Shades of Difference

The term "mass market" implies both a standardized product and a standardized consumer, but in fact it conceals important differences along racial lines, not only in Americans' buying habits, but in their responses to the culture of consumption. For African Americans, commercialized beauty was not only an aesthetic, psychological, and social matter, but, from the outset, explicitly a problem of politics. Cosmetics were never far removed from the fact of white supremacy, the goal of racial progress, the question of emulation. Unlike mass-circulation magazines aimed at white audiences, African-American periodicals often debated the political meaning of cosmetics. Black critics excoriated an exploitative cosmetics industry, gullible consumers, and a white-dominated society that imposed its beauty standards on all. "Good Looks Supremacy," Chandler Owen, editor of the *Messenger,* called it: If people of color ruled the world, white people would curl their hair and darken their skin.[1]

Advertisers, manufacturers, and advice writers—all part of a nascent black consumer culture—defended the beauty trade with their own claims. Casual readers of the 1928 *Oklahoma Eagle,* for instance,

beheld a two-page advertisement in the rotogravure section, its headline announcing: "Amazing Progress of Colored Race—Improved Appearance Responsible." Amid images of businesses and banks, prosperous farms and churches, the Madam C. J. Walker Company offered an assessment of African-American history since Emancipation. "In 64 short years our people have cast aside the shackles of slavery—have risen to the heights of social and commercial supremacy," the ad noted. To what did black Americans owe "such epochal progress"? "PRIDE OF RACE, APPLIED INDUSTRY and BETTERED APPEARANCE." "Add Beauty to Brains for Success" was the simple recipe for living in a modern world where first impressions counted as much as wealth. "Radiate an air of prosperity and who is to know if your purse is lined with gold or not?" the ad maintained. "Look your best . . . you owe it to your race."[2] With a few potent images, the Madam C. J. Walker Company advanced a sweeping historical, psychological, and political interpretation of the role of beauty in everyday affairs. Caught up in its story of uplift and hope, a reader might be forgiven if she overlooked that this was, after all, a sales pitch for hair grower, bleach cream, and face powder.

A public dialogue about the meaning of cosmetic preparations and beautifying practices accompanied the entry of black women into consumer culture. While many fashioned their appearances by following in some measure the aesthetic of European beauty, they frequently understood their beauty rituals in ways that modified, undercut, and even challenged the charges of white emulation. Powder boxes and porcelain jars became the battleground in a contest of cultural visions, political concerns, and individual desires.

Even before the emergence of a mass beauty trade, black reformers, educators, intellectuals, and journalists had begun to speak out about the political meaning of appearances. In the late nineteenth century, as Jim Crow tightened its grip on black Southerners, the color line was drawn more starkly: Caricatures of unruly hair, oily skin, and apelike features

The New Negro Woman, in Voice of the Negro, *1904.*

circulated throughout American culture. New cosmetic preparations promised relief from such stereotypes. By claiming to turn African Americans white or many shades lighter, a number of manufacturers—white and black—in fact reinforced racial bigotry. Others, however, especially the pathbreaking women beauty culturists, stressed racial pride and dignity in their appeals; Madam C. J. Walker and Annie Turnbo Malone refused to sell skin bleach and emphasized hair care, not straightening, in their beauty systems. Among African Americans, the body itself—physical features, cleanliness, and demeanor—had become a subject in the debate over collective identity and action. As lecturer and author Azalia Hackley put it, "The time has come to fight, not only for rights, but for looks as well."[3]

Black writers rejected the physiognomic equation between looks and character as long as white Americans were setting the aesthetic standards. Morality had no color, they argued, and racial definitions based on the "one drop" rule of African "blood" consigned African Americans to a life of degradation. At the same time, the black elite pictured a "New Negro" to counter the plantation and minstrel stereotypes, envisioning a figure of modernity who embodied changed historical circumstances and future prospects. In a 1904 issue of the magazine *Voice of the Negro,* John H. Adams, Jr., sketched the New Negro Woman, her physical beauty and purity claiming the moral ground long held by the white lady. She possessed "the sober consciousness of true womanhood the same as her white or red or olive sisters." Nevertheless, Adams could not imagine her appearance apart from the pose,

expression, and features of white Victorian womanhood, the governing image of refinement and culture.[4]

The contradictory rejection and embrace of Euro-American aesthetic standards surfaced repeatedly as black writers, reformers, and educators responded to the new beauty culture that spread throughout black communities in the early twentieth century. Azalia Hackley declared that "kinky hair is an honorable legacy from Africa," yet hoped African features would evolve into more desirable European ones through good grooming: "Constant care of the hair will cause an improved condition of the texture which will in time be inherited." Similarly a *Voice of the Negro* editorial suggested that civilizing culture and education had "smoothed down" the "rough, savage features that our African ancestors had."[5]

Like the beauty culturists, African-American etiquette books and beauty manuals situated beautifying within the political mission of black uplift. Improved appearance expressed self-respect, registered collective progress, and would expedite social acceptance. "On the streets and as the street cars pass our homes," observed Hackley, "colored people should give the best pictures possible of themselves." Refined looks particularly defended black women against the slander of promiscuity that had long explained away predatory sexual behavior by both white and black men. Hackley harangued girls at Tuskegee to dress neatly, appear subdued, and not let their faces be a "public bulletin" inviting male attention. This advice, which recognized that black women represented both their race and their gender, became more urgent as their presence in public life increased.[6]

At issue were not only the prejudices of white Americans but a perception by educated black Americans that stereotypes had some basis in lower-class reality. The poor rural woman who came to town each Saturday and learned "her lessons in manners, dress, and morals from what she sees in the streets" needed training in hygiene, grooming, and proper dress. Also under attack was the urban "street" style of young working-class black women, who dressed in yellow and red gowns, and promenaded New York's "African Broadway" with male "dudes" and

"run-arounds" in silk hats and figured waistcoats. Advice writer E. M. Wood decried the "hired girl" who painted her cheeks "much after the fashion of the wild Indian." Oiled hair, "primping the face," and "cologning it down" instead of bathing were all marks of the street to be eradicated.[7]

Although black leaders advocated grooming and cleanliness in their crusade for social acceptance, they denounced the "wholesale bleaching of faces and straightening of hair." Emphasizing race pride, educators considered these practices a degrading bid to deny African heritage and to look like white people. Ministers railed against those who practiced and profited from these unnatural and ungodly habits. Like their white counterparts, middle-class reformers distinguished between cosmetic artifice and the cultivation of real beauty. Nannie Burroughs called upon women to spurn cosmetics, arguing that self-improvement lay in education and culture:

> Many women who bleach and straighten out make as their only excuse that it improves the appearance. A true woman wouldn't give a cent for a changed appearance of this sort—a superficial nothing. What every woman who bleaches and straightens out needs, is not her appearance changed, but her mind. She has a false notion as to the value of color and hair in solving the problem of her life. Why does she wish to improve her appearance? Why not improve her real self?

