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Tiffany M. Gill. *Beauty Shop Politics: African American Women's Activism in the Beauty Industry.* Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2010. 208 S. $75.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-252-03505-0; $25.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-252-07696-1.

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Beautiful Hard Work: Black Beauticians at the Intersection of Labor, Beauty, Politics, and Freedom in Twentieth-Century America

In *Beauty Shop Politics*, historian Tiffany M. Gill takes readers from the turn-of-the-century golden age of black business in America through the height of the black freedom struggle to the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina. Along the way, she focuses on the experiences of black beauticians and connects economic autonomy, entrepreneurship, and political activism within the black beauty industry. Throughout the twentieth century, Gill shows, African American beauticians used their unique position within their communities–which offered them a considerable degree of security and autonomy, as well as intimate connections to their clients–to engage in racial-uplift work, community organizing, and political mobilization. As Gill explains in her introduction, in the early stages of her research, she was "astonished to find everyone from Martin Luther King to Ella Baker touting beauticians as key political mobilizers" and set out to understand how it was that "beauty culturists" figured so prominently in national and grassroots political campaigns (p. 2). It was their economic autonomy, their ability to build and maintain close relationships within their communities, and their reliance on a black clientele, Gill concludes, that accounted for their significant political activism. The salon was a conflation of home and work that served as a gendered space of pampering and femininity, while it was also the site of grueling physical labor, calculated entrepreneurial pursuits, and savvy political and social activism. Black beauty culturists worked within the space of the salon to promote opportunities for black women, strengthen their communities, and advocate for civil rights.

While other scholarship on the beauty industry has highlighted how important it was for black women as a means of employment, a gateway into modernity and consumerism, and a part of the discourse on racial uplift and black pride, no one has yet looked at how black beauty culture provided opportunities for black women to develop into community leaders and political activists. Gill mines memoirs, interviews, and archival sources, such as the *Negro World* and the records of the National Association of Colored Women's Clubs (NACWC), to find the telling clues of black beauty culturists' political work and recover the histories of clubs, like the National Beauty Culturists' League (NBCL). In a tightly written narrative that moves chronologically from the late 1800s to 2007 in six chapters, Gill offers a fresh analysis of familiar early twentieth-century black businesswomen, including Madame C. J. Walker and Annie Turnbo Malone, and draws attention to the roots in the black beauty industry shared by such well-known clubwomen and civil rights organizers as Mamie Garvin Fields; Lucille Green Randolph (wife of A. Philip Randolph); and Bernice Robinson (cousin of the renowned civil rights leader Septima Clark).

Some of the strongest and most compelling parts of Gill's monograph, in fact, are when she offers mini-biographies of black women in the beauty industry to demonstrate the intersection of commercial pursuits and social reform, as well as the connection between economic autonomy and political courage. Through the story of Ezella Mathis Carter, a graduate of Spelman Seminary in 1907 and later a beauty-culture student in Chicago at the Enterprise Institute, we learn how educated clubwomen used door-to-door product demon-

strations and sales to administer to the needs of poor women, engage in race work, and advance entrepreneurially independent of the masculine world of black business. Close looks at Walker's economic activism and Amy Jacques Garvey's "Our Women and What They Think" page of the *Negro World* reveal the ways in which African Americans navigated the tensions between race-first ideologies that chastised most modern black beauty practices and a lucrative, autonomous industry that promoted economic nationalism and strategic philanthropy. Building a narrative of Robinson's activism in South Carolina from a 1980 interview (conducted by Sue Thrasher and Elliot Wiggington), Gill shows how "the intersection of her economic necessity and political disappointments fueled the groundbreaking path that her life was soon to take" (p. 111). Robinson used her beauty salon in Charleston to hold voter registration drives and strategy sessions. Because of her efforts, membership in the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) in Charleston rose from three hundred to more than one thousand. Beautifully written, these women's stories not only recover the lives of previously invisible activists and entrepreneurs, but also provide a window onto the beauty salon as a site of "safety and empowerment" where black beauticians, enjoying economic autonomy and job security, could engage in subversive political work (p. 106).

