

## 5

## “Black Beauticians Were Very Important”

*Southern Beauty Activists and the  
Modern Black Freedom Struggle*

In 1964, after a sit-in at a Woolworth lunch counter where she had food and drink, not to mention racial epithets, hurled at her, civil rights freedom fighter Anne Moody made a curious sojourn to a place she knew her embattled body and spirit could be refreshed and replenished, a place that stood in stark contrast to the Woolworth counter, a place of safety, refuge, and community support. Her quest did not take her to a local church. As Moody recalls in her canonical memoir, *Coming of Age in Mississippi*, “I stopped in at a beauty shop across the street from the NAACP office. . . . The hairdresser took one look at me and said, ‘My land, you were in the sit-in, huh?’ ‘Yes,’ I answered. ‘Do you have time to wash my hair and style it?’ ‘Right away,’ she said, and she meant right away. There were other ladies already waiting, but they seemed glad to let me go ahead of them. The hairdresser was real nice. She even took my stockings off and washed my hair while my legs were drying.”<sup>1</sup>

Moody’s desire to get clean after being doused with ketchup and mustard during the sit-in is not surprising. However, her request to have her hair not only washed but also styled, combined with her description of the gentle pampering by the hairdresser and the deference shown to her by the other clients, highlights that beauty salons functioned as places where black women could rebound from their direct confrontations with Jim Crow segregation. Photographer and scholar Deborah Willis, the daughter of a beautician who spent much of her childhood in her mother’s home-based salon, had similar recollections: “Often . . . domestics . . . would leave work and come to our house to be beautiful for church. . . . [They] shared stories about humiliating

encounters.”<sup>2</sup> Indeed, 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 of black women’s leadership and platforms from which to agitate for social and political change.

While activism was already deeply entrenched in the professional culture of beauticians by the 1960s, the political climate of the modern black freedom struggle gave their access to community space and intimate role in black women’s lives greater significance. Black beauty culturists in this period were keenly aware of the economic autonomy their profession afforded them, the unique institutional space they controlled, and the access they had to black women within their communities. They were instrumental in developing the political infrastructure for African American women’s involvement in the civil rights movement, which was for the most part under black female control and under the radar, hidden from whites unsympathetic to the cause of racial justice.

## Beauty Activism in Professional Organizations

Continuing a tradition of political engagement dating back to the organization’s founding, the National Beauty Culturists’ League should be in the pantheon of civil rights organizations. At the league’s 1948 convention in Washington, D.C., President Cordelia Greene Johnson explained that “the time had come for [beauticians] to take an active part in the fight for civil rights.” Johnson further exhorted beauty operators to “refrain from the old time practice of gossiping with their customers about petty problems about their neighbors’ private lives and rather talk about vital civil rights issues that confront the race.”<sup>3</sup> On the one hand, Johnson’s comments seem to ignore the long and rich activist history of the organization. However, what is most significant is that Johnson understood that her organization needed to acknowledge and be included in the shift happening in postwar black activism.<sup>4</sup> In 1955, the theme of the NBCL’s annual convention was “Beauticians United for New Responsibilities.” Maude Gaston, a politically active beautician from New York, led a panel titled “Beauticians United for Political Action,” where she and other beauticians already active in political organizing discussed ways for beauticians to harness their political power. That fall, based in large part on deliberations of the 1955 convention, Cordelia Greene Johnson issued a letter to President Dwight D. Eisenhower on behalf of the league expressing their outrage over the murder of Emmett Till in Mississippi. Johnson stated that the NBCL had “supported and cooperated with this administration in

every way” but explained that the organization was “deeply concerned about the welfare and civil rights of Negroes in America” and pressed Eisenhower to take bolder steps on behalf of civil rights.

By 1957, beauticians were seen as such a formidable force that Martin Luther King Jr. accepted the invitation to be the keynote speaker at NBCL’s convention that summer. King was in high demand that year, receiving three honorary degrees, the NAACP’s prestigious Spingarn Medal, and his first ever *Time* magazine cover. His address, “The Role of Beauticians in the Contemporary Struggle for Freedom,” was well received and he was awarded the organization’s Civil Rights Award.<sup>5</sup> Katie Whickham, who assumed the presidency of the NBCL that year, asked King to address the convention again in 1958. Citing a “long standing commitment in another section of the country,” King declined the invitation but went on in a letter to talk about his work in the then-nascent Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC). He asked Whickham if she would instead give veteran civil rights leader Ella Baker a chance to make a statement concerning the voter registration efforts of the SCLC to bring together the “vast wealth of latent potential” that existed among beauticians.<sup>6</sup> Whickham welcomed Baker’s involvement, and the two became political allies. Baker, recognizing the NBCL’s ability to reach women, later recommended that Whickham become the first female SCLC staff officer. Openly dissatisfied with the lack of women in leadership positions, Baker lobbied extensively to get more on the executive staff. She was successful in 1959, when she proudly announced Whickham’s election as assistant secretary: “[I]n keeping with the expressed need to involve more women in the movement, we believe that Mrs. Whickham will bring new strength to our efforts. The National Beauty Culturists’ League, Inc. of which she is president, has strong local and state units throughout the South, and voter registration is a major emphasis to its program.”<sup>7</sup> However, Whickham’s appointment did not have a sustained impact on the SCLC’s gender imbalance, as her tenure did not last long, which was common with the organization’s female appointees.<sup>8</sup> Although she was only on staff for just over a year, she remained dedicated to political activism throughout her life. Her legacy included an invitation by Vice President Richard Nixon to serve on the President’s Committee on Government Contracts, an appointment as a Civil Defense consultant during the Kennedy administration, and an invitation by President Lyndon Baines Johnson to participate in a conference after the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 called “To Fulfill These Rights.”<sup>9</sup>

Whickham also was recognized by Louis Martin, a newspaper executive who served as the deputy chairman of the Democratic National Committee

from 1961 to 1969, the first African American to hold that post. When trying to figure out a way to extend President Lyndon Baines Johnson’s appeal in the 1964 election by “activat[ing] those below the level of the middle-class,” he approached Marjorie Stewart Joyner and Katie Whickham to get beauticians in their respective organizations involved in the campaign to elect President Johnson.<sup>10</sup> He found beauticians to be among his most ardent grassroots organizers and explained, “There were some people that were active, some people were interested, some weren’t. But where you found a beauty operator who was interested, you really had a jewel.”<sup>11</sup> Marjorie Stewart Joyner was certainly one of those jewels and had already been active in political campaigns before she was approached by Martin. Just four years after she led a group of beauticians on their first European excursion, she chose “Your Ballot, Ticket to Freedom” as the theme of the United Beauty School Owners and Teachers Association 1958 national convention. Later that year, after meeting a young senator with presidential aspirations, John F. Kennedy, she articulated UBSOTA’s goals: “We aim to make every shop owner and every beautician a missionary to mobilize all the Negro women they come in contact with to make voting next to God and cleanliness.”<sup>12</sup> The organization continued to advocate for voting rights, galvanizing black women to vote and support Democratic candidates.<sup>13</sup>

While organizations such as the NBCL and UBSOTA inspired beauticians on the national level, grassroots leaders in state organizations and local beauty shops took Whickham and Joyner’s admonitions to heart in unprecedented ways. A flurry of state level organizing emerged in the 1930s and 1940s in response to new state regulation and licensing. Nowhere was this growth in state beauty organizations more evident than in the South.<sup>14</sup> One of the most active of these groups was the Mississippi Independent Beautician Association (MIBA), which started in April 1941 after a local beauty school organized to create an award winning float in the annual Delta Cotton Makers Jubilee parade in Greenville. Seeing the successful float as an indication of the beauticians’ latent potential, Clemmie Todd, along with her sister, laid the foundation for the MIBA. In July 1941, eighty beauticians from forty-two cities and towns across the state gathered in Greenville and, according to the association’s historian, Evelyn Stegall, “blindly, but enthusiastically set up plans, made laws and by-laws and divided the state into seven districts.” In just over a year, the organization boasted more than five hundred members.<sup>15</sup>

By July 1954 the association was formidable enough that their annual convention, held in Clarksdale, garnered front page news coverage in the *Jackson Advocate*, the state’s oldest black newspaper. The headline proclaimed, “State

Beauticians Praise Supreme Court Decision; Group Urged to Resist Any Form of Continued Segregation." The Supreme Court decision referenced was the landmark *Brown v. Board of Topeka*, which had declared segregation on account of race in public schools unconstitutional just a few months earlier. White political officials in Mississippi, such as Senator James Eastland, called the decision a "monstrous crime," while Governor Hugh L. White plainly and emphatically stated, "We're not going to pay any attention to the Supreme Court decision. We don't think it would have any effect on us down here at all."<sup>16</sup> Members of MIBA, on the other hand, issued a "Declaration of Principles" that was boldly printed in the *Advocate*:

We, the members of the Mississippi Independent Beauticians Association in annual convention assembled in Clarksdale, Miss., July 11-14, hereby make the following declaration of principles:

That we go on record as highly endorsing the decision of the United States Supreme Court in outlawing segregation in public schools.

