Beauty Culture and Women's Commerce

Cosmetics today seem quintessential products of a consumer culture dominated by large corporations, national advertising, and widely circulated images of ideal beauty. The origins of American beauty culture lie elsewhere, however, in a spider's web of businesses—beauty parlors, druggists, department stores, patent cosmetic companies, perfumers, mail-order houses, and women's magazines that thrived at the turn of the century and formed the nascent infrastructure of the beauty industry. Few of these enterprises used the kinds of systematic marketing and sales campaigns so familiar to contemporary Americans. Nonetheless, the proliferation of products, services, and information about cosmetics and beauty definitively recast nineteenth-century attitudes toward female appearance.

Women played a key role in these developments. Indeed, the beauty industry may be the only business, at least until recent decades, in which American women achieved the highest levels of success, wealth, and authority. Such well-known figures as Helena Rubinstein and Elizabeth Arden, the remarkable African-American entrepreneurs Madam C. J. Walker and Annie Turnbo Malone, and post–World War II

businesswomen Estee Lauder and Mary Kay Ash mark an ongoing tradition of female leadership. Although exceptional businesswomen, they are only the most visible signs of a much larger phenomenon. As beauty parlor owners, cosmetics entrepreneurs, and "complexion specialists," women charted a path to mass consumption outside the emergent system of national advertising and distribution. In so doing, they diminished Americans' suspicion of cosmetics by promoting beauty care as a set of practices at once physical, individual, social, and commercial. Their businesses transformed the personal *cultivation* of beauty—the original meaning of the expression "beauty culture"—into a *culture* of shared meanings and rituals.

Before the Civil War, women dressed their own hair or, if affluent, bade their maids or slaves to do so. Professional hairdressers, often men who visited the homes of the wealthy, were relatively few in number. Commercial beautifying was generally considered a "vulgarizing calling," a legacy of its ties to personal service and hands-on bodily care. This view changed as women's need for jobs grew more pressing in the late nineteenth century. Industry, immigration, and urban growth had transformed the American economy and society. Working-class women expected to support themselves or contribute to family income, but even middle-class women were thrown back on their own resources when their husbands died or failed in business. The vast majority of female wage earners toiled in factories, on farms, or in private homes as domestic workers, but growing numbers worked in clerical, retail, and service jobs. These included hairdressing, cosmetology, manicure, and cosmetics sales.[1]

Although commercial beauty culture mainly offered women low-wage work, it became one of a handful of occupations—along with dressmaking and millinery—to sustain female entrepreneurship and ownership. Ironically, the feminine stereotypes that rendered women unfit for the world of commerce validated their endeavors in the beauty business. Promoters proclaimed that "no profession is more suitable for

women, or more pleasant, than that of helping others to become beautiful and youthful in appearance." Some, like Mary Williams, became salon proprietors. The daughter of slaves who had bought their freedom, Williams learned the hair trade after the Civil War and opened a shop in Columbus, Ohio, in 1872. Serving both white and black residents, Williams eventually ran the "leading hair-dressing establishment in the city," sold hair goods, and taught the trade to other African-American women.[2]

Women also became inventors, manufacturers, and distributors of beauty products. The full extent of their business activity remains unknown. Still, the U.S. Patent Office recorded the efforts of many women bent on achieving success selling cosmetics. They patented improved complexion creams, combs to straighten or curl hair, and clever devices to carry powder or dispense rouge. Most often women sought trademark protection for their products. From 1890 to 1924, they registered at least 450 trademarks for beauty preparations, the bulk of them after 1910. These confident inventors and manufacturers probably represent only a fraction of all the women who peddled their own formulas to neighbors or sold them in local salons. Many filed papers with the Patent Office years after they had put their product into use; only when they perceived a market for it, or faced imitators, did they choose to register the trademark.[3]

Beauty entrepreneurs came from all walks of life. Some of the more affluent had found themselves caught between women's new educational opportunities and ongoing sex discrimination in employment, especially in the sciences. Anna D. Adams aspired to be a surgeon, Marie Mott Gage a chemist. Adams abandoned her career in surgery when faced with the prejudice of male physicians, became a professor of chemistry, and eventually founded a chain of beauty parlors. Gage, who grew up in a family of doctors, studied chemistry at Vassar, but by the 1890s was writing beauty manuals and manufacturing products for the "scientific cultivation of physical beauty."[4]

A few women from wealthy or middle-class families turned to beauty culture in desperation, when circumstances forced them to sup-

port themselves. Harriet Hubbard Ayer, one of the first women to establish a large cosmetics manufacturing operation, was born into a prosperous Chicago family in 1849 and married the son of a wealthy iron dealer at age sixteen. For a time she lived the life of a society matron, but growing marital conflicts and her husband's business failure led Harriet to divorce him in 1886. As sole support of her children, she took a series of jobs, then moved to New York and began manufacturing a face cream named after Madame Recamier, a French beauty of the Napoleonic era. "Not a vulgar white wash" but "intended to replace the so-called blooms and enamels," Recamier cream proved a success. "Within a month," a contemporary account observed, "the house was filled from top to bottom with women trying to manufacture toiletries fast enough to meet the public demand." Ayer traded upon her elite connections to elicit rare endorsements from prominent society women and gain display space in department stores.[5]

Most women entrepreneurs, however, started out in less fortunate circumstances. They were farm daughters and domestic servants, immigrants and African Americans, ordinary, often poor women. They lived all over the country, in cities, small towns, and rural backwaters. From socially marginal origins, they risked little going into a business whose reputation remained dubious. Traces of their local or regional exploits exist only in old fliers, ads, and patent records. But even those who became most successful, who shaped the national development of the modern cosmetics industry, often started out poor and disadvantaged.

Florence Nightingale Graham was born around 1878, some time after her parents had emigrated from England to become tenant farmers in Canada. Little is known about her early life, except that Florence grew up in poverty and had a limited education. As a young woman, she took one low-paying job after another, in turn a dental assistant, cashier, and stenographer. Following her brother to New York City in 1908, Florence found work in Eleanor Adair's high-priced beauty salon, first as a receptionist and then as a "treatment girl" specializing in facials. To better serve the wealthy patrons, Graham taught herself to

Elizabeth Arden in the 1920s.

