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Good Hair, Bad Hair: African-American Hair Relations in the Early Twentieth Century

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Abstract

Abby E. Brisbon, College '09, History Good Hair, Bad Hair: African-American Hair Relations in the Early Twentieth Century Why an African-American woman chooses to do her hair in any particular style embodies a complex history of an evolving relationship with acceptable standards of beauty, both within the community and as part of the larger society. This project will examine that evolution from the opening of Madame CJ Walker's business in 1905 through the Great Depression. What do cultural expressions such as advertisements, literature, and art say about how African-American women might have internalized the beauty standards that were placed upon them, and how did their ideas about hair evolve over the first part of the century?

Disciplines

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2008-2009 Penn Humanities Forum on Change
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**Good Hair, Bad Hair:
Hair Relations and African American Identity
in the Early Twentieth Century**

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University of Pennsylvania
Department of History
Senior Honors Thesis*
and
2008-2009 Penn Humanities Forum
Undergraduate Mellon Research Fellowship

Submitted April 2009

*To my grandmother,
the original strong black woman in my life.*

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Acknowledgments

“You can’t fight and create at the same time.”

- *Jessie Fauset, Plum Bun*

“Uplifting the brother’s no easy job.”

- *Nella Larsen, Passing*

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Prologue
Why Black Hair?

*“Everything I know about American history
I learned from looking at black people’s hair.
It’s the perfect metaphor for the
African experiment here: ...the toll of
slavery and the costs of remaining.
It’s all in the hair.”*

-Lisa Jones, Bulletproof Diva¹

The conversation would always go something like this:

Peer: Why don’t you straighten your hair?

Me: Um, I just never have.

Or, alternately:

Peer: Haven’t you ever thought about straightening your hair?

Me: No – I like my hair.

Or perhaps, by the time I arrived at college and became fed up with the question:

Peer: Aren’t you going to let me straighten your hair?

Me: No. I don’t think black women need to have straight hair to be attractive.

Peer: Wow. It’s not that deep.

To me, though, there *was* a deeper meaning behind the question of straightening one’s hair. Granted, there hadn’t been when I was five, squirming as my dad tried to gently comb the snarls out of my matted hair. There hadn’t been when I was seven and could not understand why my white mother could not control my hair from dissolving into an unmanageable ball of frizz. As I got older, though, there was always that nagging question in the back of my head – my

¹ Lisa Jones, *Bulletproof Diva: Tales of Race, Sex, and Hair* (New York: Anchor Books, 1994), 11-12.

silent answer to the eternal inquiry, “Why don’t you straighten your hair?”: “*Well, why do you?*” I slowly began realizing that black people’s hair was about perception. There was a reason my peers always focused their questions about my appearance on my hair. To society, it was a marker: of race, of identity – and of difference.

This fact was perhaps most conspicuous to me on the first day of my sophomore year in high school. I had cut off eight inches of my hair the night before, transforming an unruly ponytail that fell beneath my shoulders into the simulation of a bob that rested above my ears, and I was excited to return to school with a new look. Sitting through classes, though, none of my white friends seemed to notice the new style. When I asked one of them about her failure to comment she remarked with a shrug, “I wasn’t sure, so I didn’t want to say anything.” I stared back blankly as I processed the statement. To her, black hair – its curliness, its styles, indeed, even its length – was something she just did not understand.

That afternoon as I was walking home from school, a black student whom I had sat near in history class the previous year – and with whom I had never exchanged a single word – shouted at me from down the block. “Why’d you cut your hair?” she yelled.

African American hair is about difference: difference from the mainstream, difference within the community. From the very beginning, long before my own hair taught me how I was dissimilar from some of my friends, African hair served as a marker of religion, of social status, of regional loyalty. Indeed, in Western African societies in the fourteen- and fifteen-hundreds, “hair was an integral part of a complex language system” in its ability to impart these messages.² Hair also carried spiritual qualities; as the closest point to heaven, it was believed by some that

² Ayana D. Byrd and Lori L. Tharps, *Hair Story: Untangling the Roots of Black Hair in America* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2001), 2.

communication from the gods traveled through one's hair to reach the soul.³ Thus it had always been an important part of African lives.

When Africans were brought to the New World, then, their heads shaved by their European captors, they were not just losing their freedom, their families, and their home: they were losing a piece of their identity. Indeed, “[g]iven the importance of hair to an African...[t]he shaved head was the first step the Europeans took to erase the slave's culture.”⁴ In captivity, African Americans took their own steps to try to gain some of this individuality back, concocting homemade products to replace the “combs, herbal ointments, and palm oil used in Africa for hairdressing.” Here, they had to take advantage of what was available to them: bacon grease, for example, cornmeal, or kerosene.⁵ Utilizing methods that were sometimes dangerous and likely not wholly effective, African Americans nevertheless recognized that hair was an essential part of identity and accordingly clung to any opportunity to regain what agency they could in hair care.

Following emancipation, though, African Americans had another recourse: the beauty industry. As freed people struggled to negotiate a place for themselves within a post-slavery United States, hair maintained its importance as an outward indicator of one's status.⁶ Just as it had in Africa, how one cared for her hair could symbolize to the public her economic position or where she lived. Unlike in Africa, though, black people in America were utilizing their hair as a step towards a larger construction of identity. Throughout the first two decades of the twentieth century, advertisements from the burgeoning hair care industry demonstrated a commitment to

³ Ayana D. Byrd and Lori L. Tharps, *Hair Story: Untangling the Roots of Black Hair in America* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2001), 4.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 10.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 17.

⁶ A'Lelia Bundles, *On Her Own Ground: The Life and Times of Madam C.J. Walker* (New York: Scribner, 2001), 62.

helping black Americans to reconcile the two disparate parts of their identity that activist and scholar W.E.B. DuBois termed the “double consciousness.”⁷ Identity formation in the first part of the twentieth century thus became about that reconciliation, and necessitated both the creation of an economic identity and an inner resolution about how one’s appearance fit into the spectrum of American beauty. These negotiations surrounding identity formation are the topic of this paper.

The first chapter examines the rise of the modern hair care industry through the lens of these companies’ advertisements. It covers the period between 1900 and 1928. Through an examination of the messages offered by figures like Madam C.J. Walker and Annie Malone, two of the most prominent black entrepreneurs of the twentieth century, one can see how these companies attempted to guide African Americans through the process of shaping their appearance. Informed by the ideologies of events such as the Great Migration and the rise of the New Negro, these ads pushed notions like freedom of movement and economic independence. Simple instruction was also a key goal of many ads of this era. For a people fairly recently emancipated, learning the logistics of caring for one’s hair was an important first step in taking ownership of one’s appearance and beauty.

Chapter 2 transports this discussion into the era of the Great Depression. Even as the suffering United States economy brought hardship to all sectors of American life, the black hair care industry was experiencing additional challenges as its client base felt disproportionately high rates of poverty when the government failed to provide adequate assistance to the African

⁷ W.E.B. DuBois, “The Souls of Black Folk,” in *The Norton Anthology of African American Literature*, eds. Henry Louis Gates and Nellie Y. McKay (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2004), 694.
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American community.⁸ As well, the hair care industry as a whole underwent a push for greater professionalism as a way to legitimate a now established trade, and white beauty companies increased their advertising campaigns in African American newspapers as they realized the potentially lucrative nature of this market. This chapter assesses how these contextual changes channeled the language of advertisements in different directions, so that ads in the early 1930s were highly aware of African Americans' economic circumstances yet still encouraged women in particular to experiment with their appearance as a part of the process of identity formation.

The third chapter delves further into this question of identity negotiation and in particular examines the notion of a two-pronged identity, related to both economic position and inner reconciliation. This chapter is perhaps unconventional from the standpoint of an historical project in that it utilizes novels as primary documents, using literature of racial passing as pathway for understanding contemporary beliefs about racial identity. By analyzing the work of two prominent authors from the bookends of this discussion, this chapter explains how racial passing led to a failure of identity formation for their protagonists, and surveys how views about this topic may have changed between 1900 and 1929, when these books were originally published.

A Note on Methodology and Terms

My main primary sources for this project were advertisements published by black-owned beauty companies. As this project looks to evaluate the messages that were consumed by the African American population, I looked only at those ads found in African American newspapers. The papers I chose were those that historians have dubbed the most influential and prominent in

⁸ Joe William Trotter, Jr., "From a Raw Deal to a New Deal? 1929-1945," in *To Make Our World Anew: A History of African Americans from 1880*, eds. Robin Kelley & Earl Lewis (United States: Oxford University Press, 2000), 131.

terms of circulation throughout the period examined, namely, *The Baltimore Afro-American*, *The Chicago Defender*, *The Pittsburgh Courier*, and *The New York Amsterdam News*.⁹ These were the papers most highly read by African Americans of the time period studied and most accessible to historians now, as all four newspapers have been digitized.

Throughout the three chapters I use the term “identity negotiation,” which I use to indicate the discourse that dominated this era about the best way for African Americans to establish their place in society. I argue that while scholars were engaging in this dialogue explicitly, hair care companies were participating in it on a more implicit level through their portrayals of beauty standards in their advertisements. In offering different ways that African American women could adapt certain Europeanized qualities to their African bodies, these business owners were guiding this population through the negotiation between the two disparate sources of their identity (African heritage with American upbringing). I distinguish this term “negotiation” from “identity formation,” which I use to mean the *achievement* of creating, or forming, a solid identity within the United States society. This identity is two pronged; while it implies a reconciliation between being American and being black, it involves establishing an economic identity as well.

Additionally, I use the words “African American,” “black,” and (within the appropriate historical context) “Negro” or “colored” interchangeably. Though in some contexts these distinct terms might signify subtle differences, here they do not.

In considering the question of hair straightening, it would be easy to say that black women straighten their hair because they have internalized mainstream beauty standards that

⁹ Vishnu V. Oak, *The Negro Newspaper* (Connecticut: Negro Universities Press, 1948), 70.
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demonstrate Europeanized features as the most desirable. The notion of a double consciousness, however, shows us that identity formation within the African American community has always been much more complex than such a straightforward explanation would suggest. Identity was about negotiation and adaptation, and as the development of the black hair care industry demonstrates, in practice it was about dialogue and experimentation. For this reason, there has never been one simple answer to why any black woman decides to do her hair in any particular manner. Rather, African American hair is personal, it is emotional, and it embodies all the questions, doubts, and fears about finding a place in a sometimes hostile American society. This is the reason that that dichotomy of identity, over one hundred years after DuBois termed it a “double consciousness,” still weighs on the minds and hearts of African Americans, as they struggle to answer the question of how to embrace one’s unique African features while adapting Europeanized ones. In other words, this negotiation is about how to create an *African American* identity – one that recognizes a long and important history in this country without ignoring or casting aside those unique African features that signify our history.

Chapter 1

Newly Freed to the New Negro: Hair Relations from 1900-1928

*“She was an American. She grew from this soil,
and she would not be uprooted.”*

- Nella Larsen, Passing¹⁰

In the May 5, 1917 edition of the *Chicago Defender*, an advertisement quietly and subtly proffered its sponsor’s promise for a path towards respectability and success. Boxed among an ad for a tool that promised straighter hair, a suspiciously scant description of an investment opportunity, a funeral director’s solemn pledge to “meet your sorrow with a refined service,” and announcements of the paper’s success, it made an offer that was decidedly distinct from the advertisement directly beneath it, which screamed “LOOK! STRAIGHTEN YOUR HAIR!” This one simply stated, “Learn to Grow Hair and Make Money,” and the promise came from one of the first female African-American entrepreneurs, Madam C.J. Walker. On the left side of the ad was a photo of Madam herself. The text read in a column on the right, and the proclamation stretched across the top. The effect was that the ad had the look of a short news article, which suggested the “reliability” and “trustworthiness” of both Walker and her product. Evoking a newspaper, which was a medium grounded in truthfulness and fact, “may have reassured readers of the validity of its claims.”¹¹

The text of the ad read as follows:

¹⁰ Nella Larsen, *Passing*, in *The Complete Fiction of Nella Larsen: Passing, Quicksand, and the Stories*, ed. Charles R. Larson (New York: Anchor Books, 1992), 267.

¹¹ Noliwe Rooks, *Hair Raising: Beauty, Culture, and African American Women* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press: 2000), 60.

Complete course by mail or by personal instructions. A diploma from Leila College of Hair Culture is a passport to prosperity. Is your hair short, breaking off, thin or falling out? Have you tetter, eczema? Does your scalp itch? Have you more than a normal amount of dandruff?

Mme. C.J. Walker's Wonderful Hair Grower

Write for a booklet which tells of the positive cures of all scalp diseases, stops the hair from falling out and starts it at once to growing.

Beware of imitations—all of the Mme. C.J. Walker preparations are put up in yellow tin boxes. Accept no goods unless they are sealed with the revenue stamps and cancelled from this office.

A six weeks' trial treatment sent to any address by mail for \$1.70. Make all money orders payable to Mme. C.J. Walker. Send stamps for reply. Agents wanted. Write for terms.¹²

In these three paragraphs, this advertisement captured the basic business philosophy of the Walker Manufacturing Company, an enterprise that has generated significant research and attention as one of the great success stories of African American entrepreneurship.

The overarching message of this advertisement was curious, for while the company was indeed a profit-generating business, oddly enough the product itself was not the singular, or even the primary focus of this ad. Rather, the emphasis was split fairly evenly between what the Wonderful Hair Grower did for your hair (affected “positive cures of all scalp diseases, stops the hair from falling out and starts it at once to growing”) and what involvement with this product and this company could potentially do for your life (“A diploma from Leila College of Hair Culture is a passport to prosperity”). Changing the lives of one’s customers was an ambitious claim, and “Passport to prosperity” was particularly strong language for a newspaper ad,

¹² Advertisement, Walker Manufacturing Company, *The Chicago Defender*, May 5, 1917.

suggesting that there was a lot more behind the mission of the Wonderful Hair Grower than simply growing hair. It pointed to a desire for something more – a different kind of company. “My desire now is to do more than ever for my race,” Walker claimed. “I’ve caught the vision. I can see what they need.”¹³ Economically, Walker wanted to provide black women with a way to earn money; psychologically, she wanted them to recognize the impact beauty products could have on their lives. “I want the great masses of my people to take a greater pride in their appearance,” she said.¹⁴ Walker, then, saw beauty as more than frills and make-up; to her, creating cosmetics was a part of that all-encompassing idea of “racial uplift.” Whether or not this was her explicit goal from the beginning, the progression to this line of thought is apparent in the development of the Walker Manufacturing Company in the early twentieth century.

Madam C.J. Walker was an unquestionable success. Her “rags-to-riches” story dominates much of the scholarship on African American beauty in this era: the tale of her birth on a plantation in Delta, Louisiana in 1867, becoming an orphan then a mother at a young age, and her work as a washerwoman in St. Louis are key motifs in any discussion of the development of the black hair care industry.¹⁵ If the ubiquity of her company’s ads in historically black newspapers was any indication of her ubiquity amongst the consciousness of African-American communities, then these were all likely household stories in the early twentieth century. The significance of the Walker Manufacturing Company, however, lies not necessarily in Madam Walker, the woman, but rather in what her success and her business model symbolized. That is,

¹³ Madam Walker quoted in A’Lelia Bundles, *On Her Own Ground: The Life and Times of Madam C.J. Walker* (New York: Scribner, 2001), 269.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ See for example, sections in: Julia Kirk Blackwelder, *Styling Jim Crow: African American Beauty Training During Segregation* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2003); Ayana D. Byrd and Lori L. Tharps, *Hair Story: Untangling the Roots of Black Hair in America* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2001); Noliwe M. Rooks, *Hair Raising: Beauty, Culture, and African American Women* (New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2000); Julie A. Willet, *Permanent Waves: The Making of the American Beauty Shop* (New York: New York University Press, 2000). For a comprehensive examination of Walker’s life and times, see A’Lelia Bundles, *On Her Own Ground: The Life and Times of Madam C.J. Walker* (New York: Scribner, 2001).

she should be taken not as an embodiment of this era, but rather as a part of a larger trend towards more self-reflective black-owned businesses that acknowledged the complexities of establishing an economic foundation for African Americans while simultaneously working towards integration into the mainstream. As black hair care companies took off in the 1910s and 1920s, the messages offered in their advertisements echoed the ideologies that would ground the development of the era's most important movements like the Great Migration and the rise New Negro. Using advertising as a lens, though recognizing its limitations, one can glean from these black-owned businesses an engagement in and a commitment to helping customers to negotiate their identity in a changing society.

Laying the Groundwork: Ideological Debates and Burgeoning Black Businesses, 1900-1910

Less than fifty years removed from slavery, African Americans in the first years of the twentieth century were realizing that their place in society and how they were viewed by their white counterparts was inextricably tied to their economic success or failure.¹⁶ Thus prominent theorists of the era speculated and debated about the best ways for African Americans to gain financial independence and establish an identity that whites would recognize as contributing to American society. Historians depict this debate most often as a dispute between Booker T. Washington's bottom-up policy, and W.E.B. DuBois' notion of the "Talented Tenth." Washington emphasized building an economic foundation, primarily through industrial work, as the most important way for blacks to work their way into American society; he famously expressed this theory through his analogy of the races functioning separately as do one's fingers,

¹⁶ James R. Grossman, "A Chance to Make Good: 1900-1929," in *To Make Our World Anew: A History of African Americans from 1880*, eds. Robin Kelley & Earl Lewis (United States: Oxford University Press, 2000), 67.

“yet one as the hand in all things essential to mutual progress.”¹⁷ In contrast, DuBois depended on a trickle-down theory in relation to education,¹⁸ in which grooming a class of Negro scholars who could lead the race was crucial for advancement.

Despite his acceptance by white America and his acknowledged influence as the founder of the Tuskegee Institute, which trained African Americans in primarily industrial fields, Washington’s accommodationist strategy was a contentious point within the black community throughout the first two decades of the twentieth century.¹⁹ DuBois’ greatest criticism, outlined most clearly in his 1903 collection of essays *The Souls of Black Folk*, came from his perception that Washington was implying the inferiority of African Americans by limiting them to labor and discouraging any agitation for greater civil rights.²⁰ Though DuBois did not disparage industrial education entirely, he believed strongly that there needed to be more emphasis on educating scholars in order to advance.²¹ Essentially, this debate sought the perfect balance between self-help and integration, asking to what extent African Americans should be building up their own foundations, and how much they should be fighting for acceptance into and equality from the mainstream.

In the midst of this debate, black America was seeing a remarkable development of black-owned businesses – including hair care businesses – aided by gradual urbanization and, perhaps counter-intuitively, the loss of white patronage of African American companies.²²

¹⁷ Booker T. Washington, “Up From Slavery,” in *The Norton Anthology of African American Literature*, eds. Henry Louis Gates and Nellie Y. McKay (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2004), 596.

¹⁸ Booker T. Washington, et al., *The Negro Problem: A Series of Articles by Representative American Negroes of Today*, 1903 (New York: AMS Press, Inc., 1970), 33.

¹⁹ Patrick S Washburn, *The African American Newspaper: Voice of Freedom* (Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 2006), 74.

²⁰ *Ibid*, 75.

²¹ August Meier, *Negro Thought in America, 1880-1915: Racial Ideologies in the Age of Booker T. Washington* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1964), 192.

²² *Ibid*, 139.

Increasing prejudice following the end of Reconstruction along with a growing ideological movement towards an “ideal of race pride” (besides laying the groundwork for the development of the New Negro in the 1920s) meant that more African American business owners were benefiting financially from the segregated society. Indeed, the creation of a segregated economy, which was most severe in the South due to its “more extreme patterns of segregation and discrimination,”²³ served a dual-purpose for blacks in the first decade of the twentieth century: firstly, it allowed them to “prove” themselves as a race by demonstrating intelligence and survival ability through business acumen and thus paving the way for assimilation into the mainstream. Simultaneously, it served as a “far-sighted measure of defense,”²⁴ wherein they could exist as a race if integration were to fail. Though a truly segregated economy was impossible, as the failure of several all-Negro community attempts proved,²⁵ the success of African American businesses in this era attests to the (relative) benefits of segregation in the economic sphere.

Certainly, the growth of the African American beauty industry is demonstrative of this phenomenon. Walker and her peers epitomized the new upper class: a sect of African Americans who obtained their fortune not from reliance on white sponsorship or support, but from the patronage other African Americans. It is little wonder that this upper class of the new century, then, which reflected shifting perspectives on how to get ahead based on what the changing economic and geographic landscape allowed, would develop an affinity for racial solidarity and a focus on the construction of a “group economy.”²⁶ Facing rising hostility from whites and intensifying residential segregation as African Americans began to move from the rural South

²³ August Meier, *Negro Thought in America, 1880-1915: Racial Ideologies in the Age of Booker T. Washington* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1964), 145.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 146.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 149.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

into urban centers in the North and West,²⁷ it simply made sense for black business owners to turn inward in their quest for economic success. These were those business owners like Walker and Annie Malone of the Poro Company, Walker's main competitor – those whose companies took off in the 1910s and 1920s, and in whose stated ideologies and political involvement one can see the evolution of the “New Negro” in the 1920s – an African American conscious of her worth, and expectant of equal rights from the government.²⁸

Not all advertisements produced by the hair care companies of this era, however, offered such clear-cut, nor explicitly ideological messages as the Walker ad previously discussed. One early 1900s ad from Crane and Company out of Richmond, Virginia simultaneously touted its “Wonderful Face Bleach and Hair Straightener,” which came “both in a box for \$1.” Pictured beneath the heading of “BLACK SKIN REMOVER” were before and after images (a feature that would quickly become convention), facing towards each other so that the reader could see only their profiles. The “before” picture was in negative, so that it was entirely blacked out, with the only real racial signifier being the decidedly curly head of hair (whose kinks were visible even in this negative view). Two paragraphs detailed the benefits of each of the products, with the face bleach yielding “a peach-like complexion...if used as directed,” and the hair straightener in each box offering “enough to make anyone’s hair grow long and straight, and keep...it from falling out.” The product, the notice added, was “[h]ighly perfumed and makes the hair soft and easy to comb. Many of our customers say one of our dollar boxes is worth ten dollars, yet we sell it for one dollar a box.”²⁹ This was not a company purporting to uplift the race by celebrating African American beauty, nor did it hint at a business sector that was moving towards ideologies of racial

²⁷ James R. Grossman, “A Chance to Make Good: 1900-1929,” in *To Make Our World Anew: A History of African Americans from 1880*, eds. Robin Kelley & Earl Lewis (United States: Oxford University Press, 2000), 106, 111.

