

“RACE WONDER WOMAN”:
MADAM C. J. WALKER AND THE UPLIFT OF THE RACE,
1867-1919

A Thesis

Presented to

The Faculty of the Department

of History

University of Houston

In Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Arts

By

Stephanie Helen Weiss

May, 2013

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ABSTRACT

This thesis considers the influence black beauty industry mogul, Madam C. J. Walker, held in both the business and political worlds from the turn of the century until her death in 1919. Included within are explorations of the construction of Walker's unique political ideology, her business model and practices, and her commitment to philanthropic engagement. Walker's contributions to concepts of identity for black women in this period and her role in the renegotiation of black beauty ideals are also considered, revealing Walker as one of the most powerful race leaders of her generation and worthy of careful study.

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For my parents

Introduction

In 1926, African American journalist George Schuyler published a lengthy article in *The Messenger* praising the life and legacy of the great businesswoman, Madam C. J. Walker. Seven years after her death, the article titled “Madam C. J. Walker: Race Wonder Woman” speaks of her professional achievement, unmatched generosity, and devotion to the people of her race. “I know of no other woman, white or black, who, previous to her time, had built up such a large and successful business,” Schuyler stated. Of her charity work, he added “Madam Walker blazed the trail, and has no peer among the members of her race.”¹

In recent years, historians have placed the achievements of powerful political minds such as W.E.B. Du Bois and Booker T. Washington alongside the work of activists like Ida B. Wells-Barnett and Mary McLeod Bethune as they crafted an African-American narrative. Each made a unique contribution to the growth and uplift of the black population in twentieth century America. Juxtaposed with such well-known figures, beauty industry mogul Madam C. J. Walker commands far less notoriety. Yet she pulled herself from the rundown shack of a sharecropper to become one of the most influential personalities of her generation despite the number of obstacles that faced black women. A self-identified woman of her race, Walker created great opportunity for thousands of black women in the United States

¹ George Schuyler, “Madam C. J. Walker: Pioneer Big Business Woman of America,” *The Messenger* 6 (August 1926), 254, 258. A lengthy article, it was printed on pages 251-258,264-266.

and beyond, used her influence to advance numerous political causes, donated funds generously, and helped the world to see beauty in black faces.

The analysis that follows examines the political development, philanthropy, and civic involvement of Madam C. J. Walker. Drawing on the freedom afforded by her profitable business enterprise, Walker seized the opportunity to involve herself in various business and philanthropic activities, choosing to invest most greatly in causes important to African Americans. Throughout this study, I examine Walker's impact on concepts of race identity, womanhood, and perceptions of beauty as they pertain to black women specifically, establishing her as a powerful voice for both women and African Americans in the turbulent political atmosphere of early twentieth century America.

Within this framework, I address three larger questions. First, I seek to understand how the unique political environment operating during this time period facilitated the development of numerous homegrown political figures like Walker. Secondly, I examine the role Walker's working-class background played in the molding of her political ideology and business plan, as well as its impact in the company's recruitment of agents. Third, I explore the innately political underpinnings of the beauty industry from which she grew, including the work of its professionals, the content of its advertisements, and its significance in questions of diasporic identity formation during this period.²

² A note on terminology: in this study, the term working class does, in fact, infer a class consciousness constructed in independent black spaces and occupations. See Robin Kelley, "We Are Not What We Seem."

Despite her engaging story, historians have generally overlooked Madam C. J. Walker. However, in recent years, scholars of many disciplines have worked to incorporate Walker's rags-to-riches story into the popular narrative that so fiercely embraces the concept of the "American Dream." As my analysis considers many overlapping themes, the written literature with which I converse is necessarily diverse in scope. In many cases, these concepts have visible roots dating far back into the antebellum period. Where it is necessary for the advancement of the argument, these origins are illuminated, but in order to maintain focus, those which are merely complementary have been footnoted. The following is an introduction to the literature specific to Madam C. J. Walker, highlighting the works I found most influential in forming my argument and analysis.

In 2001, journalist A'Lelia Bundles, great-great-granddaughter of Madam C. J. Walker, published her first definitive biography, *On Her Own Ground: The Life and Times of Madam C. J. Walker*.³ This text follows Madam Walker from her Delta, Louisiana birth to her 1919 death at Villa Lewaro, her Irvington-on-the-Hudson estate and charts the extreme lengths to which Walker was willing to go to promote her business. Bundles also examines her deeply held commitment to racial advancement and uplift. Walker's business and civic presence seemed to grow in tandem as she claimed involvement in many of the most powerful civil rights organizations of the time. As Bundles shows, Walker immersed herself in local

³ A'Lelia Bundles, *On Her Own Ground: The Life and Times of Madam C.J. Walker* (New York: Scribner Publishing, 2001).

projects, such as the construction of a YMCA facility for Indianapolis's black youth, but contributed heavily to national and international causes as well. Becoming more radical in later years, Walker provided support for Marcus Garvey's nationalist organization, the Universal Negro Improvement Association, as well as assisted with the development of an agenda to guide the short-lived International League of Darker Peoples.⁴

Despite her familial ties to Walker, Bundles provides a balanced account of Walker's life. While celebrating her story of business success and benevolence, she also highlights numerous misconceptions commonly found in Walker's story. First, Bundles denies that Walker's personal wealth at any point exceeded one million dollars in her lifetime. While she did find incredible success, Walker's estate was only worth approximately \$600,000 when she died in 1919—a sum equal to over six million dollars today, but not enough to qualify her for status as a millionairess. Secondly, Bundles does not present Walker as the originator of the products or techniques she employed. Nor does she suggest Walker was the inventor of the pressing comb, a title often placed on Walker's resume. Instead, Bundles portrays Madam C. J. Walker as a hard-working businesswoman who strove to always maintain a positive reputation and mastered the world of promotion and advertisement.

⁴ Tony Martin, *Race First: The Ideological and Organizational Struggles of Marcus Garvey and the Universal Negro Improvement Association* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1976). Also, Ula Taylor's *A Veiled Garvey: The Life and Times of Amy Jacques Garvey* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001).

Privileged with access to family records that included personal correspondence with important individuals like W. E. B. Du Bois and Mary McLeod Bethune, the manuscript collection deposited at the Indianapolis Historical Society, and the papers of prominent acquaintances like Booker T. Washington, Bundles was able to craft an entertaining and informative history. She did, however, struggle to find documentation on Walker's early life, as very few records were kept by uneducated blacks like Walker or the government under which they lived. The bulk of her narrative centers on the development of her business and her rising stature in both professional and political circles, as permitted by available sources. Walker, faced with the disadvantaged position all black women encountered in this time period, also experienced pressure from within the African American community. Accused of being disingenuous, many claimed she straightened hair and promoted a white standard of beauty, a statement Walker fiercely denied. With much hard work, Walker was able to professionalize the work performed by her "hair culturists" and many prominent men and women within the black community extended their support.

Beverly Lowry presents a second biography on Madam Walker, *Her Dream of Dreams: The Rise and Triumph of Madam C. J. Walker*. Also a journalist, Lowry shares Bundles's easy and flowing writing style. The two biographies draw from many of the same sources, resulting in a very similar story. Perhaps the greatest strength of Lowry's narrative is the skill to which she weaves in the larger historical context, including discussions of well-publicized lynchings and news worthy events. Yet

where Bundles's book hits its stride after Madam Walker's arrival in Indianapolis, Lowry's book derails. Overwhelmed by insignificant details, the reader loses track in the storyline. Additionally, where details are scant, Lowry has an irritating habit of speculating.⁵ The two titles remain the only full treatments of Madam Walker's life.

Once her manuscript collection was made available to the public, the scholarship on Walker's contributions to other topics expanded greatly. Tiffany M. Gill, Kathy Lee Peiss, and Noliwe M. Rooks are leading scholars who have added significantly to the growing field of beauty culture, each highlighting the contributions Madam Walker made to the development of the industry in various ways. Gill examines the politics of beauty culture through the spaces it occupied. In *Beauty Shop Politics: African American Women's Activism in the Beauty Industry*, the author investigates the methods employed by the beauty industry to create institutions and spaces through which the community could work for social, political, and economic change.⁶ Noliwe M. Rooks examines how beauty was perceived and utilized in the formation of a new racial identity during the Progressive Era. Lastly, while Rooks and Gill focus primarily on the African American community, Kathy Peiss approaches the beauty industry widely, exploring the commanding presence displayed by business women like Walker and Elizabeth

⁵ Beverly Lowry, *Her Dream of Dreams: The Rise and Triumph of Madam C.J. Walker* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf Publishing, 2003).

⁶ Tiffany M. Gill, *Beauty Shop Politics: African American Women's Activism in the Beauty Industry* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2010).

Arden in the expansion of an industry once controlled by men and viewed as misogynist in nature. In her book, *Hope in a Jar: The Making of America's Beauty Culture*, Peiss rejects the idea that the growth of beauty culture impeded the advancement of women, instead revealing the many benefits all women were able to wrought from it.⁷

Noliwe M. Rooks' work *Hair Raising: Beauty, Culture and African American Women* situates Walker and her advertisements at the center of the debate surrounding how the politics of hair, and hair straightening in particular, impacted identity formation for black women throughout the twentieth century.⁸ Rooks bases much of her analysis of Walker on the comparison of newspaper advertisements placed by the Walker Manufacturing Company and those of her white-owned competition in the nineteen-teens⁹. Using this approach, it is clear that Walker's advertisements are a departure from the dominant concept of beauty. Rather than associating black features with unattractiveness, Walker attempted to define a new ideal of beauty in the eyes of the black population. Her advertisements featured an image of Walker herself, "dark-skinned, large-boned" and highlighted

⁷ Kathy Lee Peiss, *Hope in a Jar: The Making of America's Beauty Culture* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 1998).

⁸ Noliwe M. Rooks, *Hair Raising: Beauty, Culture, and African American Women* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1996). eBook Collection (EBSCOhost). Rooks, an English professor and Associate Director of the Center for African American Studies at Princeton University, also wrote a book titled *Ladies' Pages: African American Women's Magazines and the Culture That Made Them* (2004), which provides further information regarding consumerism in the black community during this period.

⁹ Rooks' analysis continues after Walker's death, tracking the changes made in the advertisements placed by Walker's daughter, Lelia. For the purposes of this project, only those published under Madam Walker's leadership will be considered.

health rather than specifically targeting outward appearance.¹⁰ Additionally, Rooks notes the wide usage of “Madame” within the industry, a self-appointed title that inferred respectability and professionalism rather than inferiority and shame.

Historian Tiffany M. Gill’s *Beauty Shop Politics* provides broader context and lengthens the discussion surrounding the political nature of beauty. Gill traces the roots of hair care back to the antebellum period where enslaved women began caring for the hair of both black and white women. It was through the extension of this responsibility that hair care was deemed a suitable trade for black women.¹¹ *Beauty Shop Politics*, however, is mostly a treatment of the twentieth century. Gill’s discussion of Madam Walker and her contemporaries provides a strong bridge from the slavery period to the beauty shop culture of the 1970s. Simply by establishing themselves as successful business-owners, the author suggests, Madam Walker and her counterparts were resisting an engrained ideology that the business world held no place for women—especially black women.

Expanding upon the research of Bundles and Rooks, Gill illuminates how the beauty industry allowed for the creation of community institutions that would serve as the foundation for political and social change. Referring to Robin Kelley’s theory of “black space,” Gill suggests that unlike churches and barbershops, beauty salons

¹⁰ Ibid., 50.

¹¹ Gill, *Beauty Shop Politics*, 10. As argued by Glenda Gilmore, black women of this period understood both the advantages and disadvantages of their position. Seemingly unimintimidating, black women were able to use their social “invisibility” to their benefit in the advancement of causes important to the race. This was especially true when occupying socially approved spaces. See *Gender and Jim Crow*, chapter 6.

were both “black space” and “women’s space.”¹² Owners of beauty parlors were not the only beneficiaries of the industry. The market it served, or the women seeking out salons to receive services, invested in the uplift of the race by ensuring the success of local business owners who served as powerful leaders within the community.

Like Gill, Peiss’ *Hope in a Jar* traces the influence of beauty culture through the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Particularly around the turn of the century, Peiss notes a shift in the industry’s leadership, identifying a number of female entrepreneurs entering and dominating the market. Women regardless of race or class were not oppressed by the industry or bound to an ideal they rejected, Peiss argues, but rather chose to finance its development by purchasing products marketed for their consumption.

Each of these scholars recognizes the differences that existed between the black and white cosmetic industries, but including both in her analysis allows Peiss to draw specific conclusions about the relationship between the two. She asserts that the world of black beauty was from the onset a political issue as it highlighted the white supremacist implications of beauty standards in the dominant culture. She also discusses the advertisements of white companies in black newspapers. Understanding black women as a unique market, some white owned companies

¹² Ibid., 3. Robin Kelley asserts that segregation ironically “facilitated the creation and maintenance” of spaces free from white scrutiny. This byproduct of Jim Crow ordinances elevated the importance of barbershops and salons, as well as churches, bars, and other sites of recreation, from social to political spaces where working-class blacks could socialize. See “We Are Not What We Seem.”

revised the pejorative language of their ads to satisfy black customers.¹³ Others chose to promote separate products, or in extreme cases, established companies deceitfully publicized as black owned in order to capitalize.¹⁴

Lastly, Kate Dossett's recent work *Bridging Race Divides: Black Nationalism, Feminism, and Integration in the United States, 1896-1935* examines the politics of black clubwomen in this time period. Dossett identifies prominent black women who were engaged in various types of club work, each contributing to the creation of a black feminist voice as well as carving out space for women in the Black Nationalist movement. Her monograph includes Amy Jacques Garvey, Margaret Murray Washington, and the Walkers—both Madam and her daughter A'Lelia. Rejecting the assertion that club work was undertaken wholly by middle class women and assimilationist in nature, Dossett instead argues "the resistance-versus-accommodation framework does not always help to explain the complex ways in which race, class, and gender intersected in black communities in the early twentieth century."¹⁵ Dossett's argument can also be expanded to the larger political culture of the 1910s, which is often reduced to a similar binary.¹⁶

¹³ Peiss, *Hope in a Jar*, 110-112.

¹⁴ Peiss, *Hope in a Jar*, 223

¹⁵ Kate Dossett, *Bridging Race Divides: Black Nationalism, Feminism, and Integration in the United States, 1896-1935* (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 2009), 36. Dossett's work is in conversation with a number of prominent books on the history of clubwomen, including Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham's foundation work *Righteous Discontent: The Women's Movement in the Black Baptist Church, 1880-1920* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993). Higginbotham suggests that the clubwomen's "preoccupation with respectability reflected a bourgeois vision," an assertion with which Dossett clearly disagrees. See Higginbotham, page 15.

¹⁶ Represented by Booker T. Washington and W. E. B. Du Bois, this dualism does not accurately reflect the complex political climate and will be discussed further in chapter 1.

Dossett's is the first treatment of Walker to highlight the truly political nature of the woman rather than connecting her activism to a larger politicized industry. In addition to her limited affiliation with high ranking Black Nationalists like the Garveys, Dossett cites Walker's development of a black owned and operated business that solely served the black community as an example of economic nationalism and representative of her alignment with a larger Black Nationalist agenda.

In this study, I argue that Madam C. J. Walker is a complicated figure, a pragmatist that complicated the political, economic, and social terrain of the Progressive Era. Whereas many African American leaders such as W. E. B. Du Bois and Booker T. Washington adhered to a strict political philosophy, Madam Walker and many others did not and instead constructed an ideology of her own that complimented her vision of race uplift.

My scholarship contributes to the established discussion on Madam C. J. Walker in two ways. First, while it is nearly impossible to discuss the influence and legacy Walker made on her generation and those that followed without discussing the financial impact of the Walker Manufacturing Company, this thesis attempts to encourage further analysis of lesser known, but equally important, aspects of Walker's professional career. Two primary examples are the implementation of the beauty culture curricula at black colleges and trade schools and Walker's extension of the company to serve a black community that reached beyond the borders of the United States. Secondly, this work attempts to deepen our understanding of

Walker's contributions to the women of her race, including professional opportunity and concepts of beauty as it relates to the construction of a new black identity in the Progressive Era.

This thesis is divided into three thematic chapters and an epilogue that examines the legacy of Madam C. J. Walker. Chapter one chronicles the personal details of Walker's life as well as an exploration of the political arena she encountered in the early decades of the twentieth century. Also, this chapter includes an introduction to many of the important relationships Walker established with individuals such as George Knox, Booker T. Washington and Ida B. Wells-Barnett that ultimately gained her access to an elite political circle. Examining Walker's background is imperative for understanding her motivations and provides a solid foundation for further analysis of her work.

Chapter two explores the relationship Madam Walker maintained with women of her race. Through the creation of educational and professional opportunities, her involvement and contributions to organizations like the National Association of Colored Women and Mary McLeod Bethune's Daytona Institute and her role in the professionalizing the work undertaken by her agents, Walker played a pivotal role in the uplift of African American women of all classes.

Madam Walker's connection of beauty with a larger black identity led her to connect with those of African descent throughout the United States and beyond. Chapter three examines the professional, philanthropic, and political endeavors in

which Walker engaged with particular interest in the transformative journey that led to a broadened vision of race that stretched beyond the United States. Through her interaction with diasporic populations throughout the Caribbean, Central and South America, Madam C. J. Walker became an international figure.

