

Like their predecessors, nineties feminists faced a substantial challenge when critiquing beauty culture. While beauty culture clearly contributed to the disempowerment of American women in the late twentieth century, in some ways, some women have exercised significant power through the same culture. Women worked as advertisers and beauty entrepreneurs throughout the twentieth century, and thanks to ongoing feminist activism, they have secured even more of these lucrative positions since the 1960s and 1970s. Additionally, women held lower-paying “pink-collar” jobs as beauticians, retail workers, and direct saleswomen in beauty businesses. Women also served as editors (again, partly because of feminist activism), writers, and readers of fashion and beauty magazines, and the authors of innumerable beauty advice books. While men have held the majority of the positions of power within beauty culture,

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<sup>1</sup> Nomy Lamm, “It’s a Big Fat Revolution,” in *Listen Up: Voices from the Next Feminist Generation*, ed. Barbara Findlen (Seattle: Seal Press, 1995), 90.

women have had better opportunities in beauty businesses than they had in many other professions.<sup>2</sup>

Because women have been so intimately involved in both the production and consumption of beauty culture, it has been very difficult for feminists to articulate a clear critique of normative beauty standards without alienating other women. Feminists have pointed to the prevalence of eating disorders, the mushrooming demand for cosmetic surgery, and the insecurities women express about their bodies, their hair, and their faces to illustrate the dangers beauty culture holds for women. Antifeminists such as Karen Lehrman have countered that, because women are so involved in the production of beauty culture, this system could not possibly be discriminatory or oppressive for women.<sup>3</sup>

Indeed, women *choose* to participate in beauty culture; however, they have been forced to choose from inadequate options. Feminists have defended women's right to participate in beauty culture however they want; they have objected to the consequences women face for choosing *not* to conform to normative beauty standards. Of course, women have not been motivated to participate in beauty culture solely out of fear of punishment for nonconformity. Women have consistently turned to normative beauty culture as a source of power, despite the limitations of this system. Feminists have struggled to recognize and defend the opportunities individual women have found within beauty culture, while simultaneously trying to root out the sexism that pervades the system.

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<sup>2</sup> For example, men continue to control the lucrative business of cosmetic surgery. Elizabeth Haiken, *Venus Envy: A History of Cosmetic Surgery* (John Hopkins University Press: Baltimore, 1997), 11.

<sup>3</sup> Karen Lehrman, *Lipstick Proviso: Women, Sex, and Power in the Real World* (New York: Doubleday, 1997), 87.



Feminist theorist Susan Bordo has explained that women and men make choices within a context of power and oppression.<sup>4</sup> Women who have chosen to purchase cosmetics or undergo cosmetic surgery have done so because they believed this decision was the most empowering option available to them. Looking “good” *has* offered some women a measure of social and economic power and a sense of emotional satisfaction. Yet, as feminists have pointed out, the advantages of normative attractiveness are limited and come at a price. “Beauty” requires constant disciplining of the body, it is dependent on youth and heredity as well as racial and class privilege, and the women who most closely conform to normative beauty ideals are stereotyped as “dumb blondes.” Furthermore, as feminists have frequently lamented, women are encouraged to compete within beauty culture to look better than one another.<sup>5</sup> On a day-to-day basis (and especially in beauty pageants) women’s bodies are critically compared to one another, spawning anxieties and divisions among women.

When women choose to conform to normative beauty standards, they make it harder and more isolating for other women to reject beauty standards. Nevertheless, by working *within* the beauty industry, many women have empowered themselves, and—to some degree—empowered other women. Perfume advertisers such as Amelia Bassin (the feminist pundit) and Robin Burns (the Calvin Klein executive responsible for Obsession advertisements) made successful careers for themselves by selling other women beauty products. Bassin used her professional success to try to make careers in advertising more

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<sup>4</sup> Bordo, “Bringing Body to Theory,” *Twilight Zones: The Hidden Life of Cultural Images from Plato to O. J.* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997).

<sup>5</sup> For feminist critiques of the competitive nature of beauty culture, see “No More Miss America!” from *Sisterhood is Powerful: An Anthology of Writings from the Women’s Liberation Movement* (New York: Vintage Books, 1970), 586; Alta, “Pretty,” *Woman in Sexist Society: Studies in Power and Powerlessness*, ed. Vivian Gornick and Barbara K. Moran (New York: Basic Books, Inc., 1971), 3.

accessible and advantageous to women. She also critiqued advertisements that portrayed women in derogatory ways, and praised ads that were consistent with gender equality. Direct sales executive Mary Kay Ash built a successful cosmetics company, provided thousands of women with professional opportunities, and encouraged male business leaders to support and respect female saleswomen. Beauty advice writers such as Helen Gurley Brown and Jane Fonda made careers for themselves teaching other women how to succeed in the beauty cultural system. Fonda has argued that her *Workout* videos and books changed beauty culture to idealize female strength. All of these women advanced “liberal feminist” strategies for dealing with beauty culture. They sought to empower themselves and (some) other women by working to gradually reform—rather than fundamentally change—the normative beauty cultural system.