Gill's analysis of the space of the beauty salon represents an important contribution to the historiography of the African American freedom struggle. She shows how black beauticians throughout the twentieth century occupied a particular space in the black community that supported their activism. As arbiters of respectability and style, and as laborers engaged in intimate, individual-care work, they often commanded a significant degree of respect and trust. Moreover, individuals who owned their own salons or worked hair in black homes, in addition to being free from the reprisals of white employers or clients, could offer a safe space to disseminate information; register voters; spread and receive local news; and (quite literally) hold an audience captive to informal lectures on political rights, public health, and local resources. Vera Pigee of Clarksdale, Mississippi, was responsible for registering more than one hundred voters through her beauty shop. When Clarksdale's chief of police demanded that Pigee divulge the names of her clients, she told him in no uncertain terms she would not, and suggested he leave *her* shop, adding, "If I ever need your service I will call you" (p. 119). Little wonder, then, that Highlander Folk School founder Myles Horton recognized the importance of developing black beauticians as leaders in the civil rights struggle.

Not every beauty salon functioned as a site of subversive political activity, Gill notes, and not every black beauty culturist engaged in political organizing through their entrepreneurship and labor. Yet this acknowledgement leads readers to consider an even more exciting intervention that *Beauty Shop Politics* offers: a reevaluation of the meaning and importance of beauty work itself. The ability to gather safely and freely and the sense of having one's dignity restored through professional care and attention is itself "a political act" (p. 136). Gill deftly weaves together personal narratives, an analysis of space and community, and evocative reminiscences to demonstrate how a seemingly simple act like having one's hair washed can carry so much emotional and psychological weight. Take, for instance, the reference to beauty culture that Gill finds in Anne Moody's memoir *Coming of Age in Mississippi* (1968). After enduring the invectives and food hurled at her during a Woolworth sit-in in 1964, Moody sought refuge and respite in a beauty shop across the street from the NAACP office, where several clients gladly let her go ahead of them. "Indeed," Gill writes, "beauty salons, particularly those in the Jim Crow South, functioned as asylums for black women ravaged by the effects of segregation and served as incubators for black women's leadership and platforms from which to agitate for social and political change" (p. 99).

In the years since the 1960s, desegregation and opportunities within the white-collar sector for African Americans, along with increased female attendance in vocational schools and universities, have forced the black beauty industry into "a different, sometimes obsolete role" (p. 125). These changes, Gill stresses, do not preclude political activism, and her focus on the connections between black beauty culture since the 1970s and the black women's health movement undermines a strict declension narrative of post-civil rights African American activism. Indeed, as Gill points out, the health risks that black women face disproportionately to white women–cardiovascular disease, diabetes, breast cancer, and HIV/AIDS–are all the more dire in the former Jim Crow states, highlighting the entrenched, institutionalized, and pervasive racial inequalities that belie any notion of a "post-racial America." Black beauticians in the late twentieth century, like the generations before them, used their salons, labor, knowledge, and community connections to promote the dignity and care of the black female body.

It is perhaps because Gill's analysis and writing are so compelling in the first and last thirds of her monograph that the middle section–a discussion of the international presence of black beauticians–seems sparse and underdeveloped. Gill packs a lot into 136 pages. The book's reasonable length and clear, consistent argument, however, make it ideal for advanced undergraduates and first-year graduate students. The fifth chapter on black beauticians and the black freedom struggle is perhaps the strongest and most engaging; it could stand alone as a short reading. Indeed, with its fresh analysis of black women's political engagement with race work, entrepreneurship, and the freedom struggle, *Beauty Shop Politics* represents some of the most exciting new work on twentieth-century American history, bridging African American history, women's history, and labor and business history, while keeping African American women–still underrepresented in both the historical record and scholarly studies–front and center.

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