²⁸ August Meier, *Negro Thought in America, 1880-1915: Racial Ideologies in the Age of Booker T. Washington* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1964), 259.

²⁹ Advertisement, Crane and Company, *The Baltimore Afro-American*, May 31, 1902.

solidarity and self-sufficiency. Rather, what Crane and Company presented, quite literally in how it juxtaposed these two profiles so that the women before and after were staring each other in the face, was a glimpse into what *you* as the customer could see when you look in the mirror: black by birth, but “perfectly white” by the aid of beauty products.

Moreover, whereas those companies that offered explicit economic incentives for not only using but also becoming a sales agent for their product were suggesting a specific avenue for personal economic development, this ad left its customers to fill in how appearing white would be able to alter their lives. In this way, there is no intrinsic race pride in this message: the goal here is not to *refine* African features or to provide basic hair care techniques to a people who under slavery did not have access to products made specifically for them. The goal is to alter those features beyond recognition – that is, eliminate any sign that they existed, and in so doing presumably change one’s life.

Of course, it is impossible from a single advertisement to glean all of the motivations or even the agendas of any beauty company. Indeed, part of the contradiction between the dominant African American ideologies of the first decade of the twentieth century and some of the advertisements published in black newspapers is inherent in the medium of advertising itself. As historian Roland Marchand points out in his study of American advertisements, ads do not give us a true picture of the everyday; people did not want to see their life reflected in the newspaper. Rather, they wanted “a distorting mirror that would enhance certain images.”³⁰ In other words, people wanted to know that this product was going to make their life better – that with the use of this commodity, theirs would be closer to “life as it ought to be.”³¹ This does not, however, detract entirely from the value of this medium as a useful historical source, particularly in the

³⁰ Roland Marchand, *Advertising the American Dream* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, California: University of California Press, 1985), xvii.

³¹ *Ibid.*

context of this discussion. As historian Noliwe Rooks asserts, advertisements do give a good sense of what was culturally acceptable in any particular era,³² if not a direct reflection of the mundane, or even of certain ideological beliefs. Indeed, it was in the best interest of the advertisers to appeal to their customers' "broader assumptions about social values," and in so doing, these companies tended to reinforce existing conventional beliefs,³³ allowing future generations to discern whom certain companies were targeting, and what was important to their lives.

At the same time, part of the contradiction between ideology and reality is also reflected in the struggles of African American newspapers. In a way, these choices between advocating for a celebration of African heritage and pushing European features as the standard of beauty were the same kinds of decisions black-owned newspapers themselves had been making since the mid-1800s: should they be accommodating, passively reporting on their (lack of) civil rights as dictated by white America, or should they serve as an advocacy tool, fighting aggressively for rights and likely angering whites in the process?³⁴ Though the papers examined in this chapter (created in the 1900s and 1910s) had decided to do the latter, this is an important balance to keep in mind while examining the ads of the first few years of the twentieth century, as beauty advertisements in particular revealed a different side of this debate – the debate as it played out in practice. For, while papers like the *Chicago Defender*, the *Baltimore Afro-American*, and the *Pittsburgh Courier* symbolized a "new type of newspaper" – one that never pretended to be neutral, explicitly making advocacy for the African American race its primary goal – it was still

³² Noliwe Rooks, *Hair Raising: Beauty, Culture, and African American Women* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press: 2000), 55.

³³ Roland Marchand, *Advertising the American Dream* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, California: University of California Press, 1985), xviii.

³⁴ Patrick S Washburn, *The African American Newspaper: Voice of Freedom* (Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 2006), 45.

sometimes limited in the face of reality. Advertisements were hard to come by, which meant that circulation was the primary source of funding. Yet, due to high illiteracy rates among blacks and suppression in the South, dissemination was a constant battle. This meant that they would take what they could get in terms of advertising, despite protests against the fact that they accepted ads for products like skin bleaches.³⁵

Putting principles aside, though, these advertisements signified a race that in its negotiation of beauty was clearly trying to find its place in American society. As they had done during slavery, African Americans experimented with Western standards and methods of hair care to create an aesthetic that worked for them. A 1902 ad for the Ozonized Ox Marrow Company, for example, announced in bold letters, its “WONDERFUL DISCOVERY” – “Curly Hair Made Straight By Original Ozonized Ox Marrow (Copyrighted.)” – wonderful, perhaps, because this product offered one method of purportedly moving closer towards integration into the mainstream. Pictured beneath the heading were before and after images, positioned in profile so that it was clear that the flyaway hairs depicted in the first image had been smoothed and contained in the second. “This wonderful hair pomade is the only safe preparation in the world that makes kinky or curly hair straight as shown above,” the ad’s text boldly claimed. “It polishes the scalp and prevents the hair from falling out or breaking off, cures dandruff and makes the hair grow long and silky.”³⁶ Granted, this advertisement was not entirely derogatory in its language, nor did it condemn African American hair as fundamentally problematic; a contemporary ad for Scott’s Magic Hair Grower, for example, described black hair as “kinky, harsh, knotty, stubborn, short and thin” within one breath, claiming that its product could reverse

³⁵ Noliwe Rooks, *Hair Raising: Beauty, Culture, and African American Women* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press: 2000), 35.

³⁶ Advertisement, Ozonized Ox Marrow Company, *The Baltimore Afro-American*, May 31, 1902.

these qualities, making hair “grow long, thick, beautiful, straight, silky, pliable.”³⁷ This ad suggested in its diction that black hair was inherently unmanageable. Yet Ozonized Ox Marrow Company still purported to change the lives of its customers life by changing the texture of their hair – that is, by moving them farther from their African heritage in favor of something decidedly Europeanized.

DuBois characterized this constant balance between Africanized and Europeanized features with his theory of a “double consciousness.”³⁸ He claimed that black people in the United States experienced a “two-ness” in which they struggled to reconcile the “two warring ideals” of Americanism and African ancestry “in one dark body.” At once not African, yet not entirely American by virtue of his dark skin, the African American “simply wishes to make it possible for a man to be both a Negro and an American, without being cursed and spit upon.”³⁹ Though his own views over the decades shifted on issues such as race differences and the value of interracial marriage,⁴⁰ DuBois maintained that through this two-ness, African Americans developed a unique character that positioned Negroes as their own best hope for advancement⁴¹ - an advancement that would rely on a fight for civil rights led by Negro scholars at the forefront.

At the same time that DuBois was offering his greatest criticisms of what he saw as Washington’s accomodationist policies and arguing for the importance of this double consciousness in informing the American Negro experience, Baptist organizer and NACW

³⁷ Advertisement, Scott Remedy Company, *The Baltimore Afro-American*, July 26, 1902.

³⁸ W.E.B. DuBois, “The Souls of Black Folk,” in *The Norton Anthology of African American Literature*, eds. Henry Louis Gates and Nellie Y. McKay (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2004), 694.

³⁹ August Meier, *Negro Thought in America, 1880-1915: Racial Ideologies in the Age of Booker T. Washington* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1964), 190.

⁴⁰ *Ibid*, 202.

⁴¹ *Ibid*, 203.

member⁴² Nannie H. Burroughs was urging African Americans to reject white beauty standards entirely. In her 1904 article “Not Color But Character,” she disdained what she called America’s “colorphobia,”⁴³ contending that a “true woman wouldn’t give a cent” for bleached skin and straightened hair – what she called “a superficial nothing.”⁴⁴ The change, then, Burroughs argued, needed to come from within first, before the race would improve as a whole. Indeed, she stated, “If Negro women would use half the time they spend in trying to get white in trying to get better, the race would move forward apace, but the production of more white Negroes, whether home-made or born that way, that does not bring to the race more character and worth, are unwelcome guests that may be excused at any time.”⁴⁵ A progressive African American race, she seemed to be saying, had no room for those who did not recognize their own value and worth.

New African-American Voices, 1910-1928

What Burroughs in fact revealed in her article was a focus on inner goals that characterized the development of the New Negro. While the Washington/DuBois debate was largely expressed in economic terms, negotiating “American democratic ideals” in relation to African Americans’ “outer life,”⁴⁶ dialogues surrounding beauty standards turned that discussion inward, emphasizing a necessity to reconcile one’s own identity as a key component in racial uplift. It was in the 1910s, as several black-owned beauty companies such as the Overton-Hygienic Manufacturing Company, Annie Malone’s Poro Company, and the Walker

⁴² A’Lelia Bundles, *On Her Own Ground: The Life and Times of Madam C.J. Walker* (New York: Scribner, 2001), 77.

⁴³ Nannie Burroughs, “Not Color But Character,” *Voice of the Negro* 1 (July 1904), 277.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 278.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 278.

⁴⁶ August Meier, *Negro Thought in America, 1880-1915: Racial Ideologies in the Age of Booker T. Washington* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1964), 257.

Manufacturing Company, all of which had entered the scene at the turn of the century⁴⁷ and all of which were beginning in the next decade to rise in popularity, that advertisements started to offer on a wider scale a different kind of voice for the masses – one that was for African Americans, *by* African Americans.

Thus while many advertisements of the 1910s and 1920s often still extolled “New Discover[ies] of “scientific hair treatment[s]” that would work as straighteners, there was also an increased focus on hair growth as the goal and on preventative measures against scalp diseases such as dandruff.⁴⁸ Even the more obscure companies, in this case the Joyner-Gilmore Company based in Rochester, New York, proclaimed that their “New Discovery” could produce results in only “ten minutes a day...without the use of drugs.”⁴⁹ Similarly, the Newell System promised relief from “tight, itching scalp, Dandruff, Falling or Breaking Hair, or Bald Spots” with its hair-growing product Jeckey.⁵⁰ In this way, the shifted emphasis of these hair product advertisements revealed the agenda of African American businesses in this time period. A new focus on common scalp diseases displaced the idea of black hair as inherently “kinky, harsh, knotty, stubborn, short and thin,”⁵¹ and implied instead that many of the frustrations African Americans might feel actually resulted from exterior forces like skin conditions. In other words, these ads shifted the blame, so that rather than telling African Americans that their hair was inherently defective, they attributed some these qualities to more controllable factors, like psoriasis or tetter. In terms of granting African Americans agency in the negotiation of their position in American

⁴⁷ Ayana D. Byrd and Lori L. Tharps, *Hair Story: Untangling the Roots of Black Hair in America* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2001), 31.

⁴⁸ Advertisement, Joyner-Gilmore Company, *The Pittsburgh Courier*, March 25, 1911.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Advertisement, Newell, *The Chicago Defender*, April 5, 1919

⁵¹ Advertisement, Scott Remedy Company, *The Baltimore Afro-American*, July 26, 1902

society, this shift in emphasis was of major importance. For discovering identity, a belief that one's hair was *not* intrinsically deficient in its natural state was key.

This cultivation of a new African American voice was punctuated by the concurrently burgeoning new black press that was (as previously discussed) consciously *not* neutral on political or economic matters. In fact, the *Chicago Defender's* very name originated from its founder Richard Abbott's explicit "pledge to be a defender of blacks" in his production of the paper. To that end, he adopted from the outset a tone modeled on the sensationalized Yellow Journalism of William Randolph Hearst and Joseph Pulitzer.⁵² When questioned, Abbott remained "adamant" that he would not be objective: this was "an advocacy press," and it would always maintain its bias towards blacks.⁵³ As such, Abbott was also unabashed about offering his suggestions on the best methods for African Americans to better their condition. Easily most representative of this was his campaign that encouraged southern blacks to abandon the South in exchange for the relative freedom of Northern cities, in a move he called the "'Great Northern Drive'"⁵⁴ – and, in fact, many heeded his suggestion. In what came to be known as the Great Migration, an exodus northward brought 500,000 rural Southerners to Northern cities over the course of the decade, a trend that would continue in waves (albeit smaller ones) until the 1970s.⁵⁵

While Abbott obviously did not single-handedly cause the Great Migration, the continual propaganda exalting the virtues of northern living certainly was influential.⁵⁶ Though the *Defender* faced some suppression from white southerners, particularly as they became concerned

⁵² Patrick S Washburn, *The African American Newspaper: Voice of Freedom* (Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 2006), 83.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 84.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 84.

⁵⁵ James R. Grossman, "A Chance to Make Good: 1900-1929," in *To Make Our World Anew: A History of African Americans from 1880*, eds. Robin Kelley & Earl Lewis (United States: Oxford University Press, 2000), 108.

⁵⁶ Patrick S Washburn, *The African American Newspaper: Voice of Freedom* (Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 2006), 87.

about losing large amounts of their labor force as blacks moved North,⁵⁷ as well as the continued challenge of illiteracy among blacks, it was estimated that each copy of the paper was read by five to seven people.⁵⁸ By sheer numbers, then, aided by the restrictive social and economic structures established in the South, Abbott was a “key” explanation, if not for the fact of the Migration itself, at least in part for its magnitude.⁵⁹

This movement demonstrated a desire for economic control that the burgeoning black hair care industry would display as well, driven primarily by the absence of job openings. Particularly in the first decade of the century, economic opportunities for African Americans were extremely limited in any region of the United States: industrial jobs for men in Northern and Western cities – where the majority of black people lived in these regions⁶⁰ - were available only sporadically,⁶¹ and while domestic work for women was more readily available than were such factory jobs, the pay was a mere “pittance.”⁶² Meanwhile, the sharecropping system established in the rural South, which maintained the structure of plantation after the Civil War, kept many African Americans in a virtual state of slavery. Taxes on the crops they grew, on land they rarely owned, meant that many African American families could remain indebted to a white landlord almost indefinitely.

One pivotal difference, however, between the condition of black rural Southerners mid-1910s and those who worked the plantations during slavery was the opportunity for movement. Though economic hardships and the day-to-day strains of existing within a segregated society

⁵⁷ Patrick S Washburn, *The African American Newspaper: Voice of Freedom* (Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 2006), 95.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 83.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 87.

⁶⁰ James R. Grossman, “A Chance to Make Good: 1900-1929,” in *To Make Our World Anew: A History of African Americans from 1880*, eds. Robin Kelley & Earl Lewis (United States: Oxford University Press, 2000), 77.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 76.

⁶² *Ibid.*

meant movement might not have been simple or straightforward, the act of leaving one farm to work on another was not as much about the practicality of the issue as it was about reclaiming and asserting one's independence in a way that he could never do under slavery. Thus, migration became a way of rejecting the notion that African Americans could only exist within certain prescribed sectors of the society.⁶³ Therefore when the United States entered World War I in 1917, forcing factory owners to hire African Americans to fill the positions white laborers had vacated, the Great Migration peaked. The highest number of African Americans moved North between 1915 and 1919, with 61,000 moving in this time span to Chicago alone.⁶⁴ The reasons for leaving the South in this era had been mounting: continued prejudices in the South were punctuated by a rise in the number of lynchings, and disastrous crop crises, including a boll weevil infestation in Georgia and "sugar industry problems" in Louisiana, led to high rates of unemployment among the heavily rural black population.⁶⁵ These factors, when combined with the sudden opportunity for employment in the industrial urban North, meant that Abbott's repeated suggestions to move there likely fell on willing ears. Besides the practical (and crucial) economic motivation, migration north allowed for the ultimate rebellion against the restrictive nature of rural Southern life: abandoning the system entirely.

It was to this tradition of reclaiming identity through control over one's economic situation that black hair care entrepreneurs alluded when their 1920s advertisements asked questions like, "Do You Need Money? If So, This Is Your Chance." In framing their ad in unequivocally economic language, in this case the Overton-Hygienic Manufacturing Company acknowledged the difficulties of finding employment; in fact by cautioning readers that "*This Is*

⁶³ James R. Grossman, "A Chance to Make Good: 1900-1929," in *To Make Our World Anew: A History of African Americans from 1880*, eds. Robin Kelley & Earl Lewis (United States: Oxford University Press, 2000), 81.

⁶⁴ Patrick S Washburn, *The African American Newspaper: Voice of Freedom* (Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 2006), 86.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

Your Chance,” (emphasis mine) the clear indication was that African Americans might not have had many others. Urging “Reliable and Energetic Persons” to become sales agents for the High-Brown product line, this ad went on to warn, “YOU CAN’T AFFORD TO GAMBLE...if you wish all-year round steady employment—Opportunity knocks.”⁶⁶ The main draw of this advertisement was clearly the possibility of employment; the product itself was secondary.

Indeed, the very idea of the sales agent itself embodied the notion of freedom of movement. Beyond the potential for economic self-sufficiency that would come as the result of a steady salary, the ability to work as a sales agent implied independent travel in the interest of creating and expanding one’s customer base. Anthony Overton, of course, was not the first to utilize a business model centered on granting greater economic voice to individuals – empowering employees to direct their own financial situation – in the form of door-to-door sales. Even before Madam Walker became successful, there was entrepreneur and contemporary competitor Annie Malone’s Poro Company, under which Walker herself was trained.

Even as the structure of the Poro Company offered individuals greater economic autonomy, however, inherent as well in the business model was the importance of community building and solidarity with one’s neighbors. As an agent’s success depended on the size of her clientele, it was necessary for her to make connections and reach out to those who lived near her. It is no surprise, then, that Malone frequently referred to her network of agents as “The PORO Family”⁶⁷; in the degree of trust people came to associate with those who provided their hair care, the interdependence of these networks, and the possession of the common goal of racial

⁶⁶ Overton-Hygienic Manufacturing Company Advertisement, 1923, <http://www.ci.chi.il.us/Landmarks/O/Overton2.html> [accessed March 7, 2009].

⁶⁷ Program for 1924 Poro Company Performance, “A Trip to Monrovia Liberia by the PORO Family,” Claude Barnett Papers, Chicago Historical Society.

uplift,⁶⁸ the company shared similar qualities with a family unit. It was also likely significant that this “family” consisted of women whose employment opportunities had previously been limited primarily to domestic work. While in many ways hair care was still inherently linked with the domestic sphere (a notion discussed in more depth in Chapter 2), this field of work gave women access to a piece of the business world and in the training process, Poro Beauty School Gladys Porter remarked, the women often formed a lasting bond.⁶⁹

The advertisements for the Poro Company in the 1910s, however, suggested very little of this focus on community. Like others of this era, many of her advertisements emphasized hair growth; in fact, one ad that ran for much of the decade simply featured the photo a young woman, Miss Juanita Toliver, and the caption, “PORO Hair Grower, 50¢ a Box, 10¢ extra out of city, Treatment \$1.50, 3240 Dearborn St., Chicago.”⁷⁰ Presumably, though there was no before image, nor explicit testimonial, Toliver was enjoying the hair that fell well below her shoulders as the direct result of using Poro products. There was also the occasional advertisement sponsored by beauticians who had completed Poro training and were soliciting clients individually,⁷¹ a fact that in and of itself speaks to the prestige of this business, that new hair specialists felt it would help their trade to capitalize on the Poro name. Overall, though, Malone’s advertisements in this decade gave little hint of the structure of the company.

In fact, one ad in particular read as almost defensive, as Malone tried to remind readers of the primacy of her own product over all others. “The Original Poro Hair Grower,” the heading read, positioned over photos of Malone herself and a Mrs. L.L. Roberts, whose connection to the

⁶⁸ Ayana D. Byrd and Lori L. Tharps, *Hair Story: Untangling the Roots of Black Hair in America* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2001), 31.

⁶⁹ Gladys L. Porter, *Three Negro Pioneers in Beauty Culture* (New York: Vantage Press, 1966), 21.

⁷⁰ Advertisement, Poro Company, *The Chicago Defender*, September 24, 1910.

⁷¹ See, for example: Advertisement, Poro Hair Grower, *The Chicago Defender*, January 10, 1914; Advertisement, Margrette Fountain, *The Chicago Defender*, May 30, 1914.

company was not made clear. Their pictures were captioned with their own brief testimonies: “4 Years ago my Hair was only a finger-length, and my temples were bald half way up my head,” read Malone’s. Roberts’ stated, “4 Years ago my Hair just covered my shoulders.” The text of the ad read, in part, as follows:

Imitation is the sincerest flattery: and the fact that so many people in St. Louis and throughout the country think it worth while to imitate “PORO” HAIR GROWER is the best proof of the merits of “Poro.” We were the first to engage in the business of growing the hair regardless of its condition and the condition of the scalp, and in our work have used the preparation which is known as “Poro.” This is made and sold exclusively by myself. I have the exclusive right to the name, and I, alone, know the secret of the composition that bears that name...

Be sure that the name “Poro” is on every box; not genuine without it.

If your hair is dry harsh, brittle and falling out—use “Poro.”

It stops the falling and starts the hair to growing at once.⁷²

Like those ads examined previously, this ad did reveal a move towards reclaiming the language surrounding beauty standards: nothing in the diction of this ad that suggested inherent deficiencies in African American qualities. Yet, there is also no suggestion of a greater commitment on the part of its company’s founder to wider racial uplift. An historian would not know from this ad anything of Malone’s philanthropic work, including support for organizations like the YMCA in Saint Louis, and the establishment of an orphanage and a beauty college;⁷³ nor could he know that the incentives offered to her agents after the completion of training, and plaques to top-selling agents attempted to “instill...a sense of pride into those who completed the training process.”⁷⁴ These shortcomings reveal once more the limitations of advertisements as a primary document, and serve as a caution against using such documents to definitively suggest

⁷² Advertisement, Poro Company, *The Pittsburgh Courier*, March 25, 1911.

⁷³ Ayana D. Byrd and Lori L. Tharps, *Hair Story: Untangling the Roots of Black Hair in America* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2001), 32.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*

the motivation of any of these companies. Still these ads are instructive in examining the language and images available to the greater public, if not always the full intentions of the companies themselves.

At the same time, the limitations of advertisement as a medium do not preclude their purposeful and directed utilization as a method of promoting the self-confidence and character development (the “inner goals”) of which Burroughs wrote. Of course, the economic usefulness (the “outer goals”) was also clear: in the community that resulted from this “sales strategy that [at the time] was being used [along with the Poro Company] throughout the nation by a number of female entrepreneurs”⁷⁵ one could easily find a push for African American self-sufficiency. Though activists such as Marcus Garvey, founder of the Universal Negro Improvement Association advocated explicitly for self-sufficiency, stating that the “Negro is ready...to carve out a pathway for himself in the course of his life... to do things for himself and by himself,”⁷⁶ companies like Overton’s, Walker’s, and Malone’s benefited from segregated black communities without taking an open stand for or against them. This was the balancing act all black-owned businesses faced in this era, for while “separate was almost never equal,” institutions born out of segregation were still a source of pride to the African American community, as well as a space where their specific needs could be met “with respect and in a businesslike fashion.”⁷⁷

The goals of self-sufficient African American companies, then, return to the basic desire to obtain independence from mainstream expectations and ownership over one’s own portrayals in society. As with the Great Migration, black-owned businesses fought not only for the practical

⁷⁵ Ayana D. Byrd and Lori L. Tharps, *Hair Story: Untangling the Roots of Black Hair in America* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2001), 32.