For generations the system of public school provided for Negroes in Mississippi has most assuredly generated a feeling of inferiority as to our status in the community which has a bearing on our hearts and minds.

Now that the United States Supreme Court has declared the practice of segregation in public schools as being unconstitutional we can look forward to our children enjoying in the future the same human rights as children of any other race—the best in public education—hoping they will not have to endure the untold sufferings of their forebears.

We are encouraging the beauticians of Mississippi to cooperate with public school officials when called upon, only to implement the ruling handed down by the high court of the land calling for complete integration, however, under no circumstances will we cooperate with any group which has its objective the perpetuation of segregation in any form—voluntarily or otherwise.<sup>17</sup>

While the members of the MIBA were certainly positioning themselves against whites in their state who were determined to maintain segregation at all costs, a stance that could put their organization, indeed their very lives, in peril, the statement is more accurately understood as an activist call to those within the black community to continue the fight for civil rights. The declaration's publication in the black press, along with African American beauticians' well-established position in black communities, meant that they were not just responding to white supremacy but also were at the forefront of inspiring an activist agenda among the black readers of the *Advocate*. Furthermore, the statement that MIBA would not work with any groups that

voluntarily or passively supported segregation is certainly directed toward African Americans who were not willing to engage in the inevitable battle to uphold the Supreme Court's ruling.

In many ways, the different approaches of the national and state organizations reflect Charles Payne's analysis of the community organizing tradition versus the community mobilizing tradition of civil rights activism.<sup>18</sup> While the beautician's organizations on the national level strengthened black women's role in large-scale and national campaigns and events, state organizations focused on activating those within their communities, particularly those who were already a part of local organizations or professional associations, to engage in social change. State organizations were able to speak to the needs and fears of their local communities with accuracy and insight. Beauticians who were organized on the city level in Durham, North Carolina, for example, were perhaps even more in tune with the dynamics in their communities and more vocal about their intolerance for those African Americans who were unwilling to engage in civil rights activism. They reserved their harshest criticism for black male leaders; ministers, seemingly the most praised members of the civil rights community, were often the recipients of their disapproval. Although ministers and beauticians shared an admirable professional position in terms of flexible hours, a stable salary, an all-black clientele, and a nontraditional work environment, beauticians in Durham did not feel as though ministers took advantage of those occupational benefits. When the *Carolina Times* asked its readers if Durham ministers should take a more active part in the civic life of the city, members of the local Cosmetologist Club were among the most vocal critics, contrasting their own activism with the perceived apathy of the ministers.<sup>19</sup>

On the local level, beauticians such as Ruby Parks Blackburn of Atlanta demonstrated the ability to advocate for improvements in their communities while helping their own businesses. Born in Rockdale, Georgia, in 1901, Blackburn received her training at the Apex Beauty School after spending a few years as a domestic worker. In 1932, she opened a beauty shop on Simpson Road in Atlanta and founded the TIC (To Improve Conditions) Club, an all-female organization that over the years of Blackburn's presidency tackled everything from environmental racism to neighborhood beautification. TIC played an important role in getting an additional junior high school for Atlanta's black residents and establishing a day nursery for working mothers.<sup>20</sup>

Although Blackburn became a successful beautician, she never forgot the poor conditions she worked under as a domestic servant.<sup>21</sup> During World

War II she established the Atlanta Cultural League and Training Center for Domestic Workers, an organization whose objective was to make domestic workers more employable. However, beyond simply training better laborers, the organization also had a strong civic and political mission. In the postwar period she tackled issues like political enfranchisement and bus desegregation through the local NAACP which honored her for her efforts in their voter registration drives. In 1951, she formed the Georgia League of Negro Women Voters and worked diligently to overcome obstacles in registering black female voters.<sup>22</sup>

Of all of her efforts, she was best known for her work to get bus service extended to black neighborhoods.<sup>23</sup> In 1953, she and another local businesswoman, Irene Sims Hendrix, brought suit against the Dixie Hills Bus Line for not providing "proper and adequate transportation" to black neighborhoods. After being threatened by a boycott, Dixie Hills responded by extending their service and schedule. Blackburn and Hendrix were undoubtedly interested in getting their clients and customers unfettered access to their establishments, but they used this personal agenda to benefit those in their race who were dependent upon public transportation.<sup>24</sup>

While national, state, and local organizations gave beauticians a place to develop their collective leadership, the beauty salon was the site where most of the civil rights activities came to life. The black beauty salon in the Jim Crow South was a unique place, replete with ironies and contradictions. In fact, the paradoxical nature of the beauty shop is what gave it its political power. A salon visit was a personal and intimate experience occurring in the midst of a social context. While the focus is on the client and having her hairstyling needs met, the beautician wields a considerable amount of power as an arbiter of good taste and proper behavior. The grooming that occurs within a salon, which for black women during most of the twentieth century entailed an elaborate process of hair cleansing, conditioning, and oiling of the hair and scalp followed by the pulling of the hair through the teeth of a steel comb heated over an open flame, was at once pampering and torturous. Salons themselves served as places of rest for black female bodies, a luxury for women who often spent their days laboring for white families and their evenings caring for the needs of their own households. Feminist scholar bell hooks remembers the beauty parlors of her youth as places "where one did not need to meet the demands of children or men. It was the one hour some folk would spend 'off their feet,' a soothing, restful time of meditation and silence."<sup>25</sup> However, these same salons were often sites of twelve-hour days of grueling labor for the beauticians who worked there.

Beauty salons, particularly those in the South, conflated homespace and workspace. Linking the rhetoric of the 1950s that emphasized women's domestic duties with the very real financial needs of African American families, beauticians opened salons in their homes so that they could earn a living without disrupting their domestic duties. For example, Cozell Frazier, owner of Cozy's Beauty Nook in St. Helena, South Carolina, opened her salon in her home so that she could care for her ailing mother.<sup>26</sup> Similarly, Bernice Caldwell of Charlotte, North Carolina, "fixed a shop on her sun porch," allowing her to care for her children while earning a living.<sup>27</sup>

Furthermore, a beautician's success was based on her ability to convince her client that her services were not a luxury to be indulged in sporadically but a necessity that required consistent upkeep. Indeed, a trip to the hair salon to receive the standard "press and curl" was a specialized process that required regular visits to the salon. By the 1940s, African Americans became the largest per capita consumers of cosmetic and hair preparations, and this growth increased throughout the civil rights movement.<sup>28</sup> Indeed, in this time of heightened political activity, the practice of straightening or pressing one's hair, linked to white beauty standards in previous decades, had become so deeply entrenched in black women's lives that there was little discussion over its meaning. Older public debates over whether straightened hair detracted from racial consciousness had largely been abandoned. Indeed, by the 1950s, beauticians were well known and respected for supporting causes to dismantle racism and used their activism to minimize discussions concerning the conflation of hair straightening with a white beauty aesthetic.

