

Hot Combs and Hair Grease: African-American Beauticians and Political Activism in Atlanta,
1930-1965

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Spaces associated with beautification and femininity remain complicated for Black and White women across cultures. The pressure to achieve a certain aesthetic and perform normative femininity makes these areas complicated for both groups. However, in the highly racialized structure of the Jim Crow South, hairstyling and beauty salons served vastly different functions in each community. While both Black and White women cultivated these spaces centered around the practice of hair and beauty, they generated different forms of beauty culture based on the needs and social position of their racial group. For many African-American women in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the process of hairstyling went beyond purely aesthetic reasons. White beauty culture formed around the American myth of self-made upward mobility and relied on ideas of social prestige and wealth to appeal to their community. In contrast, Black beauty culture aligned with the collective struggle for racial advancement.¹

The late nineteenth century saw the construction and reinforcement of the color divide with the creation of American-American caricatures and Jim Crow laws. Crafted by racial stereotypes and designed to subjugate, images of American-Americans reflected dominant ideas of Black culture and the position of Blacks in White society. Images of the Mammy and Topsy littered the pages of advertisements and American popular culture with exaggerated ape-like features and “wild” or covered hair categorizing African-American womanhood. The caricatures reinforced notions of White superiority and created a series of oppositional binaries which placed Black femininity as the antithesis of White femininity. In other words, if white womanhood could be defined as innocent and refined, black womanhood could be defined as the opposite: savage and salacious.²

¹ Kathy Peiss, *Hope in a Jar: The Making of America's Beauty Culture* (New York: Henry Holt and Company Inc., 1999), 80.

² Patricia Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Power of Empowerment* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 77-79.

Grooming granted African-American women the agency to construct their identity as African-Americans and as women on their own terms.³ Hairstyling functioned as a tool to subvert the racist and sexist depictions of Black womanhood. In the highly charged environment of the early twentieth-century, Black hair became entangled in a web of social and political meanings of race, beauty, and power.⁴ African-American beauty salons offered a reprieve for the damaging insults leveled at Black women during the period and an alternative version of their identity. Racial pride and uplift in the Black community took the form of a well-groomed, beautiful woman, a factor which made the beauty salon an important site within the community and one which gave the beauty salon an elevated status in the lives of African-American women. The notion of hair and appearance as a shield against a racist society was a concept that White women did not have to contend with since their beauty was often held as the norm.

In order to understand how beauticians engaged in political activism in the mid-twentieth century, it is important to examine what beauty salon meant to African-American beauticians. Beauty culture allowed African-American women to assert their version of beauty and negotiate areas of respectability and femininity.⁵ Engaging in salon work gave African-American women agency and access to the self-sufficiency denied to them in jobs traditionally held by Black women in the late-nineteenth and twentieth centuries. As the modern Civil Rights Movement gained momentum in the 1930s, beauty salons also allowed African-American women to engage in political activism and gave them access to forms of leadership within their communities. The proximity to the Black community and intimate nature of the salon allowed the business to

³ Tiffany Gill, *Beauty Shop Politics: African American Women's Activism in the Beauty Industry* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2010), 106.

⁴ Julia K. Blackwelder, *Styling Jim Crow* (College Station: Texas A & M University Press, 2003), 6.

⁵ Blain Roberts, *Pageants, Parlors, and Pretty Women: Race and Beauty in the Twentieth-Century South* (North Carolina: UNC Press Books, 2014), 59.

operate outside the White gaze. African-American spaces of leisure acted as a platform for self-expression and as a stage to voice their rage against the unjust system of Jim Crow. Beauty salons in Atlanta provided African-American women with a Black- and female-oriented space that allowed beauticians to engage in collective and individual activism during the Civil Rights Movement. Beauticians in Atlanta played pivotal roles as bridge leaders by supporting civil rights financially and morally.

The Birth of Beauty Culture

Hair traditions and the importance of hair among African-American women can be traced back to West Africa before the Trans-Atlantic slave trade. The shifting nature of hair and hairstyling practices among African-American women set the precedent for African-American beauty culture in the late-nineteenth century. In various African societies during the fifteenth century, hair functioned as a marker of status and a signal of the individual's position in society. It served as a signifier of age, community, wealth, ethnic identity and religion. The styling of hair could take up to several days to complete and became a bonding activity among women.⁶ The start of the Trans-Atlantic slave trade and the creation of a caste system based in part on hair texture shifted the relationship between Black women and their hair.⁷ The loss of proper hairstyling tools and products prompted enslaved women and men to construct new methods of hair care while toiling in the fields. Enslaved men and women utilized cards used for wool to comb their hair and moisturized their strands with bacon grease or sometimes kerosene.⁸ Enslaved women in the nineteenth and early twentieth-century practiced hair wrapping, a custom

⁶ Cheryl Thompson, "Black Women, Beauty, and Hair as a Matter of Being". *Journal of Women's Studies* 38, no. 8 (2009): 831-856; Tracy Patton, "Hey Girl, Am I More Than My Hair" *NWSA Journal* 18, no. 2 (2006): 27. ⁷ Ibid; Thompson, 833-834.

⁸ Shane White and Graham White, "Slave Hair and African American Culture in the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries", *Journal of Southern History* 61, no. 1 (1995): 69.

where they would bind a piece of hair with thread or cotton to keep it from knotting and to add a bit of curl. Other women straightened their hair by applying grease to the hair and laying a heated cloth across the head.⁹

The end of the Civil War and Emancipation marked a transition in the hair care industry, as African-Americans started to experiment with the aesthetic and social presentation of themselves in society.¹⁰ The custom of wearing the hair in its natural state declined in favor of sporting straight hair in the later nineteenth century. Straight hair stood as a symbol of modernity and freed status whereas natural hair held connotations of subjugation and bondage.¹¹ The absence of African-American hair care and the need to address the significance of hair initiated the start of the Black beauty industry. At the turn of the century, Annie Turnbo Malone and Madame C.J Walker revolutionized the Black beauty industry with the formation of their beauty manufacturing companies. Walker and Malone used the folk knowledge around African-American hair that passed from generation to generation of Black women to build their haircare empires and create the modern beauty salon.

In the late nineteenth century, the health and longevity of hair among working-class African-American women suffered. The lack of indoor plumbing and electricity resulted in infrequent hair washing and scalp ailments.¹² The use of chemical hair straighteners compounded the problem of hair-related issues. Upon seeing the increased interest in hair straightening in the African-American community, White-owned companies began crafting chemical hair

⁹ *Ibid.*, 70.

¹⁰ Tera Hunter, *To 'Joy My Freedom* (Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1998), 3.

¹¹ Crystal Powell, "Bias, Employment Discrimination, and Black Women's Hair: Another Way Forward", *Brigham Young University Law Review* 2018, no. 4 (2018): 933.

¹² Henry Louis Gates, Jr., "Madam Walker, the First Black American Woman to Be a Self-Made Millionaire" *PBS.org*, <https://www.pbs.org/wnet/african-americans-many-rivers-to-cross/history/100-amazing-facts/madam-walker-the-first-black-american-woman-to-be-a-self-made-millionaire/>

straighteners and skin bleaches. The advertised products proved harmful in multiple ways to the physical and emotional health of Black women. Some of the hair straightening products contained alcohol and other irritants that dried out the hair and caused breakage.¹³ More importantly, advertisements generated by these companies reinforced White beauty standards and utilized racist language and depictions to market their products to African-American women.¹⁴ These companies dominated Black hair care and the Black beauty industry before 1904 and the creation of the Poro Company.