Lastly, the epilogue explores the legacy of Madam C. J. Walker. As Black Nationalism transitioned to Black Power in the 1960s and 1970s, Walker's story and message reverberated with a new generation of activists. This chapter focuses primarily on the collection of children's biographies that have emerged in recent years. Highlighting themes of philanthropy and self-worth, the literature portrays Walker as a powerful and independent female figure for children, particularly young girls.

Chapter 1
“I got my start by giving myself a start:”
The Making of Madam C. J. Walker

In 1912, representatives of the National Negro Business League (NNBL) arrived in Chicago, Illinois, for the organization’s annual meeting. A showcase of black entrepreneurship and diligence, a crowd of more than 2,000 descended on the city to hear founder Booker T. Washington and other enterprising black business owners speak on the year’s achievements. Through three days of impassioned accounts from various speakers, beauty industry mogul Madam C. J. Walker eagerly awaited an opportunity to address the gathering. Seven years earlier, Walker had arrived in Denver, Colorado, with only two-dollars to her name. She immediately set to work—building a hair care empire that provided economic security for her family as well as thousands of black women in the United States and beyond. Emboldened by pride in her personal accomplishments and frustration with Washington’s unwillingness to place her name on the program, Walker refused to remain silent. She rose between speakers. Addressing Washington, “Surely you are not going to shut the door in my face.” She continued, “I am a woman that came from the cotton fields of the South. I was promoted from there to the wash-tub. Then I was promoted to the cook kitchen, and from there I promoted myself into the business of manufacturing hair goods and preparations.”¹ Those who attended the

¹ *Report of the 13th Annual Convention of the NNBL, Chicago: IL, 1912*, edited by Kenneth Marvin Hamilton and Robert Lester, reel 2, frame 0570, Records of the National Negro Business League (Bethesda, MD: University Publications of America, 1994). [microform].

NNBL convention showed wild support for Madam Walker, including placing her name on the official list of speakers the following year.

Self-made, Madam Walker built her empire on her “own ground.”² Due in large part to the financial independence afforded her by her profitable business, Madam C. J. Walker dedicated much of her time and resources in later years to the betterment of her race, becoming a champion for causes related to education, entrepreneurship, and equal opportunity for African Americans. In the years following her first NNBL convention, Madam Walker made many powerful friends in the black business world, as well as cultivated lasting relationships with some of her generation’s most influential political minds, including Booker T. Washington, Marcus Garvey, and Mary McLeod Bethune.

The daughter of sharecroppers, Madam Walker’s transformation from an overworked washerwoman to one of the nation’s wealthiest African Americans is a remarkable tale of diligence and personal ingenuity. This chapter examines the personal details of her life as well as the larger environment that ultimately shaped her political ideology and delineated the transformation Sarah Breedlove made from humble beginnings in rural Louisiana to Indianapolis’s famed powerhouse businesswoman. Very much inspired by Booker T. Washington, Madam Walker joined many of Washington’s ideas with those of his generation to create her own political philosophy, striving to provide the tools for self-help and personal advancement to African American women across the country. In later years,

² *Report of the 13th Annual Convention of the NNBL, Chicago: IL, 1912.*

however, Walker's vision was broadened beyond the borders of the United States as a result of her exposure to the complex political environment in which she engaged.

African American political life at the turn of the century is often reduced to the tension between Booker T. Washington's accommodationist "self-help" strategies and W. E. B. Du Bois's active pursuit of civil rights and integration for African Americans. While this debate is significant, identifying it as defining the larger political climate is also limiting. Black leaders during this period subscribed to various strands of what were termed integrationism and assimilationism, but also supported a revived nationalist movement led by Marcus Garvey and A. Philip Randolph's commitment to the struggle for labor rights.³ Du Bois, Garvey and Randolph, along with many others, constituted an incredible group of political minds who contributed heavily to the dynamic environment of intellectual exchange that was quickly placing Harlem at the center of the black world.⁴

Despite sharing a common goal for progress, these men were rarely cooperative and frequently clashed over a proposed course of action. Early supporters of Garvey's nationalist ambitions, W. E. B. Du Bois and A. Philip Randolph

³ Situated at the cuff between what is considered "classical" and "modern" Black Nationalism, the Garvey movement includes a continued push for separatism, as evidenced by his "Back to Africa" campaign. One may also argue that Garvey's form of Black Nationalism is more akin to the insular communities of self-reliance seen in the twentieth century, much like the Nation of Islam or the Black Panthers. See Moses, *Classical Black Nationalism* (1996) and Van DeBurg, *Modern Black Nationalism* (1997), both New York University Press.

⁴ Jacqueline Moore, *Booker T. Washington, W. E. B. Du Bois, and the Struggle for Racial Uplift* (Wilmington, Delaware: Scholarly Resources, 2003). See also Cary Wintz's *African American Political Thought, 1890-1930: Washington, Du Bois, Garvey and Randolph* (Armonk, NY: M. E. Sharp Publishing, 1995). An edited volume of writings and publications related to Du Bois, Washington, Garvey and Randolph, Wintz's book highlights the similarities and differences in the political ideology of these important individuals.

became disenchanted with the movement in later years, triggering the launch of the very public “Garvey Must Go” campaign in 1920 intended to derail Garvey and the work of his Universal Negro Improvement Association. Both editors of popular publications, *The Crisis* and *The Messenger* publicized Du Bois and Randolph’s scrutiny of Garvey to readers across the country.⁵

While many African American leaders did affix themselves to one philosophy or another, many more—and women in particular—are largely identified as being associated with the less controversial trend towards race uplift. Easily contoured to the aims of more defined ideological schools of thought, race uplift endorsed broad themes of enterprise and morality, such as racial solidarity, self-sufficiency and personal improvement. Just as it was not exclusive, it was also not new to this time period. Concepts relating to the amelioration of the plights facing African Americans had been discussed since the early years of slavery. A product of the religious traditions practiced by African slaves, uplift “speaks of a personal or collective spiritual—and potentially social—transcendence of worldly oppression and misery.”⁶ Shifting from a focus on freedom and group advancement, race uplift ideology was redefined in the post-Reconstruction era. Still intimately connected to the relief from oppression, African Americans came to view education as a key to

⁵ August Meier, *Negro Thought in America, 1880-1915: Racial Ideologies in the Age of Booker T. Washington* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1963).

⁶ Kevin K. Gaines, *Uplifting the Race: Black Leadership, Politics, and Culture in the Twentieth Century* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996) 1. For a greater understanding of the earlier struggles of people of African descent, see Vincent Harding, *There is a River: The Black Struggle for Freedom in America* (New York: Vintage Books, 1981).

social mobility and equal citizenship. Leaders worked tenaciously to provide educational opportunities for African Americans, founding colleges and industrial training programs to serve the wider black population. Most notable is Booker T. Washington's Tuskegee Institute, but many others such as Wiley College in Marshall, Texas, and Daytona Educational and Industrial Training School for Negro Girls in Daytona Beach, Florida, first opened their doors to black students in this period.⁷ Each of these institutions received generous support from Madam C. J. Walker for their efforts.

Widely popular among middle-class blacks, subscribers found race uplift ideology appealing for a variety of reasons. For many, uplift encouraged the undermining of the biological inferiority argument used to bar social inclusion for African Americans. Instead, uplift crusaders proposed class as a determinant rather than race and suggested that with proper attention, African Americans of all levels were assimilable and fit for citizenship.⁸ For others, particularly amongst charitable organizations dedicated to assisting the less fortunate and disadvantaged of the race, it consolidated efforts, provided awareness, and established a network of likeminded individuals for future collaborations. The National Association of Colored Women (NACW), for example, identified itself as an organization of middle-

⁷ Daytona Educational and Industrial Training School for Negro Girls was started in 1904 by Mary McLeod Bethune. In 1923, the small school merged with local Cookman College where it became a co-ed institution under the name Bethune-Cookman College.

⁸ Often viewed pejoratively, Gaines suggests this stance actually further entrenched racist sentiment by reinforcing stereotypes of the deprived poor who were in need of moral reform. See introduction of *Uplifting the Race*.

class women dedicated to the cause of race uplift, going so far as selecting “Lifting as We Climb” as the organization’s motto. Focusing on topics specifically related to women, the NACW used its resources for education, women’s suffrage, prison reform, and the launch of a publicity campaign against lynching.⁹

Coming to inhabit a large segment of Progressive era history, much scholarship has emerged in recent years on the impact of black clubwomen like the NACW in the early twentieth century.¹⁰ Most important for this examination of Madam Walker’s political evolution, Kate Dossett’s *Bridging Race Divides* complicates the role that such women’s organizations played. Centering on the intersections of uplift ideology, feminism, and Black Nationalism, she argues that black women employed various strategies well-suited to their goals, which included nationalist and Pan-Africanist approaches. Self-identifying as “race women,” these women constructed ideologies in an almost piecemeal fashion to fit their needs. Interested in social reform, Dossett also uses the NACW, individual leaders such as Mary McLeod Bethune, Amy Jacques Garvey, and Madam C. J. Walker to examine

⁹ Stephanie Shaw, “Black Club Women and the Creation of the National Association of Colored Women,” *Journal of Women’s History*, Vol. 3, issue 2 (Fall 1991): 11-25. Also, Beverly W. Jones, “Mary Church Terrell and the National Association of Colored Women, 1896-1901,” *Journal of Negro History*, Vol. 67, issue 1 (Spring 1982): 20-33.

¹⁰ See Gilmore, *Gender and Jim Crow* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996); Wolcott, *Remaking Respectability* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001), and White, *Too Heavy a Load* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1999). Each title contributes to the dynamic nature of the movement of black clubwomen significantly. White’s book is considered a foundational piece on clubwomen, considering various organizations and leaders. Gilmore has produced an interesting case-study of grassroots women in North Carolina and Wolcott focuses on interwar Detroit. More on clubwomen can be found in chapter two.

nationalist threads within the larger tradition of clubwomen.¹¹ Dossett includes a lengthy discussion of Madam C. J. Walker and her daughter, Lelia, placing their black-owned enterprise squarely at the juncture of the feminist and Black Nationalist traditions, as their work supported the economic advancement of women within an insular black community, a thought-provoking argument that provides interesting context for the continued study of Madam Walker.¹²

It is from this world that Madam C. J. Walker emerged—one that Rayford Logan referred to in 1965 as the “nadir of race relations.”¹³ Black leadership of the era lacked political consensus and society held a precarious position for women interested in entering the business or political world regardless of race. Moreover, the denial of rights to African Americans was deeply entrenched in early twentieth-century America. Yet despite her disadvantageous position, Madam C. J. Walker was able to find incredible financial success throughout the United States, which she used to advocate for the continued uplift of African Americans. The remainder of this chapter will examine her personal history and political evolution.

¹¹ Kate Dossett, *Bridging Race Divides: Black Nationalism, Feminism, and Integration in the United States, 1896-1935* (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 2009) 2-5. Though the Walkers are discussed throughout the book, their chapter encompasses pages 107-149.

¹² *Ibid.*, 108.

¹³ Rayford Logan, *The Betrayal of the Negro from Rutherford B. Hayes to Woodrow Wilson* (New York: Collier Press, 1965).

In 1867, in a ramshackle cabin in Delta, Louisiana, former slaves Owen and Minerva Breedlove welcomed their second daughter, Sarah, into the world.¹⁴ The first freeborn of the Breedlove children, Owen and Minerva hoped for a better life for Sarah, but they surely could not have imagined the all she would achieve. Like most of the black population in the rural south, the Breedloves began sharecropping after emancipation.¹⁵ Sarah spent most of her early years toiling alongside her parents and siblings in the cotton fields. By the age of seven, Sarah had suffered the deaths of both her parents. As medical care was often inaccessible, there is no recorded cause of death, but it is likely that the Breedloves fell victim to one of the many disease epidemics, such as cholera, smallpox or yellow fever, that were frequently experienced by residents of the swampy Mississippi Valley.¹⁶

After the death of her parents, Sarah moved in with her sister, Louvenia, and her sister's husband Jesse in Vicksburg, Mississippi. Jesse Powell never embraced Sarah as family. Even as a young girl, Sarah recognized Jesse's cruel nature. Whether willingly or forcibly, Sarah began working as a laundress to supplement the struggling household's meager income at a very young age.¹⁷ Though only

¹⁴ In reference to names and titles: Sarah Breedlove's marriage to Mr. C. J. Walker was her third. Until her marriage to Walker and her public use of his name in her professional life, I use the name Sarah to avoid confusion.

¹⁵ A'Lelia Bundles, *On Her Own Ground: The Life and Times of Madam C. J. Walker* (New York: Scribner Press, 2001), 25. Madam C. J. Walker's manuscript collection housed at the Indianapolis Historical Association offers very little information on her life and business prior to her arrival in Indianapolis. Therefore, the early years of her biography rely heavily on the Bundles biography, written by her great-great-granddaughter who has access to additional materials cited as Madam Walker's Family Collection.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 34-35.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 36-37.

fourteen, Sarah wed Moses McWilliams to escape her current situation. An arrangement that appeared more pragmatic than emotive, Sarah seized the opportunity to care for a home of her own. Three years later, Sarah gave birth to the McWilliams' only child, a daughter whom they named Lelia.¹⁸ McWilliams died unexpectedly in 1888, leaving Sarah widowed with a small child at only twenty years of age. Much like her parents, Sarah dreamed of finding a better life for herself and her young daughter. Like many others in what was termed the First Great Migration, Sarah headed north to St. Louis in search of new opportunity where she continued working as a laundress, a job performed almost exclusively by African American women.¹⁹

Historian Jacqueline Jones identifies the task of laundering as “the province of black women exclusively” as white women widely regarded manual labor with disdain regardless of her social status.²⁰ Working-class black women had scanty more opportunities for work in the urban north as in the rural south. Many labored in the homes of more affluent whites, as domestics, and many more as laundresses. Having only completed three months of formal education, Sarah was nearly illiterate, which only further limited her prospects. In addition to the availability of

¹⁸ Bundles, *On Her Own Ground*, 40-41.

¹⁹ Joe Trotter, *The Great Migration in Historical Perspective: New Dimensions on Race, Class, and Gender* (Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 1991).

²⁰ Jacqueline Jones, *Labor of Love, Labor of Sorrow: Black Women, Work, and the Family, from Slavery to the Present* (New York: Basic Books, 1985), 108. Also, Darlene Clark Hine, *A Thread of Hope* contributes to our understanding of the work performed by African American women into the 1940s, highlighting the arduous nature of agricultural and domestic work, including laundering.

stable income through laundering, black mothers like Sarah also embraced the flexibility it often afforded, however limited it may be. Laundering provided “a modicum of control over their time and childcare responsibilities,” as wash work was done at home and often with the help of older children.²¹ However, Sarah also recognized the difficult and arduous nature of the work: “What are you going to do when you grow old and your back gets stiff?” she said to herself.²²

Sarah also found that the urban environment of St. Louis made her painfully aware of her ragged outward appearance. St. Louis boasted a small yet significant population of educated and upward-moving black men and women who made a lasting impact on the young woman. More than just their climb up the social ladder caught her eye: they looked different from her. Compared to Sarah’s dark skin tone, many may have had a lighter complexion, but it was their well-groomed hair that she associated most with their success. Like many southern blacks migrating to urban centers, Sarah’s hygiene and diet were very poor, causing her own hair to become brittle and fall out and ultimately becoming a source of deep embarrassment for her.²³

In the coming years, though the origins of their relationship are hazy, Sarah Breedlove would acquaint Annie Minerva Turnbo—a woman who ultimately introduced her to the business world and in later years became her fiercest

²¹ Jones, *Labor of Love*, 108-109.

²² Gill, *Beauty Shop Politics*, 20.

²³ Bundles, *On Her Own Ground*, 63.

competitor. Turnbo was a black hair care professional who specialized in the growing of hair through the use of scalp treatments and moisturizing products. With the regular use of Turnbo's products, Sarah saw a marked improvement in the health of her own hair. We may not know the details of their introduction, but it is clear that Sarah Breedlove became one of Turnbo's early sales representatives—a walking, talking success story of Annie Turnbo's hair growing methods.²⁴

In 1904, the city of St. Louis hosted the World's Fair. Booker T. Washington and his third wife, Margaret Murray Washington, who was serving as president of the National Association of Colored Women, both spoke at events around the city that year. The 1904 World's Fair, sometimes referred to as the Louisiana Purchase Exposition, found mixed reviews within the black community. Refused accommodations and concessions on the grounds, some chose to stay away, but many others of all social classes were drawn by the promise of jobs or the opportunity to hear leaders like Washington and Du Bois give public addresses. Enamored with Washington, it is likely that Sarah attended both the fair and the NACW convention held at St. Paul's Baptist Church, where she was also a member, in July of the same year.²⁵ Very shortly after the World's Fair, Walker began entertaining thoughts of going into business for herself by concocting products of her own recipe.

²⁴ Bundles, *On Her Own Ground*, 65. Turnbo married multiple times both before and after her interaction with Walker and is referred to by various names based on source. Her aliases include Annie Malone, Turnbo-Pope, or Turnbo-Malone.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 72-75.