She reminded her readers that women's identification with purity derived not from appearance but "the straightness of life and the whiteness of soul."[8]

These critics spoke directly to a burdensome but repressed issue raised by cosmetics, the existence of color hierarchies among African Americans. "Many Negroes have colorphobia as badly as the white folk have Negrophobia," Burroughs pointedly observed. During slavery, light-skinned African Americans received preferential treatment in work assignments, becoming household servants and sometimes re-

ceiving training in skilled trades. Because many were the offspring of plantation owners, they were more likely to be manumitted. After Emancipation, these advantages gave them greater job security, independence, and influence. "Good" hair and light skin affected everything from employment to club and church memberships. By the 1890s, the "mulatto elite" were suspected of trying to become a separate caste or pass into white society.[9]

The status hierarchy based on color figured in the most intimate relationships between men and women. In a particularly acute analysis, women reformers argued that the white aesthetic ideal, by representing only white women's purity and supposed need for protection, implicitly supported the defamation and sexual abuse of black women by white men. This aesthetic also corrupted black men, who judged women on the basis of outward appearance, not inner character, and scorned those with dark complexions. All black men required in women, Anna Julia Cooper charged, were "the three R's, a little music and a good deal of dancing, a first rate dress-maker and a bottle of magnolia balm [i.e. skin whitener]." Nannie Burroughs sarcastically remarked, "The white man who crosses the line and leaves an heir is doing a favor to some black man who would marry the most debased woman, whose only stock in trade is her color, in preference to the most royal queen in ebony."[10]

With the rise of new movements for racial solidarity in the 1910s and 1920s, skin color and hair texture—and the use of cosmetics to alter them—became ever more charged political issues. A newly assertive political leadership pointed to the use of straighteners and bleaches as ipso facto evidence of self-loathing and the desire to appear and be white. Marcus Garvey's United Negro Improvement Association (UNIA) proclaimed not only a new political destiny for the masses of African Americans, but a new aesthetic for dark-skinned people. The militant journal *Crusader* featured dark-skinned girls and beautiful African women, wearing traditional hair arrangements and dress, on its covers and noted the enthusiastic response of readers. The Negro Universal Protective Association even denounced Madam Walker upon her death

in 1919 for having promoted white emulation; although Walker had always stressed growing and grooming the hair, her critics charged that her system amounted to straightening.[11]

Condemnations of bleaching and straightening rang out in African-American political journals. George Schuyler, columnist for the *Messenger,* spent much of the 1920s blasting skin bleach, "one of the chief Aframerican industries and customs"; chiding women who swallowed arsenic tablets or calcimined their faces; and denouncing "race conscious Negroes who spend huge sums in skin whiteners." Schuyler's hostility to those who exploited racial awareness—white and black—led him to write a satiric novel *Black No More,* whose title was the trade name of an actual skin bleach. In it, inventors produce a device that turns African Americans white, thus creating a crisis for both "race leaders" and the Ku Klux Klan. Often cosmetics appeared to be weapons in an escalating war of words, as black leaders charged each other with skin-color hypocrisy. Schuyler rebuked the Garveyite *Negro World* for advertising skin lighteners: "Evidently Brother Marcus has hit upon a new plan for solving the race problem." Chandler Owen attacked Garvey's followers as two-faced: "To take this very crowd away from the world would bankrupt Madame Walker, the Poro, Overton, Dr. Palmer's, [and] the Apex . . . in a few weeks."[12]

There was more than enough hypocrisy to go around. Black leaders and journalists were deeply ambivalent about the African-American beauty industry, caught in the irony that an exemplary model of black economic development profited, in their view, by exploiting the desire to be white. Although the *Crusader* and *Negro World* criticized bleaching and straightening, they advertised whitening creams, pressing oils, and similar preparations made by African Americans. Critics of Madam Walker's business were largely silenced in the face of her political activism and financial success. Thus even Schuyler lavished praise on Madam Walker as a "Race Wonder Woman" who had emancipated her sisters from economic and psychological slavery. And when the Walker Company ran a contest to reward a "race leader" with a trip to the Holy Land in 1925, UNIA official Percival Burrows, with Gar-

vey's blessing, sold Tan-Off and other Walker preparations containing ballots, and exhorted consumers to "give me your votes."[13]

Similar contradictions marked such black newspapers as the Chicago *Defender,* the New York *Age*, and the Pittsburgh *Courier.* These weeklies played a critical role in shaping and mobilizing black public opinion. They not only served their own cities but circulated throughout the South, Midwest, and Southwest as "national" newspapers. The Chicago *Defender*, for example, had a circulation estimated to be at least 130,000 in 1919. These publications vaunted the achievements of African Americans, protested discrimination and lynching, and encouraged black Southerners to migrate north. Their "race news," features, and assertive editorials epitomized freedom and modernity for thousands of African Americans.[14] At the same time, advertisements for beauty products and services dominated their pages. The Plough and Walker companies often bought full-page advertisements and the ads of smaller firms dotted newspaper columns. In the 1920s, cosmetics and toiletries, including bleaches and straighteners, accounted for 30 to 40 percent of black newspaper advertising, and in a few cases as much as 50 percent.[15]

The incongruity was not lost upon critics and observers: How could newspapers that propounded black advancement run "anti-kink" and "bleach your skin" advertisements? Two "conflicting forces" warred within black America, one social scientist remarked in 1924, "an attempt to efface racial characteristics" and "an unmistakably powerful force, race pride, which is everywhere evident in Negro life." Noting that the ads particularly "reflected on our women," the *Half-Century,* a black women's magazine, condemned the "Bleaching Imposition" and scolded the press to "take out the kinks."[16]

If the political debate over bleaches and straighteners offered fervid charges and countercharges, black commercial culture complicated the picture. African-American manufacturers, newspapers, tastemakers, and consumers defined hair and skin preparations in ways that

limited and resisted the charge of white emulation. They denied the contradiction between racial solidarity and cosmetics in three ways: by positioning cosmetics within a race-conscious economic nationalism, by proclaiming black women's beauty as a sign of racial pride, and by asserting that African Americans had the same "natural" right as all women to be beautiful.