Helena Rubinstein in the 1920s. (Photograph by Hal Phyfe)

speak with proper diction and to project an image of upper-crust Protestant femininity. A year later, she joined cosmetologist Elizabeth Hubbard in opening a Fifth Avenue salon. Their partnership quickly dissolved and Graham bought the shop, decorated it lavishly for an elite clientele, and, improving on Hubbard's formulas, developed her own Venetian line of beauty preparations. When she reopened the salon, she took the name Elizabeth Arden, one she considered romantic and high class.[6]

In contrast, Helena Rubinstein had already achieved considerable success by the time she arrived in the United States. The facts of her early life, like Arden's, have been obscured in a haze of publicity notices. In the 1920s and 1930s, she claimed to have been born into a wealthy family of exporters, taken advanced scientific and medical training at prestigious European universities, and obtained her winning skin cream from the famed actress Modjeska. Her 1965 autobiography and other sources present a somewhat different picture. Born in 1871, Rubinstein came from a middling Jewish family, her father a wholesale food broker in Cracow. Helena's medical education ended after two years when her parents, apparently opposed to her fiancé, sent her to live with relatives in Australia. In the 1890s, she worked as a governess and perhaps as a waitress. The cream used in her family had been made by a Hungarian chemist and relative, Jacob Lykusky, who taught her the simple beauty techniques she ultimately capitalized upon: cold cream to cleanse the face, astringent to close the pores, and vanishing cream to moisturize and protect the skin. Her friends clamored for the cream, and Rubinstein began to sell it. Finally she opened a beauty shop in 1900, using money lent her by a woman she had befriended on the passage to Australia.[7]

Within two years Rubinstein had become a success. She moved to London in 1908, opened a salon in Paris in 1912, and when war erupted in Europe, relocated to New York and opened a salon off Fifth Avenue, not far from Elizabeth Arden. There the two rivals warred for leadership in the high-status beauty trade. Disdainfully referring to each other as "that woman," they refused to acknowledge how much

they had in common—their troubled family life, economic insecurity, string of typical female jobs, their immigrant status, and not least, the acts of self-making they performed to become cosmetics entrepreneurs.

Annie Turnbo and Sarah Breedlove also found in the beauty trade an escape from poverty and marginalization, an outlet for entrepreneurial ambition. Born in 1869 and orphaned as a child, Annie Turnbo lived with her older siblings in Metropolis, Illinois, a small border town on the Ohio River. She received an education, taught Sunday school, and joined the temperance movement, but how she earned a living as a young woman is unknown. As a girl Turnbo learned plant lore by "gathering herbs with an old woman relative of mine . . . an herb doctor [whose] mixtures fascinated me." In the 1890s she began experimenting with preparations to help black women like herself care for their hair and scalp. Many of them needed remedies for such common problems as hair loss, breakage, and tetter, a common skin ailment, but women also considered lush, well-groomed hair a sign of beauty. By 1900 Turnbo had produced a hair treatment containing sage and egg rinses, common substances in the folk cosmetic tradition. In that year she and her sister moved to Lovejoy, Illinois, a river town inhabited only by African Americans. They began to manufacture the product Turnbo called Wonderful Hair Grower and canvassed door to door. Facing a skeptical black community, she recalled, "I went around in the buggy and made speeches, demonstrated the shampoo on myself, and talked about cleanliness and hygiene, until they realized I was right."[8]

Demand quickly outstripped the two sisters' ability to produce the hair grower, and Turnbo hired three young women as assistants. Urged by friends to expand the business, in 1902 she moved across the Mississippi to St. Louis, drawn by its vibrant black community, a robust drug and toiletries trade, and the Louisiana Purchase Exposition, then being planned. Once well established in St. Louis, Turnbo began to extend her market, first throughout the South, then nationally. In 1906, as competitors began to imitate her product, she proudly registered the trade name "Poro," a Mende (West African) term for a devotional soci-

Annie Turnbo Malone.

Madam C. J. Walker, circa 1914.

ety. When she married Aaron Malone in 1914, Annie Turnbo Malone's Poro was a thriving enterprise.

Sarah Breedlove, or Madam C. J. Walker as she became known, also entered the hair-care business in these years. Her early life bore some similarities to Malone's, her chief rival. Born to former slaves in Delta, Louisiana, in 1867, she was orphaned as a child and moved in with her older sister. In 1882, at age fourteen, she married laborer Moses McWilliams. Over the next few years, she gave birth to her daughter Lelia, then her husband died in an accident. Moving to St. Louis in 1888, Sarah did housework and laundering, raised her daughter, and joined the African Methodist Episcopal church and several charitable societies. She also briefly became a Poro agent.[9]

When her hair began to thin and fall out, Sarah experimented with formulas containing sulphur, capsicum, and other stimulants, and began to sell her own remedy. She too called her product Wonderful Hair

Grower, which may have been one of the reasons Malone registered the Poro trade name. Although each woman claimed to have invented hair-care systems for African Americans, they probably modified existing formulas and improved heating combs already on the market, adjusting them for the condition and texture of black women's hair. Their technique for pressing hair, using a light oil and wide-tooth steel comb heated on a stove, put much less strain on the scalp than earlier methods using round tongs or "pullers." By straightening each strand, this "hot comb" process created the desired look of long, styled hair.[10]

McWilliams moved to Denver in 1905 and began to sell in earnest. "I made house-to-house canvasses among people of my race," she recalled, "and after awhile I got going pretty well." She married newspaperman Charles J. Walker, who helped her start an advertising campaign and mail-order business. Over the next few years, Madam Walker extended her business to the South and Midwest and in 1910 settled the company in Indianapolis, which she considered a favorable spot both for African Americans and for national distribution. Although she incorporated the company in 1911, the major decisions and the profits remained in her own hands.[11]

In another period, Arden, Rubinstein, Malone, and Walker might have lived and labored in obscurity, a fate shared by most women. At the turn of the century, however, women's need for employment in a growing commercial and service economy joined with new cultural perceptions about appearance making and self-display, to foster women's enterprises in beauty culture. Finding ways to overcome the economic barriers and social impediments women faced, these four shrewdly took the measure of their times—and the market—to build business empires.

Like those who started other consumer-oriented businesses, beauty entrepreneurs grappled with common problems of ensuring distribution, creating brand recognition, and increasing demand. Sex discrimination intensified the host of challenges they faced. Women had less access

than men to credit and education in business methods. They were generally barred from professional training in pharmacy, which was necessary to run drugstores and was the path men usually took into toiletries manufacturing. These obstacles had profound consequences for women's businesses. Although information about these early enterprises is limited, most remained small-scale affairs: a one-woman manufacturing operation based in a kitchen or a sideline to salon services, requiring little capital investment.[12]

In some of the larger companies, women controlled promotion and marketing as the firm's public face, but husbands or brothers held key positions in finance and manufacturing, where they oversaw both money and workers. When Elizabeth Arden expanded from salon services to product sales in 1918, she attended largely to her exclusive salons while her husband supervised production and distribution of the cosmetics line. In other cases, men played lesser or adversarial roles. Although Charles Walker initially helped his wife establish her hair-grower business, it was Madam Walker who ambitiously expanded the enterprise into the national market. Women often struggled with husbands or relatives for control of their companies. The marriages of Walker and Malone ended in divorce over business conflicts; Harriet Hubbard Ayer's ex-husband and daughter charged her with mismanagement, committed her to an asylum, and assumed control of the company. The Woman's Cooperative Toilet Company found it necessary to explain to a prospective sales agent in 1891, "We are not men doing business under assumed ladies' names," and derided this "*mania* of our men imitators."[13]