During this period, Sarah had married again. The marriage between her and second husband, John Davis was troubled from the beginning, however. With her daughter Lelia off to college, Sarah was becoming restless in St. Louis. Encouraged by the words of self-help and entrepreneurship that she surely heard from Booker T. Washington and his wife, Sarah dreamt of moving westward and starting a business of her own. Although they never legally divorced, Sarah left Davis in 1903.²⁶ Equipped with the newfound confidence her improved appearance gave her, Sarah did venture westward to Denver, Colorado, in 1905. She continued selling Annie Turnbo's products to support herself initially. She also accepted wash work and cooked in the home of a respected pharmacist. In her scarce free time, Sarah began experimenting with hair preparations.²⁷

In time, Sarah was able to develop a hair-growing product of her own. When asked where the recipe came from in later years, Madam Walker spoke of a dream she had after having prayed for direction. "I had a dream, and in that dream a big black man appeared to me and told me what to mix for my hair. Some of the remedy was from Africa, but I sent for it, mixed it, put it on my scalp and in a few weeks my hair was coming in faster than it had ever fallen out."²⁸ Whether the formula was in fact a product of divine inspiration, a tweaked version of Annie Turnbo's product, or a concoction she created with the assistance of the pharmacist for whom she

²⁶ Bundles, *On Her Own Ground*, 50, 56.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 60.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 60.

worked, is unclear. Regardless, it did provide a solution for both Sarah's damaged hair and her precarious economic situation.

In 1906, Sarah and Mr. Charles Joseph Walker held a small marriage ceremony in Denver, Colorado. Clearly overtaken with his adoration for her, Walker had followed Sarah west after the two began courting in St. Louis. A newspaperman, Mr. Walker understood the power of proper advertising. Surely benefiting from her husband's acumen, Sarah adopted the title Madam C. J. Walker and began marketing a product line of her own development. Elaborate advertisements for the Walker Company appeared regularly in local black newspapers such as *The Denver Statesman*. She worked tirelessly, promoting her products door to door as well as opening a small salon. With C. J.'s help, Madam Walker also built a substantial mail order business that grew her profits exponentially. As her client base expanded, Walker recruited and trained agents of her own to share the workload and satisfy the demand she had discovered in Denver and the surrounding area.²⁹

Denver represents another important moment in the transformation of Sarah Breedlove. In addition to serving as the metaphoric birthplace of Madam C. J. Walker as a public figure, her company, and her products, it was here that Madam C. J. Walker developed the business model that led to her incredible wealth. Walker continued to invest heavily in newspaper advertisements for exposure and relied on the development of a core of agents to continually expand her customer base. Using

²⁹ Bundles, *On Her Own Ground*, 84-88.

this model, Walker products were soon available in cities throughout the United States and in time, South America and the Caribbean.

The success she found was inspiring, fueling a pursuit for sustained growth that continued until her death in 1919. The black community in Denver was small, however, and despite the success she had found there, the city offered limited potential for the level of economic growth she envisioned. In 1907, the Walkers began a lengthy trip through the southern states of Oklahoma, Texas, Arkansas, Louisiana, Mississippi, and Alabama where the response was overwhelmingly positive. Women often wrote letters to Madam Walker thanking her for her products and boasting about results. Julia Coldwell, a Dallas woman, exclaimed “My hair was the talk of the town...I am quite an advertisement here for your goods.”³⁰

This early trip also established the protocol Madam Walker followed for most of her future travels. The pillars of black communities helped to create opportunities for her. Upon arrival in a new city, she introduced herself to church officials, public servants, fraternal organization leaders, and others who could provide her with an interested audience. Staging demonstrations in town after town along the road, Walker provided hair treatments, expanded her mail order business, and trained agents to continue serving customers once she had moved on. Now confident in the power of her product and the profits it could earn, the Walkers decided to leave the Denver market to the now experienced agents and began

³⁰ Bundles, *On Her Own Ground*, 92-93.

planning for further expansion—including the establishment of a new headquarters in the eastern urban center of Pittsburgh.³¹

The eastern city allowed the Walkers to greatly expand operations. Pittsburgh, one the nation’s largest industrial centers, was well-connected by road and rail, offered a workforce accustomed to manufacturing work, and also provided a new client base for Walker’s products. In 1907, Madam Walker opened a hair parlor on Wylie Avenue in the heart of black Pittsburgh. In search of treatments, women flocked to Walker’s salon in great numbers. Many also enrolled in courses at the newly founded Lelia Beauty School to join the ranks as Walker agents, most having believed they “would never be more than maids and laundresses.”³² The next step, Walker believed, was the construction of a factory devoted to the manufacture of her goods. Constantly on the road, it was becoming more and more difficult to maintain a stock of items to treat customers and sell. Her first pitch for investment in stock for a factory project was made to Reverend Charles Parrish and Alice Kelly. Both were well established in the Pittsburgh community. Unable to provide much more than enthusiasm, Parrish and Kelly instead encouraged Walker to approach Booker T. Washington and the National Negro Business League for financial support. Walker’s attempt to raise \$50,000 never came to fruition, but it did spark correspondence between the two that continued until his death in 1915.³³

³¹ Bundles, *On Her Own Ground*, 89-93.

³² *Ibid.*, 96.

³³ *Ibid.*, 100-101.

During a business visit to Indianapolis in 1909, Madam Walker was introduced to Dr. Joseph Ward, a man deeply involved in the city's medical community, who convinced her of the wonderful resources his city had to offer.³⁴ Easily accessible, Indianapolis was well connected to many major urban centers by rail, waterway and highway system— important attributes in Madam Walker's decision to finally locate a permanent manufacturing operation in the center of downtown Indianapolis. The following year, Madam Walker left the Pittsburgh operation in the capable hands of her now grown daughter to develop the Indianapolis operations. She purchased a home and began construction of a salon. Undeterred by her failure to find investors in Pittsburgh, Walker also personally financed the construction of a factory to manufacture her goods. Upon its completion, the factory employed only black workers and created many new jobs in Indianapolis.³⁵

The shift to Indianapolis was a major turning point in the growth of the company. With the establishment of a factory and beauty school, both physical representations of her ever increasing success, Madam Walker's business had, almost overnight, become too large for her to manage on her own. Madam Walker was always her own best agent, increasing profits by as much as twenty-five percent each year, but with little education, she struggled with accounting and managerial tasks. By 1910, the company was earning more than \$10,000 annually, a sum that

³⁴ Bundles, *On Her Own Ground*, 102.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 135.

equals nearly \$200,000 today. She recognized her need for assistance with managing the daily business operations of her continuously growing enterprise.³⁶ Freeman Briley Ransom and Robert Lee Brokenburr, two of Indy's brightest young attorneys, became her counsel and quickly her loyal friends, both playing large roles in the advancement of her company.³⁷ In September of 1911, shortly after beginning work with Walker, the two men assisted with the incorporation for the Madam C. J. Walker Manufacturing Company of Indiana. Providing the funds for the stock herself, Madam Walker, her husband C. J. Walker, and daughter Lelia Walker composed the first board of directors.³⁸

Freeman B. Ransom, in particular, became a very close friend of Madam Walker's as time progressed, providing advice on topics of both a professional and personal nature. Through correspondence, the two often discussed political debates, kidded about Walker's propensity towards spending, and spoke fondly of the loving relationship between "Mother Walkie" and Ransom's young son, Frank.³⁹ Often rewarding her success and hard work with luxurious purchases such as a new car or a prized pair of diamond solitaire earrings from Tiffany & Co., Ransom often joked, "I take pleasure in the fact, that there can hardly be anything else, for you to

³⁶ Bundles, *On Her Own Ground*, 107.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 106.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 110.

³⁹ Letter to Madam C. J. Walker from Ransom, 2 August 1915, box 1, folder 15, MCJW Papers, Indianapolis Historical Society.

buy.”⁴⁰ Both concerned with causes of race uplift, Ransom and Walker shared an interest in philanthropic involvement, both patronizing the local YMCA for example. Their shared commitment to causes related to black life in Indianapolis and beyond cultivated a relationship of mutual respect and understanding that can be gleaned from their lively correspondence.

With the day-to-day operation of her business left in the hands of Ransom, who proved a more than capable professional, Madam Walker could now travel freely to grow her business. Though she considered Indianapolis home, she was more often than not traveling, spending as much as a year and a half on the road at one time.⁴¹ Her trips were often physically and emotionally grueling. In addition to being away from the comforts of home for extended periods of time, traveling through regions adhering to strict Jim Crow segregation laws proved especially difficult. Walker often stayed as a guest in the private homes of friends and new-found acquaintances in such cases. Walker regularly made speaking engagements along the road as well. Sharing her rags to riches story, Madam Walker’s lectures certainly encouraged self-determination and a strong work ethic. She often punctuated her lectures with images presented with a slide projector—the most famous being a photograph of her home on the plantation where her parents

⁴⁰ Letter to Madam C. J. Walker, 2 August 1915, box 2, folder 17, MCJW Papers, Indianapolis Historical Society. Also from this folder: Receipt from Tiffany & Co., 9 March 1919. The referred to earrings were appraised at \$5100.00 in 1919.

⁴¹ *Report of the 14th Annual Convention of the NNBL, Philadelphia, PA, 1913*, edited by Kenneth Marvin Hamilton and Robert Lester, reel 3, frame 0709, Records of the National Negro Business League (Bethesda, MD: University Publications of America, 1994). [microform].

labored as sharecroppers and evidencing the substantial gains she had made as a result of her work. In many ways endorsing nationalist themes, Walker presented financial self-sufficiency as a solution to many issues facing the race. As both her name and products became better known, the speaking opportunities came more and more frequently. In a letter to Ransom, she stated, "I am getting invitations from many of the ministers of the surrounding towns asking me to come and give lectures."⁴² Madam Walker had established herself and was now being recognized for her success and actively sought out to share the story of her ascension with others.

By 1912, she had made many powerful friends who helped catapult her into a position of greater notoriety. Again, with professionals assisting with the financial managing of the company, Madam Walker could now pursue other interests. She became acquainted with many of the city's most notable personalities, and through them, invested herself in social issues facing the black population. In 1911, *Indianapolis Freeman* publisher and personal friend of Walker's, George Knox, spearheaded a campaign for the construction of a YMCA for the black youth of the city. Believing it would improve many of the community's urban problems, she made a generous \$1,000 donation—which placed her name on a short list of contributors at that amount or higher.⁴³ An active member of the National Association of Colored Women (NACW) where she became deeply involved with

⁴² Letter to Ransom from Madam Walker, 9 September 1915, box 1, folder 2, MCJW Papers, Indianapolis Historical Society.

⁴³ Bundles, *On Her Own Ground*, 113-120.

many of their most visible projects, Madam Walker became acquainted with NACW member Mary McLeod Bethune, an educator from Florida with whom she shared a passion for the education of young black girls. Bethune's Daytona Normal and Industrial Institute for Negro Girls would become one of Madam Walker's favorite charities—evidenced by the \$5,000 gift she gave to the school just before her death.⁴⁴

Capitalizing on the wide network her civic involvement provided, Madam Walker worked to establish her training program at black technical trade schools across the country. Affiliating the training program with a college or university, she believed, would elevate the status of both students and seasoned agents by attaching a sense of professionalism and respectability to the field as a whole. While some institutions did not recognize the interconnected nature of their educational goals and Madam Walker's philosophy of empowerment, others such as Roger Williams College, Wylie College, and Mary McLeod Bethune's Daytona Normal and Industrial Institute for Negro Girls were among the first to offer her curriculum. The process for installation of such educational programs as well as the impact it had on the profession will be discussed in depth in a later chapter.

Although Madam Walker had kept regular correspondence with race leader and president of Tuskegee Institute Booker T. Washington and donated generously to his institution, their relationship was not always mutually supportive. Walker's

⁴⁴ Bundles, *On Her Own Ground*, 130. With inflation, Madam Walker's \$5,000 gift to the Daytona Normal and Industrial Institute would amount to approximately \$60,000 in 2012. See page 272 of Bundles's *On Her Own Ground* for other charities named in her final arrangements.

initial proposal to install the program at Tuskegee was refused; Washington stated “with reference to place your work in our course of study; our Trustees and Executive Council do not see their way clear to follow your suggestion.”⁴⁵ In time, however, Washington and the other Tuskegee administrators conceded, allowing the addition of the beauty culture program to the institution’s curriculum where it would remain one of the university’s most successful programs for years after Washington’s death.⁴⁶

In the final years of her life, Madam Walker’s daughter urged her to relocate to New York. Longing to be near Lelia, Walker agreed. She began construction on a palatial thirty-room estate, Irvington-on-Hudson, also known by the name Villa Lewaro.⁴⁷ Suffering from kidney disease, Madam Walker was relieved when she was able to finally settle in upon the completion of the renovations. Advised by doctors to relax, Walker began spending more time at her estate, but she did not sit idle. In January of 1919, Walker invited the representatives of the highly political International League of Darker Peoples to her home, an organization of which she claimed membership.⁴⁸ Walker also showed continued support for the NAACP’s anti-lynching campaign and encouraged many of her agents to become engaged in

⁴⁵ Letter from Booker T. Washington to Madam Walker, 22 May 1914. *The Booker T. Washington Papers*, edited by Louis R. Harlan and Raymond Smock, Vol. 13 (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1972), 30.

⁴⁶ Gill, *Beauty Shop Politics*, 27.

⁴⁷ Bundles, *On Her Own Ground*, 215. On page 221, Bundles discusses the origins of the name Villa Lewaro. Famed tenor and friend of daughter Lelia, Enrico Caruso, created the name—an acronym that combine the first letters of each of Lelia Walker Robinson’s names.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 257.

pressing social issues.⁴⁹ In April of 1919, her health quickly deteriorated and at the age of 51, Madam Walker died on May 25. Reflecting her commitment to philanthropy in life, Madam Walker’s final will and testament marked large sums of money for donations to various organizations and causes, such as Tuskegee Institute and Mary Bethune’s Daytona Normal and Industrial Institute. She also left her home, Villa Lewaro, to the NAACP after the death of her daughter—provided that the organization was continuing its work towards racial uplift.⁵⁰

In the fifteen short years that bridged Madam C. J. Walker’s arrival in Denver to her death at Villa Lewaro, the beauty industry pioneer was able to make many important contributions to the uplift of African Americans, including bettering the economic situation for herself and many others. Most importantly, Walker provided a rare opportunity for the black community to acquire the tools necessary for self-improvement. Through educational opportunities and better and safer working conditions within a black-owned, black-operated business, employees and agents of the Walker Beauty Company could now establish stable households and better the lives of their children.

Fiercely committed to philanthropy, Madam Walker also extended her aid beyond those affiliated with her company. Her generous donation towards the

⁴⁹ Bundles, *On Her Own Ground*, 267.

⁵⁰ “Final Will and Testament of Sarah Walker”, Apr 29, 1919, box 3, folder 4, MCJW Papers, Indianapolis Historical Society. Should the committee be disappointed with the work of the NAACP at the time of A’Lelia’s death, Madam Walker’s will states the property should instead be given to the organization doing “the most for Racial Uplift.”

creation of a YMCA center to serve the black community in Indianapolis drew national attention, impressing important figures like Booker T. Washington who chose to mention it in his introduction of Walker at the 1913 National Negro Business League convention in Philadelphia. Whether or not the organization approached Walker for financial support, she gave freely when she was introduced to causes that positively impacted the black community. Walker's willingness to interact with black leaders in both the business and philanthropic arenas opened opportunities for continued political involvement and growth.

But surely those who benefited most from the work of Madam C. J. Walker were African American women and girls. Walker helped to open an entirely new field for women workers that offered autonomy and opportunity for advancement. Additionally, through the establishment of educational programs to support her agents, particularly her stubborn determination to offer her beauty culture curriculum at black colleges and trade schools, Walker worked to professionalize the work done by culturists like her. Chapter two engages the relationship between Madam Walker's commitment to racial uplift and women, examining the role of college beauty programs as well as the organization of her agents.

Chapter 2
“Woman’s Duty to Woman:”
Madam C. J. Walker, the Walker Agents, and the Renegotiation of Beauty

On August 17, 1917, Madam C. J. Walker called to order the first National Convention of the Mme. C. J. Walker Hair Culturists’ Union of America. The culmination of years of planning and structuring, Walker stood before hundreds of her best agents—women who shared both her passion for the work and her vision for the future. They trekked from states north and south, east and west until Philadelphia’s Union Baptist Church was filled with “two hundred well dressed women” ready to take part in the historic meeting.¹ Influenced heavily by the political climate of the day, Walker addressed the assembly, her words full of patriotism and protest: “We must not let our love of country, our patriotic loyalty, cause us to abate one whit of our protest against wrong and injustice.”² This moment was truly special for Madam C. J. Walker, the organization serving as a symbol of both her lifelong pursuit of uplift and her commitment to the women of her race.

What had begun as a simple business idea intended to change the circumstances of one individual had by 1917 come to transform the lives of thousands of black women in the United States and beyond. Continuing to grow the company she had built “on her own ground,” Madam Walker provided an opportunity for financial independence to an entire generation of women and their families, promising personal autonomy and prosperity in exchange for hard work. This chapter aims to uncover the tremendous

¹ “Minutes of the First National Convention.” 30-31 August 1917, box 12, folder 26, MCJW Papers, Indianapolis Historical Society.