Many commentators and consumers determined the value of beauty preparations by distinguishing between racist white companies and race-conscious black ones. Whatever questions African Americans may have had about goods produced by their own, public controversy erupted specifically over the activities of white-owned companies. The *Crusader,* among others, called for boycotts. Viewed as unscrupulous exploiters of black consumers, white-owned companies stood accused of selling fake or hazardous preparations that ruined the skin and even led to death. The *Half-Century* charged that white manufacturers would never produce good products for African Americans because they wanted to preserve the racial order. "Too many of our people have the same features," the magazine noted. "Whiten the skin a little, and the white people would not know white from Colored—the result of such a condition is plain." Concerning a chemical hair treatment, one female pharmacist asked, "now if they don't use it themselves, why put it on other people's heads with rubber gloves?" Some black manufacturers encouraged views that displaced general anxieties about cosmetics onto white manufacturers. Anthony Overton pointedly observed, "We do not ask you to let us experiment on you."[17]

Letters to the *Half-Century* from 1919 to 1921 denounced white-owned cosmetics firms. Liane de Witt of Augusta, Georgia, told of a friend who used a skin bleach and whose "skin became sore and peeled off in great patches and where it is dark, it is darker than ever." She concluded, "I don't believe a Colored concern would be so dirty as to deliberately place on the market a preparation to ruin the beauty of their women." Mary Vaughan described a visit to a white-owned factory in Paris, Tennessee, and criticized the company's disfiguring bleaching powder. An Oklahoma reader wrote about the illness and death of a

woman with a "clear, red-brown" complexion who had used a cosmetic made by a white manufacturer.[18]

It is difficult to assess the accuracy of these charges. They appeared, after all, in a magazine subsidized by Anthony Overton, who had a direct interest in discrediting his competition. But although undoubtedly selected for their critical content, these letters do seem authentic expressions of concern, and some of their allegations may well have been true. Skin bleaches received particularly close scrutiny from the American Medical Association in the 1920s and the Food and Drug Administration in the 1930s. Nadinola bleach cream, it turned out, contained 10 percent ammoniated mercury, a concentration high enough to cause serious skin irritation and damage. The National Toilet Company had received complaints about it from consumers through the 1920s and 1930s but did not deviate from the original formula, taken from a textbook, until 1937. Under pressure, the company decreased the ammoniated mercury to 6 percent and finally reduced it to 1.5 percent in 1941. According to the company's vice president, the lower concentration made no difference in the product's efficacy, but diminished consumers' complaints. In contrast, extant formulas and product labels indicate that at least some black-owned firms produced relatively mild forms of skin bleach: the Kashmir Chemical Company's formula included small amounts of borax, while one of Overton-Hygienic's bleaches used hydrogen peroxide.[19]

Some critics related the cavalier treatment of black consumers to discrimination in the workplace. In a letter to the *Half-Century* about Plough, reader Amos Turner complained that "we are so thoughtless, careless and ignorant that we are piling up $60,000 a year for a white company that will not give you a dime's worth of employment." Liane de Witt charged that white-owned businesses did not employ black workers because "they don't want them to see what awful things they mix up in these toilet preparations that they put out for the exclusive use of Colored people." Whether or not this was the case, black workers were rarely hired except in menial positions, as Claude Barnett, journalist and owner of Kashmir, confirmed after a visit to Plough's

headquarters. "In their offices alone they have, I should say, ten times as many employees as Poro has," he wrote Annie Turnbo Malone. "Not a black face was to be seen."[20]

The promotion of beauty preparations also came under sharp attack. Black public opinion condemned cosmetics advertisements that used before-and-after pictures and degrading language, and white-owned companies were deemed the worst offenders. Plough, for instance, shamelessly invoked racist imagery and the memory of slavery in its early advertising: "Bleach Your Dark Skin; Race Men and Women Protect Your Future. Be attractive! Throw off the chains that have held you back from the prosperity and happiness that belong to you." Too many ads "smack of ante-bellumism, disrespect, and a low grade of intelligence," the *Half-Century* complained. And the *Chicago Whip* warned its readers not to trust advertisements for dangerous preparations made by white men, concluding: "Be beautiful if you can, but don't burn your brains out in the attempt."[21]

As if in direct response to the devaluation of African-American appearance, the assertion that black women *were* beautiful became an important declaration of cultural legitimacy. The African-American press had long reported on women's work in clubs, churches, and other organizations, documenting their wide influence in community affairs. In the 1910s and 1920s, women represented the race in an added way, through a well-groomed and attractive appearance. Racial pride often took the guise of a beautiful woman on display.

Photographs of beautiful female performers, celebrities, and fashion models—generally with light skin and European features—ran in black newspapers and magazines as icons of race pride. The Pittsburgh *Courier* in the 1920s typically placed a photograph of an African-American beauty in the upper-left corner of the front page, a prominent location bespeaking the image's importance. "Must the Flapper Go?" one caption read, "We hope not." The radical *Messenger,* which defined the New Negro as a man demanding political and economic equality, now recognized the "arrival" of the New Negro Woman with appealing portraits of "beautiful, intelligent, successful" women.[22]

African-American beauty contestants from Howard and Lincoln Universities.

This New Negro Woman did not spurn manufactured beauty, as Nannie Burroughs had hoped. Fashion news and beauty tips had begun to appear in African-American periodicals as early as 1890. The *Colored American Magazine,* devoted "to the higher culture," brought the fashion column of a Madame Rumford to middle-class readers. Cleveland journalist Julia Ringwood Costen began publishing the pioneering but short-lived *Afro-American Journal of Fashion* in 1891; several other magazines succeeded it, modeled on the home journals read by white women. By 1920 most black newspapers featured women's pages with beauty columns, fashion plates, and free publicity for cosmetics firms. Even publications with a radical political agenda, such as the *Crusader* and Marcus Garvey's *Negro World,* followed the trend.[23]

Beauty contests sponsored by newspapers, magazines, and cosmetic companies proved especially popular. "The most beautiful women in the world are those of the Negro race!" exclaimed the New

York *Age,* and its 1914 beauty contest, held in conjunction with an amusement and advertising exposition, occupied the front page for weeks. African-American women's beauty was even celebrated by the white-owned Golden Brown Company. In the same year that Walker ran a contest for the greatest "race leader," Golden Brown invited customers to vote for the most beautiful woman with coupons inserted into cosmetics packages. Madam Hightower, the company's fictive spokeswoman, credited beauty contests with "the awakening of our racial pride, through the publicity given the beauties of our race in America." Answering the whites-only Miss America pageant, a national Miss Bronze America beauty contest was held for the first time in 1927. Typically finalists had a light complexion and smoothly styled hair, but sometimes the contests sparked debate over the winning image. When the New York *Age* headlined its desire to establish a "Basic Standard for Racial Beauty," one correspondent suggested rather that it should include the full range of skin colors and features.[24]