⁷⁶ Marcus Garvey, “The Future As I See It,” in *The Norton Anthology of African American Literature*, eds. Henry Louis Gates and Nellie Y. McKay (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2004), 1000.

⁷⁷ James R. Grossman, “A Chance to Make Good: 1900-1929,” in *To Make Our World Anew: A History of African Americans from 1880*, eds. Robin Kelley & Earl Lewis (United States: Oxford University Press, 2000), 93, 95.

concept of economic stability, but also for the abstract, conceptual victory: the ability to dictate one's own future, in this case by reclaiming and redefining black images. This was a goal frequently reflected not only in the language, but the content of advertisements. One method of redefining black appearance was actually teaching African American women how to care for their hair. To this end, outside of lexical self-definition, much of their purpose seemed to be simple instruction: ads of the later 1910s and 1920s were extremely explicit in their portrayal of what needed to be done in terms of hair care methodology. Furthermore, there was a reframing of language to make beauty about *us*. Black women were trying to move away from white definitions that trapped African-American women into language that condemned black hair as a handicap – something that needed to be altered from its natural state to be attractive and to allow for a normal life as a regular part of American society.⁷⁸

The instructional aspect of these advertisements was key, as it revealed a deep connection to and understanding of the African American female community. Beyond bolstering self-esteem by shifting the emphasis away from intrinsic deficiencies (a goal that worked from the assumption that internal confidence was essential to outer success), a focus on instruction demonstrated an appreciation for the unique societal position of African Americans. At the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth centuries, these new methods for hair care were simply not widely known among or available to black women. Though some African Americans had successfully created makeshift means of hair care while enslaved, the new move towards chemically based products and scientific methods was initially a largely urban phenomenon.⁷⁹ Among those still living in rural areas scalp disease was widespread, particularly for those

⁷⁸ Noliwe Rooks, *Hair Raising: Beauty, Culture, and African American Women* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press: 2000), 33.

⁷⁹ A'Lelia Bundles, *On Her Own Ground: The Life and Times of Madam C.J. Walker* (New York: Scribner, 2001), 69.

without indoor plumbing, and those who had been convinced by “old wives’ tales...that monthly hair shampoos were more than sufficient.”⁸⁰ As a result, one’s hair came to serve as a symbol of social status and economic position. Particularly in the wake of the Great Migration, when there were marked differences between the needs and capabilities of the rural South and the more urban-centered (at least from the African American point of view) Northern industrial areas, how a woman cared (or didn’t) for her hair could be an immediate giveaway of her profession and status in life.⁸¹ As rural women were prone to scalp diseases because of the conditions in which they lived, it follows that their hair then became an indicator to society of one’s lifestyle and position on the social continuum. In this way, then, hair could as a way of creating a sense of an “other” – someone who was different from the normative standards of any given era, and, it would follow, someone who was presumably not fit to exist within the confines of the American social strata, including serving as contenders in the workforce. It was in part for this reason that a segment of Richard Abbott’s campaign to bring rural Southerners to Northern cities involved teaching them how to behave and dress appropriately in their new home. His advice included comments such as, “Don’t appear on the street with old dust caps, dirty aprons and ragged clothes.”⁸² His concern about the way these new migrants dressed in public highlight the importance of appearance as a signifier of difference.

Thus, a Madam Walker ad that explained that “long and beautiful hair, a healthy scalp and a lovely smooth complexion” were the result of “constant care—not luck”⁸³ was not making that assertion in a vacuum. Rather, the didactic tone was an acknowledgement of the unique

⁸⁰ A’Lelia Bundles, *On Her Own Ground: The Life and Times of Madam C.J. Walker* (New York: Scribner, 2001), 62.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*

⁸² Patrick S Washburn, *The African American Newspaper: Voice of Freedom* (Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 2006), 93.

⁸³ Advertisement, Walker Manufacturing Company, *The Pittsburgh Courier*, March 15, 1924.

experiences of African American women with common ailments like tetter, lice, and psoriasis. Even companies without the resources of the Walker Manufacturing Company were concerned with the education of their clientele. An ad for Albright's Hair Grower, for example, though occupying a less conspicuous and much smaller area of the Society page than was the Walker ad just discussed, was sure to remind consumers to read the "full directions" contained in their product order on "how to care for hair." Therefore what Albright did not have space to explain here, the client can learn from the instructions included with the product – or, as the ad goes on, by becoming an agent ("Wanted, a thousand agents"), or by taking Albright's "Beauty Culture Course by mail."⁸⁴ Though these kinds of instructional materials may not have been limited to African Americans, the significance here is that they were now being made available to this population that had previously been underserved.

Beyond simply demonstrating recognition of the limitations of black women's knowledge about hair care, beauty ads that taught African Americans how to improve their appearance suggested an attempt to grant black women more control over how they were viewed in society. "Here are a few hints that will improve the outward appearance as to the expression," offered a Kashmir ad that explained the importance of "beautiful eyes," as they "are called 'windows to the soul.'"⁸⁵ A Walker Company ad stated simply, "Good Looks: An Easy road to fame. Here's the way to have them."⁸⁶ The Overton-Hygienic Company even printed "An Invitation for you to attend the opening of 'THE HIGH-BROWN'": an event in which "[t]he young lady in charge will take pleasure in demonstrating the superior quality and effectiveness of the products we manufacture." Addressing the letter to "our friends," the ad closed with the enjoinder, "Not

⁸⁴ Advertisement, Mrs. B.E. Albright, *The Chicago Defender*, December 13, 1919.

⁸⁵ Advertisement, Kashmir Chemical Company, *The Chicago Defender*, October 5, 1918.

⁸⁶ Advertisement, Walker Manufacturing Company, *The Pittsburgh Courier*, April 9, 1927.

only do we especially request your appearance, but shall look for you. Don't disappoint us."⁸⁷ Such wording tried to convey a personal investment on the part of the advertiser in the customer's successful use of the product. The coaxing tone took on that almost of a conspirator – we understand your experiences, they seemed to be saying, and in teaching you how to control your own appearance, we will teach you to take control of your portrayal in society.

The development and message of the black hair care industry, however, was neither as straightforward nor as wholly positive or encouraging as these ads may suggest. Ads from the Walker Manufacturing Company in particular might provide a skewed view of all black-owned beauty companies. While hers were certainly useful and necessary to any study of this period, Madam Walker's ads, especially into the 1920s, were much more elaborate, more explicit in message, and more numerous than many of the smaller companies likely had the funding to be. Throughout the 1910s and 1920s, Walker Manufacturing Company published a myriad of ads, often full-page,⁸⁸ utilizing taglines such as "Constant Care—Not Luck,"⁸⁹ "Makes Your Hair Look It's [sic] Best,"⁹⁰ and "Why Not Earn More Money – Work Shorter Hours – Better Your Condition? Learn Beauty Culture: 'The Trade of No Regrets.'"⁹¹ One cannot forget, however, that though they may have had lofty goals and admirable ideologies, in the end, the goal of these companies was to sell their product. To be sure, some entrepreneurs made clear their desire to work towards uplift of the race as a whole through the success of their product lines and schools. Malone's philanthropic work and Walker's political involvement are clear examples of that. Even the efforts of Claude Barnett, founder of the Kashmir Company, to increase white

⁸⁷ Advertisement, Overton-Hygienic Manufacturing Company, *The Chicago Defender*, March 6, 1915.

⁸⁸ Kathy Peiss, *Hope in a Jar: The Making of America's Beauty Culture* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1998), 210.

⁸⁹ Advertisement, Walker Manufacturing Company *The Chicago Defender*, December 9, 1922.

⁹⁰ Advertisement, Walker Manufacturing Company *The Pittsburgh Courier*, October 11, 1924.

⁹¹ Advertisement, Walker Manufacturing Company *The New York Amsterdam News*, June 3, 1925.

recognition of a black consumer base in order to grant African Americans a clear and contributive citizenship based on their economic participation⁹² shows a vested interest in the deeper issues that contextualized the beauty products.

Still, the goal was to draw in new customers, and often times the way advertisements attempted to do so was to offer potential clients a gateway into the mainstream, by way of normative physical qualities such as “Hair Smooth Silky and Glossy”⁹³ and “skin light, clear, smooth, and aglow with health.”⁹⁴ Thus, despite the protests of women like Burroughs, who a decade before had argued for an acceptance of character over color and lamented Negroes’ own “colorphobia,”⁹⁵ there were still ads that promised African American women to brighten their skin and straighten their hair, and in so doing, make them beautiful.

One woman whose ads encompassed this constant tension between working one’s way into the mainstream by adopting white features versus celebrating African heritage was business owner Madame Perkins. Though an advertisement for her product line, which ran throughout the 1910s, followed the conventions of beauty advertisements in both structure and content, Perkins distinguishes herself from her contemporaries in her expressed goals for the race. Businesslike in her approach, Mme. T.D. Perkins first identified herself as a “Scientific Scalp Specialist,” gave her address, and informed her audience in the first sentence of the ad that she “has spent five years in the study of the scalp.” The paragraph went on to say,

⁹² As discussed more in Chapter 2, Claude Barnett fought for the recognition of African American consumers by white companies. Barnett worked from the notion that in a society largely based on consumerism, white recognition of black consumers would, one, make the advertising campaigns of these companies more sensitive to black needs, and two, be a step towards recognition of African Americans as viable and essential members of society. (Roland Marchand, *Advertising the American Dream* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, California: University of California Press, 1985), 64; Susannah Walker, *Style and Status: Selling Beauty to African American Women, 1920-1975* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2007), 16.)

⁹³ Advertisement, Kinkout, *The Chicago Defender*, August 9, 1924.

⁹⁴ Advertisement, Walker Manufacturing Company, *The Pittsburgh Courier*, October 27, 1928.

⁹⁵ Nannie Burroughs, “Not Color But Character,” *Voice of the Negro* 1 (July 1904), 277.

No matter how dark your skin is, Madame Perkins' matchless scalp preparations and scientific method of treatment for cultivating, beautifying and growing the hair will grow your hair if there is no physical ailment to prevent. Her treatments have been successful where all others have failed. Have you written her? If not, and you want hair like her own, write her today. Be sure to enclose a four-cent stamp and write your name and address very plain if you expect a reply. Don't write unless you mean business. No agents wanted.⁹⁶

She explicitly *told* her audience that she meant business – but even without that cue, the tone was clinical and scientific. While this businesslike approach might have been the result of her own personality or preferences, it foreshadowed a balancing act that would become a greater issue in the following decade about the struggle for professionalism and for recognition of the beauty industry as a legitimate and necessary branch of business.⁹⁷ In its seeming attempt to maintain a businesslike tone, however, this ad lacked all the warmth of those ads that excitedly promised results in “1 minute”⁹⁸ or, as we saw with the Overton-Hygienic Manufacturing Company, that invited attendance at a display room opening.⁹⁹ It certainly strayed from ads that informed customers of their “Big Opportunity”¹⁰⁰ to find steady employment as a sales agent for a particular company. Thus, while Perkins might have wanted to provide black women with a product to improve their appearances, in neither her business model nor the structure of her company did she emphasize community building as necessary to the betterment of African American lives.

One must of course remember the limitations of advertisements as a primary source. As the early advertisements of the Poro Company demonstrated, ads did not necessarily reveal the

⁹⁶ Advertisement, T.D.P. Scientific Scalp Preparation, *The Chicago Defender*, August 19, 1911.

⁹⁷ Julie A. Willett, *Permanent Waves: The Making of the American Beauty Shop* (New York: New York University Press, 2000), 89.

⁹⁸ Advertisement, Kinkout, *The Chicago Defender*, August 9, 1924.

⁹⁹ Advertisement, Overton-Hygienic Manufacturing Company, *The Chicago Defender*, March 6, 1915.

¹⁰⁰ Advertisement, Poro, *The Chicago Defender*, March 31, 1928.

beliefs of a company's owner. The 1911 Poro Company ad previously discussed was just as clinical and even defensive in its tone,¹⁰¹ yet Malone proved through her extracurricular actions that she was unquestionably committed to racial uplift on a wider scale. Doubtless partially a result of increased financial success, Poro advertisements moving into the 1920s became more demonstrative of this fact.¹⁰² Much more elaborate in their design, such advertisements shifted their focus from Malone's role in the company onto the reader's potential role as an agent, and onto the effects of the product itself.¹⁰³ Perhaps had Madame Perkins' company met with similar financial success, she would have made a comparable shift; her own motivations cannot be gleaned from the advertisement alone.

The text of this Perkins ad did, however, expose another tension not present in Malone's advertisements, and indicative of the complex balance between celebrating African features and adapting European ones. "Madame Perkins' matchless scalp preparations and scientific method of treatment for cultivating, beautifying and growing the hair will grow your hair if there is no physical ailment to prevent," she promised – "No matter how dark your skin is." This statement exhibits an inevitable linkage of skin tone and hair texture in the beauty industry, but more importantly, it betrays a belief on the part of some black businesswomen that African features must be diminished – presumably to make room for European ones. Thus even as she offered a way for women to better control how they are perceived by better controlling their hair, she was succumbing to the idea that the darker the skin, the harder it was to soften and shape the hair –

¹⁰¹ Advertisement, Poro Company, *The Pittsburgh Courier*, March 25, 1911.

¹⁰² The change in Malone's focus was also in part on the advice of Kashmir Company and Associate Negro Press founder Charles Barnett, who was pushing for exclusive Negro control over the hair care industry. White control was simply unacceptable to him in a field that had the opportunity to influence such an important facet of African American life as self-perception based on beauty standards, and thus he believed that companies like Walker, Poro, and Overton needed to step up their advertising campaigns in order to obtain control over the industry. (February 8, 1929 letter from Charles Barnett to Annie Malone, from private collection of Kathy Peiss)

¹⁰³ See for example: Advertisement, Poro Company, *The Pittsburgh Courier*, January 2, 1926; Advertisement, Poro Company, *The Chicago Defender*, March 31, 1928; Advertisement, Poro Company, *The Pittsburgh Courier*, November 23, 1929.

that is, the farther the features from European ones, the more difficult it would be to straighten them out.

While the first paragraph gave a basic overview of her services, the second part of the ad shifted to first person narration and tailored much of the same information to a specifically female crowd. The two sections were separated by before and after pictures (presumably of Madame Perkins herself, though the photos were not explicitly labeled) with a heading that read, “This Tells the Story,” and the caption, “WOMEN! STOP! WAIT! LISTEN! READ! If a Woman have long hair, it is a Glory to Her: 1 Cor., 11-15/Every Woman Can Have that Glory if She Wishes It.” “This is for you,” the ad continued. “No more ironed hair, but soft, long, beautiful hair that need not be put on the dresser on retiring.” Perkins went on to give her own testimony (“With these treatments my hair grew 17 inches in two years. It had remained one length (four inches) for 15 years.”), boasting that, “I am the only woman of the race growing hair today who can show the public the real length of my hair when I first began treating it.” Her ad contained an interesting divergence from other entrepreneurs, though: while she held herself as an example as did women like Walker and Malone, she did not want to share her business. She was sure to establish herself as a clear part of the African American community, also acknowledging the “diseases” that afflicted black women: “My treatment stops falling hair or breaking off, cures split ends, removes dandruff and scalp scurf, causes the hair to grow long, no matter how short; soft, no matter how harsh; thick, no matter how thin; straight from the bulbs, no matter how kinky.” However, though she understood the challenges black women faced, she did not want the same kind of business – reminding readers again in the second paragraph, “I do not have agents,” and signing off “The T.D.P. Scientific Scalp Preparation, Madam Perkins, Sole Agent.”

Also at play in this advertisement was a deeper issue of the role of religion in creating and maintaining particular beauty standards for women in general, but especially for African American women. Following emancipation, religion played a critical role in African American identity formation, as “Black responses to segregation and racism in the United States were still largely formulated through the church.”¹⁰⁴ Of course, not all African Americans were members of churches, nor did they all identify as Christian. In fact, many purposely broke away from what they felt was a white version of Christianity: black Jewish and Muslim communities formed and expanded in the early 1900s. Still, 33 percent of African Americans were church members at the close of the nineteenth century.¹⁰⁵ Moreover, churches did not serve only as religious centers: “Some churches acted as welfare agencies, organizing for community service.”¹⁰⁶ Thus for those who did accept the teachings of Christianity, the church played an important role in one’s social as well as religious life.

Though this ad skimmed over the question by quoting scripture in its caption without further discussion, it was extraordinarily significant that the point of reference Madam Perkins provided for these normative beauty values was the Bible. “If a woman has long hair, it is a glory to her; for her hair is given to her as a covering.”¹⁰⁷ It makes sense then that so much of the advertising in this era would focus on hair growth – that in fact Perkins’ main argument for her own hair as an example was the amount it had grown in a period of two years. This biblical passage was the same that Madam Walker found troubling when she was perfecting her formula for her own Wonderful Hair Grower. A native of the South, Walker too had problems with her

¹⁰⁴ Albert J. Raboteau, *Canaan Land: A Religious History of African Americans* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 78.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid*, 79.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid*, 85.

¹⁰⁷ 1 Corinthians 11:15, Scripture taken from the New King James Version. Copyright 1979, 1980, 1982 by Thomas Nelson, Inc.

hair breaking and with slow growth; the passages in the Bible seemed like a condemnation, rather than a guide.¹⁰⁸

The Development of the New Negro

Even though many of the normative values of beauty up to this point had been problematic in some aspect, the late 1910s and 1920s produced what would come to be known as the “New Negro,” an African American who was “race-conscious, assertive, [and] race-proud...who was ‘digging up his past,’ achieving middle-class status and creating an artistic expression of his separate group life while aiming at integration into American society.”¹⁰⁹ This was the manifestation of the self-help versus integration debate in a single body, for as August Meier contends, “American democratic ideals were the objectives of the Negro’s outer life, but those of his inner life, resulting from ‘an attempt to repair a damaged group psychology and reshape a warped social perspective,’ took the form of a more positive self respect and self-reliance.”¹¹⁰ In other words, here was an African American aware of his own worth, and expectant of rights in return.¹¹¹

Grounded in the ideologies of Washington and DuBois, notions of “race pride, solidarity, and self-help” were key to the development of this new type of Negro; by extension, the Great Migration was also a significant contributor.¹¹² As previously discussed, the sheer action of movement was an important ideological victory for newly freed African Americans negotiating their independence, and the relocation out of the South likely provided much of the self-

¹⁰⁸ A’Lelia Bundles, *On Her Own Ground: The Life and Times of Madam C.J. Walker* (New York: Scribner, 2001), 61.

¹⁰⁹ August Meier, *Negro Thought in America, 1880-1915: Racial Ideologies in the Age of Booker T. Washington* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1964), 256.

¹¹⁰ Ibid, 257.

¹¹¹ Ibid, 259.

¹¹² Ibid, 259.

confidence that characterized the New Negro. On a more practical level, though, the exodus northward produced a population of urban blacks clearly motivated to create a new life for themselves. African Americans relocating to Chicago, Philadelphia, or New York were doing so in order to produce, in whatever way the term was meaningful to them. The resultant artistic, literary, and business ventures – including the beauty industry – are proof of this desire.

The New Negro was also committed to writing his own history – filling in the gaps in the histories written by the mainstream, and this process would inform other aspects of African American life, including the business sector. For the most part, the Negro history movement served as a way to instill race pride and restore dignity to those whom mainstream values had taught they were inferior.¹¹³ What this movement (perhaps inadvertently) revealed, though, was the complicated relationship between American blacks and their African roots. We have seen that African Americans were not fully *American* – physically marked with dark complexions, they were always kept a hyphen’s distance away. Doubtless, it was this distance that partially drove the history movement, to discover the ancestry that condemned African Americans to eternal separation from the mainstream. Yet African Americans did not see themselves entirely akin to Africans, despite the fact that they evolved from them. Indeed, “despite the widespread pride in the antique African past [seen in the beginning of the twentieth century], generally Negroes accepted white stereotypes as to the primitiveness of its contemporary culture.”¹¹⁴ Perhaps the key is that African Americans knew that they had *evolved* from African heritage – leading to the belief that they had become more civilized (read: superior) over the course of the generations away from the motherland.

¹¹³ August Meier, *Negro Thought in America, 1880-1915: Racial Ideologies in the Age of Booker T. Washington* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1964), 261, 263.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid*, 264.

A similar trend of simultaneously embracing yet establishing difference from one's African ancestry emerged in the black-owned sector of the beauty industry. While the networking systems of African Americans was inherent in the structure of the sales agent door-to-door model itself, the idea of Africanizing the beauty industry was inherent in the products themselves, and in the advertisements of these companies. Many of these businesses conjured up notions of the motherland in order to lend credibility and authenticity to their products. Madam Walker did it when she stated her formula had arrived from the mouth of an African man in a dream, and that it was created with the aid of a secret ingredient retrieved exclusively from Africa.¹¹⁵ Malone, too, drew on African influence in the name of her company: in fact, "Malone consciously incorporated African ideas into her business. The 1945 PORO Year Book states, 'The word Poro is African.'"¹¹⁶ In invoking this African community, historian Evelyn Phillips suggests, the structure of Malone's company was meaningful on a deeper level: "Her goals to enhance the status of Black women and the Black community mirrored the aims of the West African version of Poro."¹¹⁷ Thus, in both its exclusivity ("Only certified members sold PORO products"¹¹⁸) and attention "to the physical and worldly needs as well as the sacred needs of Black women,"¹¹⁹ Poro was modeled off of a Mende society.

While the foundational stories of these and other companies may have lent legitimacy in borrowing from African traditions, however, the parallels drawn were limited in their reach. It is certainly not insignificant that this is the tack these entrepreneurs took – and successfully – as it

¹¹⁵ A'Leia Bundles, *On Her Own Ground: The Life and Times of Madam C.J. Walker* (New York: Scribner, 2001), 60.

¹¹⁶ Evelyn Newman Phillips, "Annie Malone's PORO: Addressing Whiteness and Dressing Black-Bodied Women." *Transforming Anthropology* 11., no. 2 (July 2003). <http://proxy.library.upenn.edu:2060/cgi-bin/fulltext/120181072/PDFSTART> (accessed November 22, 2008).

¹¹⁷ Ibid.

¹¹⁸ Ibid.