However, by the early 1960s, there were changes in the services offered in salons. Beauty culturists who were accustomed to doing a press and curl as their standard repertoire were now faced with learning how to use chemical straighteners and even learning to style wigs. Rose Morgan openly discussed having to shift with the times when, in 1962, the wig craze took off. Morgan opened a wig salon and explained that her operators were now trained to administer "both the older thermal, or 'heat' method of straightening hair and the newer chemical hair relaxing processes." She also diversified her line of services by offering manicuring, make-up application, and massage therapy. In addition, she added a charm school for children and adults on the premises.<sup>29</sup>

In the 1950s and 1960s, hair that was styled to release or straighten the curl pattern was the only acceptable way for African American women to wear their hair. For whites to see black women with their hair in its natural state was considered feeding into negative stereotypes of black women as unruly

and undeserving of respectable treatment. As Maxine Leeds Craig points out, "Grooming was a weapon in the battle to defeat racist depictions of blacks."<sup>30</sup> Photographs of those who engaged in the early civil rights movement depict well-groomed women with fashionably straightened and styled hair.<sup>31</sup> The instructions given to Vivian Malone and James Hood to "dress modestly, neatly . . . as if you were going to church" when they attempted to register for classes at the previously segregated University of Alabama in 1963 would have meant for Malone, at least, that her hair be freshly pressed.<sup>32</sup> A legacy of the era of racial uplift in which notions of respectability governed the actions and presentation of black bodies, African Americans in the modern civil rights movement linked grooming to racial progress and political acceptance. Beauty product manufacturers such as the Madam C. J. Walker Company, which once had avoided any reference to hair straightening and advertised their products by invoking racial pride and economic opportunity, now openly advocated straightened hair as the only acceptable way for a black woman to wear her hair.<sup>33</sup>

Beauticians, therefore, had to walk a fine line in salons: they had to create a relaxing environment in the midst of smoking hot combs, chemical creams, and pulled hair; they had to create a sense of community in the midst of gossip and rigid beauty standards; they had to sustain a politicized environment in the midst of the frivolity of hair care. To that end, they relied heavily upon their roles as counselors and confidants. Many beauticians, such as Christiana Pitts of Raleigh, North Carolina, felt this was a natural outgrowth of her personality and explained, "I always did love people. . . . So I was just at hand being a counselor too. Not in an aggressive way, not trying to make anybody do anything, but ending up 'cause they wanted to ask me, not just for hair but kind of counseling on living."<sup>34</sup> Others, such as Margaret Williams Neal of Wilmington, North Carolina, understood that her clients not only visited her for physical beautification but also desired, perhaps even expected, her to care about their nonbeauty needs. She remembered that hairstyling was not the only reason women came to her Wilmington, North Carolina, salon, noting that "women would come by just to chat—an elderly woman would sit there to feel better since she lived alone."<sup>35</sup> A beautician, she further explains, "is the one that you are there with them and you sit in there and they can talk to you and you'll listen and that's what they want."<sup>36</sup> African American women in the Jim Crow era visited beauty salons for more than grooming; they looked to these sites as places of safety and empowerment. It is no surprise, then, that black women and those wishing to reach

them would look to their beauty shops as key institutions in the fight against segregation.

Cora McLeod, a Durham beautician and member of the Cosmetologists' Club, "remembered that the NAACP often visited her shop during the 1950s and 1960s with fliers urging people to become involved in civil rights activity."<sup>37</sup> Similarly, organizers who wanted to get information out about the election of Lyndon Baines Johnson in 1964 also turned to beauty shops to distribute campaign literature to blacks. Louis Martin, who expanded the work he did with beauticians' organizations to include local beauty shops, explained that "the most significant thing about the 1964 vote thing was we had to figure out how to reach the rank-and-file blacks without necessarily paying dues to local wheels that wanted money. You had to bribe them to give out your literature." He said that he stumbled upon an "inspired idea" when in five states he put materials in "every beauty shop. . . . The material was there. They didn't have to pass it out. It was just sitting there and the people would come in and see it. The politicians couldn't figure out what happened. . . . But we shipped it in and that really worked. We got out a bigger vote in the states in which that operated."<sup>38</sup> These efforts on the part of the NAACP and the Democratic National Committee were not dependent upon a savvy beautician, but the mere availability of a space frequented by a varied group of African American women that was hidden from those with a competing agenda. In other words, the black beauty salon was considered an important political institution for those interested in the furtherance of black civil rights.

However, not all beauty salons were involved in politically subversive activities. Still, even those salons that did not explicitly engage in political activities served as vital community institutions. For example, in Tippah County, Mississippi, Hazel Foster, a beautician, earned such a good living that she became the first person in the county (white or black) to own a telephone and was literally the center of the town's communication.<sup>39</sup> Communication often led to gossip and community divisions. Harriet Vail Wade, a beautician from New Bern, North Carolina, recounted the story of a woman in another salon who shampooed a client, put her under the hood dryer, and proceeded to talk about her on the phone. To the beautician's chagrin, the client heard every word and an argument ensued.<sup>40</sup> Wade noted that the best way to understand her salon was that it was a meeting place "for information like a newspaper is now or like television. People spoke of their accomplishments, bragged on their children, talked about how hard times were." Margaret

Williams Neal says that while overtly political conversations did not take place in her salon, she did see beauticians having a role in their clients' lives beyond just spreading gossip: "We listen, we give advice. I guess you have to tell your problems to someone, and a beautician is the one that you are there with them and you sit in there and they can talk to you and you'll listen and that's what they want."<sup>41</sup> So whether functioning as a safe space or a contested space, it was a location that was unique in its ability to sustain community. For African American women in the Jim Crow era, excluded from the male-dominated spaces of the black church and the white-dominated spaces of formal political networks, the ability to gather in a place of pampering and self-care led to community activism.

### The Consummate Beauty Activist

Of all of the civil rights programs initiated in the South, the one where beauticians were the most visible was in the Highlander Folk School's Citizenship Schools Program. Committed to interracial education and political action since the 1930s, the Highlander Folk School emerged at the "forefront of the drive to end racial segregation in the South, during the 1950s."<sup>42</sup> Starting in 1953, the Tennessee-based group led by Myles Horton began to turn its attention toward racial discrimination with a workshop titled "The Supreme Court's Decisions and the Public Schools." Highlander held workshops throughout the 1950s that drew those who would become movement figures, but the school's greatest contribution to the civil rights movement was the Citizenship Education Program it started in 1957.

In 1954, Esau Jenkins, the owner of a small bus line that transported people on the South Carolina Sea Islands to their jobs in Charleston, attended his first Highlander workshop and shared his experiences as a native of Johns Island, South Carolina. The South Carolina Sea Islands at the time had a population of four thousand people, 67 percent of whom were black, 90 percent of whom were illiterate. To complicate matters further, Sea Islanders primarily spoke a Gullah dialect and therefore had difficulty finding employment beyond the most menial jobs. Jenkins came to Highlander and described the local people's desire to vote as well as their extreme poverty and illiteracy. Septima Clark, a Charleston schoolteacher, also happened to be attending a workshop at Highlander in 1954, and she, Jenkins, and Horton began brainstorming about bringing workshops like the ones being held at Highlander to the people of the Sea Islands. Highlander staff began making trips to Johns Island in November of that year.<sup>43</sup>

The following year, Septima Clark invited her cousin, Bernice Robinson, to attend a Highlander workshop with her in Tennessee that sought to connect local economic concerns to global developments. Robinson, a forty-one-year-old Charleston beautician, was struck most by the interracial living arrangement at the school, something she was not accustomed to in her hometown. Before she left the workshop, Robinson told her cousin that she would do anything to help the organization fulfill its mission. It is a promise Clark would ask her to make good on in just a few months, when she invited her to become the first teacher for Highlander's Citizenship Schools.

Bernice Robinson's life experiences prepared her for the role she was to play in the Citizenship Education Program. Born in Charleston, South Carolina, on February 7, 1914, during "the first time that they had had snow in maybe one hundred years," Robinson had a happy childhood. Although her family was not rich, her father, a bricklayer and tile setter, refused to say that they were poor.<sup>44</sup> Her soft-spoken mother was primarily a homemaker who took in sewing to supplement the family's income. While Robinson noted that white people were not talked about much in her home, she recounted that both her mother and father were adamant about preventing their children from working for whites: "The only thing that was ever discussed in my family in reference to the whites was that my mother said, 'Well, I don't ever want any girl of mine to do any domestic work or work in these white folk's kitchen.'" As a child, Robinson was raised to value economic self-sufficiency.