² Ibid.

impact Madam C. J. Walker and the Walker Manufacturing Company had on the personal and professional lives of these women. Through the creation of the Mme. C. J. Walker Hair Culturists' Union of America, a restructuring of the training of agents, and encouragement of philanthropic work, Madam C. J. Walker converted her company into a vehicle for the pursuit of her commitment to racial uplift.

The Mme. C. J. Walker Hair Culturists' Union of America served as a cornerstone in Walker's plan for the advancement of women. Just as Walker used her own financial independence to support her political ambitions, she used the organization of agents to create a more socially and politically engaged workforce. Through sponsored philanthropic causes and engagement with key political events, such as protest of the East St. Louis Riot in 1917, Walker Agents became crusaders for Walker's style of race uplift. Agents across the country were organized into locally-maintained chapters. Each year, delegates were selected to represent their chapter at the annual national convention, where business was discussed and the year's successes celebrated.

Additionally, in the nineteen-teens, through a collaborative effort between the company and the presidents of various respectable black colleges and trade institutions, Walker established her beauty culture curriculum at Tuskegee Institute, Wiley College, Roger Williams University, and others educational institutions. By placing the curricula on college campuses, Walker was able to extend access to specialized personal instruction to those unable to reach her Lelia Beauty Schools in Pittsburgh or Harlem. Understanding the negative perception with which many viewed the beauty industry, these college programs also encouraged a sense of respectability for the trade and aided in professionalizing the work undertaken by Walker Agents everywhere.

Lastly, Walker launched an incredibly public campaign attempting to renegotiate ingrained perceptions of black beauty primarily through her advertisements. Industry professionals, like herself, found critics at every turn, including race leaders, religious officials, and politically engaged journalists. A profoundly political idea during this period, Walker's advertisements attempted to reshape, in many ways, concepts of identity and blackness among African American women. The majority of the company's advertisements focused on Walker's story of personal success, but they often included photographs of the products and the businesswoman herself rather than opting to use those of light-skinned models.

Moving chronologically, the natural progression of the chapter closely resembles that of Walker's personal evolution. Beginning with simply sharing financial benefits provided to women associated with the company, Walker's approach to uplift soon expanded to include an emphasis on charitable giving and activism among agents. In addition to providing the economic tools for women to elevate themselves, she also invested in the education and professionalization of the trade, encouraged political engagement on a national and even international level, and pushed her agents to give generously of themselves and their resources for the benefit of the race. In only fifteen short years, Madam C. J. Walker and her company were able to change the lives of thousands of women of her generation and thousands more in the years to come.

When Madam C. J. Walker spoke at the Fourteenth Annual National Negro Business League Convention in 1913, her speech focused on the methods she employed

to find success in the business world as an African American woman, as well as what her success meant for those in her employment. “I have made it possible for many colored women to abandon the wash-tub for more pleasant and profitable occupation,” she proclaimed, adding “the girls and women of our race must not be afraid to take hold of business endeavor...and wring success out of a number of business opportunities that lie at their very doors.”³ Her speech at that year’s meeting was one example of how Madam Walker continuously encouraged African American women to make active decisions regarding their futures. Additionally, her lectures always extended an invitation to all women to join the ranks as Walker Agents.

The earliest sales agents of Walker’s products came from the greater Denver area. Just one year after her arrival, the market had grown too large for one woman to manage alone and Walker was compelled to seek assistance from within the growing black community. In early years, before the first Lelia Beauty College was established, all agents received training under the direction of Madam Walker herself. Making a small investment in her own future, a woman received the tools Walker considered necessary to succeed in the beauty industry. Enrollment in her course cost twenty-five dollars, for which new agents received fourteen dollars in product in order to begin providing services, a steel Walker pressing comb, and instruction in proper technique for giving treatments.⁴ Walker kept the cost low to ensure that even the “very poorest may be

³ *Report of the 14th Annual Convention of the NNBL, Philadelphia, PA, 1913*, reel 3, frame 0709 [microform].

⁴ “Madam C. J. Walker,” *Indianapolis Freeman*, 22 June 1912, [NewsBank/Readex: America’s Historical Newspapers]. Walker is often wrongly given credit for the invention of the pressing, or straightening comb. While it is difficult to say who did invent the pressing comb, it is clear that women had been using it in Paris as early as 1872 and similar items appeared in the Sears and Roebuck catalog in the 1890s. Walker did improve the device for her purposes by widening the teeth and popularized its use among African Americans. See Rooks’ *Hair Raising*, pg 51.

benefited,” but quite often she encountered eager students who still could not afford to take the course.⁵ Having once occupied a similar position, Madam Walker intervened, often allowing the very poor to take her course at a reduced rate, allowed payment at a later date, or simply waived the fee completely. Trustingly, she noted in a letter to Ransom, “I put them on their honor to pay where they can.”⁶ Walker considered helping disadvantaged women a mutually beneficial relationship. In time, the women would make earn an income, improving her own circumstances while also generating profit for the company.

With the Denver customers well-tended, Walker began traveling more widely. She reserved time to train agents in each city she visited. She found her proposal well-received among lower class women in particular. As discussed in chapter one, the job opportunities presented to African American women in this period were very narrow, forcing many to remain in low paying domestic service positions.⁷ Working-class women flocked to her engagements to hear her speak. Employment with the Walker Manufacturing Company offered many benefits, including financial independence, the freedom to determine one’s own schedule, and the safety of serving an insular black market. Most importantly, this was a lucrative industry. Walker Agents earned more in a week than laundresses did in a month or more, on average—with the most successful beauty shop owners earning as much as \$250 per week while a domestic servant earns

⁵ Advertisement, *Denver Statesman*, 5 May 1906, [NewsBank/Readex: America’s Historical Newspapers].

⁶ Letter to Ransom from Madam Walker, 26 September 1916, MCJW Papers, Indianapolis Historical Society.

⁷ Jacqueline Jones, *Labor of Love, Labor of Sorrow: Black Women, Work, and the Family from Slavery to the Present* (New York: Basic Books, 1985).

but five.⁸ Biographer A'Lelia Bundles notes “the twin promises of enhanced beauty and financial gain...served as a magnet to women who had always believed they would never be more than maids and laundresses.”⁹ While traveling just south of Denver, Walker was able to train forty-five new agents during a single ten-day trip.¹⁰

When the Walkers left for Pittsburgh, her agents were already thriving in Denver. Pleased with the growth the company was experiencing, Walker decided to open her first Lelia Beauty College to meet the need for new agents. Named for her daughter, the Lelia Beauty College soon became the most efficient means to provide training. With much interest in the program, a second school was opened in Harlem in January of 1916 under her daughter's direction. By the end of 1917, both the Pittsburgh and Harlem locations were graduating twenty new agents every six weeks.¹¹

The education the women received at the Lelia Beauty Colleges was quite similar to those who took their training straight from Madam Walker, but also taught additional skills, such as manicuring, massage, and etiquette.¹² Agents were also expected to tidy work spaces before each client. Expectations included sweeping to “clean up hair and matches from the floor,” cleansing and sterilizing equipment, and opening windows to

⁸ “Queen of Gotham's Colored 400,” *The Literary Digest*, undated, box 12, folder 17, MCJW Papers, Indianapolis Historical Society. Many of the most successful agents entered the market early, rising to a the management of her own beauty shop. Normal agents could expect to earn a between \$15 and \$40 a week—a good wage in this period.

⁹ Bundles, *On Her Own Ground*, 96.

¹⁰ “Madam C. J. Walker,” *Denver Statesman*, 27 July 1906, [NewsBank/Readex: America's Historical Newspapers].

¹¹ “Queen of Gotham's Colored 400,” *The Literary Digest*.

¹² Proposal sent to Normal Industrial & Agricultural College, box 1, folder 17, MCJW Papers, Indianapolis Historical Society.

release odors and “drive out the germs.”¹³ Training also stressed the importance of maintaining one’s personal appearance. Upon enrollment in the program, students received a uniform that consisted of a white blouse and dark skirt that was to be pressed before wear. In addition to paying “proper attention” to a client’s hair, the agent was instructed on creating an inviting atmosphere where women, regardless of their class or occupation, could feel pampered. Such an investment in one’s physical and mental well-being would of course encourage an improved sense of self-worth.¹⁴

After the establishment of the Lelia Beauty Schools, fewer and fewer agents were receiving training directly from Walker. Walker welcomed new agents to the company by mail in the weeks after completing training. A lengthy letter, the document contained many important details directing new agents. Stressing the importance of also knowing the product, as well as acquainting oneself with the history of Madam Walker and the Walker Manufacturing Company, the document contained much information regarding the investment agents were expected to make in their clients. “Keep in mind that you have something that the person standing before you really needs.”¹⁵ The letter also provided words of encouragement. “Finally, don’t doubt your own ability,” and reassured that the Walker Manufacturing Company was already available to those seeking advice, for the company takes a “personal interest in its agents.”¹⁶

¹³ “Hints to Agents,” undated, box 7, folder 4, MCJW Papers, Indianapolis Historical Society.

¹⁴ Rooks, *Hair Raising*, pp. 63-64.

¹⁵ Letter to New Sales Agents from the Walker Manufacturing Company, undated, box 7, folder 5, MCJW Papers, Indianapolis Historical Society.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

The attentiveness Madam C. J. Walker regularly showed her agents was not driven by pure pursuit of profit, but rather a deep commitment to the uplift of the race and its women in particular. Strengthened by their financial security, women employed by the Walker Manufacturing Company were quickly becoming influential members of their respective communities. Walker soon realized, however, that as both her agents and her company became better known, criticism of the trade was also growing more prevalent. The coming years led to many changes in the operation of the company to combat such negative perceptions, including the development of a college-sponsored beauty culture curricula and the establishment of a national organization committed to protect the rights of agents.

Because of the stigma attached to beauty and aesthetic work generally, Madam Walker felt the next step after extending employment opportunities to African American women was to improve the status her agents held in the larger society. While speaking at her second National Negro Business League convention, she discussed this issue. “Now I realized that the so-called higher walker of life, many were prone to look down upon ‘hair dressers’ as they called us.” Often chastised, Walker’s products drew criticism for straightening hair and embracing white concepts of beauty. “They didn’t have a very high opinion of our calling, so I had to go down and dignify this work, so much so that many of the best women of our race are now engaged in this line of business.”¹⁷

The primary critique of the black beauty industry preyed upon the deep feelings of inferiority held by African American women through the promotion of straightening

¹⁷ *Report of the 14th Annual Convention of the NNBL, Philadelphia, PA, 1913*, reel 3, frame 0709 [microform].

techniques. Critics accused Walker and others of embracing a white standard of beauty. The black church was especially disapproving of the industry, arguing it undermined the very concepts of race pride it claimed to support.¹⁸ Some black preachers denounced it from the pulpit: “God made your hair like that and it’s a sin to straighten your hair.”¹⁹ Social commentators and journalists often published similar destructive notions about the work of Walker and the larger beauty industry. The connection these men made linking the pursuit of beauty and sinfulness still proved a formidable obstacle. So too did the opposition held by Booker T. Washington and other race leaders.

A strong supporter of capitalist enterprise, Booker T. Washington occupied a precarious position in terms of the beauty industry. Washington encouraged African Americans to make a place for themselves within the business world, yet for many years, he refused to lend his support to Walker and other successful beauty industry entrepreneurs. This is perhaps best exemplified by his repeated refusal to allow Madam Walker opportunities to address gatherings he organized. Also, his early dismissal of her proposal to install a training program at Tuskegee Institute references his lack of respect for the trade, which he too saw as upholding white concepts of beauty.²⁰ The Garvey movement also offered staunch opposition to Walker’s trade. In a 1926 *Negro World*

¹⁸ Historian Evelyn Brooks discusses the church’s position as encouraging the maintenance of a respectable appearance as part of an ideology of uplift embrace of middle class values. One may argue that this stance could be interpreted to include the long, straightened hairstyles popular among black women in this period. While the author does not address beauty specifically, Madam Walker’s pursuit of “respectability” for her agents and clients parallels Higginbotham’s work on the politics of respectability. See *Righteous Discontent*, 14-15, 186-194.

¹⁹ Susannah Walker, *Style and Status: Selling Beauty to African American Women, 1920-1975* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 2007), 65. While Walker’s study does not include the years the Walker Manufacturing Company was under the control of Madam Walker, she does discuss the difficulties she faced.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 12-14. Also: *Report of the 13th Annual Convention of the NNBL, Chicago, IL, 1912*, reel 2, frame 0543 [microform].

editorial, Amy Jacques Garvey responded to a publication by poet Langston Hughes. Garvey openly condemned the “class of ‘want-to-be-white’ Negroes” who straightened their hair in an attempt to “share the blessings of the prosperous white race.”²¹ The piece published by Hughes expressed a similar sentiment: “So I am ashamed for the black poet who says, ‘I want to be a poet, not a Negro poet,’ as though his own racial world were not as interesting as any other world.”²²

This race “world” that Hughes speaks of exhibited many ideological viewpoints affecting the identity formation African Americans. While the Hughes publication came after the death of Madam Walker, similar opinions were being shared years earlier. Forced to grapple with the negative energy coming from all directions, Walker attempted to “dignify” the profession in various ways, the most important of which were the creation of a national organization promoting professional and philanthropic attainment, the development of curricula at black colleges and trade schools, and a sustained effort through advertisements.

By 1915, Madam C. J. Walker had accumulated a long list of personal achievements, but when given the chance, she most often boasted of the work being completed by the agents with whom she was connected. She reveled in sharing success stories and attending social events while traveling. In September of that year, Walker embarked on a lengthy trip through the states of the American West. In a letter to Ransom, she stated: “I am sure that this trip is going to add at least two or three thousand

²¹ Amy Jacques Garvey, “I Am a Negro—And Beautiful,” in *Modern Black Nationalism: From Marcus Garvey to Louis Farrakhan*, edited by William L. Van Deburg (New York: New York University Press, 1997), 57. Originally published in Garvey’s *Negro World*, 10 July 1926.

²² Langston Hughes, “The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain,” in *Modern Black Nationalism: From Marcus Garvey to Louis Farrakhan*, edited by William L. Van Deburg (New York: New York University Press, 1997), 56.

per month to my income.” Even at such an early stage in the development of western cities, Walker realized the potential that lay in faraway California. Having left Denver nearly ten years earlier, she knew few of the women working in western states. Upon organizing a social gathering with her agents, Walker was displeased to discover that there were corrupt women in the city posing as agents, altering her products, and undercutting her prices. While this angered Walker, it also led her to begin earnestly discussing how to protect the interest of her agents.

Organizing a union of agents so widely dispersed proved to be an arduous task. With most of the logistic work remaining solely in Walker’s hands, she spoke before groups in cities across the nation as she traveled in the mid-nineteen teens. More clubs than chapters of a labor union, most began as informal social gatherings, much like the one she arranged in Los Angeles. The groups often started small; the greater Los Angeles area began with only twelve women.²³ Yet more and more meetings were held in the coming months, resulting in a large percentage of agents becoming involved in local clubs. All women who had “learned the art of hair growing under the Walker system” were urged to join.²⁴ After many years of organizational work, the independent chapters were convened for the first time in Philadelphia in 1917 and formed into a large national organization.²⁵

²³ Letter to Ransom from Madam Walker, 9 September 1915 ,box 1, folder 2, MCJW Papers, Indianapolis Historical Society.

²⁴ “The Walker Club: Young Ladies Organize a Class in Hair Growing,” *Washington Bee*, 20 September 1913 [NewsBank/Readex: America’s Historical Newspapers].

²⁵ “Notice to the Agents of the Madam C. J. Walker Manufacturing Company,” undated, box 7, folder 3, MCJW Papers, Indianapolis Historical Society.

In April of the following year, New York City became the first official chapter of the forthcoming union, organizing under the title the Benevolent Association of Walker Agents. The purpose of this organization was two-fold—to protect the interests of Walker Agents through the fixing of prices to discourage undercutting and adulterating of products that she encountered in Los Angeles and also to promote philanthropic involvement among the women.²⁶ Most likely at Walker’s behest, the early affiliation of agents in New York City chose the Booker T. Washington Memorial Fund as its first philanthropy. A charity which Walker supported vigorously, she strove to solicit financial support for the cause from all of her agents. From the beginning, Walker strongly emphasized a philanthropic aspect of the agenda, as it would “show the world that The Walker Agents are doing something else other than making money for themselves.”²⁷

In April of 1916, Walker wrote her attorney F. B. Ransom for his thoughts regarding such a proposal. In the same letter, she requested he contact the local *Indianapolis Freeman* to publish a notice announcing a meeting for the organization of an Indianapolis chapter once she returned to the city. “I want you to publish in the *Freeman* about the forming of a club here and the purpose and that it is my intention to form these clubs all over the country.”²⁸ As far as the management of the clubs, the maintenance of each would be left in the hands of its membership. The affiliation had benefits, of course. The group was required to pay dues, as well as cover the cost of

²⁶ Letter to Ransom from Madam Walker, 10 April 1916, box 1, folder 4, MCJW Papers, Indianapolis Historical Society.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Letter to Ransom from Madam Walker, 10 April 1916.

literature, but otherwise each chapter was intended to be self-sufficient.²⁹ Each registered agent was invited to join individually, a letter sent to her home from the Walker Manufacturing Company from the Indianapolis Headquarters. Addressed as “Dear Friend,” Walker saw the national as a loose configuration of peers, rather than to oversee the work being completed by individual agents, but also as means of protection.³⁰

In hopes of curtailing fraudulent activity, the Walker Manufacturing Company issued a notice in December of 1916 stating that good will no longer “be shipped or mailed to any address from the factory except to regular registered agents who have taken the trade.” The measure not intended to create difficulty, but to “protect the regular agents of the company from fakes and imposters.”³¹ This measure was further supported by a second directly after the national organization meeting in 1917. “Because of so much adulteration,” it read, “all boxed will be sealed with a specially designed Walker Seal.”³² The Mme. C. J. Walker Hair Culturists’ Union of America addressed issues such as this one and allowed news and information to be transmitted more easily between the workforce and company headquarters. Creating lines of communication between Indianapolis and the local agents served Walker in various ways. Not only could she communicate with the ever growing base of agents more effectively, but the union also allowed issues, like that of the tampering of products, to be identified and resolved more quickly.