¹¹⁹ Ibid.

demonstrates that the African American community certainly recognized their difference from the mainstream. Though Walker and Malone may have drawn their customers in by appealing to their African heritage, however, analysis of their marketing campaigns demonstrates that their companies were firmly situated in early twentieth century America. These were modern United States business in both the beauty standards they promoted, which, while increasingly more sympathetic to African Americans in language, still adapted European styles, and in the ideals they endorsed, which offered black people suggestions for achieving economic independence within the existing structure in the United States, without either endorsing segregation or encouraging emigration in any way. The nod to their African roots, then, was a way to acknowledge and represent their heritage, while still tailoring their messages to the specific situations of African *American* women.

The hair care industry was also firmly rooted in American beliefs in its treatment of gender roles – that is, in its endorsement of the status quo. While entrepreneurs like Malone perhaps promoted a shift in ideology by putting women in charge, she was putting women in charge of a pretty safe field – that is, one that was already considered a feminine industry. Businesswomen in the hair care field never suggested that women should be working in a trade that was anything other than female-dominated.¹²⁰ In the context of the persistent stereotypes of African Americans in the early 1900s, this question of gender performance and playing out socially proscribed roles was hugely important. As historian Michele Mitchell describes, perceptions of sexuality inform the gender roles people that adapt. The perception of black women was that they were “indiscriminate and insatiable” and “sexually available to any

¹²⁰ Julie A. Willett, *Permanent Waves: The Making of the American Beauty Shop* (New York: New York University Press, 2000), 55.

man.”¹²¹ Such beliefs “were anything but benign” – in fact, these “allegations rationalized lynching and ritualized rape, legitimated segregation, and restricted employment opportunities.”¹²² Activists, therefore, pushed for black women to take tradition radically in the other direction, upholding values that the mainstream would recognize as conservative and traditional in order to combat the stereotype of sexually promiscuous, degenerate women.¹²³ Moreover, “comparatively high” infant morality rates which Social Darwinists took to mean African Americans were “scarcely capable” of birthing healthy children¹²⁴ made changing the perception of African American sexuality as much a literal question of a biological survival¹²⁵ as it was of psychological one. Thus when African American hair companies appealed to women in what a modern audience may see as a stereotypical manner (suggesting that hair care products are most important when preparing for a date,¹²⁶ for example, or stating that becoming “a sweetheart, a wife, or an attentive, happy mother” were among all women’s top goals, along with being a “leader of society” or “an idol of the stage”¹²⁷), they were not doing so without reason or intent. In negotiating one’s way into the mainstream of America by aligning themselves with their values, there was plenty to suggest that adopting traditional gender roles could only be beneficial.

Indeed, the relationship between black-owned businesses and the products they sold was rather complex. Often times, while entrepreneurs in the industry may have fought for hair care

¹²¹ Michele Mitchell, *Righteous Propagation: African Americans and the Politics of Racial Destiny After Reconstruction* (Chapel Hill, North Carolina: The University of North Carolina Press, 2004), 11.

¹²² *Ibid.*, 13.

¹²³ *Ibid.*, 12.

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*, 10.

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*, 12.

¹²⁶ Advertisement, Walker Manufacturing Company, *The Pittsburgh Courier*, October 9, 1937.

¹²⁷ Advertisement, Walker Manufacturing Company, *The Pittsburgh Courier*, April 9, 1927.

on African-American terms, they did not actually *challenge* current beauty ideals; rather, they wanted their clients to feel beautiful and to take pride in themselves and their appearances, which frequently meant adopting the style that was most akin to the mainstream. This balancing act highlights what historians Ayana Byrd and Lori Tharps refer to as “a theme that will be seen throughout the modern history of Black hair in America—the contradictions that seem to lie at the core of creating an industry that is pro-Black while pushing an agenda of altering or ‘improving’ on Black features by making them appear ‘whiter.’”¹²⁸

The question of improvement is a key one, especially as it relates to racial uplift. Even as ads moved towards more positive language in the 1910s and 1920s, the fact that “improvement” in beauty did so often signify removing “blackheads, liver splotches,” and “tan,”¹²⁹ or getting the “Kinkout”¹³⁰ implied that black women were missing something innately – that they even needed to be improved suggested a deficiency. One Walker Company ad featured a portrait of a smiling young woman with curly hair and the headline, “Beauty: It’s Made in Our Shop!”¹³¹ An ad for Excelento Quinine Pomade opened with the line, “You, too, can have just as pretty hair [as the actress pictured above] by using Exelento.”¹³² The clear implication in both cases was that beauty did not exist prior to using the product. It is hard to separate, again, the need to attract a customer base from the advertisers’ own internalization of contemporary beauty standards. Indeed, no successful movement can be entirely progressive; though forward-thinking, black-owned businesses were still grounded in and bound to some of the conventions of the era. This fact, however, does not discount the contributions of these companies, nor does it mean they

¹²⁸ Ayana D. Byrd and Lori L. Tharps, *Hair Story: Untangling the Roots of Black Hair in America* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2001), 31.

¹²⁹ Advertisement, Overton-Hygienic Manufacturing Company, *The Chicago Defender*, December 13, 1919.

¹³⁰ Advertisement, Kinkout, *The Chicago Defender*, August 9, 1924.

¹³¹ Advertisement, Walker Manufacturing Company, *The New York Amsterdam News*, August 26, 1925.

¹³² Advertisement, Excelento Medicine Company, *The New York Amsterdam News*, March 2, 1927.

were not dedicated to the goals of creating new images and a new vocabulary for African American women.

Madam Walker's company provided an example of this, and a useful context in which to set the era, for in the story of her business lived the story of the African-American woman's struggle with her hair in the first few decades of the twentieth century. In Walker's background we saw the notion of hair as a strong indicator of class; in her vocabulary, the reframing and restructuring of language to make hair care about *us* and *our* definitions of blackness and beauty rather than white interpretations; in the structure of her ads, we got the feel of an instruction manual, teaching for the first time methods of hair care to a people who, up to that point, did not have the resources to develop a beauty industry.

Chapter 2

Hair Care in Crisis: Black Hair Politics in the Great Depression

*“At a very early age she had observed that
the good things of life are unevenly distributed.”*

- *Jessie Fauset, Plum Bun*¹³³

Black hair care companies faced a very different world in the early 1930s than they had at the turn of the century. The Stock Market crash of 1929 had launched a depression that affected every aspect of society, from product prices and employment to participation in social activities, including fraternal organizations and even churches.¹³⁴ These effects were disproportionately felt by the African American community, which continued to experience racial discrimination even as much of the rest of the country was feeling the benefits of New Deal legislation.¹³⁵ In fact, in the early years of his administration, President Franklin D. Roosevelt quite explicitly told a member of the NAACP that he would *not* push legislation that would help African Americans, arguing that his own support of legislation akin to an anti-lynching bill would only serve to alienate conservative Southern politicians whose support was crucial to the legislation he considered necessary “to keep America from collapsing.” He explained, ““I just can’t take that risk.””¹³⁶ Thus, while changing political and ideological trends began to remedy some of these

¹³³ Jessie Redmon Fauset, *Plum Bun* (New York: Frederick A. Stokes Company, 1929), 12.

¹³⁴ Joe William Trotter, Jr., “From a Raw Deal to a New Deal? 1929-1945,” in *To Make Our World Anew: A History of African Americans from 1880*, eds. Robin Kelley & Earl Lewis (United States: Oxford University Press, 2000), 131.

¹³⁵ *Ibid.*

¹³⁶ *Ibid.*, 135.

discrepancies in aid distribution as early as 1935,¹³⁷ many black Americans saw higher poverty levels than whites and little help from the government at the start of the Depression.

As a trade that could presumably be considered a luxury, the effect on the hair care industry, and hair salons in particular, was profound – especially since those who had long desired regulations on the industry saw the New Deal as a “golden opportunity” to have standards imposed on everything from workers’ wages to hours to product prices.¹³⁸ The implications of regulation in such an economy were enormous, for, according to historian Julie Willet, “[o]nce regulation was intertwined with New Deal legislation and American patriotism,” in the eyes of the bigger salons (that is, the competition to the smaller, “neighborhood shops”), “the neighborhood beautician was [seen as] a ‘cut-throat’ competitor and a ‘chiseler’ who threatened to undermine not only the beauty industry but also the nation’s economic recovery.”¹³⁹ This new legislation thus had the potential to be devastating to their business model of black-owned beauty companies, of which the most popular ones (Walker Manufacturing, Poro) essentially began through “amateur” work in clients’ kitchens, and whose success depended on client trust. Indeed, the emphasis on “top-down decision making and definitions of business legitimacy” favored by the National Recovery Administration (NRA)¹⁴⁰ stood in direct contradiction to the crux of the beautician-client relationship, which was personalized service tailored to the lifestyle of specific customers.

Of course, the effects of the Depression were not reserved for the professional field. According to historians Robin Kelley and Earl Lewis, blacks frequently related their social woes

¹³⁷ Joe William Trotter, Jr., “From a Raw Deal to a New Deal? 1929-1945,” in *To Make Our World Anew: A History of African Americans from 1880*, eds. Robin Kelley & Earl Lewis (United States: Oxford University Press, 2000), 138.

¹³⁸ Julie A. Willet, *Permanent Waves: The Making of the American Beauty Shop* (New York: New York University Press, 2000), 88.

¹³⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 89.

since the Depression hit with comments such as, “I don’t attend church as often as I used to. You know I am not fixed like I want to be—haven’t got the clothes I need.”¹⁴¹ This statement, when taken in conjunction with the era’s drop in social participation in clubs and fraternal orders, suggests that this decline was more than just the result of a lack of discretionary income for the activities themselves. The declaration that “You know I am not fixed like I want to be” reveals that a certain aesthetic had come to be expected at such gatherings. Thus while fashion and beauty could by many standards be considered an indulgence, they were not by any means considered superficial or extraneous to African American lives. On the contrary, standards of beauty affected, in part, black extracurricular positioning and participation.

Undoubtedly, struggling black Americans did often forego their beauty routine when money was short. Particularly in the rural south, where “a trip to the beauty parlor was even more of a ‘special treat,’” rising prices imposed under the new regulations necessarily served as a deterrent to salon visits.¹⁴² Still, the rise of the hair care industry in the first quarter of the century had ritualized outings to the hairdresser, and black women continued their beauty regimen throughout the Depression years, sometimes “pay[ing] with food if they did not have cash.”¹⁴³ Indeed, more than hair care alone, “salons offered beauty, relaxation, and sociability,”¹⁴⁴ which, as with the African Americans who stopped attending church events when they no longer felt they had the appropriate clothing, reinforces the notion that beauty had become inextricably tied

¹⁴¹ Joe William Trotter, Jr., “From a Raw Deal to a New Deal? 1929-1945,” in *To Make Our World Anew: A History of African Americans from 1880*, eds. Robin Kelley & Earl Lewis (United States: Oxford University Press, 2000), 131.

¹⁴² Julie A. Willet, *Permanent Waves: The Making of the American Beauty Shop* (New York: New York University Press, 2000), 104.

¹⁴³ Kathy Peiss, *Hope in a Jar: The Making of America’s Beauty Culture* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1998), 237.

¹⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

to social settings and expectations, in addition to aiding the development of a tight-knit black community.

That beauty was in any way directing, or even influencing, certain social cues meant that consumers' standards for the hair care industry were changing. Advances by those companies such as Walker, Overton, and Poro had boosted black expectations about what they should require not only from the beauty products themselves, but from the people who ran the companies. These changes reflected in the hair care advertisements of the era, which began to incorporate a different kind of language than the explicit instructions and promise of economic freedom seen in the first quarter of the century. Of course, part of this change can be attributed to other, more straightforward factors, advertisers' need to maintain client interest being the simplest explanation for the inclusion of new strategies. Hair care (despite continuing battles over legitimacy and professional standards) had been, for several years at this point, an established industry and was well known and recognized within the African American community – certainly well-advertised within African American newspapers, even with the onset of the Depression.¹⁴⁵ Additionally, the gap between the current generation and slavery was growing, as was the black urban population, which was more likely to be frequently exposed to and to participate in the burgeoning beauty industry.¹⁴⁶ Therefore, it was safe for advertisers to assume some familiarity with the processes of hair care among African American women. When they no longer had to explain that “naturally long and beautiful hair, a healthy scalp and a lovely smooth complexion” come from “constant care—not luck,”¹⁴⁷ as the Walker Manufacturing

¹⁴⁵ Susannah Walker, *Style and Status: Selling Beauty to African American Women, 1920-1975* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2007), 23.

¹⁴⁶ Joe William Trotter, Jr., “From a Raw Deal to a New Deal? 1929-1945,” in *To Make Our World Anew: A History of African Americans from 1880*, eds. Robin Kelley & Earl Lewis (United States: Oxford University Press, 2000), 96.

¹⁴⁷ Advertisement, Walker Manufacturing Company, *The Chicago Defender*, December 9, 1922.

Company did in a 1922 ad, there was room for different kinds of discussions to enter advertisements.

And they did, for even as the ads of black-owned beauty companies acknowledged the barriers created by the Depression, a more light-hearted quality simultaneously entered ads – a tone that encouraged women to consume beauty products for beauty’s sake, rather than altering one’s appearance for the purpose of racial uplift, which was a much more burdensome goal. In other words, economic improvement was no longer the primary focus, nor the main message of advertisements – though it is important to note that this aspect did not disappear entirely. Rather, Depression-era ads embraced new messages while molding their economic language to suit the contemporary challenges that African Americans faced, simultaneously reflecting the new ways black people were utilizing the beauty industry in order to negotiate their identity and place within American society.

The Push for Professionalism

The NRA codes on the beauty industry that encouraged a national streamlining of salon practices were indicative of a larger trend towards an attempt to professionalize, and therefore further legitimize, hair care as a trade.¹⁴⁸ For an industry that “was no longer just trying to simply establish itself, but [was] competing against the growing field of white-collar work and trying to fashion a sense of respectability associated with teaching, social work, and especially nursing,”¹⁴⁹ leaders in the field, and particularly members of the National Hairdressers and Cosmetologists Association, contended that standardization would lift public perception of both

¹⁴⁸ Julie A. Willet, *Permanent Waves: The Making of the American Beauty Shop* (New York: New York University Press, 2000), 89.

¹⁴⁹ *Ibid*, 54.

individual hair salons, as the most visible face of the industry within each community, and of the industry as a whole.¹⁵⁰

Though this movement towards a more “professional” image centered on discussions about hair salon practices, echoes of the debate manifested in the hair care ads of black-owned companies. Thus, while hairdressers were consciously adopting terms like “beautician, cosmetition [sic], cosmetologist, cosmetic therapist,”¹⁵¹ Walker Manufacturing advertisements began utilizing expressions like “Beauty Culturist”¹⁵² and “Beauty Expert”¹⁵³ to describe what were once simply “Sales Agents.” The Newbro Manufacturing Company cited the expertise of its “Beauty Specialists,”¹⁵⁴ and the Poro Company shifted from “Agent” to the slightly more scientific title of “Dealer.”¹⁵⁵ Indeed this was the purpose of using such words: to define the industry in terms that evoked a profession reliant upon methodology and research-based skills.

In addition to changing the terminology associated with the beauty industry in the public realm, beauty schools offered “a wide variety of courses designed to teach every aspect of the business,” for “[b]eing a professional...meant [having] expertise.”¹⁵⁶ Relatedly, beauty schools tried to link their teachings to the sciences, attempting to “blur...distinctions between beauty culture and professions like medicine.”¹⁵⁷ Indeed, textbooks used by the Madam C.J. Walker Schools of Beauty Culture featured chapters on subjects such as “Anatomy and Physiology” (including sections on “Cells, Tissues, Organs, Systems” and the “Nervous System”), “Disorders

¹⁵⁰ Julie A. Willet, *Permanent Waves: The Making of the American Beauty Shop* (New York: New York University Press, 2000), 5.

¹⁵¹ *Ibid*, 54.

¹⁵² Advertisement, Walker Manufacturing Company, *The Chicago Defender*, March 23, 1935.

¹⁵³ Advertisement, Walker Manufacturing Company, *The Chicago Defender*, June 6, 1931.

¹⁵⁴ Advertisement, Newbro Manufacturing Company, *The Chicago Defender*, April 12, 1930.

¹⁵⁵ Advertisement, Poro Company, *The Pittsburgh Courier*, January 9, 1932.

¹⁵⁶ Julie A. Willet, *Permanent Waves: The Making of the American Beauty Shop* (New York: New York University Press, 2000), 55.

¹⁵⁷ *Ibid*, 56.

of the Skin, Scalp and Hair,” and “Chemistry.”¹⁵⁸ While this was in part due to changing state accreditation policies, the fact that the shift occurred concurrently with a push for professionalism was not coincidental.

Even as black-owned companies and schools adjusted their language and practices to fit the new terms of a trend towards “professionalism,” the NHCA was working to undermine the presence and influence of non-white service workers within the industry.¹⁵⁹ Indeed, the push for regulation greatly threatened the smaller, “neighborhood” shops’ ability to stay afloat, not least through insisting on both higher wages and prices within the salon. Willet asserts that black opposition to regulation came not out of an unwillingness to comply with the NRA, though Kelley and Lewis maintain that this organization “discriminated against black workers[,] [p]artly by exempting domestic service and unskilled laborers from its provisions.” This exclusion effectively invalidated the act’s usefulness to the black community, as “over sixty percent of African Americans worked in these sectors.”¹⁶⁰ Still, some black workers expressed that there was already such a great discrepancy between black and white wages (and therefore between the amount of money within these populations) that, simply put, the African American community could not afford to comply with the new code: the salons did not have the resources to pay their workers more, and the customers could not absorb price increases for their treatments.¹⁶¹

This insensitivity to or ignorance of (or perhaps, purposeful disregard for) the unique needs of the African American community on the part of the NHCA exemplify the anxieties of

¹⁵⁸ Madam C.J. Walker Schools of Beauty Culture, *Modern Textbook of Cosmetology*, 1938-1956, Indiana Historical Society.

¹⁵⁹ Julie A. Willet, *Permanent Waves: The Making of the American Beauty Shop* (New York: New York University Press, 2000), 4.

¹⁶⁰ Joe William Trotter, Jr., “From a Raw Deal to a New Deal? 1929-1945,” in *To Make Our World Anew: A History of African Americans from 1880*, eds. Robin Kelley & Earl Lewis (United States: Oxford University Press, 2000), 137.

¹⁶¹ Julie A. Willet, *Permanent Waves: The Making of the American Beauty Shop* (New York: New York University Press, 2000), 105.

the prior two decades' debate about self-sufficiency versus integration. Much of the push towards the establishment of a "segregated group economy" that looked inward for support and sustenance was born out of a desire "to secure a permanent foothold in the business world,"¹⁶² to develop African American industries without the added complication of discriminatory policies imposed by the dominant culture. Indeed, as discussed in Chapter 1, it was largely the forced segregation of black business in the first decade of the century that had allowed for the proliferation of businesses like Poro and Overton,¹⁶³ and this era had revealed the potential financial benefit of a segregated community.

The other advantage, of course, was the increased focus on racial pride and solidarity that arose as a "natural" response to rising levels of prejudice.¹⁶⁴ Within the beauty industry, the virtual segregation of the first quarter of the century had aided company goals to create new definitions for African American women and, in so doing, to help them both to achieve inner satisfaction and to carve out for themselves a concrete economic position within United States society. The suggestion of federal regulations, then – even though the code was never "legally signed into law"¹⁶⁵ – signified a major shift in the dynamics of the African American hair care industry, at least on the business side. Though hair care remained an important aspect of black lives, the resources were much more limited, and greater restrictions meant that the community dynamic that had proved so crucial in the development of the industry was threatened.

The question of beauty standards depicted in advertisements is more complex, as it is not apparent that government regulation of the logistics of the hair care industry had much effect on

¹⁶² August Meier, *Negro Thought in America, 1880-1915: Racial Ideologies in the Age of Booker T. Washington* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1964), 141.

¹⁶³ *Ibid.*, 139.

¹⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 141.

¹⁶⁵ Julie A. Willet, *Permanent Waves: The Making of the American Beauty Shop* (New York: New York University Press, 2000), 88.

the content of advertisements. Certainly many beauty companies had flourished during a period when the majority, if not all, of their customers came from within the African American community. But even though these businesses had been financially segregated, they did not exist within a vacuum; the messages offered in advertisements were in constant dialogue with those qualities valued in the mainstream. Indeed, much of the purpose of these advertisements was to help African American women reconcile the disparate parts of their identities – the black with the American – and, as the ads examined in the first chapter often demonstrated, the way to achieve reconciliation was to adapt certain Europeanized features to one’s African body. In this way, Newbro adopting the term “beauty specialist” in light of a mainstream move towards scientific language was no more indicative of internalization of white standards than was Madam Walker arguing that “Beauty” can “Made in Our Shop!”¹⁶⁶ Both were about black identity and grappling with where African Americans could best fit into society.