Cosmetics firms did much to promote the centrality of beauty in black women's racial identity. As manufacturers turned increasingly toward media-based marketing, how to represent African-American beauty in advertising became a key question. In the early days of the industry, Anthony Overton's goods pictured respectable, well-groomed girls and refined, light-skinned women. Criticizing white manufacturers who considered cheap designs "good enough for Negroes," Overton remarked: "From the beginning we have been pioneers in putting out high-grade packages with creditable Colored faces which would be a pride to the race."[25]

The early advertisements of Madam Walker and Annie Turnbo Malone took a different tack, emphasizing the efficacy of their preparations, the creation of job opportunities, and the vast size and scope of their enterprises. Madam Walker's ads in 1912 contained a plain promise to cure hair loss and eczema. Although by 1918 the ads had a more stylish design, they continued to focus on the products themselves, with copy explaining the benefits of the Walker system and warning of adulterated preparations. Some advertisements indicated

Overton-Hygienic powder sample envelope.

Walker advertisement, from the Crisis, *1919.*

Walker's popularity with maps of the hemisphere or images of arms stretched up to the rising sun. "We Belt the World," announced one headline tinged with nationalist pride. Photographs of Malone and Walker appeared on their package labels and ads for hair grower and pressing oil. These images personified the entrepreneurs' claims and reinforced their accountability to customers.[26]

Claude Barnett's promotion of Kashmir played a signal role in changing African-American beauty advertising. Acknowledging the beauty culturists' considerable business success, Barnett nevertheless criticized their ads as throwbacks to the old-fashioned patent remedy style. "These ads had always repulsed me," he later maintained. The larger transformation of national advertising in the 1910s and 1920s—the rise of advertising agencies, modernist graphic design, and psychological appeals—reverberated within black commercial media. The expansion of a black consumer culture in Northern cities led Barnett to mimic mass marketers' appeals to modernity, beauty, and heterosexual romance.[27]

Barnett devised a savvy advertising campaign that replaced the patent remedy style with the visual innovations and sophisticated copy of the nation's large advertising firms. He recruited attractive black actresses and singers as models, used "perfumed language," and commissioned "original paintings of beautifully turned-out Negro women and elegant males in exquisitely proper surroundings." Addressing a more urbane, well-heeled consumer than did Walker and Malone, Barnett's Nile Queen advertisements opened up a dream world of fur-clad women, automobiles, and other icons of luxury. The resulting ads were so striking, Barnett claimed, that Malone and Walker "expressed great interest in this new concept of advertising beauty products for the Negro market and soon the entire field had switched to the positive approach pioneered by Kashmir."[28]

Indeed, after Walker's death, her company's advertising strategy changed dramatically. Early Walker ads had done little to elaborate consumer fantasies; in one, "social enemies" and "proven friends" were respectively hair diseases and Walker treatments. But by the

Walker advertisement, from the Messenger, *1924.*

Opposite: *Cover of the Kashmir Chemical Company's* Nile Queen *pamphlet, 1919.*

mid-twenties, the company actively promoted idealized beauty with images of charming and alluring women. "Beauty's Synonym," an ad that appeared in the *Messenger,* featured the hallmark of a modern appeal: The products disappeared entirely, replaced by an illustration of a stylish young woman gazing into her mirror as consumers gazed at her. Such images were interchangeable with those of white women's beauty promoted in mass-circulation magazines, except that black women often wore long hair—known as the Indian mane—rather than the white flapper's bob. Advertising copy sometimes praised the diversity of African-American looks. "Only by the most careful make-up can the Caucasian equal the creamy yellow, the matchless browns, and the satiny, glossy dark skin of the Colored Woman," stated a Nile Queen brochure. However, illustrations invariably portrayed women with straight or wavy hair, light brown skin, and features more European than African. Despite the growing consciousness of Africa

fostered by Garveyites in these years, advertisers found it difficult to create visual forms that acknowledged the African heritage of black Americans.[29]

Claude Barnett's provocative advertising for Nile Queen is telling. Using Egyptian images and hieroglyphic symbols, Barnett yoked the larger cultural meaning of Cleopatra—an ancient emblem of women's beauty and fascination—to the ongoing debate within black intellectual circles over the African origins of Western civilization. If Cleopatra was African, then African-American women inherited her legacy of beauty. As a *New York Age* editorial in 1934 put it, "Cecil B. DeMille may depict 'Cleopatra' how he pleases but we know and history tells us that she was a Negro woman, and the prettiest of them all." Yet the Nile Queen was not African: Indeed, she seems more the houri of a Persian harem—as DeMille would have depicted her. The name "Kashmir" added to the odd, rich mixture by evoking the luxuries of India. Barnett used "Africa" as white manufacturers celebrated Mediterranean and even Asian beauty cultures—as exotic and universalizing counterpoints. This orientalism effaced any specific African representation, yet affirmed Africa's inclusion—and that of "women of color" generally—in the geography of female beauty.[30]

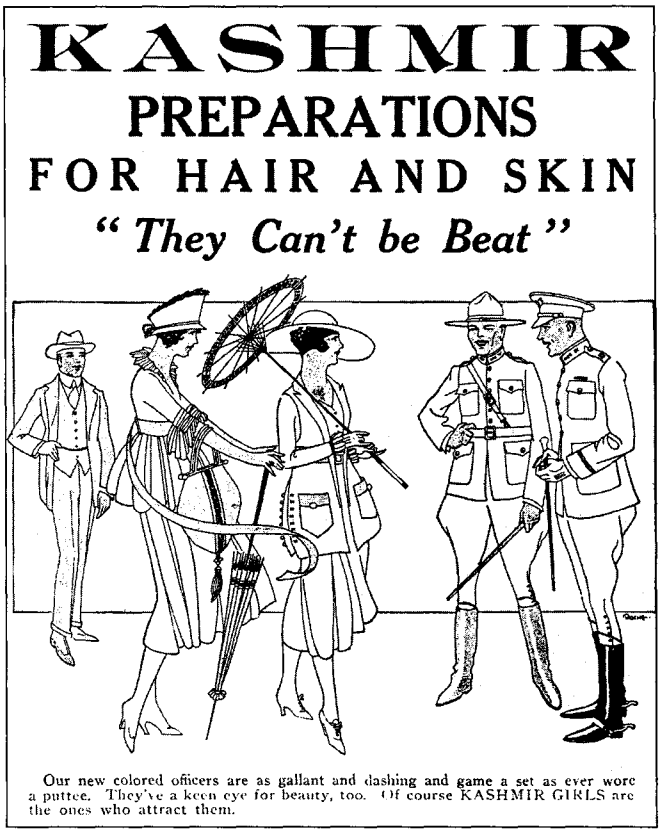
Kashmir's beauty pamphlet juxtaposed a hand-drawn fantasy of sensuous female pleasure with a photograph of a well-groomed, brown-skinned American girl. The photograph's "reality" returned black consumers to the paramount need for a respectable, clean appearance in daily life. Through the Nile Queen, black women's sensual desire was projected—and thus confined—within a mythic time and place. Like the white-oriented mass market, the African-American beauty industry generally sought to curb the association of cosmetics with sexual expressiveness: Columnists compared overly made-up women to prostitutes; advertisements linked beauty to courtship and marriage. Although some black women had found an erotic voice in the blues, advertisers dealt gingerly with the sexual sell and insisted that cosmetics used properly channeled male attraction into wedding vows. "From boudoir to beach," a Walker ad stated, beautifying led to a paradise of