²⁹ Letter to Ransom from Madam Walker 17 April 1916, box 1, folder 4, MCJW Papers, Indianapolis Historical Society.

³⁰ Letter to Ransom from Madam Walker, 17 April 1916.

³¹ “Notice to Customers and Agents of the Madam C. J. Walker Manufacturing Company,” *Indianapolis Freeman*, 9 December 1916 [NewsBank/Readex: America’s Historical Newspapers].

³² “Hints to Agents,” page 2, undated, box 7, folder 4, MCJW Papers, Indianapolis Historical Society.

Another avenue of professionalizing the trade pursued by Madam Walker was the implantation of her curriculum at black colleges and vocational schools. Primarily located in the south, Walker approached many institutions, such as Roger Williams, Tennessee; Tuskegee Institute, Alabama; and Wylie College and Guadalupe College of Texas. With the exception of the initial rejection by Tuskegee's Booker T. Washington, the response was overwhelmingly positive and the programs were a great success—for both the college and the Walker Manufacturing Company.

Historian Leroy Davis suggested there were three reasons the college curricula interested Madam C. J. Walker. First, the programs provided a ready source of agents. Her training was made accessible to individuals who may not have been familiar with Walker's work until attending the college. Secondly, graduates of the program introduced her products to new communities, even internationally perhaps, allowing Walker to relax her travel schedule as her health had already begun to deteriorate. Third, the public endorsement of key educators in the black community, like Booker T. Washington, could assist her in eliminating competition.³³ Tiffany Gill posits that a fourth motivation existed in Walker's pursuit of eager colleges. Perhaps most importantly, Walker was determined to earn respect for the work being performed by herself and her agents.³⁴ While admittedly not as prestigious as a bachelor's degree from a college or university, receiving a certificate from a respected institution elevated the student to a professional level. The written proposal Walker disseminated began:

³³ Leroy Davis, "Madam C. J. Walker: A Woman of her Time," in *The African Experience in Community Development: The Continuing Struggle in African and the Americas*, vol. 2, Edited by Edward W. Crosby, Leroy Davis, and Anne Adams Graves, 37-60 (Needham Heights, MA: Advocate Publishing Group, 1980).

³⁴ Gill, *Beauty Shop Politics*, pp. 28.

“Realizing the great demand for beauty culture among our people, not only from a standpoint of beautifying ourselves, but as a means of livelihood as well.” The program assists in the “training of the mind and development of the body,” the letter stated.³⁵

When approaching an institution with her proposal, Madam Walker made it difficult not to accept. Beginning with the establishment of a facility, Walker offered financial assistance to eliminate upstart costs. “We are offering to the schools one hundred dollars for the furnishings for such rooms, where the work can be taught systematically.”³⁶ The pledge provided enough to purchase tables, chairs, and stationary bowls. Additionally, Madam Walker invited the president of the university to send a teacher of their choice to the Lelia Beauty School in New York for training or a local agent could be recommended. Once trained, the new agent was capable of overseeing the training of the young women entering the program. Goods would also be provided to the school at a special bulk price and scholarships provided by Madam Walker to ensure students for the program.³⁷ With many of the details already worked out, the beauty culture program began, at most locations, the following school year.

The college training programs served all who were involved very well. While the Walker Manufacturing Company appeared to gain the most from the development of the programs, the institution, local communities, and extended group of Walker agents also benefited. As part of their training, students provided services to members of the local community at a reduced rate, encouraging new clients to try Walker’s products and in many cases, creating new regular customers for the company. The students did not

³⁵ Proposal sent to Normal Industrial & Agricultural College.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Ibid.

receive payment for providing services, however. The profits were instead divided between the agent-instructor and the home institution. In addition to receiving this financial support to maintain the program, the schools benefited from the expansion of their curriculum at virtually no cost. Lastly, the college curricula served to improve the reputation of Walker agents, which benefited all who practiced the trade.³⁸

When Roger Williams University president, Reverend A. M. Townsend wrote to thank Madam Walker for the opportunity, he took a moment to commend her work. “Words fail me to express to you the gratitude that is ours for the splendid evidence of your interest in us, and the work we are trying to do here... This is also a further indication of your interest in the development and welfare of your own race.”³⁹ Such sentiments were echoed in the words of other administrators. When Mary McLeod Bethune wrote to express the interest of the administrators at Daytona Educational and Industrial Institute in offering the program, she expressed her confidence in Walker’s products. “For the past four years my girls and myself have been using your wonderful Hair grower. We have proven it to be very beneficial indeed.”⁴⁰ Surely aware of Walker’s willingness to donate money freely, the administrators’ acceptance of the proposition may have been strategic. Establishing Walker’s training program provided a connection to an influential businesswoman who could assist with the uneasy financial situation facing nearly all black institutions. Regardless of motive, the college programs were well received among administrators.

³⁸ Rooks, *Hair Raising*, pp. 91-94.

³⁹ Letter to Madam Walker from Rev. A. M. Townsend, box 1, folder 7, MCJW Papers, Indianapolis Historical Society.

⁴⁰ Letter to Madam Walker from Mary McLeod Bethune, box 1, folder 7, MCJW Papers, Indianapolis Historical Society.

Madam C. J. Walker also used her advertisements to improve the respectability of the trade and her agents. The Walker Manufacturing Company regularly placed advertisements in black newspapers in many cities, as well as some of those operated by great political minds, such as A. Philip Randolph's *The Messenger* and the NAACP organ *The Crisis*. Walker believed very much in the power that lay in publications and invested heavily. Her early designs included photographs of herself and told of her personal story, whereas later designs highlighted the company's international influence. Regardless of the layout, however, Walker's advertisements rejected dominant culture in two ways: first by embracing black pride and beauty and secondly, by leading working-class women out of the domestic sphere.

Walker's earliest advertisements appeared in 1905. Mostly text driven, the design told of Walker's ascent from washerwoman. It also included three images side-by-side of Walker. The centered image shows a younger Walker, her hair short and her eyes downcast, reads "Before Using". The photographs on either side of the center were more current, depicting Walker with hair falling well below her shoulders. The image to the left shows her profile. In the one farthest to the right, Walker is looking directly into the camera. In many ways, these photographs show her evolution. The expression in the earlier photograph reflects an internal dissatisfaction in her appearance which affected her self-worth, not allowing herself to raise her eyes.⁴¹

An affliction shared by many African American women, this advertisement would have been particularly attractive to working-class women who saw themselves in Walker's "before" image. Speaking to this segment of the black population specifically,

⁴¹ Rooks, *Hair Raising*, pp. 60-61. The author expresses a similar interpretation of the layout. She asserts that in the profile image to the far left, Walker is able to survey both her past and her present, her eye contact in the final photograph expressing her confidence in the woman she has come to be.

Walker's advertisements frequently spoke of economic freedom. Incorporating phrases such as "the passport to prosperity" and to "secure freedom and prosperity," the advertisements aimed to entice African American women to join the ranks as agents, through which they would find self-sufficiency and pride.

Madam Walker also employed the newspapers to assist her in disputing her critics. During her lifetime, the Walker Manufacturing Company never endorsed or promoted the use of skin whiteners or hair straightening products. In *The New York Age* in 1914, an advertisement began circulating that stated the company did "not handle false hair nor straightening tongs. No curling irons; an entirely new method used. No burning or singeing, but a beautiful head of hair in *natural* condition."⁴² Walker went to great lengths to separate herself and her company from the white owned companies that did promote such techniques. Similarly, the words "straightening," "kinky," or "nappy" never appeared in Walker's publications.

When combined with the Mme. C. J. Walker Hair Culturists' Union of America and the establishment of her training programs at black colleges and vocational schools, the advertisements of the Walker Manufacturing Company, Madam Walker's plan for improving the stature of her agents in the larger society encompassed many facets. In the years to follow, her advertising campaigns would focus less on engaging with critics of the industry and more on the continued uplift of African American women and their international counterparts. The following chapter examines Madam C. J. Walker's international influence as well as her political evolution in the years leading up to her death.

⁴² Rooks, *Hair Raising*, pp. 64.

Chapter 3
“They’re Calling Me—My Race! My Race!”
The Political Presence of Madam C. J. Walker

By the time the First World War was ending in late 1918 and peace talks were underway, race relations in the United States had grown increasingly more desperate. In the summer of 1917, a terrible riot erupted in East St. Louis, Illinois. An industrialized city situated on the eastern bank of the Mississippi River, East St. Louis witnessed the arrival of thousands of southern black laborers searching for wartime jobs in the city. A consequence of this Great Migration’s impact on competition for jobs, the riot left many dead, countless injured, and approximately 6,000 African Americans displaced after their homes were burned to the ground. Troubles were only exacerbated by the demobilization of veterans both white and black who were returning home from the war in Europe. Similar events occurred in more than a dozen American cities in the coming years—the highest number occurring in 1919 and earning the summer of that year the title “Red Summer.”¹

While the East St. Louis riot focused the attention of foreign nations on the issues of race within the United States, World War I was simultaneously forcing Americans to open their eyes to a world outside their borders. For the black community in particular, the arrival of Marcus Garvey in 1916 sparked a renewed interest in the African continent. Adhering to the ideology widely known as Pan-Africanism, Garvey, W. E. B. Du Bois and others were cognizant of the potential for

¹ Arthur Ocean Waskow, *From Race Riot to Sit In, 1919 and the 1960s: A Study in the Connections between Conflict and Violence* (Garden City, NY.: Anchor Books, 1967). See also Harper Barnes, *Never Been a Time: The 1917 Race Riot that Sparked the Civil Rights Movement* (New York: Walker & Co, 2008).

mutual African and African-American economic, social, and political progress through a cooperative movement. Garvey's vehicle, the Universal Negro Improvement Association, in tandem with other Nationalist organizations, connected the lives of African Americans to their brethren scattered throughout the African subcontinent and Latin America.²

Madam Walker was becoming increasingly well-known as a political leader in her own right throughout the nineteen-teens. As examined in chapter one, her notoriety in the business world led to the cultivation of relationships with many powerful black leaders. Membership in national organizations such as the NNBL and NACW ultimately spurred her personal involvement in many of the nation's most well-publicized campaigns. This exposure to the larger political world broadened her focus to include an international philosophy of uplift. Beginning with the NAACP's Silent March in 1917, a demonstration intended to draw international attention to the inexcusable conduct of the U.S. government in the aftermath of the East St. Louis riot and the continuing issues of racial discrimination facing African Americans, Walker's involvement in such organizations deepened as she began to work to connect the experiences of African Americans with those of the African diaspora. This chapter examines the political and philanthropic endeavors Madam C. J. Walker undertook in the later years of her life.

² Tony Martin, *Race First: The Ideological and Organizational Struggles of Marcus Garvey and the Universal Negro Improvement Association* (Westport, Conn: Greenwood Press, 1976). See also: Tomás Fernández Robaina, "Marcus Garvey in Cuba: Urrutia, Cubans, and Black Nationalism," in *Between Race and Empire: African-Americans and Cubans before the Cuban Revolution* (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 1998).

There has seemingly always been a connection between the African diaspora in the United States and the subcontinent, perhaps best exemplified by the colonization efforts of the nineteenth century that led to the eventual establishment of a colony in Liberia. A movement that surged during Walker's lifetime and again in the later Black Power era of the 1960s and 1970s, African Americans began celebrating an African-centered history and culture in an attempt to reclaim aspects of their distinct heritage. African Americans were not alone in this endeavor, however. Afro-Cubans also retained a strong relationship with Africa. Through the connections established by Booker T. Washington and Marcus Garvey, the black community of the United States strove to preserve this shared history with the black population of the Caribbean. The literature on this subject has evolved greatly in recent years, shedding a previous understanding of each nation as culturally introverted and instead focusing attention on the many parallels that can be drawn between the experiences and the collaborative efforts of African Americans and their counterparts in the Caribbean.

Published in 1998, *Between Race and Empire: African-Americans and Cubans before the Cuban Revolution* explores various topics situated at the intersections of race and culture.³ These essays examine the exchange of ideas between African Americans and Afro-Cubans that influenced the construction of racial identity in both regions surrounding U.S. interference in Cuba. Nancy Raquel Mirabal's

³ This historiographic discussion of Cuba is one part of a growing literature on race identity and the African diaspora in the Caribbean. A number of thought-provoking studies have been written on this topic in countries such as Haiti, the Dominican Republic, and Jamaica. However, a discussion of Cuba is especially well-suited for this discussion of Madam C. J. Walker due to Cuba's experiences with U.S. imperialism, the connection with Booker T. Washington, and the repeated travel of Walker and her daughter to the island.

contribution to the volume “Telling Silences and Making Community,” examines the interactions between Cubans and African American populations in southern Florida. Florida’s form of legal segregation, or “Black Codes,” shaped the relationship between these two culturally distinct groups through a societal understanding of “blackness⁴”. Excluded from the dominant society, the result was a negotiated environment where bridges were made, but also included reserved spaces for the continuation of what was strictly Cuban.

Juxtaposed with Tomás Fernández Robaina’s essay on Marcus Garvey’s struggles in Cuba, an interesting discussion emerges. Just as Garvey’s race-based movement found critics in the United States, large segments of the Cuban population rejected his ideas. His inability to build a sustained following in Cuba suggests a disconnect from a transnational black identity; however, the remaining inclusions on cultural topics, such as the connections made through baseball and the arts, instead shows a blending of culture.⁵ Through this process of transculturation, Cuba made its impact on the development of a larger diasporic identity.

Also specifically examining Cuba, Frank Andre Guridy argues that people of African descent in both the United States and Cuba saw themselves as free to connect with the diaspora without sacrificing national goals of citizenship and

⁴ Nancy Raquel Mirabal, “Telling Silences and Making Community: Afro-Cubans and African-Americans in Ybor city and Tampa, 1899-1915,” in *Between Race and Empire: African-Americans and Cubans before the Cuban Revolution*, ed. Lisa Brock and Digna Castañeda Fuertes (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 1998), 49-69.

⁵ Tomás Fernández Robaina, “Marcus Garvey in Cuba: Urrutia, Cubans, and Black Nationalism,” in *Between Race and Empire: African-Americans and Cubans before the Cuban Revolution*, ed. Lisa Brock and Digna Castañeda Fuertes (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 1998), 120-128. Chapter on baseball: Lisa Brock and Bijan Bayne, “Not Just Black: African-Americans, Cubans and Baseball.”

equality. It was within the “U.S.-Caribbean World,” which the author identifies as a “cross-border, transnational zone,” that cultural and political differences were navigated, leading to a bilateral diffusion of ideas.⁶ Examining Washington’s Tuskegee Institute, Garvey’s UNIA, and the Harlem Renaissance, Guridy demonstrates the process by which such networks were established regionally. For example, Guridy’s discussion of Tuskegee portrays Washington as more than just a puppet of U.S. empire-building. Instead, with the assistance of Cuban leaders, Washington was able to exploit U.S. involvement in Cuba, employing it to advance a broader form of racial uplift.⁷

Upon her arrival in Indianapolis, Madam C. J. Walker had already attained a significant level of financial independence, affording her the opportunity to become involved with many charities working for the benefit of the race in her new home town, as well as on a national and international level. As previously discussed, Madam Walker made incredible contributions to improving the lives of black women around the country, but she did not stop there. Additionally, Walker worked diligently to improve the social and political world for people of African descent around the globe. Walker often used her organizational affiliations, as well as those of her own creation, as vehicles for providing economic opportunity and effectuating political change. This chapter will examine those contributions.

⁶ Frank Andre Guridy, *Forging Diaspora: Afro-Cubans and African Americans in a World of Empire and Jim Crow* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 2010), 7.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 20.