White Competition

Even though they may have shared some similar language, however, white- and black-owned beauty companies did not necessarily have similar motivations behind the advertisements they published. In fact, a direct comparison of ads from black and white companies immediately reveals a subtle degree of difference in their tone. For example, if the white-owned Valmor Company was asking, “Do You Need Money?”, the Walker company was asking, “What About Unemployment?” These were the headings of two ads featured in the early 1930s. In the Valmor ad, the question stretched across the top of the advertisement, capital white letters on a black box: “DO YOU NEED MONEY?” A short column of text, situated between two images, with a man on the left and a woman on the right, urged the reader:

¹⁶⁶ Advertisement, Walker Manufacturing Company, *The Pittsburgh Courier*, April 5, 1930.
Penn Humanities Forum Mellon Undergraduate Research Fellowship, Final Paper April 2009
Abby Brisbon, College ‘09

Become a Sweet Georgia Brown Money-Making Agent. Here's the good news! No need to be out of work. Why have money worries or hard times? You should make Big Money selling Sweet Georgia Brown Face Powder, Hair Dressing, Skin Brightener, and 300 other big and fast sellers. Everyone wants pretty, light skin. Everyone wants beautiful slick hair. Become our agent at once. Just send name, address, and two 3c stamps for Samples and our Money-Makingagents [sic] Propositions. Write today.¹⁶⁷

The Walker ad, by contrast, asked “WHAT ABOUT UNEMPLOYMENT?”, immediately following up with, “And What Are You Doing to Make Jobs Possible For Negro Boys and Girls?” As in the Valmor ad, the Walker Manufacturing Company was placing responsibility for easing the tensions of the Depression onto *you*, as the reader. The clear focus, however, was on providing aid to the black community as a whole. It was a somewhat subtle difference, but a key one: while the white-owned company was targeting the individual, Walker was asking what could be done for African Americans in general, revealing the long-term desires of each company (that is, making money by tapping into a new market versus uplifting the race economically by providing jobs to Negro youth). And in case the reader did not get the message, the Walker ad featured an image of the Walker Theater, sporting the caption: “NEW HOME OF THE MME. C.J. WALKER MFG. CO. INC.: A modern factory teeming with race boys and girls earning an honest living with an unlimited chance to rise. Help them and others.” There are text boxes on either side of the picture, the left one declaring, “The Mme. C.J. Walker Mfg. Co., owned by Negroes, operating for Negroes, answers that question!” and on the right, “Every time you purchase a box of Mme. C.J. Walker Preparations you are making possible a job for some Negro boy or girl!” The ad went on to outline some of the details of the products and included a

¹⁶⁷ Advertisement, Valmor Products Company, *The Pittsburgh Courier*, February 24, 1934.
Penn Humanities Forum Mellon Undergraduate Research Fellowship, Final Paper April 2009
Abby Brisbon, College '09

coupon for a free sample of the Wonder Pomade, redeemable by mail (“A trial will convince you!” of its value).¹⁶⁸

Subtle language differences between these ads were revealing, if not of motivation, at least of an understanding of the African American community. “Here’s the good news!” the Valmor ad proclaimed in its suggestion that sales agents need never be out of work. Their product provided those things that “everyone” wanted. “Everyone wants pretty, light skin. Everyone wants beautiful slick hair,” implying, of course, that African Americans would always be in need of those products that can bring the desired qualities, and thus sales jobs would always be available. The distinction from descriptions found in the ads of black-owned companies came in Valmor’s choice of adjectives. The emphasis was first on “pretty, light” skin, placing a premium on the *shade* as opposed to the texture or health. A 1930 Poro ad, by contrast, promised to work wonders on the customer’s skin, but what it guaranteed was to create “a lovely velvety complexion,” emphasizing smoothness over any gradient of color.¹⁶⁹ A 1935 Walker Manufacturing ad for Tan-Off asked the reader if her skin was “sallow, splotched and ugly” and assured that it would rid its users of “surface skin disfigurements.”¹⁷⁰ Of course, this focus on factors other than skin color was not universal within black-owned beauty companies; a different Walker ad for the same product declared that you could “Enjoy this Summer’s Sunshine –and take no chance with your complexion.” Indeed, the ad professed, Tan-Off would protect you from “the usual annoyance of tan, chap or sunburn.”¹⁷¹ While these latter two conditions could potentially be seen as health precautions, tan could not. Similarly, the Apex Company, owned by

¹⁶⁸ Advertisement, Walker Manufacturing Company, *The Pittsburgh Courier*, April 5, 1930.

¹⁶⁹ Advertisement, Poro Company, *The New York Amsterdam News*, September 3, 1930.

¹⁷⁰ Advertisement, Walker Manufacturing Company, *The Chicago Defender*, March 30, 1935.

¹⁷¹ Advertisement, Walker Manufacturing Company, *Atlanta Daily World*, August 2, 1936.

an African American woman, Madam Sara Spencer Washington, offered a skin bleach that promised to “Instantly Lighten...Complexion.”¹⁷²

In addition to “pretty, light skin,” Valmor also claimed, “Everyone wants beautiful slick hair.” The key word here is “slick.” Black-owned companies usually promised to make your hair “soft,” perhaps “wavy” or “thick.” A Poro ad from 1932 said its products would make your hair “Soft, Glossy and Beautiful.” Like the woman pictured in this advertisement who had “Such Beautiful Hair!,” “Yours, too, can be long, thick and silken.”¹⁷³ A Walker Company ad from 1934 said that use of their product would make your hair “healthy, soft, wavy, thick.”¹⁷⁴ As with the implications about employment for individuals versus economic uplift of the race, the difference here was subtle, but important. Softness and texture had to do with the health of hair; it indicated that one’s hair had been properly moisturized and cleaned without stripping it of essential oils. “Slickness” had to do with smoothing out kinks until they were straight, or, in other words, eliminating as best as possible any sign of African features.

These distinctions, however, were subtle, and the casual reader, likely not in the habit of conducting content analysis of the advertisements of white- versus black-owned companies, might not have noticed much difference between the two. Such similarities signify that these companies had adopted certain conventions in their marketing practices. By the early 1930s, hair care was an established industry, and the impressive advertising campaigns of the 1920s led a codification of much of the language and visuals used in such advertisements. In itself, this consistency helped lend some of the legitimacy that the leading professionals sought, by presenting to the public a unified front. Without oversimplifying the goals of black-owned

¹⁷² Advertisement, The Apex Hair Company, *The New York Amsterdam News*, October 30, 1929.

¹⁷³ Advertisement, Poro Company, *The Pittsburgh Courier*, January 9, 1932.

¹⁷⁴ Advertisement, Walker Manufacturing Company, *The Pittsburgh Courier*, March 31, 1934.

companies, there were certain conventional qualities their ads shared, at least in format if not always in message. The image of a black woman pictured near columns of text, for example (as seen in the 1917 Walker Company ad examined at the beginning of Chapter 1), was fairly common before the Newbro Manufacturing Company utilized it in 1930,¹⁷⁵ or the Poro Company in 1932.¹⁷⁶ Invoking a newspaper article in structure, it is possible that this particular convention developed out of a desire to gain the trust of its audience in regards to the authenticity and the value of the product, as a newspaper article was generally considered a trustworthy source of information.¹⁷⁷

Beyond the structural qualities, however, and as the previous comparison between Walker and Valmor demonstrated, the industry had adopted conventional language as well. It was not uncommon, for example, to present the explicit current issues facing the race, as in a Walker Company ad in the April 2, 1932 edition of the *Pittsburgh Courier*. In this, the company declared that, “in spite of the depression, hundreds of thousands of boxes are going out to women everywhere.”¹⁷⁸ This was clearly one of the more straightforward examples. More indirect acknowledgements of African Americans' financial limitations came in the form of “Money-Saving Coupon[s]”¹⁷⁹ and special “Summer Beauty Prices!”¹⁸⁰ In this way, the owners of African American hair care companies were responding to the unique economic conditions of their community just as those who had begun advertising for sales agents had done in the previous era. The specific words used were merely updated to suit the new circumstances of the Depression.

¹⁷⁵ Advertisement, Newbro Manufacturing Company, *The Chicago Defender*, April 12, 1930.

¹⁷⁶ Advertisement, Poro Company, *The Pittsburgh Courier*, January 9, 1932.

¹⁷⁷ Noliwe Rooks, *Hair Raising: Beauty, Culture, and African American Women* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press: 2000), 60.

¹⁷⁸ Advertisement, Walker Manufacturing Company, *The Pittsburgh Courier*, April 2 1932.

¹⁷⁹ Advertisement, Newbro Manufacturing Company, *The Chicago Defender*, April 12, 1930; Advertisement, Walker Manufacturing Company, *The Pittsburgh Courier*, March 31, 1934.

¹⁸⁰ Advertisement, Poro Beauty Shoppe, *The Pittsburgh Courier*, July 16, 1932.

Specific conventions in advertisements, however, meant it was easier for white-owned companies to enter the scene with their products; and they did, in full force, several even masquerading as black-owned companies in order to attract a larger constituency. Perhaps the most incredible example of this tactic was the Golden Brown Beauty Company, which “set up a ‘dummy’ organization that employed thirty-five black workers and sold only to black consumers.” They also faked an African American company founder and leader named Madame Mamie Hightower,” creating for her a story modeled off of the rags to riches narrative of Madam C.J. Walker and Annie Malone.¹⁸¹ In keeping with their ruse, their ads often referred to “race” people, a term commonly used by African Americans in describing themselves. One 1932 ad proclaimed, “Golden Brown, Recognized throughout the smart Race world as the peak of cosmetic quality,” and even offered free samples and a “Beauty Book written by 10 radiant Race stars.”¹⁸² Another referenced a popular African American figure, picturing a cutout of Duke Ellington’s head over an image of the product and the tagline, “A head fit to wear the crown.” “Crown” here not only referenced Ellington’s contemporary nickname as the “King of Jazz,” but also harkened back to the religious language examined in the first chapter. Though Madam Perkins quoted the Bible directly in her 1910s advertising,¹⁸³ reminding readers, “If a woman has long hair, it is a glory to her; for her hair is given to her as a covering,”¹⁸⁴ other companies alluded to it as well. In a 1934 ad, for example, the Walker Manufacturing Company called “Beautiful Hair” a “Woman’s Crowning Glory.” Directly beneath this heading, a letter from a Michigan client read, ““There is an old saying that Woman’s Crowning Glory is her hair, and

¹⁸¹ Kathy Peiss, *Hope in a Jar: The Making of America’s Beauty Culture* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1998), 117.

¹⁸² Advertisement, Golden Brown Chemical Company, *The Pittsburgh Courier*, February 13 1932.

¹⁸³ Advertisement, T.D.P. Scientific Scalp Preparation, *The Chicago Defender*, August 19, 1911.

¹⁸⁴ 1 Corinthians 11:15, Scripture taken from the New King James Version. Copyright 1979, 1980, 1982 by Thomas Nelson, Inc.

thanks to Madam C.J. Walker's Wonderful Hair Grower, I have that "glory".¹⁸⁵ While readers would not necessarily be on the lookout for biblical references, the correlation would be clear to anyone already keyed into it. Especially in the light of Christianity's influence within the African American community,¹⁸⁶ and given Burroughs' argument that outward appearance affected inner self-worth,¹⁸⁷ it was significant to the question of identity negotiations that a white-owned company was making biblical allusions in the context of creating beauty standards.

The Golden Brown ad went on, "Personality made Duke Ellington...Duke made his band famous...a delighted public made Duke KING OF JAZZ...and a glistening healthy head of hair, perfectly groomed, is one of the highlights of 'King Duke's' personality."¹⁸⁸ Personality, as it turned out, was becoming an aspect on which many of these advertisements placed a premium. Ads from other white-owned companies also emphasized how their products could lead to a happier or more successful demeanor and disposition. A 1929 Pluko Hair Dressing ad informed its readers that, "Smooth, Lustrous Hair Wins Popularity." This headline was positioned under the photo of a woman with a glossy, stick-straight bob and white skin, who was staring with alluring, half-closed eyes at her reflection in a handheld mirror. "Wherever you go—" the text read, "to parties, dances, the theatre, church, everywhere—you will notice the most popular men and women are those who have *beautiful, smooth, lustrous* hair. *You can have this popularity, too.*"¹⁸⁹

White-owned companies were not the only ones suggesting the importance of personality. A Poro ad from 1930 suggested that you "Make the most of the beauty that nature

¹⁸⁵ Advertisement, Walker Manufacturing Company, *The Pittsburgh Courier*, March 31, 1934.

¹⁸⁶ Albert J. Raboteau, *Canaan Land: A Religious History of African Americans*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 78.

¹⁸⁷ Nannie Burroughs, "Not Color But Character," *Voice of the Negro* 1 (July 1904), 278.

¹⁸⁸ Advertisement, Golden Brown Chemical Company, *The New York Amsterdam News*, February 17, 1932.

¹⁸⁹ Advertisement, Pluko, *The Chicago Defender*, November 2, 1929.

has given you...enjoy the admiration, love, friendship and social success that come to the woman who develops her personal attractiveness.”¹⁹⁰ The implication in all of these examples was that there was a simple and direct correlation between use of certain beauty products and one’s happiness in life. To some degree, these types of claims were to be expected; the point of advertising, after all, was to convince potential clients that these products could make their lives better.¹⁹¹ The emphasis on personality, however, took on an additional significance when placed in the context of a population that, though several generations removed from slavery, was still negotiating its place in United States society. The potential effect was that the argument focused on creating a singular *type* of personality: popular, successful, admired. There was little room in these images and portrayals for individual variation.

Of course, the increase of white-owned companies advertising to an African American market was a complex issue. After all, as historian Roland Marchand posits in his *Advertising the American Dream*, advertisers prepared Americans to become “consumer citizens.” The only rule for participation in this type of democracy was “the ‘one dollar, one vote’ principle” – but, in the world of commerce, “[s]ome people could cast far more votes than others.” Those who could not afford to participate were effectively disenfranchised,¹⁹² and in losing their vote, lost control over the content of the advertisements published. Indeed, the “exclusion of blacks is confirmed by the meager national advertising in black newspapers such as the *Chicago Defender* and the *Pittsburgh Courier*;¹⁹³ if African Americans could not afford to purchase the products being offered, there was no reason for mainstream companies to tailor their content to this community.

¹⁹⁰ Advertisement, Poro Company, *The New York Amsterdam News*, May 7, 1930.

¹⁹¹ Roland Marchand, *Advertising the American Dream* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, California: University of California Press, 1985), xvii.

¹⁹² *Ibid.*, 64.

¹⁹³ *Ibid.*

This particular version of “disenfranchisement” was one of which Associated Negro Press creator Claude Barnett was keenly aware, and he spent much of this period fighting for white acknowledgement of black Americans as a viable and lucrative market to which to advertise.¹⁹⁴ His notion, of course, was that in order to be fully incorporated into an American society largely “defined by consumerism”¹⁹⁵ (and, indeed, to even be recognized as a viable citizen of the country at all), one must be identified as a participant in mass consumption. Mainstream (read: white) companies deciding your constituent group was worth the cost of an advertising campaign was an important symbol of their acceptance.

Yet, even as he fought “to convince [other] national-brand-name advertisers to take black consumers more seriously,”¹⁹⁶ Barnett vehemently opposed white-owned *beauty* companies campaigning in African American newspapers. He expressed his concerns about these businesses in a 1929 letter to Poro Company founder and owner Annie Malone, naming the Jewish-owned Plough Chemical Company as particularly problematic because of its failure to employ black workers. “Not a black face was to be seen,” he described when recounting his visit to the Plough office.¹⁹⁷ To counteract the influence of this company, which he claimed was “by far the largest advertiser...in Negro papers” he suggested that the three major black-owned beauty companies – in his opinion the “only three” that “ought” to exist – needed to step up their advertising campaigns.¹⁹⁸ He recognized that it was no longer possible for African American companies to overtake white-owned companies like Black and White in advertising, since, by that point, they were “so large a supporter of Negro papers that they can almost shape their destinies if they so

¹⁹⁴ Susannah Walker, *Style and Status: Selling Beauty to African American Women, 1920-1975* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2007), 16.

¹⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 6.

¹⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 16.

¹⁹⁷ February 8, 1929 letter from Charles Barnett to Annie Malone, from private collection of Kathy Peiss.

¹⁹⁸ Here, Barnett was referring to “Poro, Mme. C.J. Walker, and Overton Hygienic Company.” (*Ibid.*).

desire.” The fact was that these white-owned companies had more money to spend on advertising,¹⁹⁹ meant that many black businesses simply could not compete – a fact to which Barnett’s own failed cosmetic company, Kashmir Chemical Company, was a testament. However, he seemed to believe it possible for these African American companies, and Poro in particular, to increase the importance of their products in the minds of consumers, if not their number of advertisements in the newspapers, through strategic placement of their salons, utilization of new ideas in their advertising, and “multipli[cation] and intensifi[cation]” of their advertising programs.²⁰⁰

Barnett’s arguments against white-owned beauty companies advertising in African American papers clearly revealed the importance of this industry to the black community. He hinted at the economic potential of these companies; indeed, his biggest complaint against Plough was their lack of African American employees. It is significant, however, that Barnett turned primarily to advertising as a possible counterbalance to the spread of these white businesses, especially when considered in the context of discrepancies in the motivation behind these ads. The economic manifestations of these beauty companies (product sales, employment of agents, beauty parlors) were directly related to the “outer goals” of the African American race; the content of advertisements was often related to the “inner” ones. In other words, Claude Barnett was fighting for those tangible changes that would help African Americans find their place along the economic spectrum of American society. Meanwhile, the content of advertisements, and particularly ones related to beauty, were encouraging and guiding black people to mold their identities from the inside out by offering adaptations of mainstream beauty standards suitable to an African body. This was a movement about self-definition; to lose

¹⁹⁹ Susannah Walker, *Style and Status: Selling Beauty to African American Women, 1920-1975* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2007), 23.

²⁰⁰ February 8, 1929 letter from Charles Barnett to Annie Malone, from private collection of Kathy Peiss.

advertising space to white-owned companies was to lose a piece of the agency a previously largely segregated industry had given them back.

Depression-Era Perceptions of African American Women

Of course, a focus on the “outer” goals did not disappear from Depression-era advertisements. As examined in previous sections, acknowledgement of the contemporary economic climate was very much an integral part of many ads from both black- and white-owned companies. Other aspects of the language, however, were shifting away from the conventions of the previous 25 years. For one, most ads were less explicit in the instructional aspect that was previously so prominent and important to a clientele for whom using beauty products may have been a new process. Additionally, there was a trend towards promoting beauty for beauty’s sake, even as there was a continuing dialogue regarding the accentuation of Africanized versus Europeanized features.

A Newbro Manufacturing Company ad for their “Queen” line of products demonstrated this balance between embracing new conventions while conceding the importance of old ones. The top third of the advertisement pictured the head of a woman whose shaded skin and wavy hair (which in this cartoon version estimated curls) clearly coded her as African American. Four small men with outstretched arms were situated on either side of her head, (literally) pointing out her “Youthful Luster,” “Soft Growing Hair,” “Easy to Comb Any Style,” and “Healthy Scalp.” The headline proclaimed “Leading Beauty Specialists tell how to get SOFT PRETTY HAIR,” and the text beneath read,

Ask any reputable leading beauty specialist who has analyzed hair dressing and they will tell you the ever improved Queen Hair Dressing contains every ingredient that makes your hair grow, makes it soft, sleekly beautiful and safeguards its beauty. This is the

greatest proof of a hair dressing you could have. Queen Hair Dressing makes your hair easy to comb into any style, softens it, assists in growing it, and relieves scalp trouble.²⁰¹ The ad went on to list the prices, along with a “MONEY-SAVING COUPON,” a call for agents (“Agents Wanted. Write for Details. Fine Proposition.”), and, on the right side of the ad, a small image of a man on one knee reaching his arms out in presumed rapture towards a woman in a slinky dress holding a large fan in front of her face.

The latter three aspects of this ad were most indicative of the shifting trends in 1930s advertising. The importance of the “Money-Saving Coupon” is two-fold, for even as it acknowledged the difficult economic situation of many black families, it recognized that these beauty products continued to hold an important place in their lives, and attempted to make them affordable. Additionally, the call for agents was a nod to the idea of black-owned companies looking out for their own, and a continuation of the idea of providing for the race not just through the products themselves, but by engaging African Americans in the position of sales agent. Of course, employing sales agents to sell their products was also a method of staying in business in a difficult economy. Door-to-door sales were a crucial aspect of black businesses, as many drugstores and retailers were still reluctant to stock African American products.²⁰²

Meanwhile, the image of the fawning man demonstrated the balance between African Americans *necessities* and African American *desires*. A good portion of this ad was dedicated to the idea of earning and saving money. However, this picture (though small enough that it could be overshadowed at first by the much larger visual at the top as well as the text of the advertisement) was an acknowledgement that black women enjoyed male flattery as well. A Walker Company ad from 1937 illustrated this notion even more clearly, proclaiming,

²⁰¹ Advertisement, Newbro Manufacturing Company, *The Chicago Defender*, April 12, 1930.

²⁰² Kathy Peiss, *Hope in a Jar: The Making of America's Beauty Culture* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1998), 71.

presumably in the voice of the woman pictured in the advertisement, “I am always thankful for Madam C.J. Walker and the fine products she gave to Negro womanhood but I appreciate her and her incomparable Glossine most when I have a date.”²⁰³ Thus, where Newbro implied, Walker spelled out to African American women that appreciating male admiration would not detract from appreciation of racial progress. Coming off the heels of an era of advertisements that were just teaching women how to use these beauty products, this was a somewhat progressive message; industry leaders were no longer explaining the logistics of the products and encouraging their utilization in order to aid African American women’s professional lives, but rather were prompting women to have fun and go on dates. This particular Walker ad, however, has an added layer. Glossine, the product advertised here as an anecdote for “dry, brittle hair,” claiming to “oil...and soften” as well as “add...a rich luster” to black women’s hair, was the product used to prepare the hair for straightening.²⁰⁴ For all Walker’s focus on hair growth and her explicit insistence that she never claimed to straighten hair,²⁰⁵ that *this* is the product the company associated with going out on dates seems counterintuitive.

There are a few potential explanations for the company’s advocacy of Glossine specifically for the purpose of date preparation. First, use of this product – as opposed to Walker’s Wonderful Hair Grower, for example – were more practical to advertise in connection with something for which the arrangements would need to happen fairly quickly. It simply would not make sense to suggest that a woman should attempt to grow her hair long in getting ready for a date. A second, and more perhaps insidious, explanation has to do with beauty standards, and the suggestion that men might find straight hair more attractive than they would curly. This

²⁰³ Advertisement, Walker Manufacturing Company, *The Pittsburgh Courier*, October 16, 1937.

²⁰⁴ Kathy Peiss, *Hope in a Jar: The Making of America’s Beauty Culture* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1998), 225.

²⁰⁵ Madam Walker quoted in A’Lelia Bundles, *On Her Own Ground: The Life and Times of Madam C.J. Walker* (New York: Scribner, 2001), 268.

reasoning would imply that white beauty standards were actually informing aspects of African American desires. These two justifications, of course, are not mutually exclusive, nor is the promotion of a product that aids straightening necessarily either positive or negative. As we have established, African American beauty companies aided black women in negotiating their complex identities in the United States society. In this process, both adaptation and, indeed some emulation of Europeanized features occurred. Whether that adaptation led to mindless assimilation is unlikely, as the ads show a constant dialogue between white and black features. Whether it affected black women's mindsets about their own bodies is yet to be determined.