Walker advertisement, from the Messenger, *1925.*

heterosexual romance and self-fulfillment—"what every woman justly desires, masculine admiration and matrimony."[31]

Achieving racial pride, the industry claimed, was a step in achieving racial progress. "Glorifying our Womanhood," Walker advertisements implied, was integral to African-American advancement. Barnett, for his part, tied Kashmir cosmetics to the mobilization of black soldiers during World War I, which had given a new edge to demands for equality. When the *Defender* celebrated the return of the "Fighting Eighth Regiment," Barnett ran ads which featured heroic black soldiers who, reunited with their lovely sweethearts, exclaim, "Those French Mam'selles haven't a thing on my Kashmir Girl."[32]

If beauty mattered as a symbol and instrument of racial pride and advancement, then black producers and consumers of cosmetics were innocent of the charge of white emulation. But perhaps the most striking strategy that consumer culture offered black women was an insis-



"Colored officers" with "a keen eye for beauty." Kashmir advertisement, from the Crisis, *1918.*

tence on the pursuit of beauty as a universal ideal. Advice columns carefully distinguished between emulating and beautifying. "If [a woman] uses a cosmetic with the express purpose of 'getting white' I feel that she shows a serious lack of self respect and race pride," observed "Aunt Pat" to the young readers of the *Dallas Express* in 1921. "I believe very few women guilty of this offense." Beauty experts instructed women to apply bleach only for spots and discolorations, not to peel off the top layer of skin. Face powder, they urged, should harmonize with skin color and produce a " 'finished' look," not whiten the face. "A light skin is no prettier than a dark one," the *Half-Century* insisted; "the beauty of any skin lies in the clarity and evenness of color." Aunt Pat agreed: "I heartily endorse the use of any cosmetic

which will give the face a smooth, clear surface."[33] Although the women's pages in the African-American press occasionally offered tips addressed specifically to black women, much of the advice was identical to that in such mass-circulation magazines as the *Ladies' Home Journal.*[34]

Black manufacturers in this period developed full product lines for the African-American market and adopted a sales pitch similar to that of national advertisers. The Walker Company's bleach Tan-Off vowed an end to "sunburn, freckles and skin discolorations," a commonplace promise of skin-care advertisements. Ads for Poro simply duplicated J. Walter Thompson's "two creams" campaign for Pond's. Walker's ads were not much different from Armand's in praising a powder that "imparts an olive tint to fair complexions and harmonizes bewitchingly with darker skins." Manufacturers also assimilated dark skin to mass-market taxonomies of beauty. African-American women became Spanish, Creole, Mediterranean, and "brunette types" in ads for Carmencita face powder, LaCreole hair preparations, and others.[35]

Many white-owned firms in the 1920s, perhaps feeling the heat of black public opinion, rewrote their advertising in less explicitly racist language. Plough's ads in black publications simply promised the "tint of youthfulness . . . and an unblemished complexion." Golden Brown explained that its ointment "won't whiten your skin—as that can't be done," but it would produce a "soft, light, bright, smooth complexion." This use of the word *bright* had a double meaning: By smoothing rough or uneven skin, creams did brighten, in a sense, by improving the reflectivity of light, but among African Americans the term had a distinct connotation, that of light brown skin.[36]

To its promoters, African-American women's beautifying expressed a natural and universal female desire and proper attention to fashion. Ironically, fashion slavery was evidence of the New Negro Woman's freedom and equality. Black women used bleaches and light powders just as white women did, the *Half-Century* editorialized, "in the same spirit that they wear some of the most ridiculous [Paris] Fashions." Altogether skin color seemed to be drifting from its biological moorings,

with white sunbathers cultivating deep tans, European women taking "henna baths," and brown-skin choruses singing on the Great White Way. "In the cycle of Vogue . . . this is the Bronze Age," wrote Eulalia Proctor in the *Messenger,* but after the fad for dark exoticism had ended, "will it be assimilation of a more intensive nature, or is after us—the deluge?"[37]

Between irony and unease, Proctor recognized that fashion was not a system unto itself, outside the harsh realities of racial discrimination and skin-color prejudice. Claims about beauty's universality were political assertions of female equality, but advice writers and consumers knew well that good looks supremacy affected white and black women in different ways. They noted that white women with kinky hair or swarthy skin could go to black hairdressers, use their hair-care systems, apply skin bleaches, and then return to white society with no loss of prestige. Attention focused especially on Jewish women, who were perceived to be a distinct race by both white and black Christians. The extent of Jewish crossover into the African-American consumer market is impossible to measure, but it was visible enough that the Walker Company placed several ads in the *Jewish Daily Forward* in 1925. Black commentators zeroed in on Jewish women's use of African-American grooming techniques to achieve the standard look of white beauty. "There's an awful lot of Colored women straightening Jewish women's hair and teaching them how to straighten their own," one woman wrote the *Half-Century.* "Then with the suspicious, too-tight curl removed from the hair, these women can move into exclusive districts and scorn the Colored people with whom they come in contact." The democracy of mass-produced beauty still stopped short at the color line.[38]

Focusing on race pride and the universality of female desire, the commerce in beauty products softened the political debate, downplaying the impact of white supremacy on black women's everyday cosmetics practices. How most black consumers interpreted the ads and advice directed at them remains, however, an open question. No survey re-

search tells us which women bought the controversial cosmetics, what their intentions were, or whether they were more influenced by political rhetoric or commercial appeals. It would be important to know, for instance, whether skin bleaches were used more frequently by middle-class or working-class women, in the North or the South, in cities or small towns. Cosmetics use in private may not have accorded with public expressions of ideology. Even "extreme race loyalists," one writer observed, "artfully avoid the unkempt, unimproved hair and the poorly 'attended-to' skin." For every tirade against bleaching and emulation, many tubes of Black and White ointment were sold. Indeed, the controversy over bleaches and straighteners as signs of white domination obscures the fact that black women, like their white counterparts, were buying and using a wide range of other cosmetics. Pond's vanishing cream was popular, for example, because it reduced the oiliness and shine of the skin. White emulation was hardly the issue in this and many other beauty rituals.[39]