Desiring to solve the problems she observed in African-American hair care, Annie Turnbo Malone challenged the control white businesses had on the Black haircare market. Using her knowledge of chemistry and folk knowledge surrounding African-American hair, Malone developed the “Wonderful Hair Grower” and a hair care line to treat scalp diseases and improve scalp health.¹⁵ Additionally, Malone created a chemical product that straightened African-American hair without damaging or straining the hair follicles. By 1902, Malone had moved her business to St. Louis, Missouri and created the Poro Company and set the precedent of the modern beauty industry.¹⁶ The rise of Madame C.J. Walker around 1905 further solidified the forces of beauty culture within the African-American community. Born Sarah Breedlove, Walker began her career in beauty culture as a selling agent of Malone’s Poro products. She began experimenting with her knowledge of Black hair care, expanding on the shampoo-press-and-curl system that Malone crafted. In 1905, Walker launched “Madam Walker’s Wonderful Hair

¹³ Roberts, 61-63.

¹⁴ Noliwe Rooks, *Hair Raising* (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1998), 13-14.

¹⁵ Robert Boyd, “The Great Migration To The North And The Rise Of Ethnic Niches For African American Women In Beauty Culture And Hairdressing, 1910—1920”, *Sociological Focus* 29, no. 1, 15-16; Elizabeth Engel, “Anni0035e Turnbo Malone, 1869-1957”, *State Historical Society of Missouri*, <https://historicmissourians.shsmo.org/historicmissourians/name/m/malone/>

¹⁶ Ibid.

Grower” and in 1911 she founded the Walker Manufacturing Company in Indianapolis.¹⁷ Her products quickly placing her as a major competitor of Annie Malone. Although she was not the original inventor of the straightening comb, Walker adjusted the device by widening the teeth of the comb to accommodate African-American hair. Walker’s inventions brought her national success and transformed the former laundress into a household name.

The Poro and Walker hair systems improved the lives of African-American women by addressing serious hair and scalp issues. The true success of their business relied on this ability to supply hair care and beauty services to a marginalized group of consumers. Malone and Walker circumvented the limitations of white supremacy by casting themselves as the standard of beauty and creating an alternative means of product distribution.¹⁸ Malone demonstrated her shampoos on herself when she first began her company, and Walker’s products carried her image across the labels. The inclusion of themselves in the selling and marketing of their products shifted the narrative of beauty and respectability and provided an attainable model of beauty that was crafted for and by African-American women. The language used to advertise Poro and Walker products reinforced an alternative narrative through a refusal to center hair straightening or bleaching as the central focus of their products.

Instead, Malone and Walker built their empires by concentrating on using language associated with hair health and promoting the newly formed industry as one for greater economic opportunity for African-American women.¹⁹ The success story of Walker solidified beauty culture as a career that permitted upward economic mobility, a feat in a system designed to suppress the economic and social agency of the new freedmen. Under the Black Codes and later

¹⁷ Gates; Blackwelder, 15-16; Roberts, 64-66.

¹⁸ Blackwelder, 15; Roberts, 65.

¹⁹ Boyd, 34

Jim Crow laws, accessing lines of credit and obtaining licenses to start an independent business proved difficult for many African-Americans. However, a career in beauty culture did not require much capital and developed alternatively to the dominant social system. Walker developed her “Wonder Hair Grower” with an initial investment of \$1.25 and sold her products out of her home until she began to employ selling agents.²⁰ Walker and Malone launched their businesses by selling from their homes and going door-to-door. Once a demand for their products was established, they expanded reach under a system of selling agents.

Lack of access to distribution networks and retail outlets led to the employment of selling agents.²¹ These women further established the accessibility and credibility of the industry by becoming models of the community and industry. These agents were women who went door-to-door selling beauty products for a specific company and gave demonstrations of the products. A network between beauty culture and other African-American social institutions formed through these women. Agents could rely on churches and fraternal organizations for venues to recruit more selling agents, recommendations for travel, or a space to give demonstrations.²² These women acted as physical representations of the effectiveness of the product and provided representation in a beauty industry that traditionally centered on White-American women. Some agents transformed from seller to full-time beautician in the early twentieth-century by turning their kitchens into full-scale hair salons rather than traveling to give demonstrations.²³ Annie Malone pioneered some of the first African-American hair salons in the United States with the creation of the Poro School of Beauty in 1918, and Walker followed by creating the Walker

²⁰ Gates.

²¹ Peiss, 71.

²² Blackwelder, 37.

²³ Peiss, 71.

Beauty Schools.²⁴ These schools offered training services to Black women and generated vertical retail systems comprised of manufacturing plants, selling agents, and beauty salons.

A 1924 advertisement for the Poro company reads, “How can I, a woman without training and experience earn the money so necessary to the welfare and happiness of myself and those I love”?.²⁵ The advertisement embodies the meaning of beauty culture among African-American women during the Jim Crow era. It capitalizes on the reality for many Black women of the period whose status as female and Black made it harder to find profitable economic opportunities. The advertisement reveals Black beauty culture as an escape from poverty and hints at the possibility of better home life. More importantly, it proves the accessibility of the profession for African-American women as it allowed them to enter the field with little education and training. As African-American women, discrimination based on race and gender limited access to higher education which limited the job prospects to domestic and farming work especially among working-class African-Americans. Most Southern Black women during the period of Jim Crow lacked the funds to pay for college. Even if they were able to afford higher education, racist and sexist employment practices disproportionately affected African-American women making it difficult to find appropriate employment. Additionally, wages for professional Black women often failed to reflect their elevated social position and education. In some instances, these women worked outside the home as tutors or performing domestic work for White households to help their families.²⁶ Because of the entrepreneurial aspect of beauty culture, the profession stood as an attractive option to women of all economic levels.

²⁴ Engel.

²⁵ Susannah Walker, “Independent Livings” or “No Bed Of Roses”? How Race and Class Shaped Beauty Culture as an Occupation for African American Women from the 1920s to the 1960s”, *Journal of Women's History* 20, no. 3 (2008):61.

²⁶ Stephanie J. Shaw, *What A Woman Ought to Be and to Do: Professional Women Workers During the Jim Crow Era* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 118-119; Walker, 211.

Between the 1870s and the 1900s, African-Americans migrated from and around the rural South. The shift came as a result of the formerly enslaved exercising their newfound freedom. Some migrated to find family members and others searched for better opportunities. After 1900, the trend increased exponentially launching into the social and demographic shift known as the Great Migration.²⁷ While numerous African-Americans went North, several African-Americans stayed in the South and flooded into larger Southern cities to find better employment opportunities. Women migrating from rural Southern towns escaped the clutches of tenant farming and sharecropping, yet still found themselves limited to low-paying work as domestic or factory workers.

However, migration into the urban centers generated a heightened sense of freedom and awareness of a new urban, modern aesthetic.²⁸ While examining the functions of the beauty salon among African-American women, Tiffany Gill argues that “the black beauty industry played a crucial role in providing black urban women with the personal dignity and financial stability they desired and was essential in ushering them into the modern experience by empowering them as consumers and entrepreneurs.”²⁹ Similarly, Kathy Peiss’ examination of African-American beauty culture reveals that beauty salons served as a means of identity construction among women when migrating to the North.³⁰ Robert Boyd positions beauty culture as an ethnic economy and finds that racism and sexism helped craft the salon space. Boyd also analyzed how these factors crafted the salon into a protected Black feminine.³¹ By utilizing the work of Gill, Peiss, and Boyd to examine Atlanta, one can understand how women migrating to the city during

²⁷ Townsend Price-Sprather, “Flowin’ All At Once: Gender, Race and Class: in Depression Era U.S. Urbanization”, *Race, Gender & Class*, Vol. 6, No. 2, *Race, Gender, Class: African-American* 6, no. 2 (1999): 148.

²⁸ Peiss, 230.

²⁹ Gill, *Beauty Shop Politics*, 33.

³⁰Peiss, 230.

³¹ Boyd, 35.

the early- to mid-twentieth century found confidence and the ability to blend into metropolitan society in beauty salons. The increasing population of African-Americans and the need to reconstruct oneself led to the formation of a distinct and protected market within one of the biggest hubs of African-American life in Georgia. Working-class African-American women seeking out the salon and partaking in the space provides key insight into the role beauticians played during the Civil Rights Movement in Atlanta.