Early in her childhood, Robinson showed promise as a musician. After graduating from high school, her older sister, who had migrated to New York City, planned to enroll her in the prestigious Boston Conservatory of Music. Robinson went to New York City in the summer of 1931 to work with her sister in the garment industry and save money for school. Unfortunately, her sister became very ill and was forced to quit her job, so Robinson's plans for college were thwarted. Concerned for her future, Robinson returned to Charleston and sought financial security in a short marriage that brought her a daughter, Jacquelyn, but little else. Left with a child and little money, Robinson took a job as a maid at a hunting resort on one of the Sea Islands. "My mother cried when I did it," Robinson explained, "because she had never wanted any of her kids to work in a white person's place like that, but I was always a realist, and I knew that when you've got to do it, you do it and get it over with."<sup>45</sup> Though she defied her mother's wishes, Robinson understood domestic work was one of the few reliable ways for a black woman to make a living in the South.

After her failed marriage and her dead-end job as a maid, Robinson be-

came increasingly frustrated with her lack of employment prospects, so in 1936, she, like so many others, migrated north to New York City. She began working again in a garment factory during the day and, in her own words, “at nights I went to school to learn beauty culture, and then on weekends I would work at beauty shops to get some experience.”<sup>46</sup> Robinson found beauty work to be more consistent than laboring in a garment factory. She explains: “I made good money there—about thirty-five to forty-five dollars a week—and I probably would have stayed in that work, but the problem with that was that in a garment factory that salary was not *steady*. It was only steady for a period of time. . . . That’s when I said, ‘I need to get into something that’s steady,’ and I began to take courses in beauty work. And it really *was* steady.” Beauty work proved for Robinson and other black women to be not only an escape from domestic labor but also a better labor alternative than the seasonal and volatile industrial labor since black women were often the last hired and the first fired in factories.<sup>47</sup>

Still, while beauty culture paid well and was steady, it was laborious. Roberson often had to work eighteen-hour days, causing family members in Charleston to be concerned about her health. The long hours seemed to get to Roberson as well. Soon after the start of World War II, she decided to move to Philadelphia, where her sister was living, and take the civil service examination. She qualified to work with the Philadelphia Signal Corps but did not like Philadelphia and subsequently returned to New York City. She again took the civil service examination and was sent to work with the Internal Revenue Service and subsequently the Veteran’s Administration. In 1947, just as she was about to begin work with the Treasury Department making seventy-five dollars a week, she had to return to Charleston to care for her sick mother. She did not have plans to remain in Charleston for more than a few days, but her mother’s condition worsened, and Roberson remained in Charleston until her own death.

Charleston, Roberson soon realized, did not present her with employment opportunities comparable to the ones she had in New York and Philadelphia. She was unable to get civil service work despite her experience and qualifications. The best she could get in Charleston was a job “working six days a week for an upholstery man making cushions for fifteen dollars a week.” Roberson was not just appalled by the low wages in Charleston but also disturbed that she was unable to register to vote there, since that was something she was accustomed to in New York and Philadelphia. In New York City, as early as 1944, she even helped a black assemblyman mail cards and letters to his constituents. Indeed, the intersection of her economic necessity and

political disappointments fueled the groundbreaking path that her life was soon to take.<sup>48</sup>

In 1950, Roberson returned to the profession that served her well in New York City during the Great Depression. She learned what many other black women trained in beauty work understood: Beauty work was not only depression proof but also migration proof and Jim Crow proof. In other words, it was something that a black woman could depend upon for a steady income whether she was in a Madam Walker salon on 145th Street in Harlem or in a back room off a kitchen in Charleston. Roberson explained that after her father died, her brothers built her a beauty shop in her Charleston home, where, she says, “I started making it all right.”<sup>49</sup>

Roberson’s economic self-sufficiency in turn fueled her political career in Charleston. Although Roberson had been a member of the Charleston branch of the NAACP since she returned to the city in 1947, it was in 1951 that the branch and even Roberson herself became a force to be reckoned with in the black freedom struggle. In fact, Roberson was instrumental in getting the number of NAACP members up from three hundred to over a thousand; she opened up her beauty shop as a meeting place to strategize about voter registration drives as well as to distribute NAACP literature. In the words of her interviewer, Elliot Wigginton, her salon became a “center for all sorts of subversive activity.”<sup>50</sup> Roberson says of her involvement in voter registration, “It got to the point where we were working so hard getting people to register to vote, that I would leave people under the dryer to take others down to the registration office to get them registered. I would say, ‘If you get too hot under there, just cut her off and come out!’” According to Roberson, she realized the importance of voter registration based on her experience in New York. “When I lived in New York I was able to vote . . . and then when I came home I couldn’t vote,” she explained. “So as soon as the decision was handed down then I was ready, gung ho, to get out there and help other people get registered.”<sup>51</sup>

Roberson also attributed her extensive involvement with voting rights and other civil rights campaigns directly to the economic autonomy she enjoyed as a beautician: “I didn’t have to worry about losing my job or anything because I wasn’t a schoolteacher or a case worker with the Department of Social Services or connected with anything I might be fired from.” Roberson knew about this firsthand since her cousin Septima Clark was a schoolteacher who failed to have her contract renewed just before she was scheduled to retire and subsequently lost all her pension benefits due to her civil rights involvement.<sup>52</sup> Clark was not alone. In 1955, in response to the *Brown* decision, the

South Carolina legislature passed a law making it illegal for city and state employees to belong to the NAACP. The South Carolina state NAACP, of which Robinson served as a branch secretary, saw its membership drop as a result of these pressures. In 1954, there were 7,889 card carrying members; by 1957, the number had dropped to 2,202.<sup>53</sup> Robinson noted that the measures taken by the legislature had created "quite a lot of fear among teachers and other public employees whom we have depended upon for years."<sup>54</sup> She further lamented that "that's the way it was all over the South. The whites would chop you down in a minute if you were dependent on them for a job." But Robinson explained her own situation: "I had my own business, supplied by black supply houses, so I didn't have to worry. Many people did."<sup>55</sup> She felt so beyond reproach that she told her customers, many of whom were teachers, nurses, and domestic workers, to have their NAACP membership cards sent to her house so that their white mailman would not see them and subsequently tell their employers. However, once Robinson became involved with Highlander's Citizenship Schools, she did lose friends who feared reprisals for associating with her. When an article was published about the Citizenship Schools in a white Charleston paper, Robinson was ostracized from her card group and ignored by neighborhood friends who thought her activities were too radical.<sup>56</sup>

By the end of 1956, Robinson's civil rights work was so impressive that Septima Clark suggested to Myles Horton that Robinson was best qualified to be the first teacher for Highlander's Citizenship School. After two decades working primarily in the labor movement, in 1953 the Highlander staff launched a series of workshops that focused on community desegregation. With the assistance of Clark and Esau Jenkins, a Citizenship Schools project developed on the South Carolina Sea Islands. The ultimate goal was to teach black adults to read and write and to prepare them to register to vote. After finding a location, they needed to find a suitable teacher. Black schoolteachers were eliminated immediately, even though, as Katherine Mellen Charon notes, Clark herself, a lifelong educator, saw the Citizenship Education Program as an extension of the work black schoolteachers had been doing since the turn of the century. Still, Clark's difficulties trying to mobilize and organize teachers who were dependent upon the state for their livelihood, in addition to her concern that formal educators would be too curriculum driven and too far removed from the lives of their illiterate Johns Island pupils, led Clark to her cousin, Bernice Robinson. The ever-stubborn Myles Horton eventually concurred.<sup>57</sup>

On January 7, 1957, Robinson stood before her first class of eleven women and three men at the Johns Island Citizenship School in an old dilapidated school building purchased by Highlander. Even though Clark, the seasoned educator, was involved in the selection process for a teacher, it was Robinson who, in the words of Horton, "developed the [educational] methods used by the Citizenship Schools."<sup>58</sup> Robinson established a pedagogical approach based on the needs of the students and told them on the first day, "I'm really not going to be your teacher. We're going to work together and teach each other." She also engaged them as active participants in the learning process, asking them what they wanted to accomplish in the class. The students, the majority of whom were completely illiterate and the remainder only partially literate, explained that they wanted to write their names, read the Bible, fill out a money order, and fill out blanks when ordering from a catalog. In addition, Robinson mimeographed sections of the South Carolina election laws, and many of the students mastered the text and learned basic literacy skills over the two month session. By February of the next year, eight of the fourteen students with at least five months of classes were able to read the required paragraph in the state constitution and sign their names in order to receive their voter registration certificates.<sup>59</sup>

Witnessing the success of the Johns Island School, others were soon added in neighboring regions. Beautician and activist Marylee Davis of North Charleston, who had also attended workshops at Highlander, asked for help in starting a school in her neighborhood and offered her beauty parlor as a meeting place.<sup>60</sup> Robinson served as the teacher for the twelve women enrolled in the school, most of whom were domestic workers. Davis, an integral part of the North Charleston community, was intimately acquainted with the conditions plaguing her neighborhood and wanted the students to not only learn to read the required passage for voter registration but also learn how to navigate local political hierarchies to get better roads and other community improvements.