Gaining access to distribution networks and retail outlets especially plagued women entrepreneurs. Competition for shelf space in department stores favored the more prestigious male perfumers, considered skilled craftsmen. Druggists relied on large wholesale supply companies, which tended to carry established brands and hired men as traveling sales agents. African-American entrepreneurs faced these problems and more. With few black-owned groceries, general stores, and pharmacies, they needed to convince white retailers to stock their

products. The success of cosmetics manufacturer Anthony Overton was unusual. Overton remembered calling on the trade for the first time—"several white merchants refused to even look at our samples"—but with enormous persistence he eventually broke through the color line in drug and variety stores. Only after Malone and Walker had created demand through other means were their goods accepted onto drugstore shelves.[14]

In response to these difficulties, beauty culturists redefined and even pioneered techniques in distribution, sales, and marketing that would later become commonplace in the business world. Working outside the conventional wholesale-retail system of trade, they parlayed salon- and home-based enterprises into mail-order and door-to-door peddling operations. These were already familiar methods of selling that had, by the late nineteenth century, reached into small towns and rural areas of the country and brought an array of consumer goods into American households. In the cosmetics field, the California Perfume Company (later renamed Avon) became most famous for this sales strategy. Book salesman David Hall McConnell founded the company in 1886 when he discovered that the sample bottles of perfume he gave away were more popular than the books he sold. He turned over daily operations to a Vermont woman, Mrs. P. F. E. Albee, who developed a plan to recruit women to sell perfumes and toiletries in their neighborhoods. By 1903, there were about 10,000 such house-to-house "depot agents" across the country.[15]

Many women entrepreneurs successfully imitated California Perfume's sales strategy in the 1890s and early 1900s. In magazines and circulars, they advertised for clerks, sewing women, domestic servants, and women "doing hard, muscular work" who might prefer the ease and refinement of selling cosmetics. When a Miss Prim inquired about a genteel and private occupation, Bertha Benz described her plan "for giving paying employment to ladies everywhere." She offered Prim a branch office covering her county in North Carolina, from which she could sell the "Famous Tula Water for the Complexion." The work, she said, consisted "of filling agents' orders of mailing circulars answering

letters of inquiry etc which you can do quietly in your own house without renting an office for this purpose."[16]

House-to-house canvassing and mail order permitted businesswomen with little capital or credit to expand their manufacturing operations. They reduced their risk and gained cash flow by defining sales agents as resellers, requiring them to purchase the goods, rather than take them on consignment or sell on a salary basis. Mail-order cosmetics firms kept relatively little inventory, manufacturing as orders came in. Madam Walker's business from the first "operated on a cash with order basis and very little capital has ever been necessary for its operation," observed an Internal Revenue Service agent, puzzling over Walker's haphazard bookkeeping. Starting out in 1905, she had managed, in a mere thirteen years, to build a business with thousands of sales agents and annual gross sales of $275,000, a staggering success.[17]

Beauty culturists developed "systems" and "methods," signature skin- and hair-care programs that facilitated, and subtly redefined, these distribution networks. Gone were miscellaneous creams and lotions, replaced by specialized and coordinated products and step-by-step techniques. Skin-care systems required cosmeticians to apply an array of cleansing and "nourishing" creams and to massage the face with wrinkle rollers, muscle beaters, or other devices; customers were encouraged to follow the program at home. Each product performed a single function, but together they became a therapeutic "treatment line" in a regular beauty ritual. Unlike powder or paint applied temporarily to the surface of the skin, such methods promised to assist nature and secure a lifetime of beauty.[18]

Systems were frequently taught through beauty schools and correspondence courses, replacing casual apprenticeships with formal training and certification in hairdressing and beauty culture. The first academy of hairdressing appeared in 1890, and over the next two decades beauty schools sprang up across the country, many of them founded by women. Among the earliest was Madame Le Fevre's school of dermatology, which trained fifty-seven women in one year to fulfill

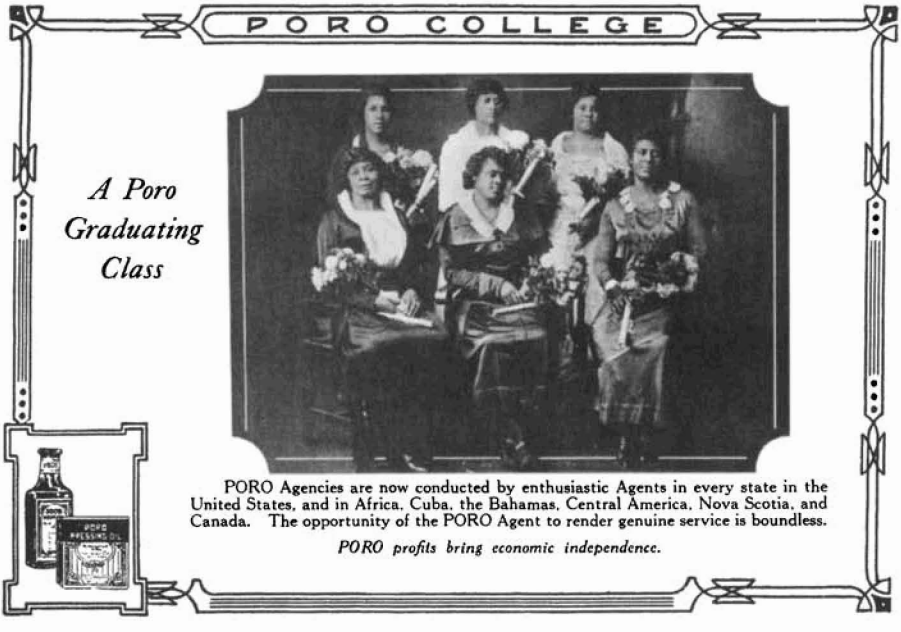
A promotion for facial vibrators from the Electric Supply Company, 1906.

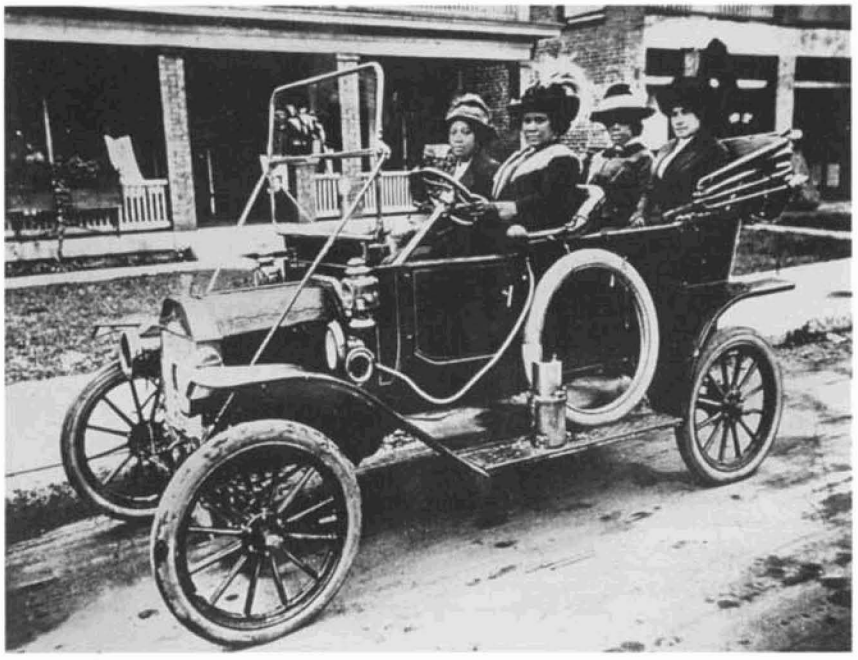
A "face lift" device from Susanna Cocroft. Detail, "Success Face Lifters" pamphlet.