After Madam C. J. Walker's intrusion onto the stage at the National Negro Business League Convention in 1912, she spoke of the success she had found as a businesswoman, but also of her sincere devotion to the uplift of the race. "Now my object in life is not simply to make money for myself or to spend it on myself in dressing or running around in an automobile, but I love to use a part of what I make in trying to help others." She went on to discuss her life's greatest ambition: the creation of an industrial school in Africa. "By the help of God and the cooperation of my people in this country, I am going to build a Tuskegee Institute in Africa!"⁸

After Walker had finished speaking, George L. Knox, the editor of the *Indianapolis Freeman* who was both a good friend and an ardent supporter of her work, rose to both confirm her statements and also interject his own praises. "You have heard only a part; the half has not been told of what she has accomplished. She is the generous-hearted lady of our town who gave \$1,000 to the Young Men's Christian Association of Indianapolis, Indiana."⁹ It was the Y.M.C.A project that introduced Walker and Knox, two of Indianapolis's strongest supporters of philanthropy. The following year, Booker T. Washington used her contribution to

⁸ *Report of the 13th Annual Convention of the NNBL, Chicago, IL, 1912*, reel 2, frame 0570 [microform]. Though Walker often spoke of this as her life's ambition and went so far as to allocate funds for its creation in her final will and testament, it is unclear whether the school was ever completed. Biographer A'Lelia Bundles suggests that there is no mention of the school or funds allocated for its construction and upkeep in records of the Walker Manufacturing Company, but a magazine article found in her manuscript collection cites the establishment of the school where a percentage of her annual income is designated for its maintenance, as well as receipt for funds sent to a school in Pondoland, South Africa. See box 3, folder 1 for article and box 9, folder 1 for receipt.

⁹ *Ibid.*, reel 2, frame 0570. George Knox unsuccessfully attempted to introduce Walker to the congregation earlier in the meeting, asking "the convention for a few minutes of its time to hear a remarkable woman," returning to his seat after moderator Booker T. Washington refused to veer from the published speaker's list. See the *Report of the 13th Annual Convention of the NNBL*, National Negro Business League, Chicago: IL, 1912, reel 2, frame 0543 [microform].

the Y.M.C.A in his own applauding of Madam Walker as he thanked her for addressing the convention.¹⁰

The construction of the Colored Y.M.C.A building in downtown Indianapolis proved to be a strenuous task, requiring great effort and sacrifice. The heart of Indianapolis's black community was rife with temptation for young men. Gambling rooms, saloons, and poolrooms provided spaces of social gathering along Indiana Avenue, but also reinforced stereotypes of African American men as morally depraved and wanton.¹¹ George Knox, supported by most of the city's middle class and elite, led the charge for the construction of a Colored Y.M.C.A facility to serve the youth population. Using his publication, the *Indianapolis Freeman*, for public exposure, Knox called the community to action. He pleaded for the "entire Negro population to lay aside petty jealousies, petty ambitions, personal aggrandizements, and all thoughts of selfishness that we may put our shoulders together and our hands to the wheel of progress" in order to "bring to this city a thing that is so much desired and needed."¹²

George Knox served as president of the committee, overseeing fundraising and promotion efforts for the project. Bolstered by the generous \$25,000 donation from Sears, Roebuck, and Company president, Julius Rosenwald, and a commitment by the established white Y.M.C.A to raise another \$60,000, the black population of

¹⁰ *Report of the 14th Annual Convention of the NNBL, Philadelphia, PA, 1913*, reel 3, frame 0710 [microform].

¹¹ Bundles, *On Her Own Ground*, 112. A note on terminology: the term *colored* is used here as opposed to *black* as that is how it appears in the source material on the Y.M.C.A.

¹² George Knox, "YMCA Notes," *Indianapolis Freeman*, 14 October 1911 [NewsBank/Readex: America's Historical Newspapers].

Indianapolis needed only to raise \$15,000 to ensure the project's success. Rosenwald's funding was conditional on the cooperation between black and white organizations. Born to Jewish immigrants, Rosenwald had a personal understanding of prejudice and was deeply drawn to the black experience through his introduction to Booker T. Washington's *Up from Slavery*. By encouraging cooperative movements for the betterment of the community as a whole, Rosenwald saw his contribution as a way to break down the racism that quite often plagued both Jewish Americans and African Americans.¹³

At a banquet celebrating the opening fundraising drive on Sunday, October 22, Madam C. J. Walker rose before the Indianapolis crowd at the Pythian Temple and made her famed gift—the first \$1,000 donation of the campaign from any individual donor. An amount nearly “unthinkable coming from a colored woman,” news of her pledge drew national attention with coverage in newspapers across the country. Receiving regular praise from the local publications, the *Indianapolis Freeman* referred to it as “her crowning act,” celebrating it as but one part of Walker's benevolence within the city.¹⁴ Walker was part of a small group of

¹³ Peter M. Ascoli, *Julius Rosenwald: The Man who Built Sears, Roebuck and Advanced the Cause of Black Education in the American South* (Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 2006), 79. Ebook. The Rosenwald Fund is most famous for its funding of schools for African American children throughout the American South, but by 1912, his support also allowed for the construction of many YMCA facilities to support black communities in cities like New York, Chicago, Baltimore and Washington D.C. See chapters 3 and 4.

¹⁴ “Foremost Colored Woman in Business,” *Indianapolis Freeman*, 28 December 1912. [NewsBank/Readex: America's Historical Newspapers].

contributors of that amount or greater, her gift exceeding that of many of the far wealthier white donors of Indianapolis.¹⁵

The African American community of Indianapolis experienced the benefits Madam C. J. Walker brought to the city in many ways. Perhaps more than the economic development, citizens of Indianapolis found her benevolence most endearing. In addition to her work with the Y.M.C.A, Walker annually dispersed food baskets to fifty needy families during the Christmas season, made regular contributions to the homes for orphans and the aging, and designated funds for scholarships for the education of promising young men and women.¹⁶ In only five short years, Madam Walker had become such an integral part of the city's black professional and social network that when she announced her plans to relocate her personal residence to New York in 1916, the Y.M.C.A she helped to fund held a special membership banquet in "recognition of the substantial aid rendered it" by Madam Walker.¹⁷ The program inscription read:

Whereas we learn that Madam C. J. Walker contemplates moving her residence from the City of Indianapolis, and whereas she has been a resident there for over five years, and whereas during this time she has enshrined herself into the hearts of all her fellow citizens—a daughter, bringing bounteous cheer and happiness to the old and poor; a sister; directing by example and precept, the way to a purer, and nobler life; a comrade, assisting in the development of christian usefulness and character; a benefactor in human uplift; a gracious sympathizer in the hour of distress and pain; a

¹⁵ Bundles, *On Her Own Ground*, 120. Bundles notes that Walker's contribution matched that of, Charles W. Fairbanks, who had served as Vice President of the United States under Theodore Roosevelt.

¹⁶ Unidentified biographical sketch publication, box 3, folder 1, MCJW Papers, Indianapolis Historical Society

¹⁷ "Y.M.C.A: A Membership Banquet in Honor of Madam C. J. Walker—the Largest Colored Subscriber to the Building Fund," *Indianapolis Freeman*, 18 December 1915. [NewsBank/Readex: America's Historical Newspapers].

generous mother to all the little children in the community and, further, whereas her marvelous business ability, resulting in immense wealth, is a distinct asset to the Commercial Life of the City and State, and whereas these qualities constitute an eminent citizen and are vested in no other one among us in so high a degree.¹⁸

Signed by members of the executive board of the Colored YMCA of Indianapolis, as well as many of the city's most prominent figures, the petition begged her to reconsider her decision, opting instead to "live always among" the people of Indianapolis in so that they "may be ever conscious of and influenced by the beautiful and useful life she lives."¹⁹ It is clear from this passage that the people of Indianapolis had tremendous admiration for Madam Walker and the work she had done while living there.

The Colored Y.M.C.A project emerged shortly after Walker's arrival in Indianapolis in 1910. This means that she wasted little time involving herself in the happenings of the city. The friendships that arose from the professional connections with the Y.M.C.A executive board would provide substantial benefits to Walker in the coming years. Her relationship with George Knox and the *Indianapolis Freeman* was in many ways symbiotic. Whereas Knox provided complimentary and steady coverage of her work in the coming years, Walker supported the publication by running regular advertisements, some as large as a full page. Her mighty position amongst Indianapolis's elite also led to her introduction to many powerful

¹⁸ "To Madam C. J. Walker from the Colored Men's Branch of the YMCA," YMCA Banquet Program, 10 December 1915, box 2, folder 7, MCJW Papers, Indianapolis Historical Society.

¹⁹ Ibid.

individuals when they visited the city, including hosting Robert R. Moton and her idol, Booker T. Washington.²⁰

Encouraged by her national connections and the constantly increasing success of her hair-care business, Madam C. J. Walker found herself drawn to issues that had wider impact. A champion of education, Walker dedicated much of her resources to the uplift of her race by way of institutions like Tuskegee Institute. Much like Marcus Garvey, Walker recognized a powerful message in Washington's form of race uplift, sparking a sincere adoration for him and the work performed at the institution. Through scholarships, monetary contributions, and the eventual establishment of her beauty culture program as part of the curriculum, it is clear that Tuskegee Institute was one of Walker's favorite charities.

Walker regularly made contributions to Tuskegee Institute, growing the level of support as her personal income increased. Often traveling, she left the bookkeeping for the Walker Manufacturing Company, as well as her personal finances, in the hands of attorney F. B. Ransom. Donations made to Tuskegee were often discussed in their correspondence. "I would like very much to have you send them \$300.00...or half of that at least," she stated in a 1918 letter.²¹ Unsure if her bank account allowed for the donation, her willingness to contribute exemplifies the relationship she maintained with the institution. Because of the generosity she had shown in the past, Washington wrote to Walker in the spring of 1914 seeking

²⁰ "Madam C. J. Walker Entertains in Honor of Major R. R. Moton of Hampton," *Indianapolis Freeman*, 3 April 1915 [NewsBank/Readex: America's Historical Newspapers].

²¹ Letter to F. B. Ransom from Madam Walker, box 1, folder 14, MCJW Papers, Indianapolis Historical Society.

sponsorship for five students to attend classes at Tuskegee. While tuition was provided free to the students, a gift from Walker of fifty dollars guaranteed each student with additional funds for personal expenses, such as room and board. Washington expressed that the amount would “certainly help them in the most satisfactory and appreciable way.”²² Despite a deep love of Tuskegee, Walker shied away from the pledge, stating she was unable to make such a strong commitment at that time. Never afraid to speak her mind, Walker responded, “I am unlike your white friends who have waited until they were rich and then help.”²³ Additionally, the establishment of her beauty culture program led to increased profits for both Tuskegee and Madam Walker, which she pledged to use to further increase her support of the institution. In 1916, Walker made sizeable contributions to both the school and the memorial fund created for Booker T. Washington after his death, requesting through correspondence that F. B. Ransom send \$300 to each.²⁴

During his life, Booker T. Washington maintained open lines of communication with many influential leaders in Cuba. Regularly accepting students from the island to study at his Tuskegee Institute, Washington made a profound contribution to diasporic relations and uplift.²⁵ Madam Walker also showed an

²² Letter from Booker T. Washington to Madam Walker, 22 May 1914, *The Booker T. Washington Papers*, Edited by Louis R. Harlan and Raymond Smock, Vol. 13 (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1972), 30.

²³ Letter from Booker T. Washington to Madam Walker, 5 May 1914, *The Booker T. Washington Papers*, Edited by Louis R. Harlan and Raymond Smock, Vol. 13 (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1972), 29.

²⁴ Letter to F. B. Ransom from Madam C. J. Walker, 18 September 1916, MCJW Papers, Indianapolis Historical Society. Also, Letter to F. B. Ransom from Madam C. J. Walker, 23 September 1916, MCJW Papers, Indianapolis Historical Society.

²⁵ Guridy, *Forging Diaspora*, 20.

interest in the small Caribbean island. Cuba, a former slave nation, included a significant black population with which Walker saw a connection. In 1913, Walker and her granddaughter, Mae, boarded the *Orruba* and set sail on a two-month journey through the Caribbean and Central America. “An untapped market of women of African-descent,” Walker visited Cuba, Jamaica, Haiti, Costa Rica, and the area surrounding the Panama Canal.²⁶

In each nation they visited, the women received a wonderful reception. A reporter suggested she “encountered more business orders than she could supply along the trip and “found more people willing to work than she could consider employing as agents.”²⁷ The trip was so successful, George Schuyler notes that upon her return, she expanded her advertising, now including “four languages—English, French, Spanish, and Portuguese.”²⁸ Walker’s trip to the Caribbean is an example of her broad perception of race uplift, promoting political union in addition to business opportunities. While many spoke other languages, Walker saw the black population in Latin America as a potential market, sharing many qualities she found within the African American community that supported her business.

When Madam C. J. Walker arrived in New York in 1916, she had already established a reputation as one of the race’s leading benefactresses. Her immersion into Harlem’s famed political scene only fueled her passions. In the years leading up to her death in 1919, Walker’s support of the black soldiers fighting in World War I,

²⁶ Bundles, *On Her Own Ground*, 154-155.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 155.

²⁸ Schuyler, “Madam C. J. Walker,” *The Messenger*.

her involvement in the NAACP's Silent March in 1917, and her selection as a delegate to attend the Peace Conference in Paris after the war highlight her highly politicized and increasingly broadening perception of race uplift. The choices she makes in her organizational affiliations during World War I also indicate a shift in a more radical direction, spurred very much by race relations both domestically and internationally.

World War I presented a host of new political opportunities. An important aspect of her business work, personal interaction was one of Madam Walker's greatest strengths. A fierce supporter of the war effort, Walker was especially interested in engaging black soldiers. Fighting in segregated units, black soldiers were sent to defend rights and freedoms abroad that they were denied at home. Upon a visit to Ohio's Camp Sherman, Madam Walker met with Company "D" of the United States Army's 317th Battalion of Engineers shortly before their deployment.²⁹ While it is unclear on what subjects she spoke, her words assuredly made a profound impact on the young soldiers, leading the company sergeant to write Madam Walker in November of 1918 asking if she would be available to greet the men upon their return home. The letter stated, "The boys of Co., "D" 317th, Engineers one night while under shell-fire, were talking of Madam C. J. Walker and the consoling words which she gave them." The men spoke of her often, the officer

²⁹ The U.S. Army 317th Battalion of Engineers was an all-black, or "Negro troops," unit that earned honors for the Meuse-Argonne and Lorraine campaigns.

noted, adding that her “words have stayed with the boys longer than any spoken by any one that I have known or heard of.”³⁰

Part of a larger community in New York City supportive of returning troops, Madam Walker took part in a celebration organized to “receive its returning soldiers, sailors, and marines in a manner appropriate to the valorous deeds which they have accomplished across the seas” and honor those who died.³¹ Selected by the mayor personally, Walker was appointed to the Committee of Welcome to Homecoming Troops. Her appointment is evidence of the recognition of her engagement in the war effort and also of her position as a leader in the black community.

Even as the war raged on in Europe, national attention was diverted as East St. Louis erupted in a violent riot. The incident was an escalation of antagonism between disgruntled workers of both races. There is much debate over whether or not a specific catalyst for the riot exists, yet as one of many similar events, the riot serves as a reflection of the hostile environment that often surrounded war industry jobs.³² Outraged, African Americans across the nation protested in support of the destroyed Illinois community. Radical leaders like Marcus Garvey and Ida B. Wells-Barnett drew the attention of the War Department for their scathing coverage of the event. “Monday July 2, will go down in history as one of the bloodiest outrages

³⁰ Letter to Madam Walker from Co. “D,” 317th Engineers, 21 November 1918, box 1, folder 14, MCJW Papers, Indianapolis Historical Society.

³¹ Letter to Madam Walker from Office of the Mayor, City of New York, 7 December 1918, box 1, folder 14, MCJW Papers, Indianapolis Historical Society.

³² Barnes, *Never Been a Time*.

against mankind for which any class of people could be held guilty,” Garvey wrote in a published reaction.³³

Less radical leaders also protested the East St. Louis riots. In 1917, the NAACP organized its famed Silent March. Under the direction of NAACP founder, W.E.B. Du Bois, nearly ten thousand African American men, women, and children silently walked the streets of New York in protest of racial violence. Madam C. J. Walker participated in the NAACP Silent March in a number of ways. First, she served on the organizing committee of the demonstration. She also joined the ranks of marchers as the column wound through the streets of New York City. Lastly, Walker solicited support from her agents. For many of her agents, who were predominantly working-class black women, this was their first time participating in civic affairs. Holding the first national meeting of Walker Agents in August of 1917, only weeks after the riots, the assembly of more than two-hundred agents drafted a telegram that was sent to President Woodrow Wilson. It stated:

We, the representatives of the National Convention of the Mme. C. J. Walker Agents, in convention assembled, and in a larger sense representing twelve million Negroes, have keenly felt the injustice done our race and country through the recent lynching at Memphis, Tennessee and the horrible race riot at East St. Louis and knowing that no people in all the world are more loyal and patriotic than the Colored people of America, we respectfully submit to you this our protest against the continuation of such wrongs and injustices in this “land of the free, and home of the brave” and we further respectfully urge that you as President of these United States use your great influence that congress enact the necessary laws to prevent a recurrence of such disgraceful affairs.³⁴

³³ Marcus Garvey, “Printed Address by Marcus Garvey on the East St. Louis Riots,” in *The Marcus Garvey and Universal Negro Improvement Association Papers*, edited by Robert A. Hill, Vol. 1 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983), 213.

³⁴ “Telegram to President Woodrow Wilson,” Minutes of the First National Convention of the MME. C. J. Walker Hair Culturists’ Union of America, 30 August 1917, box 12, folder 26, MCJW Papers, Indianapolis Historical Association.