A Poro ad from 1931 also emphasized simply beauty, declaring in a bold headline across the top, "No Woman Can Be Attractive...without a Beautiful Complexion." Beneath the heading was a large image of a woman gazing into a handheld mirror, one hand gracefully positioned behind her ear as if she were smoothing back her hair. "My mirror tells me that my hair and complexion never looked better," the caption read. "PORO Preparations are really wonderful."²⁰⁶ The cream, available in "[m]any shades" to best suit customers' complexions, promised to "make your skin smooth, clear and soft. It prevents that shiny look and makes a *perfect* base for your powder." This ad made no larger comment on the economy, except to say that the product was "Sold by Poro Agents Everywhere." The woman, dressed decadently in what appeared to be an evening gown and ornamented with large, but tasteful hoop earrings, seemed a vision of happiness – and the lack of any other image in the ad except for one of the product clearly implied that it is this *product* that led to her gaiety. This was not a woman who seemed anxious about racial uplift, though she very well might support political causes. As readers, we are not

²⁰⁶ Advertisement, Poro Company, *The Pittsburgh Courier*, August 1, 1931.

supposed to know her background; the point here is that she was comfortable enough with her place in life that she was able to take time for herself.

That advertisers were encouraging black women to enjoy themselves and their femininity took on additional significance during the Depression. As a largely male-coded crisis, women in general, and African American women in particular, likely were not in the forefront of the national consciousness. Indeed, the images that dominated this era all centered on men: the forgotten man, unemployed men riding the rails, men waiting in bread lines for food. And for the women who made up the working class, often times the situation was actually much bleaker due to the perception that working women were both “‘ignoring’ their domestic duties” and stealing “‘scarce jobs” from men.²⁰⁷ For black women, 40 percent of whom worked during the 1930s, conditions were even worse since the NRA protected neither domestic nor agricultural positions, which higher percentages of African American women occupied.²⁰⁸

In this context, too, the push for professionalism that sought more scientific terminology in connection with the beauty industry took on new meaning. Part of the invocation of scientific language certainly was about legitimacy and demonstrating that this was a field that required skill and expertise. Part of the shift, though, was an explicit attempt to align the hair care industry with professions like medicine, which was considered a much more legitimate trade. The goal was to change public perception about hairdressing; the means was to utilize conventionally masculine terminology and to associate this profession with one dominated by male workers. At the same time that these language changes were occurring, though, there was no move to define beauty as outside of the female realm. In fact, the Wilfred Academy, a beauty school located in several cities along the East Coast, declared that “‘Beauty culture’...was an ‘easy and natural

²⁰⁷ Mary Eleanor Triece, *On the Picket Line: Strategies of Working-Class Women During the Depression* (United States: University of Illinois Press, 2007), 74.

²⁰⁸ *Ibid*, 76.

occupation, inherent in practically all women,' emphasizing a woman's supposed affinity for grooming, beauty, and style."²⁰⁹ Industry officials, then, were embracing the feminine aspects of this business, even as they sought legitimacy by using the terms that men would understand as "professional."

In this light, a stronger embracing of femininity on the part of advertisers was appropriate. In an era when women's needs were somewhat pushed to the wayside, at least in public opinion, a focus on the feminine side of beauty, as opposed to the economic potential or the business side, brought the emphasis back to the individual and reminded women that it was acceptable and positive for them to spend time thinking about themselves. Even in the midst of a national crisis, it was okay to spend some extra time preparing for a date. The image of the fawning man in the Newbro ad, then, working in conjunction with the words "soft" and "pretty," seemed an attempt to appeal to a conventional sense of femininity that was not often seen in the types of 1920s advertisements that read like miniature instructional manuals. This kind of validation was important; Nannie Burroughs would argue that it was crucial for continued progress of the race. Without self-respect, Burroughs argued, African Americans could never advance. In many ways, recognizing beauty for beauty's sake was about respect for and pride in one's appearance and one's femininity; by extension, then, it was in part about racial morale.

Of course, no situation can be so thoroughly flattened into a two-dimensional image. As Susannah Walker posits, "Black women's relationship to commercial beauty culture was complex, and definitions of ideal beauty were shaped within African American society as much as they were influenced by the white beauty standards promoted incessantly in American popular

²⁰⁹ Julie A. Willet, *Permanent Waves: The Making of the American Beauty Shop* (New York: New York University Press, 2000), 55.

culture.”²¹⁰ In fact, outside of the beauty industry, there was in the later years of the Depression a political trend towards greater support of black civil rights,²¹¹ and though there were obviously still deep segregation and grossly unequal conditions, the relationship between African Americans and the mainstream was not an entirely dichotomous one. Still, the importance of the black beauty industry lay largely in the agency it gave back to the African American community, not only in the financial sense, but also in the ability to shape how they wanted to be seen through the medium of advertising.

²¹⁰ Susannah Walker, *Style and Status: Selling Beauty to African American Women, 1920-1975* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2007), 28.

²¹¹ Joe William Trotter, Jr., “From a Raw Deal to a New Deal? 1929-1945,” in *To Make Our World Anew: A History of African Americans from 1880*, eds. Robin Kelley & Earl Lewis (United States: Oxford University Press, 2000), 140.

Chapter 3:
Negotiating Identity: Literature of Racial Passing

“He’s gone over on the other side.”

- Charles Chesnutt, *The House Behind the Cedars*²¹²

*“It isn’t being coloured that makes the difference,
it’s letting it be known.”*

- Jessie Fauset, *Plum Bun*²¹³

The ideological debates of the early twentieth century over self-sufficiency versus integration were, at their essence, a struggle for control. In terms of economics, African Americans wanted to be able to support themselves as a population, yet they wanted recognition as contributing members to the American society as a whole. In terms of beauty standards, African Americans wanted ownership of definition, yet they wanted to adapt just enough of those qualities considered more acceptable to the mainstream that they could own their Americanness as well. It was a balancing act, fought out in almost every sphere of African American life, and fought particularly explicitly on the pages of black-owned newspapers in the form of beauty product advertising. This was about negotiating African American identity within United States society, and in order to fully reconcile these two disparate consciousnesses, black Americans had to wholly achieve both an economic identity and an inner resolution that their own physicality fit into the spectrum of American beauty.

²¹² Charles Chesnutt, *The House Behind the Cedars* (United States: The Modern Library, 2003), 120.

²¹³ Jessie Redmon Fauset, *Plum Bun* (New York: Frederick A. Stokes Company, 1929), 78.

In providing jobs to black women while simultaneously supplying products that allowed them to explore their physical appearance and learn how to care for their hair, black-owned hair care companies attempted to guide African Americans through both offshoots of identity, the inner and the outer goals. The result of these explorations manifested in forms such as blacks' mass movement from rural life to urban industrial centers as well as in the development of the New Negro. Both phenomena were about black people beginning to take ownership both of definition and of their financial situations. Long before the movement of African Americans crossing from South to North would develop into what became known as the Great Migration, though, authors were exploring a different kind of movement: the crossing of the color line. Though it has been alternately defined as an assumption of white culture and a denial of any culture at all,²¹⁴ literature of racial passing was as much about negotiating identity as were the beauty advertisements of the first 30 years of the century.

This is not to suggest, of course, that the goals of literature of passing and the goals of hair care advertisements were the same, nor that black-owned companies were promoting a view that actually *becoming* white was the ultimate aim. Indeed, the discussions in the first two chapters of this project demonstrated that the beauty standards promoted by these advertisements were much more complex than a simple emulation of Europeanized features. Rather, racial passing as depicted in novels allows for a deeper understanding of how African Americans understood the dual nature of identity. These books demonstrated the necessity of reconciling both inner and outer goals in order for black Americans to create a solid identity within United States society.

²¹⁴ Elaine K. Ginsberg, ed., *Passing and the Fictions of Identity* (Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 1996), 2-3, 70.

Racial passing was not about beauty standards. Few of the characters in the novels examined ever wanted to be white because they believed white people were inherently more attractive, or even because they were innately superior in any form. Instead, passing was more frequently related to economic convenience and advancement. These characters (and, likely, those who decided to pass in real life) did so in order to position themselves better financially, as they felt they would never be able to in their life as a black person. In the dual process of forming one's identity in American society, these characters chose economics over the process that Baptist organizer Nannie Burroughs had outlined in her appeal for character development over color.²¹⁵ In so choosing, however, the story rarely had a happy ending. It was not actually possible within the conventions of these books for African Americans to lead fulfilling lives under the guise of being white; to be content within oneself necessitated accepting African heritage as an important part of identity.

At the same time, passing novels inherently questioned the boundaries that racial categories attempted to create, offering new explorations of racial identities in a society largely defined by these (arguably imagined) restrictions. These novels challenged the importance of racial categories at all, for if the limitations set by the mere term "African American" could be overcome simply by a person choosing to abandon the classification, then the categories that propped up the social hierarchy would be rendered meaningless. In confronting a construction that was at once performative and rooted in the physical being,²¹⁶ racial passing challenged both legal and cultural assertions that these "identity categories are inherent and unalterable

²¹⁵ Nannie Burroughs, "Not Color But Character," *Voice of the Negro* 1 (July 1904), 277; For more complete discussion on her philosophy, see Chapter 1.

²¹⁶ Elaine K. Ginsberg, ed., *Passing and the Fictions of Identity* (Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 1996), 2.

essences”²¹⁷ – that one’s definition as “black” or “white” designated her to a specific way of being required by that classification.

What novels of racial passing did, then, was to explore the validity of a social hierarchy based on race and to articulate the consequences of failing to fully reconcile the *African* with the *American* aspects of identity. Moreover, the crafting of individual stories set these standards within a context in which readers could likely see echoes of their own lives. What these authors ultimately revealed was that beauty standards were *not* as simple as bleaching your skin, or surrendering your African heritage. Rather, novels underlined the fact that these beauty standards were shaped within a community of people, and that perception of appearance affected not only the lives of those individuals, but those of almost everyone with whom they were in connection. That tight-knit community that was so key to the development of black enterprise – yet, whose importance historians cannot necessarily glean from advertisements alone – was demonstrated through the telling of stories. Therefore African Americans who worked towards being white altered the dynamics of a solidarity (related to both racial pride and to the black economic situation) that was crucial to the development of the race – intensifying the tension between appearance and economic development in so doing. Furthermore, in striving to be white, and often necessarily abandoning that community, African Americans who passed felt an isolation that made the supposed independence and unrestraint of white life akin to imprisonment.

The goal of this chapter is not to prove cause and effect. There is no way of definitively determining direction between the origins of beauty standards, the sources that perpetuated them, and the way African Americans viewed their own beauty (and their hair care) in practice. Each factor influenced the other. The goal, instead, is to explore in greater depth the ideologies

²¹⁷ Ibid, 4.

surrounding identity negotiations by viewing such dialogues in an extreme form. Racial passing was the most radical example of adopting (rather than *adapting*) white beauty – yet, through its radical nature we can see the dual character of identity formation more clearly articulated.

To explore this issue, this chapter examines two novels of racial passing that span most of the period this project studies, from 1900 to 1929. In analyzing these novels within the historical context presented in the first two chapters, ideological parallels and dissimilarities should highlight the debates of the era. One of these books was written by a man, one by a woman, and both featured female protagonists, though in the first novel a male character played an important role. Though this project has focused thus far on African American women, it is useful for several reasons to examine both the male characters in these novels and works by male authors. The male author, Charles Chesnutt, represents one of the most influential in the canon of African American literature and was likely a prominent source at the time of the book's release. As such, it would be folly to exclude this book from this current discussion. In terms of male characters, it is important to keep in mind how much of identity is defined by *difference*. Just as laws that supported white supremacy restricted people of color based on what they were *not* (white),²¹⁸ many of the perceived differences between male and female in these books revealed key characteristics of black female identity.

Additionally, one of these novels takes place entirely in the South and one entirely in the North. Both of the authors were of mixed race themselves, though neither one ever passed. An ideal examination of passing literature of course would be much larger, and is beyond the scope of this project. Through these novels, however, one can get a decent sense of how these characters were constructed. Though it is important to remember the limitations of gauging

²¹⁸ Elaine K. Ginsberg, ed., *Passing and the Fictions of Identity* (Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 1996), 7.

audience reaction to both advertisements and literature, much can still be learned through an examination of where the messages of these two sources intersect and diverge in terms of what ideas were available to those who consumed both sources. By focusing on the language of these novels themselves, within the context laid out in the first two chapters, one can shed light on the dialogues African American leaders were having in regards to identity in this era.

Ultimately, African American culture is a creolized one – as W.E.B. DuBois argued, one could not call a Negro fully American; however, in culture and upbringing, neither is he African. Rather, African American culture lies in that space that is defined by the hyphen: it is the meeting, the combining, and the recreating of culture between two disparate sources. To say that racial passing was born out of a desire to become white would be overly simplified in the context of this double consciousness. It would be too easy to say that African Americans, throughout years of slavery and the subsequent debates surrounding advancement in United States society, unconsciously assimilated mainstream notions of what it meant to be American – and in particular, for the purposes of this discussion, attempted to adopt white standards of beauty in their quest for new self-definitions post-slavery. What novels of racial passing demonstrated is that this was not a straightforward question of emulating white features. As with hair care advertisements, many of which ultimately upheld at their base the notion that assuming certain Europeanized features would lead to a better life – even as they moved towards more positive imagery and new vocabulary to define African American women – this complex relationship demonstrates the balancing act of creating for black women a new place in society that simultaneously celebrated their unique African features and adapted to being American. In this way, these are not novels of surrender, but rather novels of negotiation: negotiation of beauty, of

economic expectations, and of what life might be like if it actually *were* possible to achieve full-on whiteness.

Laying the Groundwork: Negotiating Identity in *The House Behind the Cedars* (1900)

Such ideological debates thus provided the context under which readers met young Rena Walden, the protagonist of Charles Chesnutt's 1900 novel, *The House Behind the Cedars*. Chesnutt himself was of mixed heritage; by one account, he was a "voluntary Negro" whose skin was so light he could, but refused to, pass for white."²¹⁹ Chesnutt's fictional works frequently grappled with race relations, and in so doing, he is said to have primed the American public for "the advent of the New Negro author of the 1920s."²²⁰ The New Negro was an African American who was "race-conscious, assertive, race-proud"²²¹ – the New Negro author incorporated all these qualities. That these were the issues he focused on was appropriate for the time period, and was probably born out of the fact that his writing coincided with a crucial period in African American negotiations about identity formation, and indeed, Chesnutt frequently used "his writing as an instrument of protest"²²² in relation to these issues.

From the outset, Chesnutt established for Rena a duality of appearance that precluded any reconciliation of black with white features. The reader's first introduction to her was through the watchful eyes of her older brother, John Warwick (Walden) who, it was soon revealed, was determining Rena's eligibility to leave small town Patesville, North Carolina, in order to join him in South Carolina as a white woman. As readers, our own purposes merge with his; our first

²¹⁹ JBHE Foundation, "The Literary Canonization of Charles Chesnutt." *The Journal of Blacks in Higher Education* no. 37 (Autumn 2002). <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3134278> (accessed from jstor April 25, 2009).

²²⁰ Henry Louis Gates & Nellie McKay, eds., *The Norton Anthology of African American Literature* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2004), 604.

²²¹ August Meier, *Negro Thought in America, 1880-1915: Racial Ideologies in the Age of Booker T. Washington* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1964), 256.

²²² *Ibid*, 269.

glance becomes Warwick's first glance – and “Warwick's first glance had revealed the fact that the young woman was strikingly handsome, with a stately beauty seldom encountered.”²²³ The tone for perceptions of Rena throughout the remainder of the novel is thus set: her potential in life, the path she will follow – indeed, the path she is *able* to follow – is contextualized within a description of her physical appearance. As with hair care advertisements simultaneously calling for sales agents and hair growth, one's economic prospects were inevitably entangled in appearance. Though the type of financial opportunities each source referenced was different, both offered methods for black women to establish their own version of “consumer citizenship,”²²⁴ as it were, and to carve out a place for themselves in society.

The fact of Rena's dual identity was communicated through John's “double gaze...: as Warwick, likely white suitor; and as Walden, loving black brother.”²²⁵ As Warwick, the name he adopted for his life as a white man, John can evaluate Rena's marriageability; as Walden, the brother, he can determine her development as a woman since last they met. The two purposes, then, are entirely distinct: the desires of the suitor would not overlap with the brother's love. Her beauty is thus defined in two separate ways, though, significantly, Rena has control over the direction of neither. The important point here, though, is that there is no way that these two identities, black and white, could meld into a single unique identity – even though technically she *does* have black and white blood within one body. In the strict restrictions set by Southern society in particular, there could be no negotiation about Negroes being “partly white.” Within

²²³ Charles Chesnutt, *The House Behind the Cedars* (United States: The Modern Library, 2003), 7.

²²⁴ Roland Marchand's notion of “consumer citizenship,” discussed in Chapter 2, argued that recognition as a viable citizen in a United States society that was largely based on consumerism depended on one's ability to actively participate in the economy. Failure to do so meant that one was “disenfranchised” in the world of commerce; businesses had no need to tailor their messages to those who could not afford to buy their products. (Roland Marchand, *Advertising the American Dream* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, California: University of California Press, 1985), 64.)

²²⁵ Charles Chesnutt, *The House Behind the Cedars* (United States: The Modern Library, 2003), 206.

the context of a social hierarchy based on race as a signifier of innate qualities or characteristics, claims of “partial” whiteness would threaten to complicate the concept of white superiority. If one tried to argue for mixed race as a different kind of identity, the entire construction of racial classification could crumble. Thus, Rena could either be simply black or simply white; she could not be any combination of the two.

Warwick’s description continued,

The girl’s figure, he perceived, was admirably proportioned; she was evidently at the period when the angles of childhood were rounding into the promising curves of adolescence. Her abundant hair, of a dark and glossy brown, was neatly plaited and coiled above an ivory column that rose straight from a pair of gently sloping shoulders, clearly outlined beneath the light muslin frock that covered them... she walked with an elastic step that revealed a light heart and the vigor of perfect health.²²⁶

In fact, this appraisal was fairly racially neutral, revealing only in one key phrase (her neck as an “ivory column”) any preference for or emphasis on European features. The description *was*, however, an assessment – a valuation of sorts, as if her beauty and her very femininity were an object for approval and admiration. Indeed, John’s “gaze reveals Rena as the specimen of a female aesthetic ideal in the fine arts. She is appraised like a fine piece of sculpture, ‘admirably proportioned,’ with a neck like ‘an ivory column’”²²⁷ – in other words, she was like the creation of an artist that held little purpose outside of the enjoyment of its onlookers (onlookers who, appreciation of art besides, were judging her construction). Moreover, such an analytical introduction to Rena directed perceptions of this character throughout the rest of the book. As the product of miscegenation – “the unpardonable sin”²²⁸ – the outward lives of Rena and John (but particularly Rena) were held up to scrutiny by everyone with whom they come in contact: the

²²⁶ Charles Chesnutt, *The House Behind the Cedars* (United States: The Modern Library, 2003), 7.

²²⁷ *Ibid*, 206.

²²⁸ *Ibid*, 87.

judge who first advised John to pass, Rena's lover and short-lived fiancé, the man who recruited Rena to become a teacher for his district. Their very well being depended on their ability to maintain a particular aesthetic which, if discovered to be flawed, would cause their "fine social position," so painstakingly erected, to "collapse like a house of cards."²²⁹

It would seem that presenting her beauty as separately white and black would impede, rather than engage, the kind of implicit dialogues of beauty standards that later hair care advertisements had when negotiating a balance between Africanized and Europeanized features. After all, she chose to be white, to abandon in a sense an important part of her heritage. This view fails to acknowledge, though, the goals of identity formation and the dual aspect of these negotiations. In their debates about self-sufficiency versus integration, contemporary scholars for the most part (excepting of course strict segregationists) were all working towards the same basic aim: situating African Americans, for whom slavery still existing in their living memory, within a United States society that now had to account for a population of freed people. In choosing to be white, Rena was still engaging in this push to create a place for herself in American society; she was just foregrounding the importance of economic position over inner reconciliation.

Rena's mother, too, made economic condition primary in establishing a place for herself in society – only, as someone not light enough to pass, her story played out very differently. Mis' Molly had always taught her children that appearance was everything, and that complexion and hair in particular were prerequisites to success. Her views on this reflected in her group of friends: "[t]hey were all mulattoes...There were dark mulattoes and bright mulattoes. Mis' Molly's guests were mostly of the bright class, most of them more than half white, and few of

²²⁹ Ibid, 47.

them less. In Mis' Molly's small circle, straight hair was the only palliative of a dark complexion... Very few... had been slaves."²³⁰

It made sense that Molly would put such a premium on these two factors, complexion and hair texture; in her own experience, appearance had brought her and her family out of poverty. When she was young, "scarcely more than a child in years," she developed a relationship of sorts with a white man who put her up in "her own house, hers by deed of gift," and who provided for her poor relations for the rest of his life.²³¹ He was attracted by her beauty: her complexion, which "in youth was of an old ivory tint," her "[h]igh cheek-bones, straight black hair," and her "sparkling eyes."²³² It was a secluded life: hidden "discreetly behind the cedar screen" that obscured her home, she was almost as isolated from the surrounding community as if she *had* been able to pass and had left the neighborhood completely. Indeed, she had "some vague conception" that this lifestyle rendered her relation to society "false" – that she was fundamentally altering her position within the African American community by choosing economic comfort over racial pride. To Molly, however, this financial positioning was essential; the moral failings were "so confused with other questions growing out of slavery and caste as to cause her...but little uneasiness."²³³ Yet, she nevertheless tried to counterbalance any ethical ambiguity by providing for those she cared about: "no other woman lived in neglect or sorrow

²³⁰ Charles Chesnutt, *The House Behind the Cedars* (United States: The Modern Library, 2003), 145; This distinction of free versus slave was a key one. Before emancipation, racial identifications dictated that "Black"...marked who was subject to subject to enslavement; 'white'...marked who was 'free' or, at minimum, not a slave." For a generation that probably saw slavery within their lifetime, it was a significant indication of class that none in their ancestry had been enslaved. (Cheryl Harris quoted in Elaine K. Ginsberg, Ed., *Passing and the Fictions of Identity* (Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 1996), 7.)

²³¹ Charles Chesnutt, *The House Behind the Cedars* (United States: The Modern Library, 2003), 109.

²³² *Ibid*, 108, 109.

²³³ *Ibid*, 110.

because of her. She robbed no one else. For what life gave her she returned an equivalent; and what she did not pay, her children settled to the last farthing.”²³⁴

Even while she was geographically situated within a black community, then, psychologically, Molly was on her own, by virtue of her alliance with an oppressive form of the dominant culture. This is not to say that all white people were inherently bad, or that integration was not a goal supported by African Americans at the start of the twentieth century. Indeed to set up such a dichotomy would contradict the argument that racial categories were not actually indicative of inherent qualities or essences. Rather, Molly aligned herself with someone who maintained in his actions the discriminatory policies of the South, and the continued suppression of African American advancement. This was the problematic aspect of her isolation: not only was she not contributing to the development of the racial economy, she was implicitly agreeing to her own repression.