"her desire to establish competent women in business in cities and towns where she is not represented."[19]

A number of entrepreneurs developed franchise operations in conjunction with beauty schools. These enabled certified beauticians to own salons, advertise their services as "system" shops, and capitalize upon the entrepreneur's name and reputation. Innovative beauty culturist Martha Matilda Harper, based in Rochester, New York, began to license her "Harper Method" in 1890 and eventually had more than 300 franchised salons. The Marinello Company, founded by Ruth Maurer, opened its first beauty school in 1904 and became one of the dominant organizations in the business, training white and black women and setting up franchises around the country. The Poro and Walker systems, and later Sara Spencer Washington's Apex, attracted thousands of black hairdressers as well, some of whom made the transition to proprietor. Although unrecognized by business historians, women entre-

From the Poro Hair and Beauty Culture Handbook, *1922.*





Madam C. J. Walker and others in an open touring car.

preneurs were in the vanguard of modern franchising methods that would take off more generally after World War II.[20]

Other women pioneered in the direct sales methods known today as multilevel marketing or "pyramid" organization. In addition to beauty services and product sales, agent-operators earned money and other rewards by recruiting women into their organization and training them in their specific beauty method. Entrepreneurial black women made this strategy highly successful. Malone and Walker traveled into every region of the country to teach women how to treat hair and sell products—remarkable journeys in this period of intensifying segregation and violence against black Americans. Their recruits trained others in turn, widening the circle of distribution. Sales agents fanned out to areas otherwise isolated from the consumer market. Walker's traveling representatives were instructed to "thoroly canvass Virginia, North and South Carolina," and the Sea Islands, because "there are more Negroes

and more money there than in all other states combined." Like many direct-sales firms today, Malone rewarded agents not only with cash but with other incentives, bestowing diamond rings, low-cost mortgages, and public accolades for recruiting new agents, for becoming top sellers, and even for demonstrating thrift and charity. Led by compelling, larger-than-life personalities, these companies were early examples of what Nicole Biggart calls "charismatic capitalism," institutions that combined the profit motive with the qualities of a social or even religious movement.[21]

Women in the beauty business faced a specific cultural dilemma as they promoted the consumption of cosmetics: How were they to champion products that to a large extent still signified female immorality, goods whose use consumers often denied? If beauty was a "duty," as the prescriptive literature proclaimed, its achievement remained hedged about by women's embarrassment and anxiety about maintaining their good name. When she went into the beauty business in 1888, Mrs. Gervaise Graham observed, "Ladies went veiled to the Beauty Doctor, for fear of being ridiculed for their vanity." Similarly Harriet Hubbard Ayer recalled "how amused I was to get orders for a simple emollient cream, with the request that it should be sent in a plain wrapper."[22]

Men in the patent cosmetics and drugstore trade used two distinct appeals to induce women to buy beauty preparations. Patent cosmetics advertisements, like those for medicinal elixirs, featured sensational copy, dramatic before-and-after pictures, and promises of magical transformation. By 1900, retail and manufacturing druggists wished to separate themselves from such ballyhoo yet wondered how to handle women consumers—perceived as irrational and impulsive—in the growing market for cosmetics. With typical condescension, Chicago druggist B. S. Cooban described the problem, given cosmetics' "miscellaneous character" and the exacting requirements of "the 'dear creatures' who are our chief patrons":

> Miracles are not only expected but demanded. To meet these demands and keep the girls, both old and young, in line, requires a great variety of stock, and the exercise of considerable judgement and tact in recommending articles for individual needs. And such needs! Did you ever take especial notice of the beauty troubles and tales of woe that women give you? How they *will* "roast" some powder or lotion![23]

Promoting cosmetic wares as staple goods and toilet necessities, Cooban and other druggists advertised their intrinsic qualities, celebrated low prices, and provided instructions for use. Nonplussed by beauty and by women, they offered the dry, indulgent humor of the man behind the counter, the laconic language of "good enough," and matter-of-fact descriptions of their miscellaneous goods.

Women entrepreneurs hawked cosmetics in a different key. They called themselves beauty experts who identified with women's wants and desires, and often cited their own bodily trials and tribulations as the reason they had become manufacturers. Necessity was indeed the mother of invention. One turn-of-the-century beauty culturist, known as Madame Yale, often said that she had wanted to be a general physician until she had the "personal experience of the worst forms of female disease." She healed herself, so she claimed, then decided to devote "her life-work to the benefit of her Sister Women" by developing a complete program of physical and beauty culture. Yale reminded clients that, as a "woman precisely like yourself," she knew "more about and underst[ood] better the secrets of woman's ills than all the male doctors and so-called 'professors' in the world." Some advertisements simply telegraphed women's ownership—as in a wrinkle eradicator by "B & P Co. (Two Women)"—female identification conferring instant legitimacy. Claiming authority through shared experience created a powerful link between producers and consumers, indeed, blurred the line between them.[24]

Women's anomalous place in the business world dictated this commercial strategy. After all, beauty expertise was deemed a natural form

of female knowledge that women were expected to possess. Some businesswomen even hid their active experimentation with formulas and chemicals behind divine revelation. Madam C. J. Walker claimed she "had a dream" in which "a big black man appeared to me and told me what to mix up for my hair" and prophesied that she would beautify and uplift the race. French immigrant Marie Juliette Pinault, who had little else in common with Walker, also named a dream the inspiration for her products.[25]

These businesswomen shrewdly understood that their own personalities were business assets, integral to their sales strategies. They carefully crafted their self-images, creating distinct versions of femininity that resonated with the particular aspirations and social experiences of those they targeted as consumers. White beauty culturists often shed their names, hometowns, and social backgrounds to create personae as beauty experts. In a business dedicated to illusion and transformation, they were self-made. Madame Yale was, in fact, Maude Mayberg, who lied about receiving a degree from Wellesley College and whose other claims about formal training in chemistry, physical culture, and art are dubious. Poverty had "induced" Ida Lee Secrest "to take up the business," and, carrying some cosmetics recipes given her by an uncle, she fled Chanute, Kansas, for New York City. There she became "cosmetic artiste" Madame Edith Velaro, literally her own creation, whose "eyebrows were artificial, her lashes dyed, her complexion made up, her eyes brightened and made to look large by one of her preparations."[26]