Additionally, beauty culture provided employment outside of the jobs traditionally held by African-American women in the Jim Crow South. Between 70% and 90% of African-American women worked as domestics or in agriculture as sharecroppers without minimum wages.³² African-American women generally only took home around \$1-\$2 in wages a day working seven days a week as a domestic worker. As a domestic working in White households, African-American women were subjected to constant supervision and faced the threat of sexual exploitation. The lack of leisure time and control over work hours left little opportunity for African-American women to take care of their own families or socialize with others of the community outside of the church.³³ However, as entrepreneurs in beauty culture, women could control their work environment and craft a space conducive to their position as African-American women. This could come in the form of a formal brick-and-mortar storefront, selling door-to-door, or crafting hair salons in their kitchen. Kitchen beauty shops exemplified the accessibility and flexibility of Black beauty culture. In these home-based businesses, Black women conducted demonstrations and styled clients' hair from their homes, which also allowed them to care for their children and perform domestic tasks in their households.³⁴

³² Powell, 942.

³³ Roberts, 90.

³⁴ Roberts, 92.

The combination of the domestic space and business permitted a more informal and family-orientated space which gave African-American women greater freedom to congregate and participate in twentieth-century expectations of womanhood. The start of the beauty industry within the home aligned it with the dueling expectations of gender and the social reality of African-American women. A focus on the family and the home provided the foundation for the ideals of womanhood in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.³⁵ The need to engage in wage work to support their families and offset the economic consequences of Jim Crow kept lower-and working-class Black women from fully participating in these normative standards. The inability to participate in these standards placed working-class African-American women further outside the normative standard of womanhood and fed into the racial stereotypes of African-American women.

Entering the beauty industry meant gaining the ability to define their femininity and allowed women to participate in the traditional ideals of motherhood while catering to the needs of their families financially. Mass advertisement of cosmetics and the rise of consumer culture caused an increase in products and series among White and Black women during the 1920s and 1930s.³⁶ In conjunction with the rising interest in beauty, the number of African-American beauticians also increased throughout the United States.³⁷ The promise of social mobility and economic success prompted thousands of Black women to join beauty culture with the number of beauticians increased nationally from 12,660 in 1920 to 14,783 by the 1940s.³⁸ As the use of heated pressing irons and metal rollers increased, hair preparation became increasingly

³⁵ Susan M. Crea, "Changing Ideals of Womanhood During the Nineteenth-Century Woman Movement", *General Studies Writing Faculty Publications*, no. 1 (2015): 187-189; Roberts, 90.

³⁶ Blackwelder, 6.

³⁷ Roberts, 87.

³⁸ Roberts, 93.

complicated. The advancement in hairstyling tools, the rising popularity of beauty culture among Black and White women, and increased urbanization in the twentieth-century aided in the development of federal regulations guiding the salon.³⁹

Beauty culture stood in opposition to traditional jobs offered to Black women and attracted Black women from all class and educational backgrounds.⁴⁰ Advertisements for the beauty profession centered on the idea of social and economic mobility which made it especially attractive to women migrating from the rural South and women from a working-class background. Poro College of Beauty in Atlanta, Georgia offered day and night courses. The offering of evening classes catered to the schedules of working-class women, thus allowing the women to gain a foothold in the trade.⁴¹ The language used in advertisements and by the beauticians contributed to the image of beauty culture as a profession and distinguished it as more than “women’s service work”. Calling themselves “beauty culturalists” or “operators” rather than beauticians and referring to their hair care techniques as “scientific” reveals the importance of language in the space.⁴² The emphasis on language paints beauty salons as a means of accessing respect and maintaining dignity and autonomy while engaging in wage work.⁴³ Additionally, the resilience of the Black beauty industry made beauty culture an even more viable career for Black women.

³⁹ Blackwelder, 19; Juliet A. Willet, *The American Beauty Encyclopedia* (Santa Barbara, California: Greenwood, 2010), 145-6.

⁴⁰ Walker, “Independent Living”, 61.

⁴¹ *Southern Beauty Congress: Second Annual Program*, 1947, Emory Black Print Culture Collection, Box 25, Folder 3, Stuart A. Rose Manuscript, Archives, and Rare Book Library, Emory University.

⁴² The Show of the Stars Program: Georgia State Beauty Culturists League, Inc, Oct. 1955, Emory Black Print Culture Collection, Box 25, Folder 3, Stuart A. Rose Manuscript, Archives, and Rare Book Library, Emory University.

⁴³ Floris B. Cash, *African American Women and Social Action: The Clubwomen and Volunteerism from Jim Crow to the New Deal, 1896-1936* (Connecticut: Praeger, 2001), 49; Walker, 61.

Ella Ramsey Martin owned and operated the Poro School of Beauty Culture on 250 Auburn Ave in Atlanta, Georgia where she acted as an instructor, a beautician, and a seller of Poro products. A former employee of the mail-order department in the Poro Company during the 1920s, Martin moved from St. Louis and opened her business at the height of the Great Depression.⁴⁴ “The depression,” Martin stated, “was at its very highest and still by having a beauty shop is not seasonable [sic], seasonal so the beauticians really were making good money during the depression areas in comparison with other business so it was a good time for some and sort of bad for other”.⁴⁵ Beauty education surged during the Great Depression and served as the primary strategy the industry sustained itself with during the economic downturn.⁴⁶ The lack of purchasing power among clients led to a decrease in prices which gave rise to a barter-and-trade system within the salon. The system permitted the trading of food, clothing, and other goods in exchange for professional hair care services.

Though the number of beauticians decreased in the South in comparison to non-Southern states, African-American women continued entering the profession.⁴⁷ In general, few beauticians made it rich, but the opportunity still offered greater freedom compared to other available options.⁴⁸ The number of White women in beauty culture increased concurrently with that of African-American women in the years prior to World War II. White women were not as engaged with beauty culture in the early years of the industry in comparison to African-American women.⁴⁹ The phenomenon occurred for several social reasons. In White Southern society,

⁴⁴ Roberts, 87.

⁴⁵ Shaw, Stephanie, Edwina Tucker, Bridgette Thompson, and Edward Holloman, *Ella Martin Interview*, 11 Aug 1978, Sweet Auburn Neighborhood Oral History Project, Box 1, Folder 14, Archives Division, Auburn Archives Research Library on African American Culture and History, Atlanta-Fulton Library System.

⁴⁶ Gill, *Beauty Shop Politics*, 64.

⁴⁷ Roberts, 94.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 89.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 59.

concepts of beauty relied on an interlocking matrix of patriarchy and white supremacy. Southern White women's innate goodness revealed itself through their natural beauty. In the Southern social order, beauty acted as a reflection of female modesty and obedience. The connection between goodness, beauty, and whiteness relied on the image of the White Southern lady.⁵⁰ However, the interwar years saw a shift among White women in the South regarding beauty culture.

The rise in consumer culture and mass advertisements for beauty culture in the 1920s brought the modern beauty industry to the forefront of Southern society.⁵¹ In the South, beauty culture found itself at the center of a growing discourse in the around White Southern virtue and the Southern social order. Blain Roberts noted a, "growing recourse to cosmetics, especially, and to the beauty parlor, to a lesser extent, raised troubling questions about who white Southern women were and what they wanted".⁵² Southern politicians and commentators debated the beauty culture and the issues of cosmetics. However, the real debate centered around the industry as a "female rebellion" which questioned male supremacy, and by association, white supremacy.⁵³ The perceived challenge to the system and the opposition to the practices of modern beauty culture explains why beauty culture was slow to take hold among White women in the South.

During World War II, well-coiffed hair became a symbol for patriotic femininity and respectability in the propaganda machine as women entered the factories and took on roles that challenged the established gender expectations.⁵⁴ For White Southern women, patriotic

⁵⁰Ibid., 18-19.