Racial passing took this isolation a step further by physically removing African Americans from their community. For Rena to become white required her to leave her hometown. Her brother John defined it as an ability to start fresh: “Of course she will have no chance here, where our story is known,” he reasoned. “The war has wrought great changes, has put the bottom rail on top and all that—but it hasn’t wiped *that* out. Nothing but death can remove that stain, if it does not follow us even beyond the grave. Here she must forever be—nobody! With me she might have got out into the world; with her beauty she might have made a good marriage.”²³⁵ “That stain” of course, was the “taint of black blood” – the public marker of

²³⁴ Ibid.

²³⁵ Charles Chesnutt, *The House Behind the Cedars* (United States: The Modern Library, 2003), 19-20.

“the unpardonable sin, from the unmerited penalty of which there is no escape except by concealment.”²³⁶

Concealment meant geographical relocation, and relocation meant isolation from one’s community. It was in this isolation that one could begin to see the toll of a failure in reconciliation of one’s identity. Indeed, Rena struggled throughout the narrative to muster the same kind of “self-conviction” that John Warwick felt about her worthiness as a white woman.²³⁷ Her constant awareness of her deception of society cast a shadow on her every action, so that even as, in her public life, she placed more emphasis on the American (white) part of her double consciousness, within herself she could not reconcile this new outward image with her African heritage. Upon meeting her love interest, she worried constantly that he would discover her true identity, and debated the wisdom of not telling him. Even this term “true identity” is dubious. As previously stated, by birth, Rena contained both black and white blood; by the standards of society, however, she was simply a Negro. Firmly mired in a cultural context in which “Negro blood overdetermine[d] all other aspects of...experience or sense of identity,”²³⁸ she could not break from the prevalent belief that her African heritage, and not her love for this man George Tryon, should dictate who she was or how she acted. To her mind, in contrast to John’s beliefs about his own life, she was fully Negro, and while the present, her life as a white woman, “was more of a dream, the past was the more vivid reality.”²³⁹ In her estimation, then, her “place” was solidly in the African American community, and physically distancing herself from that population, punctuated by her limited communication with her mother, led to an intense loneliness that her brother could not fully understand.

²³⁶ Ibid, 89.

²³⁷ Ibid, 44.

²³⁸ Samira Kawash, “*The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*: (Passing for) Black Passing for White,” in *Passing and the Fictions of Identity*, ed. Elaine K. Ginsberg (Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 1996), 69.

²³⁹ Charles Chesnutt, *The House Behind the Cedars* (United States: The Modern Library, 2003), 49.

Indeed, in John's perception, becoming white was no large leap; growing up "with his father's patrician features and his mother's Indian hair, and no external sign to mark him off from the white boys on the street,"²⁴⁰ he had always thought of himself as Caucasian. Even when his classmates tried to convince him he was black, "he never admitted the charge. His playmates might call him black; the mirror proved that God, the Father of all, had made him white; and God, he had been taught, made no mistakes,—having made him white, He must have meant him to be white."²⁴¹ Firmly enmeshed in this belief, John had little trouble developing the self-assurance that allowed him to live as a white man (and a lawyer nonetheless), a widow, a father, and the owner of "a fine old plantation house, built in colonial times [and] painted white."²⁴²

The fact of his residence was in and of itself of extraordinary significance. This was an establishment that once symbolized the enslavement of his mother's ancestors, its exterior painted white in a seeming demonstration of its values and of its owners. In this way, his plantation was a metaphor for his own life: outwardly white and thus presumably supportive of a regime that maintained black oppression, but on the inside engaging just as thoroughly in the debate about black advancement in U.S. society as those hair care advertisements that offered employment opportunities to African Americans. The line that separated the inner goals from the outer perception, however, was not entirely clear-cut, for when he adopted his new life, John adopted, to some degree, the attitude that went along with it. "Once persuaded that he had certain rights, or ought to have them, by virtue of the laws of nature, in defiance of the customs of mankind, he had promptly sought to enjoy them. This he had been able to do by simply concealing his antecedents and making the most of his opportunities, with no troublesome

²⁴⁰ Ibid, 111.

²⁴¹ Charles Chesnutt, *The House Behind the Cedars* (United States: The Modern Library, 2003), 111-112.

²⁴² Ibid, 44.

qualms of conscience whatever.”²⁴³ The implication, then, was that the embodiment or appearance of whiteness on the exterior allowed for the self-confidence that came from inside. This was the inverse of the reconciliation that Burroughs wrote of in her 1904 article, “Not Color, But Character.”²⁴⁴ Whereas Burroughs argued that an inner pride in one’s appearance and one’s race would lead to outward manifestations of racial advancement, John used his outward appearance – but *not* his race – to create for himself material advantages, which in turn led to his inner conviction that he had deserved those benefits all along.

Of course, Warwick (Walden) was not immune to feelings of isolation. The mere uncertainty of his everyday life and the anxiety attached to potential discovery caused him “now and then a certain sense of loneliness.”²⁴⁵ It was partially for this reason that he brought Rena to live with him. In his life as a white man, “he had always been, in a figurative sense, a naturalized foreigner in the world of wide opportunity, and Rena was one of his old compatriots, whom he was glad to welcome into the populous loneliness of his adopted country.”²⁴⁶ The opening description, however, and his continued praises of Rena’s beauty make it clear that his solitude did not drive the decision to invite Rena. As he articulated, “His feeling for her was something more than brotherly love,—he was quite conscious that there were degrees in brotherly love, and that if she had been homely or stupid, he would never have disturbed her in the stagnant life of the house behind the cedars.”²⁴⁷ Thus while having a companion who knew his secret was on the level of an added convenience to John, Rena’s loneliness was of a whole different type – an aching and constant pain, which for the first few months “prostrated” her, as the knowledge of

²⁴³ Ibid, 56.

²⁴⁴ Nannie Burroughs, “Not Color But Character,” *Voice of the Negro* 1 (July 1904), 277; For more complete discussion on her philosophy, see Chapter 1.

²⁴⁵ Charles Chesnutt, *The House Behind the Cedars* (United States: The Modern Library, 2003), 47.

²⁴⁶ Ibid, 47.

²⁴⁷ Ibid, 46.

her secret “oppressed her...like a nightmare.” As “[t]he severance of old ties had been abrupt and complete,” her inability to share her condition with anyone only added to the feelings of immense isolation. Then,

[w]hen the paroxysm [of the first few months] had passed, there followed a dull pain, which gradually subsided into a resignation as profound, in its way, as had been her longing for home...From some ancestral source she had derived a strain of the passive fatalism by which alone one can submit uncomplainingly to the inevitable. By the same token, when once a thing had been decided, it became with her a finality, which only some extraordinary stress of emotion could disturb. She had acquiesced in her brother’s plan; for her there was no withdrawing; her homesickness was an incidental thing which must be endured, as patiently as might be, until time should have brought a measure of relief.²⁴⁸

While this passage alluded to a greater ability of African Americans, likely born out of necessity, to accept what was given them and deal with it the best they could, it acknowledged that acceptance did not inhibit emotional reaction. It remained significant, though, that her individual sense of isolation was born out of a severance from her community in exchange for a way of being that, from all outward appearances, was entirely white.

Given the difference between her feelings of isolation and John’s, hers was a loneliness that perhaps in part could be attributed to the limitations of her gender. As previously stated, racial passing was motivated by an African American desire to create a pathway for economic advancement, and it was the fact that inner goals were ignored in favor of this outer goal that led to an ultimate failure of identity formation. This line of thought, however, presented an additional challenge to African American women, who actually had more solid economic footing on their own than did black men. As discussed in the first chapter, domestic jobs were much less

²⁴⁸ Charles Chesnutt, *The House Behind the Cedars* (United States: The Modern Library, 2003), 63-64.

sporadic than the opportunities that existed for men in industry or in farming.²⁴⁹ There was a difference, however, between job availability and opportunity for economic advancement. While black women may have had work available to them, the pay was extremely low and there was not necessarily a chance to move beyond that field. Rena wanted what her brother had described when he came to visit: she, too, wanted to secure something like a large plantation house with servants, and she wanted to live a story like his, which to her had “the charm of an escape from captivity, with all the thrill of a pirate’s tale.”²⁵⁰ Thus to live as a white woman, she thought, would be to escape from a kind of imprisonment, and exist like a pirate: profiting off of the wealth, of others, perhaps, but living extraordinarily well. Rena lived before the era when hair care companies tried to provide black women with the chance to improve by granting them more economic agency in the role of sales agents. Thus in choosing to pass, Rena gave up the relative stability of job openings for African American women in exchange for the chance to secure wealth through marriage.

Ironically, in deciding on this particular path into the United States economy, she submitted to complete dependence on others. Even the decision to pass had ultimately not been hers. John Walden decided he wanted to pass, so he studied law, became John Warwick, and assumed the life of a white man in South Carolina. Though “simple” would not be an appropriate description of this process, his was certainly a more self-directed decision than Rena had the capability to make. John became white of his own volition; Rena became white on the suggestion of her brother, and only after obtaining permission from her mother. Still, though it was not hers, the decision to pass was a decision to place economic identity over reconciliation, and her failure to secure a financial base for herself was a signal of her failed identity negotiations.

²⁴⁹ James R. Grossman, “A Chance to Make Good: 1900-1929,” in *To Make Our World Anew: A History of African Americans from 1880*, eds. Robin Kelley & Earl Lewis (United States: Oxford University Press, 2000), 76.

²⁵⁰ Charles Chesnutt, *The House Behind the Cedars* (United States: The Modern Library, 2003), 17.

The ultimate indicator, however, and the aspect that drove the narrative from the reader's perspective, was the love story. All along the novel had maintained this implicit question: could Rena successfully ignore her inner reconciliation in favor of maneuvering a better economic position? In the end, in a resounding answer, it was the love story delivered the final blow, solidifying Rena's sense of isolation when her first love, George Tryon, cast her off upon discovering her African heritage. Though he ultimately decided he would rather marry a mulatto than live without his first love, Rena's fate had already been sealed. In the end, for all of George Tryon's supposed open-mindedness, indicated even in his name (in his willingness to "try on" a new type of relationship), his true nature was revealed in his gut reaction to the news. In a dream, his subconscious pondered the revelation: "In all her fair beauty she stood before him, and then by some hellish magic she was slowly transformed into a hideous black hag. With agonized eyes he watched her beautiful tresses become mere wisps of coarse wool, wrapped round with dingy cotton strings; he saw her clear eyes grow bloodshot, her ivory teeth turn to unwholesome fangs."²⁵¹ In other words, she became a monster, signified by those same physical qualities that he once loved, but which the addition of the term "African American" had given a new meaning.

Rena's physicality had driven the whole plot of this book: it was her appearance that allowed her pass in the first place, her beauty that made Tryon love her, her light skin that contributed to her acquisition of a teaching position, and by extension, her mixed heritage that led to her death. Of course, in the context of racial passing, an emphasis on appearance is natural and necessary. The terms of passing dictated that one must fit a very specific standard of beauty. Yet, though her destiny had been driven by her looks, passing had still merely served as a means to an economic end. Rena tried to use her physical qualities to create a new position for herself in

²⁵¹ Charles Chesnutt, *The House Behind the Cedars* (United States: The Modern Library, 2003), 102.
Penn Humanities Forum Mellon Undergraduate Research Fellowship, Final Paper April 2009
Abby Brisbon, College '09

the United States society. The complication in passing came from the fact that necessarily denying one's African roots, even just in the public sphere, failed to reconcile the fact of being black with the desire to be American as well, and in this narrative, such a failure was literally fatal. This decade's debate about Negro advancement in United States society was largely dependent upon African Americans' ability to find (or create) their own place, and they could not do that without claiming their unique heritage.

Racial Passing through the Lens of the New Negro: *Passing* (1929)

With the development of the New Negro, the 1920s had seen a dramatic shift in self-definitions about what it meant to be an African American. The new type of Negro was “race-conscious, assertive, [and] race-proud;” she was “achieving middle-class status and creating an artistic expression of [her]...separate group life while aiming at integration into American society.”²⁵² In other words, the New Negro was working more than ever before to reconcile the two disparate parts of African American identity – and she was producing a new kind of literature in the process. According to August Meier, the literary movement of this era was “many-faceted”:

It was symbolic of the desire to assimilate to American middle-class culture; it was directed toward demonstrating that Negroes did have intellectual and creative abilities; it expressed a belief that only Negro writers could express the aspirations of the race; it was intended to correct the stereotypes of Negro characters in the writings of white authors and to argue the race question from the Negro's point of view; it was an outgrowth of the feeling of race pride; it was connected with the idea that it would be the intellectuals who would, on the basis of racial co-operation, lead the race into achieving higher culture and civilization.²⁵³

²⁵² August Meier, *Negro Thought in America, 1880-1915: Racial Ideologies in the Age of Booker T. Washington* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1964), 256.

²⁵³ *Ibid*, 265.

These were ambitious goals, and it seems almost counterintuitive that a racial passing figure, who was necessarily premised on the abandonment of one's inner goals, would follow the African American, now so self-aware and conscious of her worth, into this new era. But follow it did, newly adapted to meet the changing circumstances of the late 1920s.

One of the most influential passing figures of this era came from writer Nella Larsen in her 1928 novel entitled, simply, *Passing*. Larsen herself was of mixed heritage, and though some key details of her life are disputed, she is said to have been born to “a female white immigrant from Denmark and a man of color from the Danish West Indies.”²⁵⁴ Biographers have suggested that Larsen's characters were the outgrowth of her own tragic story. Affected very young by her white “mother's racism and [emotional] abandonment,”²⁵⁵ it made sense that Larsen would author books in which the main characters were confused about which classification they fit.

Fitting of an era in which the industrial northern centers had seen a swelling of their black populations as job opportunities were created by the First World War and as prejudice in the South had continued to mount,²⁵⁶ the setting of this book shifted northward, to New York City and, in small part, Chicago. Here, racial passing manifested in a form entirely different from that of Rena's passing almost 30 years earlier in the South. For one, passing did not imply the same kind of permanency; it was not necessary for someone to physically relocate in order to protect her identity. Instead, it could be a much more casual endeavor. Part of this was a result of the size of New York and the distinct nature of Harlem.

In this and in other novels of the Harlem Renaissance, this neighborhood was described as if it were a separate entity entirely – and indeed it was, in every aspect except the

²⁵⁴ George Hutchinson, “Nella Larsen and the Veil of Race.” *American Literary History*, Vol. 9, No. 2 (Summer, 1997). <http://www.jstor.org/stable/490290> (accessed from jstor April 25, 2009), 330.

²⁵⁵ *Ibid*, 331.

²⁵⁶ Patrick S. Washburn, *The African American Newspaper: Voice of Freedom* (Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 2006), 86.

geographical. As Jessie Redmon Fauset described it in her 1929 novel *Plum Bun*, Harlem was a “bustling, frolicking, busy, laughing great city within a greater one...just as this city reproduced in microcosm all the important features of any metropolis, so undoubtedly life up here was just the same...as life anywhere else.”²⁵⁷ Yet, as the epicenter of black life in New York, “there was something very fascinating, even terrible about this stream of life...just as these people could suffer more than others, just so they could enjoy themselves more.”²⁵⁸ Even as the neighborhood was a smaller version of the larger city, the people were characterized by their unique African American history, which dictated a different kind of lifestyle. This city within a city was the perfect setting for the new, casual form of passing, as one could pass in and out of Harlem as she slipped in and out of her African American identity.

The first introduction to the passing figure in Larsen’s book was, like Rena, not of her own telling; however, it was not technically a description of *her*, either. Rather, it was a depiction of a letter she sent – “the last letter in Irene Redfield’s little pile of morning mail.” Thus it was through this envelope that the reader got the first sense of Clare Kendry:

After her other ordinary and clearly directed letters the long envelope of thin Italian paper with its almost illegible scrawl seemed out of place and alien. And there was, too, something mysterious and slightly furtive about it. A thin sly thing which bore no return address to betray the sender. Not that she hadn’t immediately known who its sender was. Some two years ago she had one very like it in outward appearance. Furtive, but yet in some peculiar, determined way a little flaunting. Purple ink. Foreign paper of extraordinary size.²⁵⁹

This narration was exceptionally telling in the character it shaped, particularly in the context of the passing figure. Practically unreadable on the exterior; sly with nothing to expose her

²⁵⁷ Jessie Redmon Fauset, *Plum Bun* (New York: Frederick A. Stokes Company, 1929), 96.

²⁵⁸ Jessie Redmon Fauset, *Plum Bun* (New York: Frederick A. Stokes Company, 1929), 97.

²⁵⁹ Nella Larsen, *Passing*, in *The Complete Fiction of Nella Larsen: Passing, Quicksand, and the Stories*, ed. Charles R. Larson (New York: Anchor Books, 1992), 171.

background; secretive, unless one had seen her before – these had been the requirements for passing since the beginning.

And yet, the telling of this passing figure was different. Set within the context of the New Negro, Larsen added another layer to the narrative by filtering the story through Clare Kendry's childhood friend, Irene Redfield. In her strong awareness of herself and of the issues confronting the race, Irene epitomized the spirit of the New Negro woman. Though Irene, too, passed on occasion, her passing was out of mere convenience: in order to get a cab on a hot day, or have a cup of tea in a nice restaurant.²⁶⁰ When it came to defending her race, she was an eternal champion; she had never been ashamed of her heritage. Indeed, the only time in her life that she “wished...that she had not been born a Negro,” was after she discovered that Clare and her husband had been having an affair, and even then, she felt too much race loyalty to expose Clare as an African American to her white husband: “For the first time she suffered and rebelled because she was unable to disregard the burden of race. It was, she cried silently, enough to suffer as a woman, an individual, on one's own account, without having to suffer for the race as well. It was a brutality, and undeserved. Surely no other people so cursed as Ham's dark children.”²⁶¹ Even this was an opinion informed by the New Negro movement in which African Americans embraced their heritage, for even in her despair, her wish was not to be white; it was merely to have the option of unshouldering the constant burden of being black. In this viewpoint she epitomized the reconciliation of African and American identities that passing figures never would. Discovering one's identity never meant that the problems of the race would disappear; it merely meant that once a person was firmly situated, both economically and in terms of their

²⁶⁰ Nella Larsen, *Passing*, in *The Complete Fiction of Nella Larsen: Passing, Quicksand, and the Stories*, ed. Charles R. Larson (New York: Anchor Books, 1992), 175.

²⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 258.

inner reconciliation, they could more concretely and soundly meet the challenges of inequality and prejudice.

Thus it was through the eyes of the New Negro – literally, through the eyes of Irene – that the reader understood Clare as a figure of passing. In juxtaposing Clare’s life with Irene’s the reader could clearly observe Clare’s failures in identity formation. For, though passing was more casual or even spontaneous in this era, the effects experienced by one who failed to reconcile both aspects of her identity were in no way minimized. Just as Rena had been before her, Clare Kendry was drawn to the economic benefits of racial passing. “[T]hat’s what everyone wants, just a little more money,” she told Irene as she explained her decision to her friend over tea, “even the people who have it... Money’s awfully nice to have. In fact, all things considered, I think, ‘Rene, that it’s even worth the price.’”²⁶² She, then, was aware of the price, which amounted to a denial of self, in a way that Rena never explicitly acknowledged, and was willing to disavow her African heritage for the financial security. To this statement, Irene’s “reason partly agreed, her instinct wholly rebelled.”²⁶³ In other words, the part of her mind that appreciated the economic position of African Americans understood the desire to pass; the part of her that was fiercely loyal to and proud of her race could not agree.

As Rena’s would have, the economic benefits of passing came to Clare through her marriage. In marrying a man whose family had always had the benefit of being favored by American society, this union allowed her to obtain a degree of wealth she felt would not have been possible otherwise. Yet, her marriage was the ultimate indicator of her failure to reconcile the two parts of her identity. As Mis’ Molly had found before her, aligning herself so closely with a person dedicated to maintaining white supremacy and African American suppression not

²⁶² Nella Larsen, *Passing*, in *The Complete Fiction of Nella Larsen: Passing, Quicksand, and the Stories*, ed. Charles R. Larson (New York: Anchor Books, 1992), 190.

²⁶³ *Ibid.*

only separated her from the black community, it prohibited her from ever fully realizing her own self-worth. With Molly, who lived in a society and an era strictly defined by caste, this had manifested in her group of friends and her commitment to complexion and hair texture as the most important predictors of one's success in life. For Clare, whose story was informed by a movement related to developing a positive self-image, her failure doomed her to an eternally unsuccessful quest for happiness. Passing back and forth between her life with her husband and her attempts to reconnect with black life in Harlem, between her chosen economic path and her vague racial consciousness – between white and black – she could never get a clear grip on her identity, as either white or black. The casual nature of passing had not given it less of an impact, but rather had illuminated the stark contrast between what each life could offer her.

There was one aspect from *The House Behind the Cedars*, however, that did not change. In this new context that focused on African Americans as they were, Clare's own beauty was a continual focal point in this novel. Again, as with its predecessor, an emphasis on looks is natural, indeed necessary, in a story about racial passing; looking a certain way was a prerequisite to the process of passing. What is telling in these accounts, though, was the features Larsen kept coming back to – and with Clare, it was her eyes. Her eyes were, Larsen declared,

magnificent! Dark, sometimes absolutely black, always luminous, and set in long, black lashes. Arresting eyes, slow and mesmeric, and with, for all their warmth, something withdrawn and secret about them.

Ah! Surely! They were Negro eyes! Mysterious and concealing. And set in that ivory face under that bright hair, there was about them something exotic.²⁶⁴

Her eyes served as the ultimate metaphor for her life, the dark soul concealed by a white covering. Indeed, she could slip on that white mask and charm the world with her alluring

²⁶⁴ Nella Larsen, *Passing*, in *The Complete Fiction of Nella Larsen: Passing, Quicksand, and the Stories*, ed. Charles R. Larson (New York: Anchor Books, 1992), 191.

manner; she could have anything she wanted, “[a]ll because Clare had a trick of sliding down ivory lids over astonishing black eyes and then lifting them suddenly and turning on a caressing smile.”²⁶⁵ The frequent recounting of her beauty was not just a reminder of the importance of appearance in the determining one’s ability to pass; it was a reminder that in denying her heritage, Clare was denying herself a chance to ever truly find or create for herself a place in American society. For, for all her allure and charm – her “having way,” in the words of Irene²⁶⁶ - and in spite of her stated desire to live as a white woman, her constant trips to Harlem and her admitted loneliness proved that, while she may have been engaging in the negotiations about how black people should fit into society, she was not doing so in a way that would actually help to advance the race.