Elizabeth Arden and Helena Rubinstein fashioned contrasting public personalities on which to base their cosmetics marketing. Arden, as a 1938 *Fortune* profile correctly observed, was "an alias concealing many things"—a chain of salons, a manufacturer, a sales corps, and, not least, Florence Nightingale Graham herself as she curried favor with elite society. "Arden pink" was her signature, coloring her apparel, salon interiors, and cosmetics packaging. Promotional letters under her name imitated her whispery, intimate speaking voice to create poetic pictures of youthful loveliness, considered models of

"writing in woman's own language" in the advertising industry. Often described as a dithering, smiling figure, Arden undoubtedly exasperated the male executives around her. According to several reports, she was "fond of asking male advice on money and business, and almost invariably disregard[ed] it." This criticism reflects less upon Arden's "unbusinesslike manner" than on the control she exerted over her image and the company. Pink femininity concealed Arden's acts as an exacting and tough manager who broke a threatened strike, fended off complaints from the Food and Drug Administration, and remained the sole stockholder of her company, despite several marriages and buyout offers.[27]

Rubinstein also adopted a high-society image but invoked elements of the New Woman. In her view, the beauty specialist was a professional woman, "who is human in her sympathies, and will express these sympathies thru [*sic*] science." Typically photographed in a lab coat or striking dress and jewelry, she presented a dramatic figure of modernity—exotic, urbane, and scientific. Reporters often commented that Rubinstein, a Polish Jew, was "not a talker"—her speech was heavily accented—but also stressed her worldliness and sophistication: "a woman without a country who is at home in any country." Characteristically, she took an inclusive view of beauty culture, welcoming "stenographers, clerks, and even little office girls" into her salon and acknowledging the variety of skin types in a nation of immigrants. Unlike Arden, who only flirted with the suffrage movement when it was fashionable, Rubinstein became a long-term supporter of women's equal rights.[28]

If white beauty culturists sloughed off their origins to perform the American myth of self-making and individual mobility, black entrepreneurs tended to embed their biographies within the story of African-American women's collective advancement. Madam Walker identified closely with the struggles and dignity of poor women even as she sought entrance into the ranks of the black economic and social elite. She had remade herself in certain ways, hiring a tutor in standard English and carefully fashioning a refined and elegant appearance. Still,

she persistently tied her business to the fortunes of the unschooled and poor women whose life experiences she had shared. In 1912, she burst into public awareness when she attempted to address the National Negro Business League at its annual meeting. Booker T. Washington repeatedly refused to recognize her, apparently not wanting to endorse such a disreputable calling. Finally Walker rushed up to the podium, exclaiming "surely you are not going to shut the door in my face," and launched into an impassioned speech. "I am a woman that came from the cotton fields of the South; I was promoted from there to the wash-tub . . . then I was promoted to the cook kitchen," she said emphatically, "and from there I promoted myself into the business of manufacturing hair goods and preparations." Walker proved her mettle, and Washington welcomed her back the following year, when as a featured speaker she pointedly declaimed, "I am not ashamed of my past; I am not ashamed of my humble beginning. Don't think because you have to go down in the wash-tub that you are any less a lady!"[29]

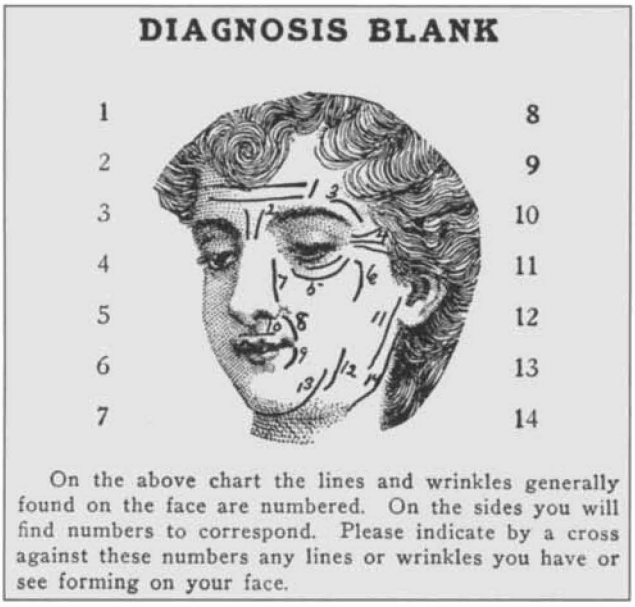
The projection of personality and expertise was central to the sales strategies women entrepreneurs adopted. Many of them advertised their beauty culture systems in local newspapers, distributed trade cards, and sent pamphlets through the mail. Advertising, however, did not dominate their marketing efforts. Beauty culturists placed relatively few advertisements, for example, in the national women's magazines then gaining popularity. Perhaps the cost of ad space was prohibitive. Then, too, some women's magazines banned ads for "quack" beauty cures, and none carried advertising from black-owned companies. At the same time, businesswomen's orientation to localism—apparent in their salons and door-to-door operations—may have disposed them against the type of advertising campaigns mounted by soap companies, packaged goods producers, and other manufacturers. Instead, beauty entrepreneurs concentrated on women's aesthetic and cultural practices, weaving their trade into the fabric of women's everyday lives. Addressing a heterogeneous public split along racial, class,

and regional lines, they devised new forms of female interaction to create a sociable commerce in beautifying.

White businesswomen in the late nineteenth century exploited popular notions of womanly bonds, ironically promoting a consumer sorority around beauty in an era when class and ethnic differences deeply divided white women. Appealing to customers as "friends" and "sisters," manufacturer Flora Jones endorsed a view of commerce as simply "woman helping woman." This language advanced the distribution and marketing of beauty culture. Door-to-door canvassers, who construed their work as *calling* or neighborly visiting, stepped into the gap between reluctant cosmetics consumers and distant companies. At least one male manufacturer believed that the growing public acceptance of beauty aids after 1880 resulted in large part from the efforts of women who "solicit the business from the housewives of their various localities." Some mail-order firms encouraged women to form purchasing clubs for discounts and premiums. They believed that friends who shared catalogs, discussed products, and wrote up orders together made cosmetics more acceptable to one another. When women requested toiletries in plain wrappers, one perfume company pleaded, "do not feel ashamed to let your friends know you use it, but recommend it to them also."[30]

Even mail order, seemingly the most impersonal form of exchange, was refurbished as a hub of intimate correspondence, sisterly service, and trusted counsel. Madame Yale urged mail-order customers to write and "tell me all, everything—just as you would talk if we were sitting in my parlor face to face." A 1915 advertisement encouraged readers to "write Madame Rubinstein for an appointment or for advice and she will answer you personally." Handwritten, confidential promotional letters masked the commercial relations in which they were produced. To handle the volume of "private" correspondence, large manufacturers designed complexion analysis charts for women to identify their facial defects and employed armies of clerks to prescribe personalized corrective programs.[31]

These business methods may be seen in the letters of beauty cultur-



From a Susanna Cocroft brochure, circa 1912.