Based on the success in South Carolina, Horton, Clark, and Robinson sought to expand the program to Tennessee, Alabama, and Georgia and realized that beauticians were best equipped to further Highlander's Citizenship Schools' goals. In December 1960, Clark, who had assumed the role of director of education, convened a meeting specifically for "members of the beauticians' profession only" at Highlander's headquarters in Monteagle, Tennessee, to be held January 15-16, 1961. The workshop, "New Leadership Responsibilities," was convened, according to Clark, because the "Highlander





Figure 6. Bernice Robinson (*standing left*) and Septima Clark (*standing right*) facilitate a teacher training workshop. Used with permission from the Wisconsin Historical Society (WHI-41508).

Folk School has been impressed with the leadership possibilities among beauticians." She continued in an appeal letter sent to beauticians in the three states: "This is one of the professions which offer to its members great freedom for leadership in community action. We also see it as offering opportunities especially suitable for *professional* women who also want to be active in the struggle for justice in the South."<sup>61</sup>

While Clark understood that women like teachers in the typical middle-class professions were not the best option for Citizenship Schools teachers, she knew that she had to appeal to the professional identity of beauticians to encourage their participation. In his autobiography, Myles Horton explained the strategic importance of gathering beauticians as leaders in civil rights initiatives due to their unique status in their communities. "A black beautician, unlike a white beautician, was at that time a person of some status in the community," he explained. "They were entrepreneurs, they were small business women, you know, respected, they were usually better educated than other people, and most of all they were independent."<sup>62</sup> While beauticians had an elevated status, were small-business women, and were usually better educated, they, unlike teachers, did not have a separation from or a patronizing relationship to the black masses. Because of segregation, they were indebted to the black community for a client base and were never far removed from their respective communities.

Moreover, black female beauticians had a degree of independence relative

to other blacks—especially black women—whose occupations were usually under the watchful eye of whites. Throughout the Jim Crow years, black women worked primarily as domestics, doing work that was often isolating and constantly supervised, clearly not offering a site to organize collective resistance. Even black professional women, like schoolteachers within segregated school systems, faced constraints due to their dependence upon white-run school boards and city councils. Beauticians worked within black female-owned establishments, were supplied by black manufacturers, and were patronized by black female clients within segregated communities.

On January 15, 1961, fifty-two beauticians from several counties in Tennessee and Alabama met for two days at Highlander's headquarters.<sup>63</sup> Many were given scholarships to attend and carpooled to Monteagle. While on the two-hundred-acre farm nestled in the Cumberland Mountains, they participated in workshops led by Horton, Robinson, and a beauty shop owner named Johnnie Mae Fowler, who was already active in her community in Winchester, Tennessee. Fowler's presentation, "The Beauty Salon: A Center of Communication and Influence," delineated key areas where beauticians could be an asset to the civil rights movement. She envisioned beauticians providing leadership in efforts to see that the *Browder v. Gayle* decision to desegregate buses and train stations was a reality in their communities. "We think the beautician should step out front and our people will see us doing this [*sic*] things without fear," she stated. What beauticians should be doing, Fowler said, was "sitting on buses on a first come first served basis." She also explained that beauticians "can help a lot by discussing this [desegregation of public transportation] in their salons." Beauty salons, according to Fowler, should be the primary place for the community to gather and obtain information. She encouraged the beauticians to not only open their businesses for civic meetings, PTA groups, and other social organizations but also to keep abreast of local happenings, like the schedule for school board meetings, so that they could share the information with their clients.

The meetings inspired the beauticians in attendance to act immediately to impact their communities. Just one day after the adjournment of the gathering, the women, under the leadership of Eva Bowman, former state inspector and examiner for the Tennessee Cosmetology Board and main contact person for the Highlander meeting, announced the formation a board of directors, who would be responsible for implementing what was to be called the Volunteer Health Center in Fayette County, Tennessee. The board was comprised solely of beauticians who attended the workshops. The center was to benefit twenty sharecropping families evicted by white

landowners in retaliation for a series of events that started in 1959 with the conviction by an all-white jury of a black man who was accused of killing a white man. Local black leaders filed a suit under the Civil Rights Act of 1957, citing their omission from jury pools based on being prevented from registering to vote. The African Americans won their case, and led by gas station owner John McFerren and his beautician wife, Viola, they organized voter registration drives in the county. Despite widespread intimidation tactics and an escalation of tension in Fayette County, more than twelve hundred African Americans voted in the November 1960 elections. As a result, white landowners evicted black sharecroppers en masse, and those with no where else to go were invited to set up tents on the property of an independent black landowner, Sheppard Towles, forming what residents called "Tent City."<sup>64</sup>

The inhabitants of Tent City had many needs, including food, clothing, and security. Inspired by their recent trip to Highlander, beauticians thought they were best able to tend to the health of Tent City's inhabitants. The beauticians demonstrated a complex understanding of citizenship rights and education; while they were brought to Highlander under the auspices of the traditional Citizenship Education Program, they forced Highlander to expand the meaning of citizenship to addressing issues concerning the immediate needs of their communities such as health care. Clark and Robinson supported these efforts even in their capacities as director of education and field director, respectively, but the onus was on Bowman and the beauticians on the board of directors to execute the plans for the center.

At their initial meeting held in January 1961, the beauticians outlined a comprehensive plan: They were to purchase a tent and floor along with heating and lighting facilities, propose a trip to Tent City for the state beauticians' organizations from Alabama and Tennessee to view the needs up close and enlist them in fundraising efforts, and contact doctors and nurses to establish the medical program. That nurses and doctors were not the ones to initiate this program demonstrated just how much more beauticians were connected to the needs of the poor and those who were living out the often difficult backlash of exercising citizenship rights.<sup>65</sup>

Things were promising—at first. In February, beauticians met at Highlander for a second time and agreed to place donation boxes for Tent City in their shops, donate the money earned from one client's hairdo each week, and encourage those within their professional networks to do the same. In March, more than three hundred beauticians from Chattanooga pledged their support and donated money to the center, and plans were made to

break ground on an actual building in late April. This shift from putting up a tent to erecting a building for the center led to confusion and greatly undermined the project. Clark, the seasoned leader and pragmatist, directed Bowman in a letter to "buy a tent and get to work on the things needed in the community now. Then later push the county to get a building and maintain a clinic or integrate the one they have."<sup>66</sup> Unfortunately, the beauticians' dreams for a health center were never fully realized, and after living in tents for over two years, the residents of Tent City began moving into new, affordable homes.<sup>67</sup>

Despite the failure of beauticians to provide a health facility for the residents of Tent City, the Highlander Folk School continued to partner with beauticians. In the midst of the Tent City debacle, another "New Leadership Responsibilities" workshop exclusively for beauticians was held at Highlander in late October 1962. An announcement explained that the purpose of the meeting was "to find the things which need to be done in a community that cannot be done by City, State, or Federal employees." The flier also addressed the question "Why beauticians?" by affirming, "Beauticians can speak out openly and can publicly promote the cause for justice and equality in the South," in ways that others could not.<sup>68</sup> In March 1963, beauticians attended a demonstration at Highlander on "How to Use a Voting Machine," so that they could share the information with their clients when they returned home.