As liberal feminist beauty marketers, these women chose to work within a sexist, racist, and heterosexist system. By accommodating the normative beauty cultural system for moderate feminist gains, they sustained the system. While Amelia Bassin struggled to make advertising less sexist and professionally more inclusive, she still encouraged women to conform to normative standards of beauty by purchasing expensive perfumes. Mary Kay Ash may have provided women with a business opportunity, but she actively discouraged women from stepping outside a narrow definition of “feminine” behavior. She encouraged women to submit to male family authority, evangelical Christian teachings, and a very rigid definition of feminine “beauty.” Beauty advice writers encouraged women to beautify for personal satisfaction rather than for critical male gazes; however, they still presented beautification as an essential obligation of womanhood. Feminist advice writers such as Jane Fonda and Susan Powter promoted

conformity to normative standards of beauty as a form of self-empowerment. By linking beautification to “progressive” politics, beauty marketers encouraged women to express themselves through their appearances rather than through their words and actions.

Feminists and Black Nationalists outside the beauty industry employed different tactics than beauty marketers when they attempted to remake beauty culture for the women within it. These activists have articulated a vociferous critique of normative beauty standards and beauty marketing through their writings, in consciousness-raising sessions, and at public protests. Additionally, Black Nationalists and feminists have challenged normative beauty standards through their personal engagement or disengagement with beauty culture. As early as the 1850s, women’s rights advocates tried to liberate women from normative fashions by donning “reform costumes” and encouraging other women to adopt them as well. One hundred years later, beginning in the 1960s, activists demonstrated their opposition to sexist and racist beauty standards with their own bodies. Many radical feminists cut their hair short, opted for androgynous wardrobes, and ceased wearing cosmetics to protest the artificiality and sexism of beauty culture. Black Nationalists adopted Afro hairstyles and Afro-centric fashions to demonstrate their pride in black aesthetics and their rejection of racist beauty standards. By encouraging women to signal their politics through their appearances, feminists and Black Nationalists offered individual women an everyday tool for resisting normative sexist and racist beauty standards.

Making an aesthetic political statement was not easy: women who refused to conform to normative aesthetic standards risked social ostracism and hostility from the larger culture. The antagonism feminists and Black Nationalists faced in the wider culture

made cooperation and affirmation within the activist community even more essential. As activists collectively adopted Afro hairstyles or threw away their cosmetics and high heels, they created supportive communities of like-minded resisters. These activist communities deliberately created new aesthetic standards, intending to celebrate the “natural” beauty of women and African Americans. Some women were overjoyed to find ways to appreciate beauty without submitting to a grueling and expensive regime. Others found these new standards as exacting and alienating as the normative standards of the larger beauty culture. Either way, feminists struggled to coexist in both an activist community striving to remake normative beauty standards, and also the oppressive, but inescapable, normative beauty culture. On a daily basis, feminists performed a difficult balancing act, where seemingly small decisions about how to wear their hair or whether to put on makeup for a job interview were fraught with political and personal significance.

Decades of activism on the part of countless feminists and Black Nationalists have still not made beauty culture an empowering, affirmative system for most women. While individual beauty marketers have supported some feminist goals, marketers’ efforts to empower women have been overshadowed by their obligation to promote exclusive standards of beauty as consumer capitalists. Beauty marketers have perpetuated existing racist, sexist, and heterosexist norms in their marketing. Nevertheless, the combined efforts of liberal, radical, and third-wave feminists, along with Black Nationalists, have indelibly shaped beauty culture. Marketers have appropriated feminist language to develop a new way of talking about beauty. Since the late-1960s, marketers have suggested that beautification offers women a means of

“liberation” and personal expression. Certainly, there are opportunities for limited empowerment within beauty culture, and feminists have struggled to maintain these opportunities for women without perpetuating the larger inequalities within beauty culture. However, the experiences of late-twentieth-century activists indicate that it is impossible to truly challenge sexism and racism within beauty culture without radically remaking the ways that that culture works. Feminists and Black Nationalists must continue to critique the ways that consumer capitalism depends on sexist and racist social norms to market to consumers. Perhaps by examining the history of efforts to challenge, reform, and subvert normative beauty culture, activists have a better chance of offering future generations a system that is truly “empowering.”

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### MANUSCRIPT COLLECTIONS

Avon Collection, Hagley Archives, Wilmington, Delaware.

John W. Hartman Center for Sales, Advertising, and Marketing History, Duke University Rare Book, Manuscript, and Special Collections Library, Durham, North Carolina.

Sallie Bingham Center for Women's History and Culture, Duke University Rare Book, Manuscript, and Special Collections Library, Durham, North Carolina.

### PERIODICALS

*Advertising Age*

*ADWEEK*

*American Druggist*

*Applause* (Mary Kay Consultant Newsletter)

*Bitch*

*Bust*

*Chain Drug Review*

*Chemical Week*

*Cosmopolitan*

*Drug and Cosmetic Industry*

*Ebony*

*Editor and Publisher*

*Essence*

*Forbes*

*Glamour*

*Good Housekeeping*

*Harper's Bazaar*

*Jet*

*Ladies' Home Journal*

*McCall's*

*Mademoiselle*  
*Madison Avenue*  
*Marketing/Communication*  
*Media Report to Women*  
*Printer's Ink*  
*Redbook*  
*Savvy*  
*Seventeen*  
*'Teen*  
*Vogue*  
*Women's Wear Daily (WWD)*

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