Walker received notification from the White House that President Wilson had received the telegram, but as the long, bloody years of war were finally coming to an end, the President's focus was far from domestic troubles. After the demobilization of military forces, diplomats from nations around the world arrived in Paris to negotiate a course of action for the post-war world. The "Big Four," President Woodrow Wilson, British Prime Minister David Lloyd George and George Clemenceau and Vittorio Orlando of France and Italy respectively, reserved tremendous influence in the proceedings. Opening in January of 1919, the conference lasted many months and undertook a number of difficult tasks. "The war toppled governments, humbled the mighty, and upturned whole societies," and at its end, "Austria-Hungary vanished, leaving a great hole at the center of Europe" that required new borders to be drawn, resurrecting old nations and giving birth to some new. It was the responsibility of the attendees to negotiate these terms.³⁵

The Paris Peace Conference drew diplomats from nations great and small, all expressing an interest shaping the direction of the new free world. The conference also attracted many journalists and lobbyists hoping to influence powerful decision-makers. Further complicated by the incredible diversity of those arriving in Paris from around the world, the conference assembly was forced to engage issues of ethnic and racial equality amongst the delegates. Japan serves as a prime example: a country with immense power in the world at this time, Japan was forced to

³⁵ Margaret McMillan, *Paris 1919: The Six Months that Changed the World* (New York: Random House Publishing, 2002), xxvi.

compete for position in deliberations with the United States and Great Britain who were adamant Japan should play a lesser role. This slight led Japan to separate itself from its western allies in the years following World War I. Other issues at the forefront of the discussion were those of women's rights, equality for black populations around the world, and freedom from oppressive rule for Northern Ireland and the European colonies in Africa.³⁶

While short lived, the League of Nations was one of the most significant products of the Paris Peace Conference. The assembly's main priority, in Wilson's eyes, this "great experiment" was established with one primary aim: not to protect the interests of one nation or another, but to prevent war like that from which the world had recently emerged.³⁷ The initial drafting of the League of Nations included the creation of a general assembly, an executive council with a strong core of the "Big Four" and Japan, and required member states to pledge to respect one another's independence and borders.³⁸

Debates over which nations and what policy issues should be included in particular caused trouble for the congress, however. The proposed inclusion of equality drew much attention to the conference. From the first draft, the document charged the League with attempting to establish an international court to ensure justice and equality and provide all nations, large and small, with an ally in matters

³⁶ McMillian, *Paris*, xxviii.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 84.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 93-94.

of injustice.³⁹ Additionally, the Japanese delegates fought for the inclusion of a universal clause ensuring racial equality. As a direct challenge to societal norms and the imperialist tradition deeply imbedded in the structure of western nations, the proposal was met by fierce opposition and never passed.⁴⁰

Many political organizations within the United States quickly elected delegates to visit Paris in the early stages of negotiation. Such endeavors found wide support in the black community as African-Americans identified American attitudes of racism as larger than their domestic manifestations. Likening the plight of African Americans to that of the Irish in Great Britain, Reverend William A. Byrd in an editorial printed in the *Cleveland Gazette* identified the “Negro problem” in the United States as a volcano that is “angrily smoldering, and if not settled, will erupt to the dismay and destruction of the world.”⁴¹ His editorial speaks to the increasingly difficult situation of race facing African Americans in this period. Plagued by lynching and race riots at home, the black community saw the Peace Conference as an opportunity to present its circumstances before world leaders.

Impassioned by ideas of advancement and equality, the radical National Equal Rights League welcomed representatives from local chapters around the country to Washington D. C. in December of 1918. Only days before the national meeting, an assembly convened at the Harlem Congregational Church selected

³⁹ McMillan, *Paris*, 94.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 298.

⁴¹ “The Peace Conference and the American Negro,” *Cleveland Gazette*, 25 January 1919 [NewsBank/Readex: America’s Historical Newspapers].

Madam C. J. Walker to represent the interests of the New York branch.⁴² From amongst these local delegates assembled in the nation's capital, a committee was nominated to represent the United States in Paris. It was one last "desperate effort now to stop the onward trend of injustice at the close of a world war" which black soldiers can also claim victory.⁴³

Madam Walker was but one of many influential women to arrive in Washington, D.C. She was joined by Mary Church Terrell and Ida B. Wells-Barnett, among others. When a decision was made that no woman would be sent to Paris, five men were chosen with Walker and Wells-Barnett to serve as alternates. Wells-Barnett, a lively personality, protested the decision and openly refused to accept such "empty honors."⁴⁴ The delegation chose instead to nominate nine delegates, a list which included both Walker and Wells-Barnett receiving full responsibility as representatives.

Scholar Kevin Gaines notes that the "wartime rhetoric of world democracy and national self-determination" served as a catalyst in the formation of many more radical political organizations and pressure groups.⁴⁵ Despite accepting an offer to travel on behalf of the National Equal Rights League only days before, Walker began assisting in the development of a new organization intent on sending delegates of its

⁴² Letter to Madam Walker from W. Stephenson Holder: President of N.Y. Branch of Equal Rights League, 12 December 1918, box 1, folder 14, MCJW Papers, Indianapolis Historical Society.

⁴³ "Peace Congress at Washington Dec. 16," Newspaper clipping, box 1, folder 14, MCJW Papers, Indianapolis Historical Society.

⁴⁴ Letter to F. B. Ransom from Madam Walker, 19 December 1918, MCJW Papers, Indianapolis Historical Society.

⁴⁵ Gaines, *Uplifting the Race*, 236.

own to France. The International League of Darker Peoples held its first meeting in the Irvington-on-the-Hudson home of Madam Walker in January of 1919. Those most closely associated with the launch of the International League of Darker Peoples viewed the African diaspora widely, envisioning connections with peoples far beyond the United States and Caribbean islands, including populations throughout Central and South America, Liberia, Japan, Egypt, India, and the population residing in European nations as well.⁴⁶

A Nationalist organization by definition, the International League of Darker Peoples pursued the unification of people of color around the world, as well as political representation within global affairs—a task very much linked to the future of the African colonies.⁴⁷ An urgent concern for its founders, the International League of Darker Peoples saw the Peace Conference as an opportunity to organize black delegates to present a united front to lobby for the return of each African colony to its indigenous people. In a letter addressed to the Japanese delegation in Paris, the organization praised Japan’s pursuit of “equal rights for all people regardless of race, creed or color” and offered support where able.⁴⁸

⁴⁶ Letter to Chairman of the Japanese Envoys to the Peace Council from the Executive Board of the International League of Darker Peoples, 30 December 1918, box 1, folder 14, MCJW Papers, Indianapolis Historical Society.

⁴⁷ Judith Stein, *The World of Marcus Garvey: Race and Class in Modern Society* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1991), 50. As the organization only existed for a very short time, it is difficult to find many published sources that provide deep analysis on the International League of Darker Peoples and its activities. See also: chapter 3 of David Lettering Lewis, *W.E.B. Du Bois, 1868-1919: Biography of a Race* (New York: Holt Books, 1994); Nico Slate, *Colored Cosmopolitanism: The Shared Struggle for Freedom in the United States and India* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012).

⁴⁸ Letter to Chairman of the Japanese Envoys. Listed in the letter’s closing, the early executive board included: Adam Clayton Powell, A. Philip Randolph, R. R. Wright, Jr., Pauline L. Baxter, J. C. Austin, and Louis W. George in addition to Mme. C. J. Walker. Marcus Garvey, though not a member of the executive board, was also deeply invested in the organization.

Unfortunately, the impact and accomplishments of the International League of Darker Peoples were severely limited, and the group disbanded only months after it was formed. Madam C. J. Walker and Adam Clayton Powell both resigned their respective positions in March of 1919 when it became clear that travel to France was impossible. The organization's primary function, the selection and presentation of delegates at the Paris Peace Conference, floundered when the United States government refused to issue travel passports—an obstacle that undermined many well-intentioned activists of various affiliations. While Walker's stated purpose on her passport application was "commercial business" in England, France, and Italy, her request was still denied.⁴⁹

Shortly after her withdrawal from involvement in the International League of Darker Peoples, Madam C. J. Walker's health deteriorated and she passed away in May of the same year

The International League of Darker Peoples emerged from a political environment shaped by war and tragedy. Race riots, fear of violence and lynching, and disenfranchisement all contributed to the construction of a more militant consciousness for Madam Walker and many others. While Walker had always provided financial support for causes related to the uplift of African Americans, she "increasingly supported the more militant politics" of the period. Walker, like many

⁴⁹ Passport Application for Madam Walker, submitted 1 February 1919, MCJW Papers, Indianapolis Historical Society.

of her generation, had fiercely supported the war effort, but with its conclusion, called for the wartime rhetoric of patriotism and justice to be extended fairly to African Americans.

For Walker, these patriotic themes were inextricably linked to the East St. Louis riot. “We should protest until the American sense of justice is so aroused that such affairs as the East St. Louis riot be forever impossible.”⁵⁰ World War I had transformed Madam Walker’s role in the political world, leading her to fight for social and political opportunity for the black population around the world, as well as the economic security she had always provided.

⁵⁰ Passport Application for Madam Walker, submitted 1 February 1919

Epilogue

In her last will and testament, Madam C. J. Walker allocated a large portion of her remaining fortune for the charities she most favored throughout her life. Many organizations received generous one-thousand dollar donations, including various establishments that cared for orphans and the aging, the A.M.E. church she attended. Tuskegee Institute received two-thousand dollars and Bethune's Daytona Normal and Industrial Institute and the NAACP five-thousand dollars each. More than twenty-five thousand dollars was sent to charities after her death. A testament to the woman, Walker wished to be remembered as a woman who worked for the betterment of her race.

In today's society, Madam C. J. Walker is remembered primarily as a businesswoman, her story a celebration of economic success and attainment of the "American Dream." Often her generosity and the genuine interest she displayed in the lives of others are largely forgotten. But as the pulse of the black community began to shift towards Black Power in the second half of the twentieth century, Walker's achievements and influence underwent repurposing. Joined with likeminded women such as Annie Turnbo Malone, Madam Walker's role as a pioneer in the redefinition of beauty for African American women and girls in the twentieth century was brought to the forefront. Along with her support for educational and professional opportunity for black women, this idea has in recent years been converted into a wonderful and informative narrative for the reading pleasure and

instruction of young girls, ensuring future generations will understand the tremendous impact Madam C. J. Walker had on her generation and those who followed.

In the late 1970s, the tradition of activism associated with the Black Power movement began to wind down and in its place rose a dynamic cultural reclamation. In addition to the creation of African American studies programs and organizations to ensure equal political representation for black communities, activists strove to introduce a new generation to the celebration of black culture cultivated during the early years of the Black Power era. One demonstration of this aim is the publication of multiple children's literature collections that expose children to the achievements of prominent black Americans. Men and women of various professions are included, such as political leaders W.E.B Du Bois and Booker T. Washington, boxer Muhammad Ali, educator Mary McLeod Bethune, and entrepreneur Madam C. J. Walker, each contributing to the construction of a vibrant narrative for young children.

The analysis that follows considers twelve titles that focus solely on the life and legacy of Madam C. J. Walker. Ranging in complexity from beginner books with simple concepts to detailed adolescent biographies, the books possess many meaningful ideas. Rooted in historical fact and context, it is clear that these titles attempt to employ Madam Walker's story for the education of children, specifically focusing on young girls. Exploring the three large themes of personal empowerment, philanthropy, and concept of beauty and self-worth, writers of this

literature encourage the growth of strong, confident, compassionate women, extrapolating much more from Madam Walker's life than a story of economic success.

Long before the publication of A'Lelia Bundles's full biography of her great-great-grandmother, she authored a simpler one intended for young adults in 1991. Since the publication of that title in the early-1990s, a score of books have been written detailing her life in a variety of ways, ensuring accessibility to readers of all ages and proficiency levels. Extracting important details from Walker's story, authors of juvenile literature emphasize many important lessons, the most prominent of which are discussions of the growth of her business, her commitment to philanthropy, and her contribution to the changing views of beauty in the black world.

Most notably, the juvenile literature on Madam C. J. Walker highlights entrepreneurship and personal fortitude. A story of triumph and empowerment despite overwhelming odds, readers are encouraged to dream big. Additionally, Walker's story proves particularly important for young women. While beauty culture may remain a woman's domain, Madam Walker's intrusion into the business world serves as a divergence from stories that portray women of Walker's generation in a gender-traditional domestic sphere. As noted in this work, the industry Madam Walker helped to create offered a lucrative alternative to domestic or wash work. Children's books are often a valuable resource for teaching history in primary schools. By situating Walker's story within this accurate historical context,

readers are forced to grapple with the considerable obstacles she faced as a poor African American woman at the turn of the century.

Secondly, the literature emphasizes the commitment Walker made to the betterment of her race. In addition to the creation of respectable careers for black women, Walker saw her economic stability as an opportunity to give back. The manner in which Walker encouraged her agents to involve themselves in social and political issues is but one example of this. Primarily focusing on her generosity to well-known organizations such as the Indianapolis YMCA, Mary McLeod Bethune's Daytona Normal and Industrial Institute and various projects headed by the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), the literature identifies Madam Walker as a generous supporter of the people of her race.

Third, I examine the manifestation of concepts of beauty in the literature. Often criticized for encouraging white concepts of beauty, an accusation she vehemently denied, Madam Walker's products treated diseases of the scalp and allowed black women to grow longer, healthier hair. The children's literature emphasizes the correlation Madam C. J. Walker recognized between success and a respectable appearance. While Madam Walker's story celebrates much more than a person's outward appearance, the literature does emphasize the confidence that stems from pride in one's natural beauty, directly connecting concepts of beauty with self-worth.

The literature consists of books at three general reading levels. Catherine Nichols's *Madam C. J. Walker* is the simplest and is referred to as a beginner book.

The majority of titles fall within the intermediate level, which consists of books intended for readers between the ages of seven and ten. The most complex and detailed books, for readers above the age of ten, are referred to as the advanced level.¹ This framework allows for a comparative analysis related both to Madam C. J. Walker's legacy and her status as an exemplar for key themes central in the education of children.

The Entrepreneur

The juvenile literature surrounding Madam C. J. Walker views her first and foremost as a businesswoman. Her courageous and independent spirit is examined through the coming and going of her family members and multiple spouses, as well as the difficult social climate that shaped her. Yet while these are important concepts for understanding Walker, her vision to provide economic self-sufficiency for herself and others is central to her usefulness to the legacy of Black Power. This section explores how books at different levels present her entrepreneurship through the empowerment it created for Walker and her agents.

Intended for children at a beginner reading level, Catherine Nichols's *Madam C. J. Walker (2005)* uses very simple sentences to introduce children as young as six years old to Madam Walker's story. The author presents Walker as someone who "was always interested in hair." She was unsatisfied with the current products

¹ Citations for each title indicate the target readership. In addition, the bibliography at the end of the paper list books by reading level.

available for purchase, the book explains, as they did not “work on her hair.”²

Looking for a solution to that problem, Madam Walker chose to manufacture her own products rather than purchase them. Punctuated with a full-page photograph of a factory bearing Walker’s name, the storyline focuses primarily on the building of the Walker Company—the development of a product, the construction of a factory, the training of agents—each stemming directly from the personal efforts of Madam Walker. With only 182 words, Nichols’s book serves as a basic foundation upon which the more detailed narratives can build.

One of the earliest published, Patricia and Fredrick McKissack’s work, *Madam C. J. Walker: Self Made Millionaire (1992)*, provides a more dynamic account of Walker’s life. Far longer than Nichol’s biography, the work by the McKissacks is intended for intermediate level readers. Organized into brief chapters, the book begins with Sarah’s birth to sharecroppers Owen and Minerva Breedlove. The author also names Sarah’s older siblings, placing Sarah within an established familial structure.³ By the end of the second chapter, however, Sarah has lost both her parents to disease and her first husband, Moses McWilliams, to unknown causes. Without family to rely on, Sarah sets off on her own in search of greater opportunity for herself and her young daughter.⁴

² Catherine Nichols, *Madam C. J. Walker* (New York: Scholastic Press, 2005), 8. Dr. Tiffany M. Gill, author of *Beauty Shop Politics*, served as content consultant on this work. Intended for ages 6 and up.

³ Patricia and Fredrick McKissack, *Madam C. J. Walker: Self-Made Millionaire* (Hillside, New Jersey: Enslow Publishers, Inc, 1992), 6. Intended for ages 7 and up.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 11.

Much like her last name, Madam Walker's location is constantly changing. Following her story through such short biographies can sometimes feel frantic, quickly shifting from Mississippi to Missouri and onward to Denver, Indianapolis and finally Harlem. But her nomadic lifestyle is also representative of her commitment to her vision and willingness to take risks. Constantly in search of new markets for expansion, Walker believed wholeheartedly in her business, never allowing her decisions to be encumbered by trepidation or the wishes of her husband. The ascension within the business world highlighted by the McKissacks can be found throughout the literature, exemplifying Walker's independent nature and personal empowerment.