Beauticians and beauty shops proved to be so effective in part because they were so hidden. It took whites in the Charleston area a while to find out about the schools Bernice Robinson had started. Otis Perkins, a reporter from the *Charleston News and Courier*, was surprised that schools had been conducted for three years before the white community discovered anything about them.<sup>69</sup> Similarly, Robinson, despite being an essential part of Highlander, was not well known among those who were trying to destroy its operations. In 1961, Highlander's Tennessee facility was raided by the Grundy county police department, and everyone on site was charged with possession of whisky. While most of the charges did not stick, Horton's deed to the property was declared void at the circuit court. The case went up to the Tennessee Supreme Court, which upheld the decision and revoked Highlander's tax exempt status. As a result, by the summer of 1961, Highlander was beginning a process of ending its involvement with the Citizenship Schools and handing its administration over to the Southern Christian Leadership Conference. Still, anyone with ties to Highlander was closely watched by the Tennessee authorities. For example, the *Chattanooga Free Press* ran an article in May 1961 vilifying Septima Clark for taking the Peace Corps examination

in Chattanooga. The “second Negro woman” who accompanied Clark was unknown to reporters, but based on a photograph printed in the newspaper, she was Robinson. In fact, the reporter was surprised that they knew so little about “the second Negro woman,” especially since she gave the Highlander Folk School as her address.<sup>70</sup> Despite Robinson’s activism, she and indeed all the beauticians in the movement always seemed to operate below the radar, exactly where Horton and other movement leaders thought they were most useful to the cause.

When administration of the Citizenship Education Program was handed over to SCLC, the project’s leaders, including Andrew Young, continued to rely upon the independence of beauticians, though Young marginalized their input—and indeed women’s input in general.<sup>71</sup> Young explained that when he could not locate a black leader within the community, he and his team would go to the beauty parlor in addition to male-owned barbershops and funeral homes to find economically independent black leaders.<sup>72</sup> While beauticians were not targeted exclusively under SCLC’s administration of the program as they were with Highlander, one emerged as a leader in the Citizenship Schools in the volatile region of Clarksdale, Mississippi. Clarksdale had an active NAACP that mounted a successful boycott against white-owned businesses for their discriminatory hiring practices, poor service, and segregated practices. However, the town also had a particularly repressive chief of police who attempted to suppress black resistance through violence and intimidation. The law also turned a blind eye toward violence inflicted upon African Americans by racist whites. For example, Vera Pigeo, a beautician who had served her local NAACP as branch secretary and youth branch organizer, was beaten by a gas station attendant in 1963 when she attempted to use the whites-only bathroom. As with most of the violence inflicted upon African Americans, the police turned a blind eye to the white assailants and even joined them in the terrorizing of black communities.

In spite of, or perhaps because of, such difficulties, African Americans in Clarksdale were eager for Citizenship Schools, and Pigeo was eager to be involved with establishing the program.<sup>73</sup> Pigeo, known for wearing hats and encouraging her clients to engage in the freedom struggle from the beauty shop she operated attached to her home, attended a Citizenship Education Workshop in 1961 and impressed the staff so much that they pegged her to be a supervisor of the schools in her region. Just four years later, she could boast of twenty Citizenship Schools, and in 1965 alone, of registering more than one hundred voters, no small task in such a volatile region. Andrew Young admitted that while male leaders were at the forefront of the movement, it

was women like Pigeo who really “ran the operations.”<sup>74</sup> Her economic independence was crucial in a repressive place like Clarksdale, and while that did not prevent her getting beaten, she never had to fear losing her job.

In fact, Clarksdale’s chief of police, Ben C. Collins, interrogated both Vera Pigeo and her husband Paul concerning their civil rights activities at their respective places of employment. When Collins questioned Paul Pigeo, a laborer at North Delta Compress, a cotton compression and warehouse facility, he asked him, “Do you want this job?” and spoke to his foreman about Pigeo’s work hours and performance. After Paul refused to denounce the civil rights activities of his family, the chief turned to his manager and stated, “I know you are going to fire him.” When the manager replied that he had no cause to terminate Pigeo, Collins replied, “Cause? Don’t you know that his wife is the most aggressive leader of the NAACP in Clarksdale?” But the manager stood his ground and asserted Pigeo’s exemplary work performance.<sup>75</sup> When Collins confronted Vera Pigeo, there was no manager or foreman with whom to deal. Instead, he asked about her customers, and Vera refused to divulge their names, explaining, “I pay city, county, and state taxes to operate a legitimate business. You have moved in with *your* secretary and made your office in *my* beauty shop. Now I am asking both of you to leave. If I ever need your service I will call you.” While neither Paul nor Vera Pigeo lost their jobs as a result of Collins’s actions, Collins’s use of workplace intimidation is telling. Vera Pigeo felt empowered enough to withhold her clients’ names and expel the staunch segregationist from her salon because she held ownership of her labor. Her husband was perhaps equally willing to stand up to Collins, but his economic stability was dependent upon a thankfully supportive employer.

## Conclusion

When remembering the Highlander Folk School, Myles Horton marveled at the role of beauticians in the Citizenship Education Program: “They thought that I was bringing these beauticians together to talk about straightening hair or whatever . . . they do, [but] I was just using them because they were community leaders and they were independent. . . . We used beauticians’ shops all over the South to distribute Highlander literature on integration.”<sup>76</sup>

In many ways, Horton’s statement illuminates the key issues surrounding the unique ways beauticians merged their profession with the politics of the civil rights movement. They were, for the most part, highly regarded in their communities and strove to be among the best women of the race. However, because of segregation and their indebtedness to the black community for a

client base, beauty culturists were never far removed from their respective communities.

While women like Ruby Blackburn, Bernice Robinson, and Vera Pige were undoubtedly activists, they were still businesswomen. Septima Clark said of a beautician who was involved in the Highlander Folk School's Citizenship Schools Program that "she wished to see her street and that section improved in order to preserve and advance her economic investment." Still, Clark was quick to add that the beautician was ultimately "more interested in doing something for the people who were suffering" than in advancing her own business.<sup>77</sup> Beauticians demonstrated that they could look after their own economic needs and the needs of their communities simultaneously, perhaps better than any other group of black businesspeople.

Moreover, beauticians had a degree of independence relative to other blacks—especially black women—whose occupations were usually under the watchful eye of whites. During the years of the freedom struggle, Southern black women worked primarily as domestics, doing work that was often isolating and constantly supervised, clearly not offering a site to organize collective resistance. Even black professional women, such as schoolteachers within segregated school systems, faced constraints due to their dependence upon white-run school boards and city councils. Beauticians worked within black female-owned establishments, were supplied by black manufacturers, and were patronized by black female clients within segregated communities. They took advantage of the benefits of their economic independence and the heightened political activity of the 1950s and 60s to take risks without fears of reprisals, something they had done for most of the twentieth century.

# 6

## "Among the Things That Used to Be"

### *Beauticians, Health Activism, and the Politics of Dignity in the Post-Civil Rights Era*

After deciding to stop straightening her hair in the post-civil rights era, writer Alice Walker reflected in a 1987 Founder's Day speech at Spelman College, "I remembered years of enduring hairdressers . . . doing missionary work on my hair. They dominated, suppressed, controlled."<sup>1</sup> For Walker, embracing her hair in its natural state was both a political and spiritual liberation. She was not alone. By the late 1960s, black women who had been socialized with the idea that straightened hair was synonymous with good grooming began celebrating and embracing notions of racial pride and self-expression that were exhibited in one's physical appearance as well as in tangible expressions of black protest.

Reminiscent of the turn of the twentieth century, when hair straightening was seen as contradicting racial uplift, the late 1960s saw a resurgence in arguments against hair straightening. Although black beauty shops were often sites where black women organized for resistance, younger African American women began to reject the grooming practices that typically went on in these salons. Black beauticians were no longer esteemed members of the black community but were remembered as being complicit in black women's oppression.

The post-civil rights period witnessed major changes in the black beauty industry and in the relationship between beauty and black womanhood. While most analyses of black beauty culture and politics in the post-civil rights era focuses on the rise and fall of the popularity of the Afro, this chapter seeks to widen that discussion by examining the impact of changing black aesthetics, global corporate interests in black hair product manufacturing,

Cultural Engagements Between African Americans and Haitians, 1930–1964” (Ph.D. diss., University of Michigan, 2003), 75, 79.