⁵¹ Peiss, 105.

⁵²Ibid., 17.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 197.

femininity took a different meaning in comparison with African-American women. Beauty became a means to construct and maintain white racial identity.⁵⁵ Despite the varying reasons, both Black and White women experienced an increase in women seeking beauty services which contributed to the influx of practitioners on both sides of the color line and created a need for more trained beauticians.⁵⁶

The National Recovery Administration proposed the “Code of Fair Competition for the Beauty Parlor Concessionaires” in 1933. The code set maximum working hours for beauticians at forty-eight hours per week, minimum wages, and made obtaining a permit a requirement to operate a beauty shop. African-American beauticians believed the proposed code failed to account for the differences in the schedules of their clientele and the process of Black hairstyling.⁵⁷ However, local and state legislation was welcomed by Black beauticians to elevate the profession and eliminate “unfair competition” by unlicensed beauticians.⁵⁸ By the 1940s, every state had regulations that dictated the sanitation practices and the supplies salons needed to stock. Permanent wave machines, dressers, mirrors, and sterilizing equipment were a few items beauticians needed to have in their salons.⁵⁹ The regulations guiding sanitation and the equipment salons placed kitchen salons at odds with the codes and generating a greater need for beauty schools.

Although later iterations of state codes would allow for in-home beauty salons, the regulation of the beauty industry solidified a separation from the home and placed Black beauty salons in conversation with other Black businesses.⁶⁰ More importantly, state and local

⁵⁵Ibid., 18.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 90-93; Blackwelder, 6.

⁵⁷Roberts, 93.

⁵⁸Ibid., 94; Blackwelder, 16.

⁵⁹Roberts, 94.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 96.

regulations generated national and local professional organizations of Black professionals, such as the National Beauty Culturalist League (NBCL) and the United Beauty School Owners and Teachers Association (UBSOTA). These organizations consisted of African-American beauticians working to promote their profession and the welfare of their community. While other reiteration of the legislation loosened the restrictions on kitchen shops in later years, these organizations continued to thrive.⁶¹ State and local branches of these national organizations, like the Georgia Beauty Culturalist League and the Atlanta Beauty Culturalist League, would later prove vital to the participation of African-American women in the Civil Rights Movement.

Since the conception of the modern beauty industry under Annie Malone and Madam C. J. Walker, African-American women have found self-sufficiency and agency in a society that denied them access to such control. As an industry constructed for and by African-American women to serve the specific needs of their group, beauticians filled a unique position within the community. The power and influence seen in beauticians in the mid-twentieth century came from their status as entrepreneurs and their skill as practitioners in a craft filled with cultural and social meaning. The function and goals of Black beauty salons connect with the ideological framework of Black businesses at the turn of the century and reflect the same themes of racial solidarity which underpinned the involvement of Black businesses during the Civil Rights Movement in Atlanta.

Black Business and Resistance in Georgia

In years prior, scholars studying the Civil Rights Movement have often neglected the impact and participation of African-American women in the movement. The classical paradigm and dominant scholarship of the movement overlook the complex tangle of structures that

⁶¹ Blackwelder, 63; Roberts, 95.

operated during the Civil Rights Era. A macro-level examination with an emphasis on national headlines typically concentrates on a few characters like Martin Luther King Jr. and formal civil rights organizations like the NAACP. However, behind the headlines was a web of people pushing the movement forward. Individuals in their day-to-day actions gave shape and direction to the movement in a way that David Garrow describes as “the greatest personal impact upon the course of the southern movement.”⁶² The recent scholarship around the movement seeks to understand the many pieces that composed the entire social upheaval, and understanding the role and history of beauticians adds greater nuance to circumstances that brought individuals into the fold of the Civil Rights Movement.

Scholars have come to note that, “each community now has a story to tell about the movement, and only when many of those stories are told will the South’s great social upheaval be understood.”⁶³ The history of civil rights in Atlanta carries a narrative that illustrates the multitude of roles beauticians played throughout the state of Georgia. In 1904, W.E.B. Du Bois remarked on the position of Atlanta in the fight for civil rights noting, “The Negro problems have seemed to be centered in this state.”⁶⁴ The observations Du Bois’ makes, although influenced by his residence in Atlanta and Albany, deserves greater attention and study. While other cities in Georgia played a role in the struggle for civil rights, scholars have described Atlanta as the nucleus of the movement in the Southeast of the United States. Black beauticians and their professional organizations operated inside of this nucleus, engaging in and supporting civic and political organizations individually and in Black professional organizations.

⁶² Draper, 3.

⁶³ Stephen G.N. Tuck, *Beyond Atlanta: The struggle for racial equality in Georgia, 1940-1980* (Athens, Georgia: University of Georgia Press, 2001), 1.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

In a 1918 memo to her agent's Madame C.J. Walker proclaimed, "I shall expect to find my agents taking the lead in locality not only in operating a successful business, but in every movement in the interest of our colored citizenship."⁶⁵ Walker's comments reveal a larger connection between economics and activism within the Black beauty industry. From the early settlement of Black business in America, self-help and sufficiency provided the foundation of business practices and owner engagement.⁶⁶ Community consciousness and social responsibility became the tenets of the beauty profession. Constructed during Reconstruction, beauty salons were subject to the dominant ideology of self-help that blossomed during the nadir in race relations from 1877-1901.⁶⁷ In this atmosphere, Black businesses were crafted around notions of communal support and racial uplift.

Shared awareness of ideas and norms combined with collective communal action bound Black businesses to their local communities. Beauty salons functioned within this ideological framework by acting as a space where African-American women helped one another craft an image of themselves. Beauticians created a shield against the stereotypical view of their womanhood while making use of cultural knowledge around African-American hair. The act of social responsibility extended to include the entire community which pushed beauticians and the salon beyond the aesthetic realm. Booker T. Washington and W.E.B. Du Bois argued that within the Black community, economic entrepreneurship acted as resistance to and a survival strategy against racism. Both men believed that economic independence gave the racial group leverage within society.⁶⁸ For African-American business leaders, the choice to take part in racial uplift

⁶⁵ Gill, *Beauty Shop Politics*, 31.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 150.

⁶⁷ Shaw, 4.

⁶⁸ Juliet E.K. Walker, *The History of Black Business in America: Capitalism, Race, Entrepreneurship* (New York: Macmillan Library Reference USA, 1998), 183-4.

and support civic projects in their community was imperative since their neighborhood looked upon them as beacons of the community. Atlanta illustrates the claims made by Du Bois and Washington through the entwining of civil rights protest with Black entrepreneurship during the Civil Rights Movement from the 1930s into the 1960s. Atlantan beauticians represented the roles African-American women played during the movement and showcased the individual and communal mobilization of the industry in support of the Civil Rights Movement.

Beauty Salons and the Modern Civil Rights Movement in Atlanta, 1930s-1960s

Atlanta can be described as one of the major centers for African-American protest during the twentieth-century. Containing the headquarters for the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) and the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), the city that was “too busy to hate” played a huge role in the Civil Rights Movement. In Atlanta, the role of Black businesses functioned as a distinctive characteristic of the civil rights struggle in the city. Auburn Avenue sat as the Black economic hub of the Southeast in the twentieth-century, housing 641 Black-owned businesses by 1944.⁶⁹ Originally called Wheat Street, Auburn Ave started in 1853 with more African-Americans moving to the area after the Civil War.⁷⁰ The strictness of Jim Crow and the development of segregated residential areas gave rise to Black business districts around the United States.⁷¹ The highly segregated social structure of Atlanta led to the creation of separate spheres for Black and White Atlantans, and within the Black space of Auburn Avenue, the organization of civil rights protests could be effectively organized.⁷² The

⁶⁹ Roberts, 94; Tuck, 55; *Ibid.*, 59.