ist Susanna Cocroft to Ethel Vining, the wife of a Longmeadow, Massachusetts, businessman. Vining paid eighteen dollars to Cocroft in 1913 for a mail-order course that promised weight loss and improved appearance. Cocroft asked Vining for a "kodak picture, showing the lines of your figure," noting "I like to keep my pupil's face before me as I dictate her lesson." Every few weeks, Cocroft sent her a form letter—personalized with references to Vining's case—with instructions for dieting and exercise and leaflets advertising her toilet preparations. Vining, in turn, dutifully sent in reports detailing her weight and measurements. "If you could realize how eagerly I scan your report," said Cocroft, "I am watching your progress." Three weeks later, however, the relationship had begun to turn sour. "There is something wrong with the way you are doing your work," she complained. "You are not reducing as rapidly as you should, Mrs. Vining." Casting the situation in terms of personal inadequacy and betrayal, Cocroft blamed Vining for the failure of her course.[32]

Many white beauty culturists tried to turn grooming habits into

The genteel manicure parlor, from Mrs. Mary E. Cobb, "How to be Your Own Manicure" pamphlet.

bourgeois social rituals. Such terms as beauty *parlor* and *salon* invoked the rooms where public met private. For Madame Caroline, profits from her face beautifier seemed incidental to securing her place in the round of social visiting: "When orders are not received, or some of Mme. Caroline's fair patrons do not call as usual, then she knows they are either ill or not alive." A trip to the beauty salon fit into the urban pleasures women newly enjoyed, along with shopping, promenading, and taking in a matinee. One elegant Chicago salon urged "parties of ladies who are in town for a day" to visit for beauty treatments, lunch, and rest, and promised they would "go forth blooming and beautiful, ready for any social duties." In the 1910s, Marinello advised its beauticians to sponsor tea parties and fashion shows in their salons or at women's homes, prefiguring the successful sales strategy of Mary Kay Cosmetics.[33]

Public demonstrations made hidden beauty practices visible, easing women's embarrassment and ignorance about cosmetics use. Adopting a stylized patter as they worked on their own faces, beauty culturists taught their systems of cleansing, face massage, and cosmetic application. To advertise her "World Renowned Face Bleach," Madame Ruppert in 1889 invited the public to witness an exhibition of women at different stages of the treatment. Madame Yale traveled the country in the 1890s, giving public lectures to women on "The Religion of Beauty, the Sin of Ugliness." With her pink complexion and mass of blond hair, Yale proclaimed herself to be a middle-aged woman who looked and felt twenty years younger. She wore a tunic without corset or stays, demonstrated beauty exercises, and appeared in *tableaux vivants* as Diana and Helen of Troy to the enthusiastic acclaim of her followers, whom the press deemed the "Yale cult."[34]

Although drawing upon the conventions of middle-class life, beauty culturists cast a wide net for consumers. Before the advent of market research, there is little way to know who actually purchased their preparations. However, beauty culture targeted not only native-born, affluent white women but other women aspiring to middle-class respectability. Madame Ruppert, for instance, advertised her face bleach in the *American Jewess,* an English-language magazine for Jewish women of German and central European background. Articles praised the New Jewish Woman, who adhered to tradition but fit into modern American life. Ruppert's face bleach, with its promise to lighten and "refine" the skin, reinforced the magazine's assimilationist message. Similarly, beauty culturists placed an occasional notice in *Die Deutsche Hausfrau,* a German-language "home journal" addressed to rural and small-town immigrant housewives. "Are worry wrinkles starting and your features beginning to look disfigured?" asked Helen Sanborn, who offered the magazine's readers a "free coupon" for advice on skin care.[35]

In order to promote cosmetics to a diverse public, beauty culturists created a palatable ideal, mixing older and newer outlooks on feminine beauty that could be translated readily into the terms of the market. In salons, lecture halls, clubs, magazines, and advertising, they fostered a

paradoxical female world of discipline and indulgence, therapy and luxury. Like most middle-class Americans, they believed the face was a window into the soul. "Is your complexion *clear*?—Does it express the clearness of your life?" asked Susanna Cocroft. "Are there discolorations or blemishes in the skin,—which symbolize imperfections within?" At the same time, they parried the idea that self-decoration registered female vanity and deceit. Reversing the Victorian logic that made appearance a function of character, they claimed that beautifying was a "moral necessity" that honored God's handiwork and nature's laws. "The day has passed forever for self-beautifying to be considered a confession of weakness," asserted Madame Yale. Women could fulfill the old adage, "beauty a duty," yet give in to the new siren song of consumption. As Susanna Cocroft urged, "Don't be ashamed of your desire for beauty."[36]

That desire could even include rouge, mascara, and lipstick. As they stressed the permanent improvement of appearance characteristic of beauty culture, businesswomen nevertheless rehabilitated the "painted woman." Madame Yale offered "temporary beautifiers" to ladies "too indolent to cultivate natural beauty," as well as "actresses and all those whose inclinations or pursuits render 'make-up' necessary." This shift in language—from paint to makeup—indicated that face coloring too could be considered an essential finishing touch in women's daily beauty ritual. "In this busy, *critical* world," observed Madame Thompson, "we need all the *help* we can command."[37]

Just as they grafted their trade onto womanly bonds and bourgeois social rituals, so beauty entrepreneurs capitalized on changes in women's lives, their new roles in that "busy, *critical* world." The beauty business emerged during the ferment of the late-nineteenth-century women's movement. In a period that both celebrated and feared white women's entrance into the public world of the workplace, college, and politics, businesswomen struggled to etch those large social changes on the face and body. Some firms advocated a form of feminism oriented to women's economic independence, linking it to their efforts to train and employ women in the beauty trade. Observing that "all the women of the twentieth century are workers," Marinello explicitly supported women's

suffrage and employment opportunities. Madame Yale argued that "the progress of women" included "efforts in aiding them to make the most of their appearance and retain their youth." She wanted beauty culturists represented in the Woman's Building at the 1893 Chicago World's Fair, but the reform-minded Lady Organizers thought otherwise. Objecting to rouge and powder as "not things we wish to dwell on or emphasize," they prohibited displays from women in cosmetics manufacturing. Yale had the last word, however, issuing fraudulent notices that her preparations had been awarded the fair's top honors.[38]

Typically, businesswomen affirmed the feminist critique of women's enforced delicacy and weakness, without the accompanying politics of the women's movement. In their view, beauty was "more powerful than the ballot." The pale, frail lady and the corpulent dowager, physical types circumscribing women's freedom, would give way to a new model of modern femininity: "A living, breathing, animated, infectious personality of flesh and blood . . . a hearty play-fellow; a good comrade, who rides, walks, rows, golfs and wouldn't be guilty of fainting for a kingdom," as Yale defined her. "Miss Cocroft has made a new woman of me," a testimonial declared, but Cocroft herself denied that the New Woman fundamentally challenged society's gender arrangements. "The women of today, yesterday, and tomorrow are the same, but our horizons are broadening," she said. "And this will not make us mannish. We can be as sweet and dear and lovable in the street as in the home." Thus beauty culturists offered women the possibility of claiming the mantle of "advanced *fin de siècle* woman" simply by changing their grooming habits.[39]