Madam C. J. Walker: Self Made Millionaire also provides considerable information on the world Madam Walker encountered as a black woman at the turn of the century. In addition to a discussion of sharecropping, the second half of the book explores segregation, defining the term as laws that "kept black people and white people apart." The authors use Walker's refusal to humbly accept a significant price increase for black customers at the local theatre and the construction of the Walker Theatre Building as a reaction to the injustice of segregation.⁵ Exposure to important concepts such as segregation promotes important discussion for children. While potentially confusing or troubling, this particular chapter of the book adds dimension to the life of Madam Walker and speaks to her political nature and intolerance for discrimination. Similarly, Kathryn Lasky's *Vision of Beauty: The Story*

⁵ McKissack, *Madam C. J. Walker*, 25.

of *Sarah Breedlove Walker (2000)* includes an introduction to the Ku Klux Klan.

Paired with a haunting illustration of a crowd watching a schoolhouse engulfed in flames burn to the ground, the text describes the role of the Ku Klux Klan (KKK) as fearful of the potential of an educated black population.⁶

The experience at the theatre is a staple in the lengthier biographies intended for advanced readers, as well. With more space, the more complex chapter books describe the event in greater detail, highlighting how Walker's accomplishments emboldened her. The sense of empowerment that her professional success afforded her led to increased political involvement in the last years of Walker's life. *Madam C. J. Walker: Entrepreneur and Millionaire (2007)* by Darlene R. Stille asserts "Madam Walker was willing to use her fortune and her influence to fight for racial equality."⁷ Books at all levels discuss Madam Walker's involvement in political organizations that worked to better living conditions for the black population. Whether discussing her presence at the NAACP's Silent March following the race riots in East St. Louis in 1917 or her involvement in the International League of Darker Peoples in later years, the author shows that Madam

⁶ Kathryn Lasky, "Delta, Louisiana: Early 1870s," chapter in *Vision of Beauty: The Story of Sarah Breedlove Walker* (Cambridge, MA: Candlewick Press, 2000). Intended for ages 8 and up. Note: Lasky's book does not provide page numbers. Citations will be by chapter title.

⁷ Darlene R. Stille, *Madam C. J. Walker: Entrepreneur and Millionaire*, (Minneapolis, MN: Point Books, 2007), 76. A'Lelia Bundles served as content consultant for the book. Intended for ages 10 and up

Walker recognized her prominence in the black community brought a moral obligation to provide a voice for the disenfranchised.⁸

As much as her notoriety provided her freedom to address race issues, economic self-sufficiency played a larger role. Many of the titles tell Madam Walker's primarily in economic terms. *Madam C. J. Walker: Building a Business Empire* (1994) begins: "Madam C. J. Walker made lots of money." Clearly an idea that catches the attention of young readers, author Penny Coleman's book revolves around the financial independence Walker created for herself and her agents. But she "did much more than make a lot of money," Coleman attests. Madam Walker's products provided a respectable career for black women, if they were willing to commit themselves.⁹ "There is no royal flower strewn road to success," Walker said. Her own success was a product of hard work.¹⁰ Her philosophy, fashioned after that of her idol, Booker T. Washington, encouraged personal empowerment. Beginning in her life time, Black Nationalists like Marcus Garvey also encouraged the creation of independent institutions within an insular black community that was self-sustained. Walker's company serves as an early example of these.

⁸ Stille, *Madam C. J. Walker*, 80-82. Walker's involvement with the NAACP Silent March and the International League of Darker Peoples appears in the following titles as well: *Madam C. J. Walker: Entrepreneur* by A'Leia Bundles & *Madam C. J. Walker: Self-Made Businesswoman* by Della Yannuzzi.

⁹ Penny Coleman, *Madam C. J. Walker: Building a Business Empire* (Brookfield, CT: Millbrook Press, 1994), 7. Intended for ages 7 and up.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 21.

Sales agents, as identified in Nichols's beginner book, sold products door-to-door.¹¹ In other texts, such as Susan Bivin Aller's *Madam C. J. Walker (2007)*, agents are referred to as Madam Walker did: "hair culturists."¹² This term inferred a sense of professionalism. Originally trained by Madam Walker herself or under her direction at one of the Lelia Beauty Schools, a new agent received instruction that she could then return to her community and put to work. Affiliating oneself with the Walker Company "gave black women a chance to be independent and earn a good living."¹³ The Walker Company provided black women with opportunity, but also reflected the sense of responsibility Walker felt black women had to one another. Agents were trained to speak to customers about economic freedom as well, offering to share the tools of success with any woman in need. Madam Walker was proud that her company "made it possible for many colored women to abandon the wash tub for more pleasant and profitable occupations," but she also reveled in the opportunity to invite more financially independent and socially engaged women to enter the workforce.¹⁴

The intermediate and advanced level literature exposes a number of other ways the Walker Company strove to empower women. In addition to liberating black women from the demeaning nature of washwork, the literature highlights

¹¹ Nichols, *Madam C. J. Walker*, 14.

¹² Susan Bivin Aller, *Madam C. J. Walker* (Minneapolis, MN: Lerner Publications, 2007), 41. A Lelia Bundles consulted on this title. Intended for ages 7 and up.

¹³ Aller, *Madam C. J. Walker*, 27.

¹⁴ Coleman, *Madam C. J. Walker*, 27.

Walker's commitment to their education. Aller and others discuss the decision to add her training program to the curriculum of many black colleges and technical schools in an attempt to elevate the status of her agents.¹⁵ Her company also provided sufficient income for women to send their children to school.¹⁶ And the creation of The Madam C. J. Walker Hair Culturists Union of America provided a powerful voice for the agents in the decision making process of the company. They would also use the organization as a vehicle of political engagement, sending a telegram to President Wilson in 1917 demanding action after the riots in East St. Louis.¹⁷

Madam Walker serves as a premier example for the discussion of empowerment for young girls. A reflection of who Walker was while living, the books encourage the growth of educated young women who could provide for themselves—and their families. The Walker agents had a commanding presence in society. The most visible of agents were always well dressed and groomed, financially independent, and politically engaged. The Association of Walker Agents became a powerful group, advocating reform within the community and the nation. In addition, the fortune Madam Walker made in the early years of the twentieth

¹⁵ Coleman, 42.

¹⁶ A'Lelia Bundles, *Madam C. J. Walker: Entrepreneur* (New York: Chelsea House Publishers, 2008), 48. Intended for ages 12 and up.

¹⁷ Bundles, *Madam C. J. Walker*, 74. Intended for ages 12 and up. Bundles published a biography for a similar audience in 1991. While this is not listed as a revision of the original, many of the chapter titles and content are the same.

century would also afford her the opportunity to give generously—another quality she attempted to instill in each of her agents.

The Philanthropist

Madam Walker is also remembered for her commitment to philanthropy. In many ways, the two go hand in hand. As the earlier chapters show, Walker's philanthropy was afforded by the success of her business enterprise, Walker distributed money widely and without hesitation and encouraged charitable giving among her agents as well. The simpler books identify philanthropy in terms of how Walker used her wealth for the betterment of others without always incorporating a specific charity or cause. The more complex titles, however, examine the various causes Walker endorsed. Through discussions of the creation of community institutions such as the Indianapolis YMCA and the education of black children at Mary Bethune's Daytona Institute, Walker's philanthropy becomes a powerful part of her Black Power legacy, speaking to her dedication to racial uplift.

Nichols's beginner biography addresses Walker's commitment to philanthropy very quickly: "Walker made a lot of money selling her products. She used some of it to help other people."¹⁸ Perhaps intended as a summary of Walker's life, businesswoman and philanthropist, the sentence that follows announces her death. Despite the lack of details, Nichols inclusion of her financial assistance for others identifies it as an important part of her legacy.

¹⁸ Nichols, *Madam C. J. Walker*, 18.

Books at the intermediate level exhibit a varying level of treatment for Walker's philanthropic interests. Much like Nichols, the McKissacks's text affords it no more than a sentence. They simply say, "She also gave freely to churches, schools, hospitals, children's homes, and other good causes."¹⁹ Many others, such as Edwin Brit Wyckoff's *Hair-Care Millionaire: Madam C. J. Walker and Her Amazing Business* (2011), Lori Hobkirk's *Madam C. J. Walker, 1867-1919* (2001), and Penny Coleman's *Madam C. J. Walker: Building a Business Empire* place Walker's philanthropy at the forefront of the story, however. "I want to live to help my race," her life-long mantra.²⁰ Evidencing that claim, authors choose to explore a variety of Walker's endeavors.

Both Wyckoff and Hobkirk focus on Walker's donation to the Indianapolis YMCA. A substantial sum of money, the donation drew considerable public attention.²¹ Hobkirk's biography also lists a number of other significant donations Walker made, including support for the Tuskegee Institute, Mary McLeod Bethune's Daytona Normal and Industrial Institute, and a five thousand dollar donation to the NAACP—the largest donation the organization had ever received. In the personal lives of her agents, she organized the National Beauty Culturists and Benevolent Association of Madam C. J. Walker Agents. Members contributed twenty-five cents a

¹⁹ McKissack, *Madam C. J. Walker*, 23, 19.

²⁰ Edwin Brit Wyckoff, *Hair-Care Millionaire: Madam C. J. Walker and her Amazing Business* (Berkley Heights, NJ: Enslow Publishers, 2011), 27. Intended for ages 8 and up.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 19.

month and upon death, the union returned fifty dollars to the family.²² Each of these organizations pursued very different paths towards the creation of a strong black community. In addition to educational institutions, like Tuskegee, the NAACP and the Association of Walker Agents worked for a better quality of living for African Americans—a common purpose shared with the Black Panthers in later years, as evidenced by the free breakfast programs and health care clinics they provided for their communities.

Upon finding success, Coleman discusses the things Madam Walker did with her money. She bought herself many nice things, including musical instruments and automobiles, but she also gave much of it away. Using the term *philanthropist*, Coleman discusses many of Walker's charities, including Bethune's school, the NAACP, and a donation to ensure the preservation of Frederick Douglass's home in Washington, D.C. As the project's largest benefactor, a plaque was placed in her honor on site.²³

Walker's philanthropy is easily found in the advanced level chapter books. Like the intermediate books, the longer treatments incorporate Walker's contributions to the YMCA project, various educational institutions, and the NAACP, but they also discuss the revision of her final arrangements. Recognizing the seriousness of her health condition, Madam Walker committed \$25,000 to various

²² Lori Hobkirk, *Madam C. J. Walker, 1867-1919* (Mankato, MN: The Child's World Inc., 2001), 32.

²³ Coleman, *Madam C. J. Walker*, 38-39.

organizations in the days preceding her death.²⁴ Nearly \$300,000 in today's dollars, Bundles states, Madam Walker wanted to do all she could for "deserving race institutions before passing away."²⁵

Ultimately, this discussion of Madam Walker's commitment to philanthropy teaches that there are more important things in life than money.²⁶ Aller states that "Sarah never forgot her long, difficult climb to reach success. She wanted to help make it easier for others."²⁷ She expected her agents to share her commitment as well. Just as she had encouraged political involvement, Madam Walker rewarded the "employees who contributed to charities in their communities."²⁸

On Beauty

The third and most controversial theme addressed in the Madam C. J. Walker literature is a discussion of beauty. Beauty advertisements of the era often featured white models and denigrated black features. Walker, on the other hand, rejected the ideals of the white community, choosing instead to engage in a "Black is Beautiful" campaign. The biographies explore social constructions of beauty during Madam Walker's life, how they shaped her ideology, and how she utilized her company to engage the perceptions of the dominant culture. Examining her experiences,

²⁴ Della A. Yannuzzi, *Madam C. J. Walker: Self-Made Businesswoman* (Berkley Heights, NJ: 2000), 82. Intended for ages 12 and up.

²⁵ Bundles, *Madam C. J. Walker*, 89.

²⁶ Hobkirk, *Madam C. J. Walker*, 30.

²⁷ Aller, *Madam C. J. Walker*, 36.

²⁸ Lasky, "Epilogue," chapter in *Vision of Beauty*.

advertisements, and spoken words, the literature sheds light on the connection Madam Walker saw between success and a respectable appearance.

Madam Walker's embarrassment in her appearance before she developed her product is a common theme throughout the biographies. Aller states, "Sarah desperately wanted to improve her appearance. She was ashamed of her short, dry, tangled hair."²⁹ A common complaint among black women, scalp disease afflicted the lower classes disproportionately—a consequence of poor hygiene and diet. Walker's desire for healthy hair is presented in each book, associating Walker's shame and lack of self-worth with her personal appearance.

Walker's desire to grow long hair may be perceived as embracing white standards of beauty that almost exclusively featured long, straight hairstyles. The children's literature rejects that premise, however. While an argument can surely be made that many black women embraced such concepts, the literature suggests Walker may have instead been influenced by the successful, middle-class blacks she encountered in St. Louis. Hobkirk notes that Walker observed that more affluent women "wore their hair pinned on top of their heads. Their hair was also smooth, long, shiny and thick."³⁰ It is there, Hobkirk suggests, the connection is made between success and appearance, not a reaction to the image accepted by the dominant culture.

²⁹ Aller, *Madam C. J. Walker*, 18.

³⁰ Hobkirk, *Madam C. J. Walker*, 16.

The intermediate and advanced literature also examines advertisements and products that targeted black women, encouraging hair straightening in an attempt to look “more like white women.”³¹ Lasky notes that white women had “good hair,” while their black counterparts suffered with “bad hair” that was “nappy or kinky.” Some advertisements sponsored by white companies vilified natural black features such as curly hair or a darker complexion, often offering skin bleaching and hair relaxing products. Many more ignored African American women completely. Madam Walker’s advertisements provided an alternative, featuring photographs of herself rather than light skinned models, and providing the black community with a new beauty ideal. Lasky notes that the “before and after” images that appeared in many of her advertisements are a statement of her evolution. In the first image, Walker’s “eyes are cast down shyly,” but in the second image, her hair falling below her shoulders, she is looking straight into the camera, emboldened.³²

Improving a woman’s outward appearance, Walker believed, would improve feelings of personal satisfaction and self-worth, but as with her agents, she encouraged the development of a person inside and out. Quoting Walker, Aller reminds the reader, “To be beautiful does not refer alone to the arrangement of the hair [or to] the perfection of the [skin]. One must combine these qualities with a beautiful mind and soul.”³³ Invested in the full development of the women of her

³¹ Aller, *Madam C. J. Walker*, 18.

³² Lasky, “Denver, Colorado, 1905-1908.”

³³ Aller, *Madam C. J. Walker*, 27.

race, it is difficult to prove the true intention of Walker's company was to embrace a white concept of beauty.

Still many in the black community accused her of encouraging hair straightening to black women in order to resemble white women. Black ministers were especially critical of Walker's treatments, arguing that if God intended black women to have straight hair than it would be so. "Let me correct the erroneous impression held by some that I claim to straighten hair," Walker stated. "I deplore such an impression because I have always held myself out as a hair culturist." Walker argued that her primary objective was to grow and promote healthy hair and scalp, regardless of style.³⁴ Despite her critics, Walker's advertisement campaigns and personal philosophy in terms of beauty have identified her as a leading example of the race uplift movement that grew out of her era.

Never advertising hair straightening techniques and deploring being identified as a "hair straightener," Walker engaged the white beauty ideal by providing an alternative image that celebrated blackness. Her advertisements and agents enhanced natural black features and encouraged women to embrace a holistic view of beauty that included much more than outward appearance, a valuable lesson for the education of young girls.

³⁴ Coleman, *Madam C. J. Walker*, 31.

Conclusion

Kathryn Lasky, author of *Vision of Beauty: The Story of Sarah Breedlove Walker*, was first introduced to Madam C. J. Walker as a child. Indianapolis, the city where Walker established her permanent operations, as well as constructed the Walker Theatre, celebrates its connection with the famous businesswoman. This is where Lasky was raised. In a note at the front of her book, she explains her personal connection with Madam Walker's story: "One of my very early memories is coming into the kitchen with a jar full of money and my mother exclaiming, 'Goodness, Kathryn, maybe you'll grow up to be the next Madam Walker!'" Understanding the opportunities Madam Walker created for the city, Indianapolis has since adopted her as one of its own.³⁵ The theatre she constructed still stands in the heart of Indianapolis. Although it was not completed until long after her death, it remains a testament to her hard work and economic might.³⁶

Additionally, the juvenile literature that has emerged in recent years will endure for generations. One fragment of a larger celebration of black achievement, the books ensure the introduction of Walker to children four or more generations removed from her own. Primarily discussing her empowerment of black women, Walker's story has become a leading example of the Black Power philosophy. Walker changed the way black women looked at themselves, recognizing a new definition of beauty that embraced their natural features. Living in a period of

³⁵ Lasky, "Author's Note," *Vision of Beauty*.

³⁶ "Madam Walker's Legacy," Madam Walker Theatre Center, 2010. <http://www.walkertheatre.com/madam-walkers-legacy>, accessed 15 November 2012.

terrible oppression for black Americans, Walker constructed a hair care empire that provided economic self-sufficiency and respectability for thousands of agents. Paired with the numerous philanthropic endeavors Walker undertook, her empowerment of herself and others speaks directly to Black Power.

At all levels, Walker's story raises questions in the minds of readers regarding opportunity. Understanding the obstacles she faced, Walker's ascension from washerwoman to one of the nation's wealthiest African Americans in only fifteen years is remarkable, if not herculean. With the publication of these juvenile literature collections and the recent incorporation into history textbooks, children across the nation have been introduced to Walker's celebratory message. An important example for children with ambitious dreams, Madam Walker's legacy simply states: anything is possible.

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