⁷⁰ Alexa Henderson and Eugene Walker, *Sweet Auburn: The Thriving Hub of Black Atlanta 1900-1960* (Denver: National Park Service, 1983), 1-5.

⁷¹ Tuck, 213.

⁷² *Ibid.*, 56.

businesses in Atlanta, similar to other Black businesses around the United States, connected to each other in a cycle of social responsibility and communal support.

Civil rights struggle often took place locally in conjunction with the national protests. Before the federal legislation was enacted, communities in the South worked to win civil rights within their local counties.⁷³ Local activists tackled problems in education, neighborhood infrastructure, and poverty within the community, especially in rural Georgia. A locally-driven focus in conjunction with their status in the community as business owners gave local business leaders authority in the community. That meant that advancing the goals of civil rights protest frequently revolved around the businesses on Auburn Avenue. The membership rolls of the Atlanta chapter of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) exemplifies the phenomenon around the mid-twentieth century with most of the members hailing from this business class.⁷⁴ Beauty culturalists in Atlanta were instrumental in bridging the gap between the initiatives of formal civil rights organizations and their constituents, especially the work of Ruby Parks Blackburn.

The story of Atlanta beauticians and their role in the Civil Rights Movement cannot be told without serious attention to Ruby Parks Blackburn. As a beautician, Blackburn emerged as one of the leading political and civic members of the Auburn Avenue community, spearheading three civic organizations and successfully earning a spot on the Fulton County Democratic Party Executive Committee in the 1958 primary.⁷⁵ The former domestic worker graduated from the

⁷³ Draper, 3.

⁷⁴ Tuck, 59.

⁷⁵ Merline Pitre, and Bruce A. Glasrud, *Southern Black Women in the Modern Civil Rights Movement*. (Texas: Texas A&M University Press, 2013), 100; *Campaign Poster for Mrs. Ruby Blackburn*, 1958, Ruby Parks Blackburn Papers, Box 5, Folder 9, Archives Division, Auburn Archives Research Library on African American Culture and History, Atlanta-Fulton Library System

Apex College of Beauty in Atlanta and opened her shop in 1932.⁷⁶ Blackburn owned and operated Ruby's Beauty Shop on 1102 Simpson Road St., N.W. from the 1930s into the 1960s.⁷⁷ While operating her beauty salon, Blackburn actively participated in the Atlanta chapter of the NAACP. Recognizing the need for greater participation from the "from the little man around the corner", Blackburn coordinated campaigns for the NAACP to increase membership.⁷⁸ The membership and attendance of the Atlanta NAACP had grown significantly particularly among Black women by 1943 due to her efforts.⁷⁹

As Blackburn opened the doors of Ruby's Beauty Shop in 1932, she worked to form the Royal Nine Social Club during the height of the Depression era. Though a club designed for the social betterment of the African-American community in Atlanta, the club addressed the economic and social gaps left by the effects of Jim Crow. Later becoming the To Improve Club (T.I.C), the all-female organization fought environmental racism by relocating garbage dumps out of exclusively Black neighborhoods and establishing day nurseries for working mothers.⁸⁰ The group's most important actions under Blackburn included getting African-Americans employed as clerks in major chain stores during the Depression, and establishing two public schools for African-American children.⁸¹ Stephen Tuck cited that the T.I.C reportedly helped more people than any other Black organization in Atlanta.⁸² During WWII, Blackburn founded the Atlanta Cultural League and Training Center for Domestic Workers. These training centers

⁷⁶ Carolyn Fouch, *Meeting Mrs. Blackburn Outstanding Cultural Leader in GLWV Program*, 18 May 1952, Ruby Parks Blackburn Papers, Box 2, Folder 7, Archives Division, Auburn Archives Research Library on African American Culture and History, Atlanta-Fulton Library System; Gill, *Beauty Shop Politics*, 102.

⁷⁷ *Ruby's Beauty Shop Business Card*, undated, Ruby Parks Blackburn Papers, Box 6, Folder 1, Archives Division, Auburn Archives Research Library on African American Culture and History, Atlanta-Fulton Library System.

⁷⁸ Tuck, 59.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 60-61.

⁸⁰ Gill, *Beauty Shop Politics*, 103; Tuck, 58.

⁸¹ Herman Mason, *Politics, Civil Rights, and Law in Black Atlanta, 1870-1970* (South Carolina: Arcadia Publishing, 2000), 49; Fouch.

⁸² Tuck, 58.

organized the political enfranchisement of domestic workers tackling both issues in employment and civic duties. The organizations founded by Blackburn connected with the goals and initiatives of the local NAACP by hosting voter registration drives and disseminating knowledge around citizenship rights.⁸³

Participating in these civic activities was good for Blackburn's image and her business since she also fought to obtain access to opportunities denied to Black Atlantans through segregation and discrimination. Black business owners faced limitations imposed by Jim Crow laws when trying to increase their business. The obstacles made social solidarity and civil rights a shared characteristic among beauty salons and other Black businesses. Blackburn and Irene Sims Hendrix, another local female business owner, pressured the Dixie Hill Bus Line to start offering better services and routes to black neighborhoods which also allowed for better access to their businesses.⁸⁴ African-American beauticians in Atlanta mobilized individually and collectively using their economic independence to support civil rights protests and launch civil rights initiatives.

In a keynote speech delivered to the 1957 convention of the National Beauty Culturalist League, Martin Luther King Jr. expounded the virtues of beauticians and acknowledged their role in the contemporary struggle for civil rights.⁸⁵ While created to boost the professional image of beauticians, national and local organizations of beauticians such as UBSOTA and the NBCL regularly encouraged their members to use their salon as an extension of civic and civil rights action.⁸⁶ In October 1959, Lester B. Granger, the executive director of the National Beauty

⁸³ Gill, 103; Kathryn L. Nasstrom, "Down to Now: Memory Narrative, and Women's Leadership in the Civil Rights Movement in Atlanta, Georgia", *Gender & History* 11, no.1 (1999): 124.

⁸⁴ Ibid.

⁸⁵ Gill, *Beauty Shop Politics*, 100.

⁸⁶ Blackwelder, 145.

Culturist League, took the stage at the organization's convention in Philadelphia. Granger recognized beauticians as the catalyst for citizenship knowledge and action for civil rights stating, "Civil rights touch all phases of Negro life... Since the beautician has personal contact with persons in all walks of life, he or she plays a most important part in civil rights."⁸⁷

More importantly, the NBCL regularly urged its members to register to vote and assist their clients with voter registration. In 1964, a convention of NCBL beauticians pledged to endorse Lyndon B. Johnson for the presidency exemplifying the use of their collective power and influence in the national political scene.⁸⁸ The NCBL had a committee for civil rights and its president, Dr. Katie Whickham, held ties to Ella Baker and would later become the assistant secretary for the SCLC.⁸⁹ Measuring the true influence of the organization in the lives of Atlantan beauticians proves to be difficult. Quantifying the extent to which personal agency versus institutional influence played in the lives of beauticians cannot be known definitively. However, the organization did harness the collective economic and social power of the Black hair salon. The initiatives of the organization reflect a larger social phenomenon and demonstrate the influence of the group. While national organizations unified their members under common goals, everyday beauticians made the choice to participate, and their agency is key. The personal agency exercised by individual beauticians and the institutional agency of the salon made a notable establishment during the movement.

Beauticians were a part of a larger dialogue of female activism and civil rights. Women throughout the Civil Rights Movement mobilized the African-American community by hosting voter registration drives and soliciting support. As exemplified by Blackburn's campaigns to

⁸⁷ "Granger Stresses Civil Rights to Beauticians." Philadelphia Tribune (1912-2001), Oct 17, 1959.

⁸⁸ Beautician Pledge Civil Rights Action! Beauticians Endorse LBJ, Stress Voting." New York Amsterdam News (1962-1993), Aug 15, 1964.