While race leaders and beauty experts interpreted cosmetics in symbolic and political terms, consumers assessed beautifying more in light of their own physical condition and social circumstances. Personal letters to Madam Walker, attached to order forms in 1918, discuss in great detail the substances, tools, techniques, and specific effects of beautifying. Written by women all over the country, they mainly concern the trouble many black women had with scalp diseases and hair growth, and rarely refer to straightening and styling. They describe frequent hair loss and breakage, problems that may have been exacerbated by poor nutrition and ill health, traditional hair straightening techniques, and the use of patent remedies. One woman had "the fever" and could never grow back her hair. Another said her hair "combs out by hands full an[d] a i[tc]hing scalp and very much dandruff." Others were driven to wearing wigs and switches. Many expressed a simple, heart-wrenching plea to have their hair restored to normal. For them, their very ability to be sociable, to be looked upon as respectable, depended on the magic of Wonderful Hair Grower.[40]

Hair grower, not the glossine used in pressing the hair, was the most

popular preparation the Walker Company sold until the late 1920s, according to customer order forms and company account ledgers. Although a few women expressed disappointment in the product, many women wrote the company to report the precise number of inches their hair had grown: The treatment "mad[e] my hair improve so much about 2 inches," wrote a "surprise[d]" Annie Dervin. Bessie Brown was on her fourth box of hair grower when she wrote, "I am wonderfully pleased with your goods and my hair has improved no little." Women certainly "pressed" their hair using hot combs and oil, but perceived this practice as the final step of an overall beauty system.[41]

Unfortunately, comparable letters about skin bleaching and skin-care products have not been found. Sales of Walker's Tan-Off rose steeply in the late 1920s, and judging from the large investment of white-owned companies in advertising, a sizable market for these preparations existed. Some consumers indeed may have wished to bleach their skin white, as the most extreme advertisements promised and critics charged. But as we have seen, skin bleaches appeared on the market in different formulas and strengths, and were used for different purposes. Moreover, women applied bleach in various ways: Some dotted it on spots or blemishes to even the skin tone; others sought to fade or dissolve unwanted hair; still others spread bleach across the entire face to peel off the darker epidermis and reveal the lighter layer below. Consumers might have rendered different verdicts on these practices, approving of fade creams, for instance, but looking critically upon those who peeled their skin.[42]

Many of the women purchasing hair and skin preparations were newcomers to commercial culture and frequently mingled the modern language of consumption with older traditions. Despite Walker's efforts to "uplift" her products in the minds of consumers, the rural women who wrote often referred to them as "hair grease" and "remedies." Some combined the use of Walker products with traditional hair-styling techniques: Marie Cane ordered hair grower but asked Walker if plaiting or twisting the hair made it grow more quickly. A number of Walker's customers expressed an ideal of beauty rooted in traditional

religious precepts, an ideal they now could realize in the marketplace. Although critics charged that the hair craze reflected a desire to look white, these women echoed the teaching of the Bible. "[I] must Give thanks to the Dear Co," said Lillie Byrd, "for i Do know Hair is the Glory of a Woman." When the "evangels" of Poro and Walker promoted their wares in rural churches, customers responded to the call. "Praise your wonderful hair grower," exclaimed one woman. Women who believed in the agency of dreams and prayers repeatedly used the word "wonderful" in their letters to Walker, gathering brand name, company, and the product's efficacy within the aura of the miraculous.[43]

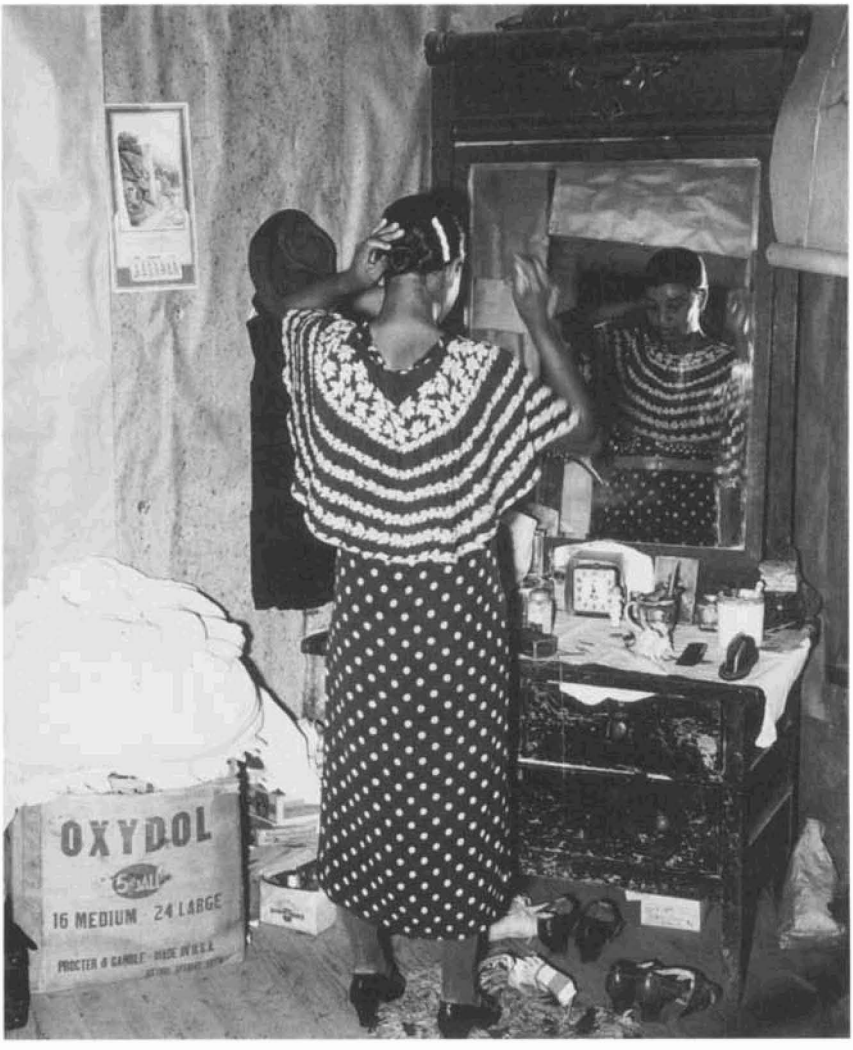
A complex blend of modern advertising, word of mouth, and faith led these women into the market for beauty products. "I have taken one of your pamphlet with me home from a cousin of maine and have red it closely," wrote Virgie Brown of News Ferry, Virginia, to Walker about the hair preparation; "my cous[i]n Amalie Madley says she likes it fine so I want to try it." Walker's promotional literature tempted Mamie Bass, a woman from Greenville, Mississippi, but the Holy Spirit moved her to buy:

> I saw adv[ertisement] in the Chicago Definder also a friend Lady of myn gave me one of your books to read and after reading your great testimonial has a great confidence in it[.] believe it will do me lots of good I really beleive it will. . . . you saw this in a dream su[re]ly the good Lord has sent such a woman and [I] am a christ[ia]n my self and has dream of your great hair oil so it rested with me so untill I cant help but take a trile.[44]

Others had already tried different hair preparations without success. Helen Bell wrote from Sheridan, Wyoming, about "a colored woman here in this town that used some kind of glossy stuff that makes the ha[i]r slick and nice looking but turns it red." The product might have been O-zo-no, whose ads tried to reassure customers that it "will not turn hair red," "the smarting sensation has been reduced to the smallest minimum," and "every objectionable feature has been re-

moved." Bell wrote, "please Madam do not feel offended at me," when she asked if Walker's glossine had the same effect. Bell judged Walker's sincerity and the product's merits on the caliber of her advertising. "I saw your hair remedies advertised in the Crisis book as I am a continual reader," she wrote, "and as I have used so many different things they have in drug stores for the hair decided I would like to give your remedies a trial." In May 1918, just before Bell wrote her letter, Walker had placed a full-page ad in the *Crisis*, the popular journal of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People. The ad explained the function of each product, depicted the Lelia College of Hair Culture (named after Walker's daughter), and affirmed Madam Walker's "genius." It clearly convinced Bell: "I will be more than glad to recommend your remedies here to any of my color as I feel so assured in them that they will do all you claim."[45]

Woman arranging hair in Earle, Arkansas, 1936.



Wife of a Mississippi sharecropper dressing her hair, 1938.

African-American consumers seem to have approached the black press differently than social scientists and political commentators, who saw an irreconcilable conflict between the editorial emphasis on racial solidarity and the advertisements for skin bleaches and hair straighteners. Most readers took pride in their newspapers, believing them to be factual and trustworthy representations, relying upon them to open up a

world of accomplishment and hope. "I got a heap to tell you but I feal so sad in hart," a Macon, Georgia, woman wrote to a Chicago friend, "my definder diden come yester[day] . . . it['s] company to me to read it." Readers like Mamie Bass and Helen Bell viewed advertisements in a similar way, paying careful attention to their messages, responding eagerly to their claims, and showing a willingness to "take a trial."[46]

Across the rural backwaters and hamlets of the South, Southwest, and Midwest, black women embraced the new beauty rituals. Sharecroppers and domestic workers mailed the Walker Company substantial sums for hair growers and glossine, eked out from washing clothes, selling eggs, or cooking meals. Women from all walks of life—those who earned meager wages, lived on isolated farmsteads, or had only rudimentary schooling—participated in this new consumer culture.[47]

The Great Migration further heightened black women's self-consciousness about appearance. Deepening poverty, segregation, and violence, combined with perceived opportunities in the North for jobs and just treatment, sparked an African-American exodus from the South after 1915. Migrants took with them a sense of destiny and their capacity to shape it. They represented themselves as highly motivated workers, "honest people & up to date," as an Alabama man put it: "The trash pile dont want to go no where."[48]

The élan of the migrants often took an aesthetic form—an awareness of self-presentation, closely linked to a new sense of physical freedom and economic possibility. When they described their physical qualifications for employment, men mentioned weight and strength, but women highlighted a well-groomed, respectable, and fit appearance. A Natchez woman catalogued her features for potential northern employers: "I am a body servant or nice house maid. My hair is black and my eyes are black and smooth skin and clear and brown[,] good teeth and strong and good health and my weight is 136 lb." Descriptions of appearance came up repeatedly in applications for work. A domestic from Jacksonville similarly asked the *Defender* to help her find "a job with some rich white people who would send me a ticket," adding "I am brown skin just meaden size."[49]

It is little wonder, then, that a number of black women believed cosmetics were a prerequisite to the journey north, the makeover at once claiming a new status and helping to make it possible. One Walker agent in St. Petersburg, Florida, mailed an order to the company's headquarters with an urgent request to "send these things at once." Her customer "is expecting to go north as soon as she get[s] them," she wrote. "She is only waiting on you to send them that she might have them before starting." Even a journalist for the *Saturday Evening Post* commented upon this phenomenon: "The first thing every negro girl does when she comes from the South is to have her hair straightened." Elizabeth Cardozo Barker, who ran a Washington, D.C., beauty salon with her sisters, recalled the girls from the South who came in with unkempt hair. She gave them "croquignole" waves, the fashionable hairstyle of the time. "What it did for their ego," she exclaimed. Beauty culture operations as well as mass-market retailers expanded to meet the demand. By the early 1920s, over one hundred beauty parlors and nine toiletries companies served black

A Walker client reads Modern Beauty *magazine as she has her hair done.*

Chicagoans; beauty parlors in Harlem were reportedly three times more numerous than elsewhere in New York.[50]

Migrants learned quickly to adopt a style of self-presentation suited to urban life. Echoing earlier reformers, long-time city dwellers warned the new migrants that their country ways might inflame white antagonism. Black newspapers and social service agencies issued instructions on proper appearance and deportment, proscribing the rural customs of head rags, boudoir caps, aprons, and house slippers in public. The *Chicago Advocate* urged parents in the city's "Black Belt" to send their daughters to school clean and well groomed: "Do not wrap her hair with strings, but comb it out, or else your child will be made a laughing stock for the whole school." The flashy style of the street still beckoned. Harlem residents believed "you must look sharp as a tack, a city slicker," recalled one woman; "many Negroes were 'immigrants' and didn't want to look like it."[51]

Waitressing, clerking, theatrical work, and other urban occupations honed an awareness of the body and appearance. "One must have looks to-day," observed Louis George in the *Messenger.* "The colored girl to-day would greatly limit her opportunities did she not make use of hair dressing, manicuring and facial massaging." But even those who worked as maids and cooks—the chief form of employment for black women at the time—approached their work with a new sense of style. "Gone are the neat housekeepers in guinea blue calicoes, starched until they rattled," one disgruntled white commentator griped, replaced with women who wore fashionable clothes. Refusing a servile identity, black women carried their uniforms in "freedom bags" and changed in their employers' homes. As Evelyn Northington observed, "The woman who cooks all day in the restaurant, the women who scrub in the department store, even the farmer's wife is making every effort she can to be beautiful."[52]