These techniques of promotion and sales served white beauty culturists' aim of fashioning a distinctive feminine market out of a varied population of women. In the 1910s, however, one segment of the salon trade—that oriented to fashionable, wealthy white women—developed into large-scale cosmetics manufacturing. Arden and Rubinstein spearheaded the effort to convert elite beauty culture into a modern industry. This "class" segment of the cosmetics trade capitalized upon distinctions of wealth and status. Having expanded their salon opera-

Helena Rubinstein with workers preparing flowers and herbs for cosmetics, around 1925.

tions into large cities and affluent beach resorts, Arden and Rubinstein turned to high-volume product sales. In 1917 Rubinstein established the manufacturing arm of her company, and Arden followed suit in 1918. Both confronted the paradoxical problem of the class market for cosmetics: how to preserve an aura of exclusivity, wealth, and high fashion *and* sell to all who had the dollars to buy. Already identified with elite women, Arden and Rubinstein designed marketing campaigns to reinforce the prestige of their systems, urging women to emulate and vicariously join high society by purchasing costly cosmetics. Both companies began to advertise in such status-conscious magazines as *Town and Country* and *Vogue.* They approached only specialty shops and higher-priced department stores, often extending to a single retailer in a city or town exclusive rights to sell the line. By the early 1920s, beauty culturists Dorothy Gray, Marie Earle, and Kathleen

Mary Quinlan had all established manufacturing and marketing operations to sell specialty cosmetics. The creation of expensive "treatment lines" promoted through exclusive salons and sales venues—a segment of the trade built by white women—had become a major route into the modern cosmetics industry.[40]

Commercial beauty culture moved in a different direction for African-American women, taking an increasingly collective and political turn. Walker, Malone, and other black entrepreneurs had much in common with white beauty culturists, for instance, their use of systems, promotion of women's economic opportunities, and belief in the social significance of appearance. They too worked within ongoing cultural traditions and capitalized upon women's patterns of sociability. But race profoundly divided white and black beauty culturists. From the first, the cosmetics industry developed along parallel but largely segregated tracks. The "ethnic market," as it is euphemistically called today, involved separate distribution networks and advertising strategies, even when white-owned firms tried to extend their sales into it. Racial stereotypes provided the features against which dominant white beauty ideals were defined and marketed. All the white beauty culturists who manufactured face bleach, such as Madame Ruppert, reinforced those stereotypes as they sold an image of fair-skinned, genteel beauty.

The many black women who entered beauty culture responded to these matters in different ways. Some conveyed a frank message of emulation, that African Americans would benefit by, and be more attractive with, lighter skin and straighter hair. Like white beauty culturists and black men in cosmetics manufacturing, they marketed face bleaches and light powders. The leading firms owned by black women took another path, however. Walker and Malone refused to sell skin bleaches and never spoke of hair straightening as an aspect of their beauty systems. Rejecting any hint of contributing to black self-denial and emulation, they argued instead that improved appearance would

reveal to all the inner worth of black women, especially those who, laboring as domestics or farmhands, were most demeaned and ill-treated. In their vision, beauty culture was a vindication of black womanhood, a way to achieve personal dignity and collective advancement. Most important, they embedded the beauty trade in the daily life of black communities linked by kin, neighbors, churches, and schools. In so doing, they created a singular form of beauty culture in which profit making was intertwined with larger ethical and political purposes. Many African-American women responded enthusiastically to these ideals. As one admiring customer put it, "We's here to help one another and feel each other['s] care."[41]

Hair grooming had long brought black women together to socialize while engaging in the time-consuming rituals of washing, combing, and plaiting, the tactile pleasures of working with hair mingling with the diversion of visiting and chatting. Teacher and one-time Poro agent Mamie Fields recalled the "official hair wrapper" in every Southern neighborhood, the talk and "fun working on each other's heads." Word of hair growers and shampoos made by African-American women spread rapidly. Women convinced each other to try these new products, buying boxes of glossine and hair grower for relatives and friends, practicing the art of hairdressing on each other. Like many women, Elizabeth Clark placed an order with Madam Walker "not for my self" but "for a friend of mine." For these businesses, word of mouth was the finest form of advertising.[42]

Commercial affiliations followed from family ties and women's friendships. Lubertha Carson applied to be the agent for Landrum, South Carolina, writing that "all my friends ask me to take the trade so that they can get the treatment from me." Women took great pride in "making an agent"—teaching the beauty system to a trainee and presenting her with her first sales kit and diploma. Grace Clayton instructed her sister Page for six weeks and then wrote Madam Walker, "I am shore she is all right now and ready to recive your papers." Mattie Stephens "is quite a promising agent and will do well in her Section," wrote her sponsor; "there is no other agents at this place and there are

quite a few Colored people there." To sell in most places, the Walker Company instructed, "All you have to do is to get around among the people, in other words be a mixer." Indeed, newcomers to a community had difficulty entering the trade. Belinda Bailey "did not take up your work," she wrote Walker, because "i am a Stranger around Heare i Believe i Better waite untell i get Better quanted with the People it is hard for me to catch on to the ways of them."[43]

Beauty culture spread rapidly in part because it promised direct, practical rewards—the means to earn a living. For African-American women, finding steady and dignified work was a tremendous challenge. The rigidly sex- and race-segmented labor market allowed them only a handful of occupations, and most struggled to earn a living as domestic servants, washerwomen, and field hands. In a time when Southern black domestic workers earned only one or two dollars a week, the Walker Company claimed its agents could "easily make from three to five dollars a day." Actual earnings are difficult to determine: Although some women gained only a small clientele, top saleswomen pulled in as much as $100 a week. The most successful hairdressers moved out of their kitchens to open storefront beauty shops. One agent credibly contended that Walker had enabled "hundreds of colored women to make an honest and profitable living where they make as much in one week as a month's salary would bring from any other position that a colored woman can secure."[44]

Hair work also offered flexible hours and part-time employment for women who had other jobs or family responsibilities. While her brother fought in Europe in 1918, Annie Bell cared for his child; unable to "work out" as a maid she became a Walker agent. A small-town telephone operator in Arkansas sold Walker products as a profitable sideline, "to supply some few ladys who have used your goods before." The trade also attracted women with little education, physical ailments, and limited job prospects. Ethel Cornish, forced by illness to leave her factory job, went to a free course offered by Walker and became an agent: "I received my comb and preperation a month ago and have nine costomers at present all of them seem to be satisfied." A deaf woman who

had trouble finding work enthused, "I am wild to start the treatment and would much rather have your art of hair growing than any other position."[45]