⁸⁹ "Granger Stresses Civil Rights to Beauticians"; Gill, 100.

increase the membership of the NAACP, women reached into ignored sections of the community such as the working-class and women to draw them into the fold of civil rights organizations.⁹⁰ After 1946, formal institutions became more male-dominated and African-American women began to seek spaces and groups where they could exercise their voice on social issues such as auxiliary club and women's clubs. The difference between beauty culturalist groups and efforts by other women's groups come from the beauticians' economic independence, flexible vocation, and proximity to the working-class population. Although they were business owners, black beauty culturalists did not simply seek monetary gain.

Like other Black business owners during the period, owning one's own business or working in a Black-owned establishment meant escaping social and economic discrimination. The construction and use of the beauty salon and its male-counterpart, the barbershop, placed the business in a unique category of its own. Beauty salons differed from the Black-owned insurance companies and banks from the "Golden Age" of Black businesses that survived the Great Depression.⁹¹ Similar to Black barbershops, Beauty salons remained a force across Black business districts in Georgia even during the Depression when more financially secure White-owned businesses began replacing many Black businesses. The intimate nature of the Black beauty salon and barbershop made White intervention near impossible at the community level. Although White Americans secured shares in the manufacturing of Black hair care products, codes of racial segregation kept White Americans from owning and operating beauty salons and barbershops. The separation kept both businesses and as a Black space of leisure where clientele could visit socialize.⁹² However, gender remains an important element to note in the analysis of

⁹⁰ Nasstrom, 124.

⁹¹ Walker, *The History of Black Business*, 183.

⁹² Anne Valk and Leslie Brown, *Living with Jim Crow: African-American Women and Memories of the Segregated South* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 131.

beauty salons during the Civil Rights Movement. The salon provided a space for African-American women and centered their voices in the social and political gatherings within the salon.⁹³

The salon in comparison to other Black businesses occupied both the private and the public realm. The purpose of the beauty salon centered on achieving a physical aesthetic that aligned with the societal norms guiding the outward performance of gender. The intimacy of hairstyling and a deep connection to femininity forms the basis of the beauty salon, thus placing the business in the private realm of women. Yet, the beauty salon simultaneously occupied the public realm as a business that has the potential for consumers to access a monetized commodity and the suppliers to gain economic and social capital.⁹⁴ The financial independence of the Black hair salon as a Black- and women-operated space shielded the business from the White gaze and provided an economic venture independent of White employers and husbands.⁹⁵ Associated with femininity and the private sphere, beauty salons were protected because of the gender stereotypes which places greater importance on male tasks and actions in comparison to that performed by women.⁹⁶ Located in the Black designated area of Atlanta, such as Auburn Avenue, beauty salons represented a counterspace that nurtured conversation against racial discrimination.⁹⁷ As wage-earners employed by other Black women and tailored to their specific needs, African-American beauticians successfully divorced themselves from the confines of male-dominated and male-led businesses.

⁹³ Gill, *Beauty Shop Politics*, 63.

⁹⁴ Gill, *Civic Beauty*, 584.

⁹⁵ Roberts, 58.

⁹⁶ Naomi Ellemers, "Gender Stereotypes", *Annual Review of Psychology* 2018, no. 69 (2018): 276.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 102-103.

In the struggle for civil rights, the source of one's income mattered more than the amount of the income.⁹⁸ Unlike farmers in rural Georgia and middle-class professionals such as nurses or teachers, beauticians were protected from economic backlash when taking a political stance. The emphasis on physical pleasure and communion shaped the true power of the salon. The communal and leisurely nature of the salon fused political potential in the consumption of the experience.⁹⁹ Beauticians and their clients built confidant-listener relationships in their economic exchanges, the informal environment lending itself to the freedom of expression for African-American women.¹⁰⁰ The environment of the salon granted the freedom to talk and express which other businesses on Auburn Avenue lacked. Patrons did not visit insurance companies or banks to commune with each other, even within a Black-owned establishment. Rules of conduct and expectation of service guided the interaction of individuals with the space around them. The complex relationship between the client and the beautician gave the beautician a certain type of influence over her client. Beauticians acted as facilitators of conversation and they set the tone for dialogue within their establishments. They controlled the input into conversations about the movement as well as support the movement monetarily and intellectually.¹⁰¹

Though not inherently political, the conversations in the salon reflected the everyday lives and the injustices clients faced as Black women in the Jim Crow South. In the talk about these injustices, social issues connect with the call for citizenship rights.¹⁰² The salon operated as a source of communication and information; and as an institution organized by African-

⁹⁸ Alan Draper, "Class and Politics in the Mississippi Movement: An Analysis of the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party Delegation." *Journal of Southern History* 82, no. 2 (2016), 5.

⁹⁹ Roberts, 58.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 101.

¹⁰¹ Anna Barnes, "The Black Beauty Parlor Complex in a Southern City," *Phylon (1960-)* 36, no. 2 (1975): 152.

¹⁰² Nasstrom, 127.

Americans, it was conducive to political activism and resistance to Jim Crow.¹⁰³ Segregation became congregation when African-American women gathered to gossip, recount the news, and bask in the fellowship of other Black women in addition to getting their hair done. The salon allowed them the freedom to vent their rage and humiliation.¹⁰⁴

When Anne Moody took part in a sit-in at a lunch counter in Jackson, Mississippi, she was thrown to the floor and beaten. Covered in condiments, Moody sought out the beauty salon. The owner of the shop in Mississippi moved her ahead of other waiting patrons, took off Moody's soiled stockings and washed her legs as Moody's hair dried.¹⁰⁵ Though not in Georgia, the actions of the Mississippi beautician reflect the relationship between politics, racial uplift, community, and the salon that extended to Black beauty parlors around the United States. The story of Anne Moody reveals the range of methods and strategies Black women used to resist Jim Crow in the twentieth-century. While the financial support of SNCC and the NAACP were vitally important, the moral support offered by the salon proved even more vital. The ability to soak in the comfort of other women that identified and understood the struggle acted as resistance in the sense that it gave communal support and motivation to continue the struggle. The salon provided refuge from society in conjunction with functioning as a gateway for spreading the message of civil rights among working-class African-Americans.

Yet, not all beauty salons functioned similarly. Besides being a gendered and racialized space, the salon carried an element of class as well. Economic status dictated which salons African-Americans patronized and the atmosphere of the space. Middle- and upper-class women had greater time for leisure in comparison to working-class women. Secular spaces for pleasure

¹⁰³ Valk and Brown, 141.

¹⁰⁴ Roberts, 194; Gill, *Beauty Shop Politics*, 99; Kelley, 45.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 195.

granted an experience of autonomy and independence without the stifling effect of other social institutions and their set of norms. These spaces allowed individuals to construct their own boundaries and rules for engagement. For working-class women, beauty salons acted as one of the few spaces where they could exercise their freedom and express themselves outside the confines of gender, racial, and class expectations.¹⁰⁶

Salons were one of the few spaces where working-class women could congregate with other Black women outside of religious institutions. Unlike churches where societal expectations guided conduct, women visiting the salon could simply exist independently from the confines of religious and gender expectations.¹⁰⁷ In contrast, middle- and upper-class women had social clubs and societies in which they could organize and voice themselves. Auxiliary clubs such as the Order of the Eastern Star, sororities, and connections forged through a higher socio-economic status granted these women greater access to power and civil rights leaders.¹⁰⁸ The salon space for women of a higher status often diverged from that of working-class women. Middle- and upper-class women desired a quieter, more relaxed experience and operators responded to the desires of the clientele by tailoring their experience in the salon to reflect their needs.¹⁰⁹ Class and location influenced the type of conversation and the amount of engagement between beauticians and their clients.

Approximately sixty-eight million Black women encountered their beautician at least twice a month, with some women visiting their beautician weekly.¹¹⁰ Among African-American women,

¹⁰⁶ Robin D. G. Kelley, *Race Rebels: Culture, Politics, and the Black Working Class* (New York: Free Press, 1994), 39.