The heated political rhetoric about emulation did not appear in the comments of these black women, but most adapted their beauty practices to immediate social realities, an adaptation that straighteners and bleaches might facilitate. Complexion certainly pigeonholed white

A well-groomed appearance on the job. Lewis W. Hine's portrait of a print-shop worker, circa 1920. (Courtesy George Eastman House)

women—witness the immigrant women whose dark skin marred their job prospects—but these handicaps might be overcome. For African Americans, however, physical attributes continued to have explicit social, economic, sexual, and psychological effects. Both men and women were still classified by an elaborate lexicon of skin tones (yellow, smooth-brown, creamy, black, bright, blue-veined) and hair textures (good, bad, halfway good, halfway bad, nappy, kinky). As the writer Pauli Murray put it, "The sliding scale of color bedeviled everyone, irrespective of where one stood on the color chart."[53]

Interviewing rural black Southerners in the 1930s, anthropologist Hortense Powdermaker discovered that "without being asked about color, women are very likely to include it in describing the virtues or defects of their husbands." Photographs were "invariably lighter than the

original, and sometimes the features and hair [were] made to appear less Negroid," with some women even holding in their lips to make them look smaller. Urban African Americans too were "color struck" or "partial to color." Sociologists Horace Cayton and St. Clair Drake discovered many Chicagoans in the same period whose marriages, employment, and social activities were affected by color distinctions. As one dark-skinned man, describing the kind of woman he wanted to marry, said, "I don't want her too dark—just dark enough so she can't call me black." A very dark complexion especially hampered women seeking work as secretaries, waitresses, doctor's assistants, actresses, or other positions involving face-to-face contact with the public. "I have a policy of hiring only real light girls with good hair," said the owner of an exclusive restaurant. "A dark girl has no drawing power." Those with lighter skin tones were viewed as more refined, while their darker sisters were considered better manual laborers.[54]

It was possible to find alternative views. A poem in the *Messenger* praised the black girl who used no artificial beautifiers as the most authentic representative of the race:

> No vulgar grease or heated iron ever touched
> Your tangled hair;
> No rouge your full red lips, no powder
> Ever streaked the midnight blackness of your skin.[55]

In the blues, "high yellow" and "coal black" competed for the roving eye of the singer. "Teasin' browns," however, were most popular.

Indeed, "a veritable cult of the brown-skinned woman" had emerged, the Chicago sociologists found, reflected in the appearance of dolls, movie stars, and beauty queens and in the attitudes of high school students. This ideal was the Brazilian *moreno* with brown skin, soft features, and "good hair," similar to the respectable girl in the Kashmir ads. She was no simple avatar of white emulation, but rather the product of a shift in African-American self-perceptions—if not a black girl, then certainly not a white one either.[56]

The ideal of brown-skinned beauty was vigorously promoted by the African-American beauty trade. One window display at a Harlem beauty shop invited women to "come in and become a brown-skinned tulip." Manufacturers produced powder in shades ranging from white and rose-flesh to golden brown, but not colors to match very dark complexions. In a rare study of black consumers' response to advertising, economist Paul Edwards found that African Americans detested antiquated images like Aunt Jemima, who "looks too much like old-time mammy," but approved of the well-groomed, brown-skinned woman depicted in cosmetics advertisements for Madam Walker's face powder: "Here the Negro was dignified and made to look as he [*sic*] is striving to look and not as he looked in antebellum days . . . here was the New Negro." As they left behind the world of servility and inferiority, consumers adopted beautifying as an essential aspect of becoming modern African-American women. Still, the ideal they favored remained a painfully restrictive one.[57]

African-American beauty had become a commodity to trade not only in the marketplace of goods but in the exchange of political ideas. For black women themselves, however, beautifying was much more. Although opposed by some as a sign of emulation and falsity, cosmetics offered others a way of negotiating new experiences and expressing a new sense of self. For those who embraced it, the culture of beauty asserted desires for dignity, respect, and social participation in a world in which these basic human imperatives were all too often denied.

Through the 1930s, black women continued to purchase beauty products and services, while black cosmetics firms struggled to stay afloat. Remarkably, in the midst of the Depression, one investigator tallied 382 hairdressing shops in Harlem storefronts. Countless women did hair work in their own kitchens or parlors, and itinerant operators carried their straightening combs and supplies door to door. As they had thirty years earlier, women looked to the beauty trade for employment, and beauty systems like Sara Spencer Washington's Apex urged women

Valmor Products Catalog cover, 1936.

to "plan your future by learning a depression-proof business." This hopeful proposition belied women's actual prospects—low earnings and long hours driven by competition and the oversupply of beauticians. Most clients were household workers, themselves hard hit by the Depression. Still, going to the hairdresser had become a ritual, and women would pay with food if they did not have cash. The salons offered beauty, relaxation, and sociability in a troubled time. At the establishment where she first learned hair work, Elizabeth Barker recalled, customers would "sit in there for hours, sometimes. They'd play cards; sometimes they'd gossip . . . they just came expecting to sit."[58]

Beautifying continued to be a central economic and cultural activity, but the message of female dignity and racial advancement allied with it became more subdued as the decade wore on. Walker and Malone's pioneering conception of beauty culture, merging commerce, philanthropy, and politics, suffered as newer companies, such as Snow White and Valmor, came out with cheaper products. Salon operatives remained important figures in civic affairs, but the commercial images projected by the beauty business were increasingly depoliticized. When Sara Spencer Washington began publishing the *Apex News* in 1929, beauty columns ran alongside stories on politics and notable African Americans; by the mid-thirties, these had disappeared, replaced by articles on romance, marriage, and the psychological effects of beautifying. Valmor, a mail-order firm selling Sweet Georgia Brown preparations, went even further, explicitly sexualizing the sale of beauty products. Illustrations of steamy embraces, passionate kisses, and women in negligees, along with old-fashioned before-and-after pictures and lighten-your-skin copy, appeared throughout its catalogs. Here black women's identity was centered on achieving beauty to attract a man. Sweet Georgia Brown became a leading brand in the African-American market in the 1930s and 1940s, and according to New York retailers, aggressive promotion explained its success. How consumers themselves understood Sweet Georgia Brown advertising remains an unanswered question, but there is no doubt that Valmor's rise signaled the end of an era.[59]