Therefore, in her inability to embrace her African heritage, Clare’s failure in reconciling her identity was complete. Thus, just as Rena Walden’s death was unsurprising, so was Clare Kendry’s. In dramatic fashion fitting of her lifestyle, Clare literally fell from grace when she plunged out of a sixth-story window after being confronted by her enraged husband – who had just learned of her ancestry – at a party. ““So you’re a nigger, a damned dirty nigger!”” he ran in shouting. “His voice was a snarl and a moan, an expression of rage and of pain.”²⁶⁷ Even right before her death, Larsen once again punctuated in this language how Clare never could have realized her own worthiness while with someone who so clearly despised African Americans.

Her death itself was ambiguous, made dubious because Irene, the lens through which the reader viewed the events of these books, “never afterwards allowed herself to remember. Never

²⁶⁵ Ibid, 254.

²⁶⁶ Nella Larsen, *Passing*, in *The Complete Fiction of Nella Larsen: Passing, Quicksand, and the Stories*, ed. Charles R. Larson (New York: Anchor Books, 1992), 182.

²⁶⁷ Ibid, 271.

clearly.”²⁶⁸ All that is said is that, “One moment Clare had been there, a vital glowing thing, like a flame of red and gold. The next she was gone.”²⁶⁹ The only other qualifying information was that immediately before the moment Clare fell from the window, Irene had run “across the room, her terror tinged with ferocity, and laid a hand on Clare’s bare arm.”²⁷⁰ Had Irene pushed her? The book does not clarify, but if she had, it would be fitting within the historical context of the New Negro movement. This was a trend towards taking pride in oneself – in embracing and reconciling one’s own beauty (those all-important “inner goals”) as it was. Irene had been the epitome of the New Negro woman for the whole of the novel. In pushing Clare to her death – indeed, even in her desire to push Clare to her death – she was casting off not just this individual woman, but the idea of abandoning one’s African heritage in exchange for an economic identity as well. This was the goal of the era, and the reason that, whatever the immediate cause of Clare’s death, it was implicitly caused by her great failure to reconcile her inner worth. In her commitment to the outer goals – the economic achievement, she doomed herself (at least within the conventions of racial passing literature) to an ultimate demise.

In these novels of passing, one finds a negotiation of identity that is somewhat unexpected – unexpected because, on the surface, racial passing is about little more than a desire to be white. What these novels demonstrated, however, as did the beauty advertisements of the same era, was that identity formation for African Americans involved two different sets of negotiation: that which took place in the economic sphere, and that which was about internal reconciliation; or, in other words, the inner and outer goals. In passing for white, Rena and Clare

²⁶⁸ Ibid.

²⁶⁹ Ibid.

²⁷⁰ Ibid.

may not have been thinking about racial advancement as a whole. They may not have been trying to uplift their relatives or their friends, and they certainly were not arguing for the celebration of African features. They were, however, fighting for an economic place for African Americans within the economic sphere, if on a more individualized level. The ways African Americans chose to fight their proscribed social and economic positions were varied, yet fight they did, and this was a dialogue in which racial passing figures were actively involved.

Epilogue

*“Already the Negro sees himself against a reclaimed background,
in a perspective that will give pride and self-respect ample scope,
and make history yield for him the same values
that the treasured past of any people affords.”*

- Arthur A. Schomburg²⁷¹

This is not a story with an ending. From the advent of permanents in the late 1940s to the rise of the Afro in the mid-1960s, hair has continually aided in the process of shaping and reshaping African American identity and self-definitions in the subsequent decades after the Great Depression.²⁷² Indeed, since the Poro and Walker Manufacturing Companies sold their first tins of hair grower at the start of the twentieth century, the hair care industry has expanded enormously, introducing to the African American community an entirely new vocabulary in the process. Hot comb, relaxer, texturizer, perm; tender-headed, hard-headed; good hair, bad hair: these are some of the terms that African Americans have come to use in defining hair care, and by extension, in defining this important part of their identity.

For hair remains, as it probably always will, a marker of difference – a physical reminder of the unique history that African Americans have lived in the United States. This is why learning to tend to one’s hair is about learning to reconcile those two disparate identities, black and American. In discovering ways in which to celebrate their African features even while embracing an American identity, African Americans were not just finding out how to take care

²⁷¹ Arthur A. Schomburg, “The Negro Digs Up His Past,” in *The Portable Harlem Renaissance Reader*, ed. David Levering Lewis (United States: Penguin Books, 1994), 67.

²⁷² Ayana D. Byrd and Lori L. Tharps, *Hair Story: Untangling the Roots of Black Hair in America* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2001), 46, 50.

of their physical appearance: they were actually in the process of establishing their own identity and position within United States society.

Appendix A: Advertisements featured in Chapter 1

Learn to Grow Hair and Make Money



Complete course by mail or by personal instructions. A diploma from Leila College of Hair Culture is a passport to prosperity. Is your hair short, breaking off, thin or falling out? Have you better, worse? Does your scalp itch? Have you more than a normal amount of dandruff?

Mme. C. J. WALKER'S Wonderful Hair Grower

Write for booklet which tells of the positive cures of all scalp diseases, stops the hair from falling out and starts it at once to growing.

Beware of imitations—all of the Mme. C. J. Walker preparations are put up in yellow tin boxes. Accept no goods unless they are sealed with the revenue stamps and cancelled from this office.

A six weeks' trial treatment sent to any address by mail for \$1.75. Make all money orders payable to Mme. C. J. Walker. Send stamps for reply. Agents wanted. Write for terms.

Madam C. J. Walker, President of the Mme. C. J. Walker Mfg. Co., and the Leila College, 640 North West Street, Indianapolis, Indiana.

These remedies are manufactured only by

THE MADAM C. J. WALKER MFG. CO.
640 North West Street, Indianapolis, Indiana

Walker Manufacturing Company
The Chicago Defender
 May 5, 1917
 (Ch. 1, p. 1-3)

BLACK SKIN REMOVER.



A Wonderful Face Bleach.
AND HAIR STRAIGHTENER.

both in a box for \$1, or three boxes for \$2. Guaranteed to do what we say and to be the best in the world. One box is all that is required if used as directed.

A WONDERFUL FACE BLEACH.
A PEACH-LIKE complexion obtained if used as directed. Will turn the skin of a black or brown person perfectly white. In forty-eight hours a shade or two will be noticeable. It does not turn the skin in spots but bleaches out white. The skin remains beautiful without continual use. Will remove wrinkles, freckles, dark spots, pimples or bumps or black heads, making the skin very soft and smooth. Small pox, measles, liver spots removed without harm to the skin. When you get the color you wish, stop using the preparation.

THE HAIR STRAIGHTENER.
that goes in every one dollar box is enough to make anyone's hair grow long and straight, and keeps it from falling out. Highly perfumed and makes the hair soft and easy to comb. Many of our customers say one of our dollar boxes is worth ten dollars, for we sell it for one dollar a box. THE NO-SHEDDING thrown in free.

Any person sending us one dollar in a letter or Post-Office money order, express money order or registered letter, we will send it through the mail postage prepaid; or if you want it sent U. S. O. D., it will come by express, free extra.

In any case where it fails to do what we claim, we will return the money or send a box free of charge. Packed so that no one will know contents except receiver.

CRANE AND CO.,
123 West Broad Street,
RICHMOND, VA.

Crane and Company
(Ch. 1, p. 7-8)

The Baltimore Afro-American, May 31, 1902

Ozonized Ox Marrow
(Ch. 1, p. 10-11)

WONDERFUL DISCOVERY
Curly Hair Made Straight By



TAKEN FROM LIFE:
BEFORE AND AFTER TREATMENT.

ORIGINAL OZONIZED OX MARROW
(Copyrighted)

This wonderful hair ointment is the only safe preparation in the world that makes kinky or curly hair straight as shown above. It nourishes the scalp and prevents the hair from falling out or breaking off, cures dandruff and makes the hair grow long and silky. Sold over forty years and used by thousands. Warranted harmless. Testimonials free on request. It was the first preparation ever sold for straightening kinky hair. Beware of imitations. Get the Original Ozonized Ox Marrow as the genuine never fails to keep the hair straight, soft and beautiful. A toilet necessity for ladies, gentlemen and children. Nicely perfumed. The great advantage of our straightening pomade is that by its use you straighten your own hair at home. Owing to its superior and lasting qualities it is the best and most economical. It is not possible for anybody to produce a preparation equal to it. Full directions with every bottle. Only 40 cents. Sold by druggists and dealers or send us 40 cents for one bottle or \$1.40 for three bottles. We pay all express charges. Send postal or express money order. Write your name and address plainly to

OZONIZED OX MARROW CO.,
76 Wabash Avenue, Chicago, Illinois.

The Original Poro Hair Grower

MRS. POPE-TURNBO.

MRS. L. L. ROBERTS.



4 Years ago my Hair
was only a finger-
length, and my tem-
ples were bald half
way up my head.

4 Years ago my Hair
just covered my shoul-
ders.

Imitation is the sincerest flattery; and the fact that so many people in St. Louis and throughout the country think it worth while to imitate "PORO" HAIR GROWER is the best proof of the merits of "Poro." We were the first to engage in the business of growing the hair regardless of its condition and the condition of the scalp, and in our work have used the preparation which is known as "Poro." This is made and sold exclusively by myself. I have the exclusive right to that name; and I, alone, know the secret of the composition that makes that claim. From the use in my treatments hundreds have received direct benefit. Our claim has always been that when the hair begins to grow as the result of the use of "Poro" it will continue to do so if only this the hair and scalp be kept clean. Many persons are constantly finding that is true. You cannot afford, by using mere imitations, to risk not attaining the result you desire.

Be sure that the name "Poro" is on every box; not genuine without it.

If your hair is dry, harsh, brittle and falling out—use "Poro."

It stops the falling and starts the hair to growing at once.

Mrs. A. M. Pope-Turnbo

3100 Pine Street
St. Louis, Mo.

Pittsburg Office
6226 Frankstown, Ave.
Mrs. W. A. Coy.

Poros Company
The Pittsburgh Courier, March 25, 1911
(Ch. 1, p. 18-19)



CONSTANT CARE — NOT LUCK

Human history and experience have taught us that many persons believe that a head of naturally long and beautiful hair, a healthy scalp and a lovely smooth complexion come from luck, but they do not. Constant care and the frequent use of preparations of proven merit are the secrets.

Use Madam C. J. Walker's

Vegetable Shampoo Pure, thorough cleanses hair and scalp.	Glossine To soften dry, curly hair.
--	--

Wonderful Hair Grower
Nourishes and stimulates the growth of stubborn, lifeless hair.

Tetter Salve
For Tetter, Eczema and Itching Scalps.
Best preparation especially recommended for short, thin and falling hair,
tetter and eczema of the scalp. Sent as trial treatment for \$1.00.

Complexion Soap **Superfine Face Powder** **Cleansing Cream**
Witch Hazel Lotion **Deposant Rouge** **Vanishing Cream**

World renowned and made to aid you have a lovely, smooth complexion.
For Sale at Drug Stores, or Agents and by Mail.

Free Booklet—Write To-day

The Madam C. J. Walker Mfg. Co., Inc.
640 N. West St., Indianapolis, Ind.

Walker Manufacturing Company
The Pittsburgh Courier, March 15, 1924
 (Ch. 1, p. 22)

Mme. T. D. Perkins

SCIENTIFIC SCALP SPECIALIST
4630 West 35th Ave., Denver, Colo.

Madam T. D. Perkins, of Denver, Colorado, who has spent five years in study of the scalp, is now interesting women all over the globe in the care of the hair and scalp. No matter how dark your skin is, Madame Perkins' matchless scalp preparations and scientific method of treatment for cultivating, beautifying and growing the hair will grow your hair if there is no physical ailment to prevent. Her treatments have been successful where all others have failed. Have you written her? If not, and you want hair like her own, write her today. Be sure to enclose a four-cent stamp and write your name and address very plain if you expect a reply. Don't write unless you mean business. No agents wanted.



THIS TELLS THE STORY

Copyrighted March 20, 1910.

WOMEN! STOP! WAIT! LISTEN! READ!

If a Woman have long hair, it is a Glory to Her: 1 Cor., 11-15.

Every Woman Can Have that Glory if She Wishes It.

This is for you. No more ironed hair, but soft, long, beautiful hair that need not be put on the dresser on retiring. Do you want this kind of hair? If so, write for particulars to Madame T. D. Perkins, the Scientific Scalp Specialist, of Denver, Colo., who is astonishing the world with her wonderful art of growing hair.

My own hair is my best advertisement. With these treatments my hair grew 17 inches in two years. It had remained one length (four inches) for 15 years. What I did for my hair I am doing for hundreds of others, and will do for you with my Matchless Scientific Scalp Preparations. My treatment stops falling hair or breaking off, cures split ends, removes dandruff and scalp scurf, causes the hair to grow long, no matter how short; soft, no matter how harsh; thick, no matter how thin; straight from the bulbs, no matter how kinky. First treatment will show wonderful improvement. Do not wait if you are interested in your hair. I give treatments all over the United States by mail. Write me at once. I send booklet of information, and testimonials of those taking my treatment when four-cent stamp is enclosed. I do not have agents. I need a personal history of your hair and scalp and your physical condition.

All mail promptly answered when four-cent stamp is enclosed. I am the only woman of the race growing hair today who can show the public the real length my hair was when I first began treating it. Send for booklet if you mean business. You can secure these preparations only from me. None like them made in the world. The T. D. P. Scientific Scalp Preparation, Madame Perkins, Sole Agent.

T.D.P. Scientific Scalp Preparation,
The Chicago Defender, August 19, 1911
(Ch. 1, p. 25-30)

Appendix B:

Advertisements featured in Chapter 2

DO YOU NEED MONEY?



Become a
Sweet Georgia Brown
Money-Making Agent
Here's good news! No
need to be out of
work. Why have
money worries or hard
times? You should
make big money sell-
ing Sweet Georgia
Brown Face Powder,
Hair Dressing, Skin
Brightener and 100
other big and fast sell-
ers. Everyone wants
pretty, light skin.
Everyone wants beau-
tiful slick hair. Re-



ceive our agent at once. Just send name, address and two 10 cent stamps for samples and our Money-Making Proposition. Write today.

VALMOR PRODUCTS CO.
5249 Cottage Grove Ave., Dept. 406, Chicago, Ill.

Valmor Products Company
The Pittsburgh Courier, February 24, 1934.
(Ch. 2, p. 46-49)

WHAT ABOUT UNEMPLOYMENT?

And What Are You Doing to Make Jobs Possible For Negro Boys and Girls?

The Mme. C. J. Walker Mfg. Co., owned by Negroes, operated by Negroes, for Negroes, answers that question!

NEW HOME OF THE Mme. C. J. WALKER MFG. CO. INC.

Every time you purchase a box of Mme. C. J. Walker Preparations you are making possible a job for some Negro boy or girl!

For twenty-five years the leader in its field, Madam C. J. Walker's Wonderful Hair Grower is still the peer, for short, brittle or lifeless hair, a safe remedy for dandruff and falling hair and is extra good to give lustre and promote the growth of the most stubborn hair.

A TRIAL WILL CONVINCE YOU!

Building that many men desire a sleek, well-groomed appearance for their hair, and the mass of the advertised preparations for men are manufacturers, the Mme. C. J. Walker Mfg. Co. is now marketing a preparation, trial and truly possessing all the virtues of the many preparations, yet without their faults.

Mme. C. J. Walker's Wonder Pomade

Just what its name implies. A wonderful hair dressing for men. It will not turn the hair red. It does not plaster or gum the hair. The delight of barbers and pedicled everywhere. WONDER POMADE gives life to the hair and health to the scalp.

HANDY BOX 25c

ABSOLUTELY HARMLESS!

Madam C. J. Walker's Wonder Pomade can be used on a baby's hair!

— TWO SIZES —

For Sale at Drug Stores, Barber Shops and of Walker Agents Almost Everywhere!

LARGE BOX

Women can make big money selling Mme. C. J. Walker Preparations and giving Mme. Walker Treatments

WRITE TODAY FOR TERMS

FREE! FREE!

Sample of Wonder Pomade sent by request.

USE THIS COUPON:

NAME: _____

Address: _____

City: _____

The Mme. C. J. Walker Manufacturing Company, Inc.
WALKER BUILDING INDIANAPOLIS, IND.

Walker Manufacturing Company
The Pittsburgh Courier, April 5, 1930
(Ch. 2, p. 45-49)



Smooth, Lustrous Hair

WINS POPULARITY

Wherever you go—to parties, dances, the theatre, church, everywhere—you will notice the most popular men and women are those who have *beautiful, smooth, lustrous hair*.

You can have this popularity, too.

The secret of beautiful hair is the use of Pluko Hair Dressing.

This delicately-perfumed preparation quickly and easily makes even the most harsh, wiry and unruly hair, so long, straight and silky it can be arranged in the latest style and will stay that way, always appearing smooth and glossy.

Start using Pluko today! It's sure, safe and inexpensive. The white can is 50c and the green can 25c. Ask your dealer.

Pluko

ALWAYS THE FINEST
HAIR DRESSING
EASY AND PLEASANT
TO USE



HAIR DRESSING

WHITE 50¢
AMBER 25¢

Pluko

The Chicago Defender, November 2, 1929

(Ch. 2, p. 51)

YOUTHFUL LUSTER

EASY TO COMB ANY STYLE

SOFT GROWING HAIR

HEALTHY SCALP

Leading Beauty Specialists tell how to get SOFT PRETTY HAIR

Ask any reputable leading beauty specialist who has analyzed hair drawings and they will tell you the ever improved Queen Hair Dressing contains every ingredient that makes your hair grow, makes it soft, sleekly beautiful and safeguards its beauty. This is the greatest proof of a hair dressing you could have. Queen Hair Dressing makes your hair easy to comb into any style, softens it, assists in growing it, and relieves scalp troubles.

Send the now for Complete treatment of Shampoo and Queen Hair Dressing, or if you want a bargain send \$1.00 in stamps for any five of the preparations below. Remember what the beauty specialists advise, send now. Mark what you want. Newbro Company, Atlanta, Ga. Order now.

Agents Wanted
WRITE FOR DETAILS.
KING PROPOSITION.

MONEY-SAVING COUPON
Newbro Mfg. Co., Atlanta, Ga. 0-1
Send me the following five I have marked them.

- Queen Hair Dressing.
- Queen Hair Whitening Shampoo.
- Queen Hair Soap.
- Queen Hair Conditioner.
- Queen Coconut Oil Shampoo.
- Queen Florida Waterhair Cream.
- Queen Face Powder (most for ladies).
- Queen Cream (1 Hi-Tone Health).
- Fresh Pink.

Name _____
City _____ State _____
Street or R.F.D. _____

Newbro Manufacturing Company
The Chicago Defender, April 12, 1930
 (Ch. 2, p. 55-56)

When I've Got A Date

THAT'S WHEN I'M
MOST THANKFUL

for

Madam C. J. Walker's
GLOSSINE



• I am always thankful for Madam C. J. Walker and the fine products she gave to Negro womanhood but I appreciate her and her incomparable GLOSSINE most when I have a date. . . . A bit of GLOSSINE applied to my hair and brushed in lightly adds a silky sheen and natural softness that makes it look like I am fresh from the hair dresser.

• And yes, hair dressers too, are fond in their praise of Madam C. J. Walker's GLOSSINE. Of all the ready products at their disposal they know nothing compares with Madam C. J. Walker's GLOSSINE. It oils and softens dry, brittle hair; adds a rich luster and keeps the hair clean and sweet smelling for days and days. Men and women find it great so smooth and beautiful the hair. Try GLOSSINE today. Made only by The Madam C. J. Walker Mfg. Co., Inc., Walker Bldg., Indianapolis, Indiana.

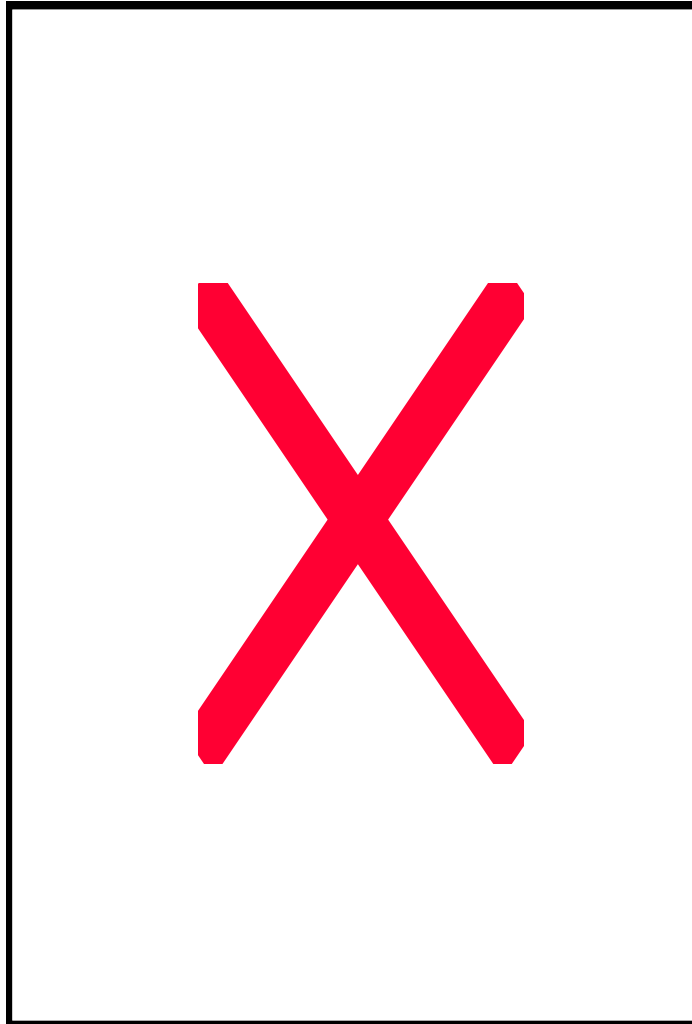
35¢ AT GOOD
DRUG STORES
and
BEAUTY SHOPS



MADAM C. J. WALKER'S
GLOSSINE

MAKES THE HAIR SOFT AND SILKY

Walker Manufacturing Company
The Pittsburgh Courier, October 16, 1937
(Ch. 2, p. 56-58)



Poro Company
The Pittsburgh Courier, August 1, 1931
(Ch. 2, 58-59)

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