Beauty culture unleashed tremendous entrepreneurial energy among women used to suppressing their ambitions. As they traveled throughout the country, Walker and Malone galvanized city women and farm-dwellers alike. "I told you when you were in Des Moines that your talk inspired me so that I was determined to see what good I could do in this world and for my people," wrote Beatrice Crank to Walker after opening a beauty parlor. Maggie Branch of Chuluota, Florida, could canvass only a few hours a day but had quickly acquired six customers. "I am Still Working right on I am confident this wonderfull remedy will sell like hot cakes," she wrote Madam Walker. Sallie Adams competed for one of the prizes given out at the annual Walker convention and wrote, "I am both day and night with my hair work."[46]

Even educated and professional women who once scorned hair work now seized the chance to earn a higher income. Melinda Burleigh, a teacher in Portsmouth, Virginia, started out selling Walker products as a sideline but quickly expanded into full-time work. She trained women to become hairdressers, solicited customers in nearby counties, and became manager of a distribution depot. "I have given up teaching," she wrote. Some college-educated women set up their own beauty systems. Ezella Mathis Carter, a Spelman College alumna, had been a teacher and school principal in rural Georgia before entering the beauty trade; Sara Spencer Washington's family goaded her to teach, but instead she founded the Apex Hair and News Company, which became one of the largest black-owned businesses in the 1920s and 1930s.[47]

Walker and Malone worked with the leading institutions of African-American life to expand their companies. Despite early opposition from some ministers, who believed hair pressing was neither natural nor godly, churches became key places for promoting hair systems and distributing goods. Walker and Malone lectured to Baptist and African Methodist Episcopal congregations across the country and donated

goods for church fairs and fundraisers. They often addressed consumers in a religious idiom: Malone's "evangels of Poro" spread "the gospel of 'better personal appearance,'" while Walker instructed agents selling to a new prospect to "imagine yourself a missionary and convert him." Sales agents and customers alike answered in kind, praying for God's blessings and closing their letters alternatively "yours for success" and "yours in Christ." Churches often became the staging ground for campaigns into new markets. F. B. Ransom, Walker's general manager, wrote a sales representative on her way to Chicago that "there are some two or three large churches on the west side and quite a community of colored people." He noted, "You could do a big business over there."[48]

African-American beauty culturists eagerly addressed women's clubs, lodge halls, and colleges. Walker actively took part in the National Association of Colored Women and spoke at its convention on several occasions; in 1918, she appealed "for club women to get closer in touch with our women in the factory." She also sought permission to install beauty parlors in women's dormitories at black colleges. Booker T. Washington refused to allow a salon at Tuskegee, but Roger Williams University, Guadalupe College, and the Arkansas Baptist College, among others, all agreed to the arrangement.[49]

Advocating Christian principles in business, both Walker and Malone dedicated themselves to black social welfare and community building, including industrial education, recreational programs, and charitable giving. Malone built Poro College to be "more than a mere business enterprise," nothing less than an institution "consecrated to the uplift of humanity—Race women in particular." Opened in 1918, it not only housed Poro's factory and offices, but offered theater, music, athletics, lectures, chapel services, and art murals. Reaching out to young women in need of training and jobs, Malone gave them—and black St. Louis—a wider view of culture.[50]

In many cities and towns, agent-operators formed clubs to embody the ideal of the "business family group," encouraging trade while serving the community. As Walker put it, clubs would "solidify the com-

mercial, civic and racial interests of our women." Dozens of Poro and Walker clubs formed in the 1910s and 1920s, and smaller firms followed suit. Agent-operator clubs protected companies from people posing as official agents or adulterating trademarked products, a problem afflicting the large firms from the beginning. At the same time, they combined two common forms of working-class affiliation, the mutual aid society and the social club. Members mingled, shared beauty tips, enjoyed outings and entertainments, gained insurance benefits, and raised money for churches and charity. Beauty salons—known for their spirited conversation between beauticians and clients—became neighborhood centers for sharing information and organizing. Annie Turnbo Malone stressed that "every PORO Agent should be an active force for good" and rewarded agents' service to the community as well as their sales prowess.[51]

For many working-class black women, beauty culture strengthened their involvement in community affairs and even carried them into political activism. Two hundred Walker agents attended their first national convention in 1917, and heard Madam Walker speak on "Women's Duty to Women." Walker had long financed efforts for African-American uplift, but she increasingly supported the more militant politics of the National Equal Rights League and the International League of Darker Peoples. "We must not let our love of our country, our patriotic loyalty, cause us to abate one whit in our protest against wrong and injustice," she declared to the delegates. As American soldiers marched abroad, the convention sent a petition to President Woodrow Wilson, protesting mob violence and lynchings at home in the wake of the St. Louis riot.[52]

Black women entered the market for hair-care and beauty products at a particular historical juncture. New visions of economic self-sufficiency, personal autonomy, and social participation, spreading throughout African-American communities, arose to combat the deepening privations and assaults of everyday life. In this context, commercial beauty culture was something much more than an isolated act of consumption or vanity. In the hands of African-American women entre-

preneurs, it became an economic and aesthetic form that spoke to black women's collective experiences and aspirations.

"The cosmetic business is interesting among modern industries in its opportunities for women," Helena Rubinstein observed. "Here they have found a field that is their own province—working for women with women, and giving that which only women can give—an intimate understanding of feminine needs and feminine desires."[53] More accurately, it was Rubinstein, Arden, Walker, and many other beauty culturists who defined those needs and desires. These businesswomen fashioned, in effect, a consumer market for beauty largely outside dominant distribution networks and the emerging organizations of national advertising and marketing. Linking the growth of commerce to job creation and training, entwining cosmetics purchases and beauty services, many of these enterprises braided together women's identities as consumers and workers. In this way they brought groups of women into the growing consumer culture who had previously had only a tenuous connection to it. Poor, working-class, and black women, largely ignored by national advertisers and magazines, joined the affluent in the market for beauty.

Rubinstein and the other women entrepreneurs established a tradition of beauty culture, which claimed women would find a lifetime of beauty by adopting daily rituals of skin and hair care that required coordinated products and techniques. Rubinstein never achieved her dream that society would quit viewing beauty culture as a "frivolous or wasteful expenditure of time"—a view that had much to do with lasting stereotypes of women.[54] By drawing upon female sociability and customs, however, women entrepreneurs made formerly hidden and even unacceptable beauty practices public, pleasurable, and normal. In this way, they contributed substantially to modern definitions of femininity, to the growing emphasis on making and monitoring appearance, and to the centrality of commerce and consumption in women's lives.

By promoting the idea of improving nature, women entrepreneurs validated beauty culture for a broad range of women. "Women may be divided into two classes, those who have good complexions and those who have not," Madame Yale observed with her usual aplomb, capsizing a social structure based on wealth, occupation, and ethnicity.[55] In the female democracy of manufactured beauty, all could improve their looks—and those who did not had only themselves to blame!

These ideas, of course, circulated in the service of profit. Whatever Madame Yale's assertions, women's commerce recognized the profound cultural differences among women. The businesswomen who addressed those differences, whether appealing to poor black women or wealthy society matrons, understood how much social origins, income, and prejudice weighed upon women who sought to remake themselves through appearance. Indeed, they had built their businesses on that very understanding.