24. Press release, UBSOTA and ACPO, 24 April 1952, Box 30, Folder 15, FB, HPL.

25. According to Harvey Levenstein, “Only one kind of visitor seemed immune from French disapproval and criticism [during the Cold War]: African Americans.” *We’ll Always Have Paris: American Tourists in France Since 1930* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 147.

26. Bethune, *Chicago Defender*, May 1954.

27. Unless otherwise noted, information on the European voyages has been derived from Katie Whickham, “Our Trip: Memoirs of Our European Tour, 1956,” Marie Steward Smith Collection, AAMP; and “Beauty Pilgrimage: 195 Women Learn Latest Continent Hair Styles,” *Ebony*, August 1954, 38–44.

28. MSJ to Amory Houghton, 22 January 1960, MSJP.

29. Dudziak, *Cold War Civil Rights*, 56.

30. Von Eschen, “Challenging Cold War Habits,” 635.

31. Marjorie Stewart Joyner, “Our European Scrapbook: Some Clippings of a Memorable Trip,” *Beauty Trade*, October 1954.

32. MSJ interview by Flug; emphasis added.

33. According to Andrew Wiese, African American incomes tripled during the 1940s and increased by another 50 percent during the 1950s. Andrew Wiese, *Places of Their Own: African American Suburbanization in the Twentieth Century* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 124.

34. For the changing consumption practices of African Americans in the postwar period see Robert Weems, *Desegregating the Dollar: African American Consumerism in the Twentieth Century* (New York: New York University Press, 1998), chapter 2 and Jason Chambers, *Madison Avenue and the Color Line: African Americans in the Advertising Industry* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007), chapter 2.

35. Mrs. Joseph N. Grant to MSJ and Willa Lee Calvin, 1 October 1962, MSJP (unprocessed).

36. “European Travellers,” *Beauty Trade*, September, 1958, 39.

37. “Back to Vacation Coifs,” *Beauty Trade*, September 1957, cover.

38. “Beauty Pilgrimage,” *Ebony*, 44.

39. For more on the politics of respectability, see Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent*, chapter 7.

40. For a firsthand account of the trips from a beautician’s point of view, see Whickham, “Our Trip.”

41. Whickham, “Our Trip,” p. 2.

42. “Travel by Freddy,” *Pittsburgh Courier*, February 17, 1962.

43. E. Franklin Frazier, *Black Bourgeoisie* (1962; reprint, New York: Free Press, 1997), 192, 194.

44. “Beauty Pilgrimage,” *Ebony*, 46.

45. Bethune, *Chicago Defender*, August 1954.

46. Borstelmann, *Cold War and the Color Line*.

47. See Levenstein, *We’ll Always Have Paris*, 148–149.

48. Whickham, “Our Trip,” 23.

49. *Ibid.*, 20.

50. *Ibid.*, 22.

51. “Eastern News,” *Beauty Trade*, April 1958.

52. “School News,” *Beauty Trade*, May 1958, 33.

53. “Daughter of Ghana Ambassador Studying at Mme. Walker College in Washington,” *Beauty Trade*, April 1960, 34.

54. “Haiti Gets First Negro Beauty School,” *Beauty Trade*, November 1960, 57.

55. “Bermuda’s Only Beauty School Graduates 12 in First Year,” *Beauty Trade*, February 1961, 37.

56. “Beauty Trade Introduces Pressing for First Time at Puerto Rico Show,” *Beauty Trade*, 30–31.

57. *Ibid.*

58. “Around the World,” *Beauty Trade*, November 1961.

59. Grant to MSJ and Calvin, 1 October 1962.

## Chapter 5. Southern Beauty Activists and the Modern Black Freedom Struggle

1. Anne Moody, *Coming of Age in Mississippi* (1968; reprint, New York: Delta Trade Paperbacks, 2004), 293.

2. Christina Royster-Hemby, “Reflected in the Lens,” *Baltimore City Paper*, 30 March 2005, <http://www.citypaper.com/arts/prinready.asp?id=9785/> (accessed December 15, 2005).

3. National Beauty Culturists League, *Daily Bulletin*, 11 August 1948, Series 18, Box 7 Folder 3, Records of the National Council of Negro Women, National Beauty Culturists League, MMBCH.

4. For a larger discussion of the nature and scope of postwar black women’s activism, see Martha Biondi, *To Stand and Fight: The Struggle for Civil Rights in Postwar New York City* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003); Shockley, “We, Too, Are Americans”; Gretchen Lemke-Santangelo, *Abiding Women: African American Migrant Women and the East Bay Community* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996); Shockley, “We, Too, Are Americans”; Christina Greene, *Our Separate Ways: Women and the Black Freedom Movement in Durham, North Carolina* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005); and Laurie Green, *Battling the Plantation Mentality: Memphis and the Black Freedom Struggle* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007).

5. Convention information is derived from Mark, *National Beauty Culturists’ League*, 36.

6. Martin Luther King to Katie Whickham, 7 July 1958, in Martin Luther King Jr., Peter Halloran, and Clayborne Carson, eds., *The Papers of Martin Luther King, Jr.*, vol. 4, *Symbol of the Movement* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1992).
7. Quoted in Belinda Robnett, *How Long? How Long? African American Women and the Struggle for Civil Rights* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 93.
8. See Robnett's discussion of the gender politics of the SCLC in *ibid.*, 93.
9. Mark, *National Beauty Culturists' League*, 288–289.
10. Louis Martin, interviewed by Michael L. Gillette, 12 June 1986, Internet copy, Lyndon Baines Johnson Library, University of Texas, Austin. For more information on Louis Martin see, Alex Poinsett, *Walking with the Presidents: Louis Martin and the Rising of Black Political Power* (New York: Rowan and Littlefield, 2000).
11. Martin interviewed by Gillette.
12. "So This Is Washington," *Chicago Defender*, 24 May 1958.
13. Ethel L. Payne to MSJ, 11 January 1958, MSJP.
14. South Carolina Beauticians Club (1936), North Carolina State Beauticians and Cosmetologists Association (1939), the Orange Blossom Cosmetologist Association of Florida (1939), Arkansas Beauticians Association (1940), Mississippi Independent Beautician Association (1941), Tennessee State Beauticians Association (1956), Texas State Association and Beauty Culturists League (1942), Virginia State Beauticians Association (1943), Alabama Modern Beauticians (1944), Georgia State Beauty Culturists' League (1946), Louisiana State Beauticians Association (1946). See Mark, *National Beauty Culturists' League*.
15. Mark, *National Beauty Culturist's League*, 158–163.
16. Quoted in Davidson M. Douglas, *Reading, Writing, and Race: The Desegregation of Charlotte Public Schools* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1995), 26.
17. "State Beauticians Praise Supreme Court Decision; Group Urged to Resist Any Form of Continued Segregation," *Jackson Advocate*, 24 July 1954, 1.
18. See Charles Payne, *I've Got the Light of Freedom: The Organizing Tradition in the Mississippi Civil Rights Movement*, 2nd ed. (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2007).
19. See *Carolina Times*, 22 August 1950, 22.
20. See undated letter, Box 4, Ruby Parks Blackburn Papers, Auburn Avenue Research Library on African American Culture and History, Atlanta (hereafter cited as RBPB).
21. See appointment books and receipts from Blackburn's beauty salon, RBPB.
22. Kathryn Nasstrom, "Women, the Civil Rights Movement, and the Politics of Historical Memory, 1946–1973" (Ph.D. diss., University of North Carolina- Chapel Hill, 1993), 71.
23. For more on the segregated housing and public transportation system in Atlanta during the early years of Jim Crow, see Hunter, *To 'Joy My Freedom*; for the postwar