¹⁰⁷ Gill, *Civic Beauty*, 585; Gill, *Beauty Shop Politics*, 108.

¹⁰⁸ Kelley, 36.

¹⁰⁹ Barnes, 152-3; Roberts, 102.

¹¹⁰ *Ruby's Beauty Shop Appointment Books*, 1951-1953, Ruby Parks Blackburn Papers, Box 6, Folder 2, Archives Division, Auburn Archives Research Library on African American Culture and History, Atlanta-Fulton Library System; "Beautician Pledge Civil Rights Action! Beauticians Endorse LBJ, Stress Voting." *New York Amsterdam News* (1962-1993), Aug 15, 1964.

working-class women frequented the beauty salon at a higher rate than their upper-class counterparts.¹¹¹ Due to their highly visible occupation and the politics of respectability, appearance became key to the self-construction of working-class African-American women. Working in the domestic service carried negative connotations associated with stereotypical images of the Mammy and stripped the domestic worker of her autonomy and sense of self.¹¹² Visiting the salon and deciding to style one's hair demonstrates a level of agency and self-definition. In a society where skin color and hair texture defined an individual's social status, the ability to construct the outward appearance took on a more political role in comparison to White beauty salons. In their ability to adorn themselves through the styling of their hair, working-class Black women exercised their ability to resist the dominant language around their existence.¹¹³ Despite class differences, racial solidarity took precedence over the class divide due to a shared sense of race consciousness and communion.¹¹⁴

As community-orientated spaces in proximity and connection to civil rights organizations, beauty salons in Atlanta carried a special advantage. Estell Phinazee's Madam Walker Beauty Shop on 330 Auburn Avenue N.E. conducted business in the Prince Masonic Lodge which also held the headquarters for WERD, the nation's first radio station operated by African-Americans, and the headquarters of the SCLC.¹¹⁵ Coretta Scott King served as the mistress of ceremonies for students graduating from Ella Martin's Poro School of Beauty in 1961.¹¹⁶ The role of business owners in the civil rights struggle was a distinct feature of Atlanta. The business leaders and elite

¹¹¹ Ibid.

¹¹² Gill, *Beauty Shop Politics*, 104.

¹¹³ Barnes, 153; Gill, *Beauty Shop Politics*, 33; Roberts, 58; Blackwelder, 6.

¹¹⁴ Shaw, 55.

¹¹⁵ *Atlanta City Directory*, 1950, Auburn Archives Research Library on African American Culture and History, Atlanta-Fulton Library System; Frances Hamilton, "Prince Hall Masonic Temple & Tabor Building", Sweet Auburn Avenue: The Triumph of the Spirit. The Georgia Institute of Technology School of Information and Design and Technology published May 2002, <https://sweetauburn.us/princehall.htm>.

¹¹⁶ "Photo Standalone 4 -- no Title." *Atlanta Daily World (1932-2003)*, Jun 6, 1961.

of Atlanta had their hand in civil rights protest and complete separation from social responsibility and the salon would have been difficult to achieve.¹¹⁷ The web of networks among individuals and the ideology of Black business made this connection possible. Beauticians and other business leaders in Atlanta unified economic and civic goals under professional organizations such as the Atlanta Business League, where members were urged to “take part in the fight against discrimination and business.”¹¹⁸ As business owners, beauticians were subject to local taxes and licensing regulations failed to note the distinct practices of Black hair and the position of Black women. While protesters fought to desegregate schools and public establishments, beauticians fought to gain recognition and the greater representation on the state Cosmetology Board.¹¹⁹ An imbalance of representation and the use of White beauty salons as the norm made gaining citizenship rights a means of gaining political leverage. Beauticians’ fight to improve their status in the beauty field connected them to the goals of civil rights organizations and made it beneficial for them to support the movement.

The proximity to the working-class and the importance of hairstyling among African-American women positions the beauty salon as a center of resistance and civil rights consciousness among the Black working-class. Civil rights leaders relied on beauty shops to reach Black women and their families, particularly the working-class. Beauticians functioned as a bridge into that section of the community by providing spaces for civil rights discussion, dissemination of voter and citizenship knowledge, and monetary donations to civil rights organizations.¹²⁰ Kathryn Nasstrom and Belinda Robnett note the importance of African-

¹¹⁷ Tuck, 55.

¹¹⁸ "New Members for Business League Drive." *Atlanta Daily World* (1932-2003), Aug 10, 1952.

¹¹⁹ Ibid., Ruth Edmonds Hill, *Black Women Oral History Project* (Westport, Connecticut: Meckler Publishing, 1991), 127-8.

¹²⁰ Blackwelder, 63; "Two Beauty Salons Donate Day's Proceeds to NAACP." *Atlanta Daily World* (1932-2003), Jul 07, 1957; "Beautician Pledge Civil Rights Action! Beauticians Endorse LBJ, Stress Voting." *New York*

American women in the civil rights movement and the tradition of black female activism. African-American women linked social and communal networks in order to mobilize the community in the efforts of political organization.¹²¹ Robnett describes this process as micro-mobilization and the women as bridge leaders because of their function as a metaphorical bridge between formal organizations and potential constituents.¹²² African-American beauticians in Atlanta fulfilled this role by forging connections between formal civil rights organizations like the NAACP and the wider community.

Like other social Black institutions, beauty salons helped sustain the community. However, the forces of patriarchy and sexism limited African-American women's access to official positions of leadership in civil rights organizations. Rosa Parks served as the only women on the committee to write the constitution of the Montgomery Improvement Association (MIA), Ella Baker stood as one of few women in positions of leadership in the SCLC, and women serving on boards of civil rights organizations were frequently relegated to committees responsible for welfare and membership.¹²³ Even with the appointment of Dr. Katie Whickham as the assistant secretary in the SCLC, the organization continued to have an imbalance of female staff members.¹²⁴ Despite the limitations, African-American women crafted informal spaces for leadership in which they navigated the public world of the movement and the private world of the potential members.¹²⁵ Beauty salons remained an institution where African-American women could engage with and act on issues, and where women were the focus of leadership which fell

Amsterdam News (1962-1993), Aug 15, 1964; "Granger Stresses Civil Rights to Beauticians." *Philadelphia Tribune* (1912-2001), Oct 17, 1959.

¹²¹ Nasstrom, 127.

¹²² Belinda Robnett, "African-American Women in the Civil Rights Movement, 1954-1965: Gender, Leadership, and Micromobilization". *American Journal of Sociology* 101, no. 6 (1996), 1661.

¹²³ *Ibid.*, 1669.

¹²⁴ Gill, *Beauty Shop Politics*, 100.

¹²⁵ Robnett, 1664.

outside dominant definitions of the word. Women like Ella Baker worked tirelessly in the background supplying critical structure and organization for the Civil Rights Movement. Women provided the foundation for civil rights protest and drove the movement forward.¹²⁶

Since Reconstruction, women organized campaigns utilizing both men's and women's networks of work and leisure to disseminate information about civil rights.¹²⁷ Atlantan beauticians during the Civil Rights Movement took advantage of their position within the community and crafted an informal space of authority which lacked the titles and recognition of official organizations.¹²⁸ Local professional organizations like the Atlanta Beauty Culturalist League took part in generating local protests. Ella Ramsey Martin, owner, and beautician of the Poro School of Beauty created professional organizations in the early 1930s to elevate the status of African-American beauty culturalists as well as mobilize beauticians on a state and local basis. The local chapter distributed information about hair care techniques while seeking to improve the public image of the profession and contribute to the betterment of the Black community. In a 1960 speech to 300 Georgia beauticians, Martin declared that every beautician's name should "appear on the registration list and that all beauticians go to the polls and vote."¹²⁹ Martin and the local beauty culturalist organizations actively enlisted beauticians to volunteer their shops for voter registration drives and educational projects. Beauticians in Georgia and Atlanta pledged to support sit-ins, school desegregation, and student protest organizations morally and financially.¹³⁰

¹²⁶ Nasstrom, 128.

