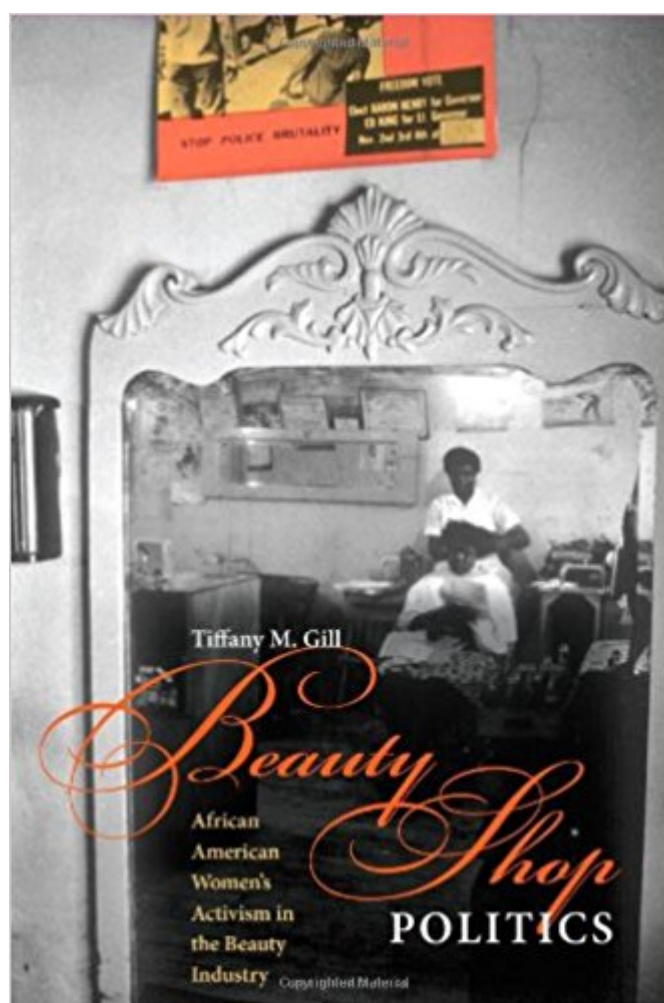


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Beauty Shop Politics: African American Women's Activism In The Beauty Industry (Women In American History)



Synopsis

Looking through the lens of black business history, *Beauty Shop Politics* shows how black beauticians in the Jim Crow era parlayed their economic independence and access to a public community space into platforms for activism. Tiffany M. Gill argues that the beauty industry played a crucial role in the creation of the modern black female identity and that the seemingly frivolous space of a beauty salon actually has stimulated social, political, and economic change. From the founding of the National Negro Business League in 1900 and onward, African Americans have embraced the entrepreneurial spirit by starting their own businesses, but black women's forays into the business world were overshadowed by those of black men. With a broad scope that encompasses the role of gossip in salons, ethnic beauty products, and the social meanings of African American hair textures, Gill shows how African American beauty entrepreneurs built and sustained a vibrant culture of activism in beauty salons and schools. Enhanced by lucid portrayals of black beauticians and drawing on archival research and oral histories, *Beauty Shop Politics* conveys the everyday operations and rich culture of black beauty salons as well as their role in building community.

Book Information

Series: Women in American History

Paperback: 208 pages

Publisher: University of Illinois Press; 1st Edition edition (March 3, 2010)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 0252076966

ISBN-13: 978-0252076961

Product Dimensions: 6 x 0.7 x 9 inches

Shipping Weight: 10.4 ounces (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 3.7 out of 5 stars 5 customer reviews

Best Sellers Rank: #304,170 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #73 in [African American Books > Politics & Social Sciences > Politics & Government > Specific Topics > Women in Politics](#) #233 in [African American Books > Health, Fitness & Dieting > Beauty, Grooming, & Style > Style & Clothing](#) #280 in [African American Books > Politics & Social Sciences > Politics & Government > International & World Politics > African American](#)

Customer Reviews

"Gill has made a major contribution to our understanding that the beauty industry has been central to African American women's search for economic sufficiency and the struggle for all African