- period, see Gary Pomerantz, *Where Peachtree Meets Sweet Auburn: A Saga of Race and Family* (New York: Penguin Books, 1997); Herman "Skip" Mason, *Politics, Civil Rights and Law in Black Atlanta, 1870–1970* (Charleston: Arcadia Publishing, 2000).
24. See Georgia Public Service Commission vs. Dixie Hills Bus Lines, 6 October 1953; and J. C. Steinmetz to Ruby Blackburn, 14 October 1953, both in RBPB; Mason, *Politics, Civil Right and Law*, 49–54.
  25. bell hooks, *Bone Black: Memories of Girlhood* (New York: Henry Holt, 1996), 112.
  26. Cozell Frazier, interviewed by Tunga White, St. Helena, S.C., 7 August 1994, BTV.
  27. Bernice Toy Caldwell, interviewed by Leslie Brown, Charlotte, N.C., 7 June 1993, BTV.
  28. Weems, *Desegregating the Dollar*, 34.
  29. "Integration Comes to the Beauty Business," *Ebony*, August 1966.
  30. Craig, *Ain't I a Beauty Queen*, 35.
  31. For collections of photographs of the civil rights movement, see Bruce Davidson, *Time of Change: Civil Rights Photographers, 1961–1965* (Los Angeles: St. Ann's Press, 2002); Herbert Randall, *Faces of Freedom Summer* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2001); Manning Marable and Leith Mullings, *Freedom: A Photographic History of the African American Struggle* (London: Phaidon, 2002); Steven Kasher, *The Civil Rights Movement: A Photographic History, 1954–1968* (New York: Abbeyville Press, 1996); Cecil Williams, *Freedom and Justice: Four Decades of the Civil Rights Struggle as Seen By a Black Photographer of the Deep South* (Macon, Ga.: Mercer University Press, 1995).
  32. Marisa Chappell, Jenny Hutchinson, and Brian Ward, "'Dress modestly, neatly . . . as if you were going to church': Respectability, Class and Gender in the Montgomery Bus Boycott and the Early Civil Rights Movement," in *Gender and the Civil Rights Movement*, ed. Peter Ling and Sharon Monteith (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 2004), 96n1.
  33. See Madam C. J. Walker Company Advertisements in the 1960s in black publications like *Ebony* as well as in the Madam C. J. Walker Papers at the Indiana Historical Society, Indianapolis.
  34. Pitts quoted in Mawhood, "Tales to Curl Your Hair," 17.
  35. Margaret Williams Neal, interviewed by Rhonda Mawhood, Charlotte, N.C., 19 July 1993, BTV.
  36. *Ibid.*
  37. Greene, *Our Separate Ways*, 32.
  38. Martin interviewed by Gillette.
  39. Julie Willett, *Permanent Waves*, 150.
  40. Harriet Vail Wade interviewed by Rhonda Mawhood, Wilmington, N.C., 1 August 1993, BTV.
  41. Neal interviewed by Mawhood.

42. John M. Glen, *Highlander: No Ordinary School*, 2nd ed. (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1996), 154.
43. John M. Glen, introduction to Glen, *Highlander*.
44. All direct quotes from Bernice Robinson's life have been taken from typed, unedited interview: Bernice Robinson, interviewed by Sue Thrasher and Elliot Wigginton, Charleston, S.C., 9 November 1980, Box 1, Folder 5, Avery Research Center, College of Charleston, Charleston, S.C.
45. Ibid.
46. Ibid.
47. For a larger discussion of black women's precarious situation with factory work, see Jones, *Labor of Love, Labor of Sorrow*.
48. On the resiliency of the black beauty market, see Bundles, *On Her Own Ground*; and Walker, *History of Black Business in America*.
49. Robinson interview by Thrasher and Wigginton.
50. Elliot Wigginton, ed., *Refuse to Stand Silently By: An Oral History of Grassroots Social Activism in America, 1921–1964* (New York: Doubleday Books, 1991).
51. Robinson quoted in LaVerne Grant, "Contributions of African-American Women to Nonformal Education During the Civil Rights Movement, 1955–1965" (Ed.D. diss., Pennsylvania State University, 1990), 46.
52. For more information on the life of Septima Clark, see Septima Clark, *Echo in My Soul* (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1962); Cynthia Stokes Brown, *Refuse to Stand Silently By: Septima Clark and the Civil Rights Movement* (Navarro, Calif.: Wild Trees Press, 1986); and Katherine Mellen Charron, "Teaching Citizenship: Septima Poinsette Clark and the Transformation of the African American Freedom Struggle" (Ph.D. diss., Yale University, 2005).
53. R. Scott Baker, "Ambiguous Legacies: The NAACP's Legal Campaign Against Segregation in Charleston, SC, 1935–1975" (Ph.D. diss., Columbia University, 1993), 180.
54. Bernice Robinson to Lucille Black, 28 January 1956, in *Papers of the NAACP, Selected Branch Files, 1956–1965* (Bethesda, Md.: University Publications of America, 1991).
55. Robinson interview by Thrasher and Wigginton.
56. Sandra Brennehan Oldendorf, "Highlander Folk School and the South Carolina Sea Island Citizenship Schools: Implications for the Social Studies" (Ph.D. diss., University of Kentucky, 1987).
57. For a larger analysis of the hesitancy of African American schoolteachers to get involved in civil rights activities, see Charron, "Teaching Citizenship," 345–348. For an analysis of Clark's reasons not to use teachers, see 479.
58. Clark, *Ready from Within*, 51; Horton, *Long Haul*, 105.
59. See Mellon, "Teaching Citizenship," 480–484.
60. Glen, *Highlander*, 197; Mellen, "Teaching Citizenship," 487.
61. See "Announcing a workshop on New Leadership Responsibilities" and Septima

Clark to beauticians in Tennessee, Alabama, and Georgia, 12 December 1960, Box 80, Folder 10, Highlander Folk School Papers, Social Action Collection, Wisconsin Historical Society, Madison (hereafter cited as HFSP); emphasis added.

62. Horton quoted in Aldon Morris, *The Origins of the Civil Rights Movement: Black Communities Organizing for Change* (New York: Free Press, 1984), 145.

63. A press release dated 17 January 1961 claims the attendance of "fifty-two women beauticians from Tennessee and Alabama," but the sign in sheets reflect thirty-four women and one male beautician. I find it interesting that the press release ignored the presence of the man. See MSS 265, Box 80, Folder 10, HFSP.

64. Charron, "Teaching Citizenship," 514–515.

65. See untitled press release, 17 January 1961, and Notes from the Board of Directors meeting, 16 January 1961, MSS 265, Box 80, Folder 10, HFSP.

66. Septima Clark to Eva Bowman, n.d., Box 38, Folder 6; Bowman to Co-workers, 19 April 1961, Box 38, Folder 6 (HFSP); quotation from handwritten note Clark to Bowman, n.d., Box 38, Folder 6 (HFSP).

67. Charron, "Teaching Citizenship," 518.

68. Announcement of Workshop for Beauticians on "New Leadership Responsibilities," 28–29 October 1962, Box 80, Folder 10, HFSP.

69. Oldendorf, "Highlander Folk School," 67.

70. For more information about the raid on Highlander and its legal battles, see Glen, *Highlander*; Horton, *Long Haul*; Aimee Isgrig Horton, *The Highlander Folk School: A History of its Major Programs, 1939–1961* (Brooklyn, N.Y.: Carlson Publishing, 1989). See "Highlander School's Septima Clark Among Seven Taking Peace Corps Test," *Chattanooga Free Press*, 29 May 1961, clipping in Clark/Robinson Papers, Folder 5, Avery Research Center, College of Charleston, Charleston, S.C.

71. For a larger discussion of the SCLC, namely, its gender politics, see Robnett, *How Long? How Long?*

72. Young quoted in Mellon, "Teaching Citizenship," 536.

73. For a larger discussion of the situation in Clarksdale with regard to resistance and repression, see Annelieke Dirks, "Between Threat and Reality: The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People and the Emergence of Armed Self-Defense in Clarksdale and Natchez, Mississippi, 1960–1965," *Journal for the Study of Radicalism* 1, no. 1 (2007): 71–98.

74. For more on Pigea, see Françoise Nicole Hamlin, "Vera Mae Pigea (1925–): Mothering the Movement," in *Mississippi Women: Their Histories, Their Lives*, ed. Martha Swain, Elizabeth Anne Payne, Marjorie Spruill, and Susan Ditto (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2003), 281–93; Charron, "Teaching Citizenship," 557–5588; and Vera Pigea, *The Struggle of Struggles* (Detroit: Harlo Press, 1975).

75. Pigea, *Struggle of Struggles*, 99–100.

76. Morris's interview with Myles Horton in *Origins of the Civil Rights Movement*, 145.

77. Clark, *Echo in My Soul*, 161.