¹²⁷ Ibid., 63; Cash, 5-6.

¹²⁸ Robnett, 1663-5.

¹²⁹ N. H. Bronner, "Georgia Beauty Culturalists End Successful Convention." *Atlanta Daily World* (1932-2003), May 09, 1961.

¹³⁰ Roberts, 87.

Beauticians contributed individually as well as collectively in professional organizations. The actions of Mrs. Rose Morgan Louis, an Atlantan beautician in 1957, exemplified the resistance individual beauticians engaged in. The owner of the Rose Morgan House of Beauty and the Rose Meta Shop, Louis decided to open her salons on a day that she usually does not operate and donate her proceeds from the day to the local NAACP chapters. The operators followed her example by forgoing the day's income to donate to the organization as well.¹³¹ Louis and the beauticians in her shop demonstrate key strategies in Black beauticians' support of the Civil Rights Movement. Mrs. Louis, as an entrepreneur residing in a Black space, possessed the power to support any organization or political cause she desired without the fear of repercussion. Non-shop owning operators employed by a member of their group enjoyed the same benefits with the addition of having the financial means to donate. While not all beauticians were financially successful and class distinctions were evident among beauticians, they still acquired more money than the average domestic or factory worker. Some beauticians continued to engage in civil rights action from their salons, and other beauticians used their profession as a springboard to craft official civil rights organizations.

In 1951, Blackburn founded the Georgia League of Negro Women Voters (GLNWW) after being rejected from the all-white League of Women Voters.¹³² Blackburn served as the president of the organization, personally providing voter machine demonstrations and swearing-in poll workers during the 1950s. The primary goal of the organization included registering every African-American woman of legal age to vote in Georgia and the organization provided informational classes about candidates and the issues they addressed. The GLNWW also tackled civic issues in the Black Atlantan community working to address sewer conditions and the

¹³¹ "Two Beauty Salons Donate Day's Proceeds to NAACP."

¹³² Pitre and Glasrud, 100; Gill, *Beauty Shop Politics*, 102.

installation of crosswalks in Black neighborhoods.¹³³ The organization had expanded to fifty chapters around the state by 1956, with Blackburn presiding over the statewide organization and the Atlanta chapter.¹³⁴ While women in positions of formal leadership were difficult to find in organizations such as the SNCC and the SCLC, women composed the leadership of the GLNWW including a number of business owners from Auburn Avenue.¹³⁵ The chair of cultural training of the GLNWW, Mrs. Alice C. Davies, owned and operated the Apex School of Beauty on Butler Street.¹³⁶ Other members on the board of the GLNWW frequented Blackburn's shop. Alice Bell, the second vice president of the GLNWW, visited Ruby's Beauty Shop on an almost weekly basis from 1949 into the late-1950s.¹³⁷

Blackburn's profession as a beautician gave her the flexibility and monetary means to participate in civic and political ventures. As entrepreneurs, beauticians had the ability to tailor their schedules to fit their needs. The flexibility of beauty salons allowed Blackburn to schedule around her many civic and political obligations. Additionally, the lucrative nature of the business meant that Blackburn earned around \$10- \$60 a week.¹³⁸ The purchasing power allowed Blackburn to help fund her civic operations, as well as financially contribute to the Atlanta NAACP. In a period when two-thirds of African-American women were employed in the domestic field and earned only \$1- \$2 a week, having dispensable income gave beauticians more

¹³³ Mason, 50.

¹³⁴ Tuck, 88.

¹³⁵ *Program from Harvest Dinner by Georgia League of Negro Women Voters*, 10 Nov. 1969, Ruby Parks Blackburn Papers, Box 2, Folder 7, Archives Division, Auburn Archives Research Library on African American Culture and History, Atlanta-Fulton Library System.

¹³⁶ *The Show of the Stars Program: Georgia State Beauty Culturists League Inc.*, Oct. 1955, Emory Black Print Culture Collection, Box 25, Folder 3, Stuart A. Rose Manuscript, Archives, and Rare Book Library, Emory University

¹³⁷ *Ruby's Beauty Shop Appointment Books*.

¹³⁸ *Ibid.*; Roberts, 90.

freedom to contribute to the movement.¹³⁹ The level of involvement of Black beauticians in Atlanta ranged from active to passive engagement.

Some beauticians utilized their businesses as a center for civil rights by hosting voter registration and crafting civic organizations while others passively engaged by giving African-American women the space to self-define and speak-out against the system. In essays submitted to the 1961 Georgia convention, beauticians showcased an example of active engagement. At the 1961 Georgia Beauty Culturalist League convention, Georgia beauticians, “expressed having had very successful and satisfying experience in getting their customers to be registered voters after they themselves became keenly aware of the benefits to be enjoyed from the use of the ballot.”¹⁴⁰ The story of Anne Moody and the moral support she received from the shop owner in Mississippi reveals the impact that comfort and talk could have for African-American women participating in the Civil Rights Movement. Both strategies illustrate Black women’s involvement in Atlanta during the Civil Rights Movement and compose a part of the larger discourse around the roles of women during the movement.

A Way Forward

Visions of beauty and femininity which were once characterized by white womanhood became attainable to African-American women through hair salons and the services they offered. The process of beautification gave women the power to define themselves socially and economically in ways that had not been present before the dawn of beauty culture. Hair salons were revolutionary as spaces owned and largely operated by Black women, and as spaces where they could negotiate the meaning of hair care and beauty within the dominant discourse of

¹³⁹ Nasstrom, 124; Roberts, 90.

¹⁴⁰ N. H Bronner, "Georgia Beauty Culturalists End Successful Convention." *Atlanta Daily World* (1932-2003), May 09, 1961.

beauty in the early twentieth-century.¹⁴¹ Beauticians mediated the meanings surrounding hair and the physical black body through their craft, a skill that brought them prestige and respect within the African-American community.

More importantly, the relationship between the beauty salon and the Black community and their economic success brought them into the battle for civil rights in the United States. The position and meaning of the Black beauty salon within the Black community protected the space. Cloaked in meanings of femininity and the perceived frivolity of hairdressing, beauty salons in Atlanta were shielded from authorities who were looking at male-dominated social spaces and formal Black spaces like the church and fraternal Black organizations. Unfortunately, a cultural shift around hairstyling and meaning of hair in the mid-1960s during the Black Power Movement shifted the perspective of the beauty salon among African-Americans. As institutions closely aligned with the ideals of respectability politics, younger African-Americans viewed the salon as no longer promoting Black equality and welfare.¹⁴² The shift also meant the loss of the beauticians' contribution to the social and political landscape of African-American history.

The classical paradigm of the Civil Rights Movement tends to focus on a few key middle-class leaders and national organizations, which distorts the reality of the period. Mobilization for civil rights took place locally with grassroots movements and collective action of the community.¹⁴³ Statewide organization and local organizations like the Georgia Beauty Culturalist League and the Atlanta Beauty Culturalist League were connected to the National Beauty Culturalist League, however, these organizations were crucial because they mobilized for the needs of local communities. As historians recognize the need for a closer examination into

¹⁴¹ Gill, *Beauty Shop Politics*, 106.

¹⁴² Roberts, 195.

¹⁴³ Robnett, 1661.

the actions of grassroots organizations during the movement, the contributions of African-American women and the definition of leadership needs to be re-examined. While lacking the titles, beauticians continuously acted as ground operatives that recruited, distributed knowledge and promoted change locally.¹⁴⁴ In the background of the great social upheaval of the Civil Rights Movement, beauticians in Atlanta mobilized for the advancement of African-Americans in Georgia and nationally. Scholars now need to coax these individuals and organizations from the background and center them to truly garner a better understanding of the Civil Rights Movement.

¹⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 1665.

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