Americans' political rights."--American Studies
"A welcome relocation of the discussion of black women's beauty culture."--Women's Review of Books
"Gill's book is important. . . . Beauty Shop Politics ... allows a glimpse into black women's relationships with each other, relationships that are simultaneously professional and intimate, in which black women are both producers and consumers, as well as active creators, on both sides, of spaces that are uniquely their own."--The Journal of Southern History
"A meticulously researched, well-written, and cogently argued book that contributes to scholarship that complicates historiographical boundaries between business history, labor history, history of consumer culture, women's history, and the history of African American political activism."--The Journal of American History
"[Gill] impressively demonstrates how beauticians became an important part of the black economic urban infrastructure. . . . Highly recommended."--Choice
"The scope of the material and interdisciplinary scholarship evident throughout the book makes Beauty Shop Politics a comprehensive addition to the bookshelves of women's studies, African-American studies, and entrepreneurial studies, as well as to history, business, and political-science departments. It is a truly interdisciplinary endeavor."--The Chronicle of Higher Education
"A tremendous contribution to African-American history. Beauty Shop Politics demonstrates the central role of black women in the history of black business and shows how black businesswomen challenged the dictates of black male leaders in the worlds of black business and civil rights."--Lynn Hudson, author of *The Making of "Mammy Pleasant": A Black Entrepreneur in Nineteenth-Century San Francisco*

A bold reassessment of black beauty salons as vital sites for social change

The beauty shop is a space for healing and renewal. I loved the truth of remembering how healing my sessions and time with my beauty have been to my life. I learned from all levels of women in the salon the beauty of living a life I love. When I was reading the book I revisited my strength.

Excellent. Ideal resource. Research quite useful.

Excellent read

In *Beauty Shop Politics*, Tiffany M. Gill documents the central role that black beauticians played in the struggle against Jim Crow laws. Beauty shops were one of the few industries that offered black women some economic stability and upward mobility in the face of segregation. The industry also

offered black women a respectable alternative to domestic labor, as well as a change to not work for white people. As political tensions rose, civil rights organizers increasingly turned to black beauticians for disseminating social and political information. Initially, the hair care industry was dominated by white English and French men. Black men slowly worked their way into the industry, serving as hairdressers for white women, but that period was short-lived, as the stereotype of black men as sexual predators began to emerge. During the antebellum period, black women began to emerge as hairdressers in greater numbers; the early twentieth century saw the emergence of black female entrepreneurs, namely Annie Malone and Madame C.J. Walker, who played an integral role in expanding black beauty culture. Through hard work and sheer perseverance, the women fought for beauticians to gain the respect of the general public. The women had to fight charges that they were inhibiting racial uplift, particularly because their products appeared to straighten black women's hair at a time when it was culturally looked down upon. Still, the women fought to have beautician courses established at black colleges, arguing that the industry provided black women economic stability. They also fiercely promoted themselves to the public by contributing to various philanthropic causes. In times of economic hardship, the beauty industry offered black women an opportunity to enter a respectable profession that entailed a steady income and entrepreneurial opportunities. On the national level, women worked to create a national organization that would legitimize their profession. In 1912, Madame Walker argued that "hairdresser" was a derogatory term, and insisted on the use of the term "beauty culturist." With their economic and professional status now in place, beauty culturists were quickly gaining a strong foothold and establishing their place within their communities. Because the black beauty industry was owned and supplied by blacks, and catered to the black community, black beauticians had some insulation from the economic hardships that their peers faced. Thus, they were able to participate in civil rights activism without the fear of losing their jobs or their customer base. Some, for instance, established literacy schools so that their students would be able to pass voter registration tests. Others distributed information through their beauty shops, which had become central locations for community organizing. Gill also extends her research to the present day, noting how the focus has now shifted from civil rights to women's health initiatives. Perhaps the best thing about this book is its accessibility to a wide audience. Gill writes in a clear and engaging style that makes the book an excellent choice for a non-academic reader who is interested in the subject. She includes noted figures in black women's history such as Madame Walker, Annie Malone, and Septima Clark, and uses compelling anecdotes about women such as Mahalia Jackson and Anne Moody, author of *A Coming of Age in Mississippi*. Most importantly, Gill introduces the reader to a roster of

lesser-known figures who also played important roles during this period. The book is an invaluable resource for women's history and African American history scholars.

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