

"Is it True What They Say about Models?": Modelling African American Womanhood On the Eve of the Civil Rights Era

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Abstract

This paper explores the work of models, modelling agencies, and popular magazines in forging a new iconography of African American womanhood. These raced and gendered images and ideas engaged heterosexual appeal, feminine deportment, and middle-class consumerist status as a strategy for race advancement on the eve of the civil rights era.

Résumé

Cet article explore le travail des modèles qui ont du succès, des agences de modèles, et de revues populaires en forgeant une iconographie de la féminité afro-américaine. Ces images axées sur la différence entre les races et entre les hommes et les femmes, ces idées ont engagés l'intérêt hétérosexuel, la conduite féminine, et le statut consumériste de la classe moyenne comme stratégie pour l'avancement de la race à la veille du l'époque des droits civils.

The Negro woman is keeping company, she's a housewife, she's a career girl! Regardless of her occupation, she looks in the mirror...wanting to look like the movie stars, the cover girls...yet so little has been said or shown of the beauty of the darker-skinned women. The Negro woman should take heed of this statement and recognize that she, too, has beauty...that can mean success and happiness.

Erase from your mind any preconceived idea that you - because of your coloring - cannot achieve beauty.

(BWC, "Introduction," 9)

Between 1946 and 1956, Brandford Models, the first agency to train and represent African American women as professional models, exuberantly claimed beauty to be within the reach of all women, regardless of "coloring." Brandford Models, a New York-based agency, also operated a modelling school that trained average women to cultivate beauty as a road to "success and happiness." In its promotional material, Brandford Models framed the concern of African American women about their professional and personal appearance as partially fuelled by consumerist images in popular movies and magazines. According to Brandford Models, African American women, in comparing themselves to these visual representations, faced their own mirrors and lamented, "What's wrong with me"? Brandford Models assured women that the fault was not theirs by advancing principles of beauty

framed in concepts of individual and democratic achievement. Indeed, throughout the life of Brandford Models, the claim that "all women can be beautiful" attracted many average working women to take the agency's training courses although the majority never earned wages from employment in the industry. While modelling schools provided instruction deemed crucial to the many women negotiating their way in the urban workforce, professional models and model agents facilitated the display of feminized ideals of beauty as accessible through purchase and effort.

This paper explores the work of African American models and modelling agencies on the eve of the civil rights movement, specifically the period 1945-1954. It considers how certain models, modelling agencies, and entrepreneurs such as the owners of *Ebony* magazine presented positive images of African American women to African Americans at home and to wider international audiences, and how those audiences viewed these gendered displays. I analyze how the promotion of a racialized beauty culture of African American womanhood, constructed by different groups of African Americans, announced heterosexual appeal, feminine deportment, and urban middle-class status through the access of consumer goods as a strategy for race advancement.

This study positions modelling agencies and mass consumer magazines as real and representational spaces that were opened to African Americans as part of the broader changes in post-World War Two America. As Lizbeth Cohen demonstrates, the postwar era witnessed the intensifying correlation between values of "freedom, democracy, and equality" with "the process of mass consumption." As the Cold War progressed, the heightened connection between abstract values and consumer practices framed mass consumption as civic responsibility in the democratic nation or the "consumers' republic" (Cohen 2003, 1-8). In this period, the consumer power of African Americans grew to such a degree that it attracted

attention from analysts and marketers who highlighted the necessity for race-positive depictions in advertising to help lure this "new" consumer (Weems, Jr. 1998, 10-41). The continuing entry of African American women into new occupations not only increased their visibility, income and participation in a mass consumer culture, but also made them more sensitive to the ways in which consumer practices could be associated with a particular form of raced gender identity and with an upwardly mobile class status. Within this context of postwar consumerism, the representation of African American womanhood assumed new symbolism: ideals and practices of beauty were consumed and displayed as a strategy for racial advancement and as a form of entitlement to equal rights in America.

The job of models, like that of nurses, exotic dancers and flight attendants, defies easy categorization; such groups have been variously defined as workers, semi-professionals and professionals (Barry 2007; Ross 2000). For feminist historians, this is especially relevant when considering how women whose labouring bodies helped sell commodities or services understood their material lives and negotiated identities and subjectivities. This is particularly true when assessing model work that is often too easily castigated as unskilled, morally suspect and anti-feminist. Yet, the debut of African American models during the mid-1940s underscores the classed, raced, and gendered contexts in which they laboured and displayed notions of womanhood. The construction and performance of gendered displays by African American entrepreneurs and models highlights the agency of women in confronting racist understandings of African American womanhood.

On the eve of the civil rights movement, the aspiration to white-collar work and the racialized gendered etiquette required of such labour fuelled the demand by ordinary African American women for model training. The increase in employment opportunities and economic gain among African

American women remained small in comparison to that witnessed in white America and these improvements were largely restricted to those in urban and northern centres. Yet, however limited and limiting the postwar advances, new opportunities were opened to members of the race, especially women. For example, the traditional employment of African American women in domestic work dropped from 60% to 41% between 1940 and 1950; a decade later, that figure fell to 36%. Accompanying this decline was the relative growth of African American women in clerical work, although such work became increasingly gendered and racialized as white female labour (Giddings 1984, 231-58; Price 1969, 116-18). Popular understandings of African American women as lacking middle-class morals and manners often cast them as unsuitable for white-collar work. When hired, African American women were often slotted into clerical positions that restricted interracial contact, thereby keeping white employees and customers "safe" from workers of the race (Fine 1990; Jones 1985; Kwolek-Folland 1994). Despite discriminatory ideologies and practices, the combination of organized urban protest, the rise of a liberal consensus and demographic changes allowed a modest increase in the employment of African American clerical workers during the early postwar period (Anderson 1982; Jones 1985). The small but perceptible movement of some African American women into previously white enclaves enhanced their visibility and tested their viability as middle-class, white-collar workers (Haidarali 2005).

Modelling provided African American women with one of the few routes out of chronic economic insecurity and tenuous social status. The term "professional" best describes African American models precisely because of the ability of the model to enact behaviours and social status historically denied to African Americans as an economic class. Discussions of African American class identity and class formation

recognize important differences from such development in white America: definitions of the African American middle-class did not parallel that of white America. Between the late nineteenth and the mid-twentieth centuries, members of the emerging African American middle-class worked in a number of professions. While patterns varied by region, the most common employment as professionals included skilled artisans, "along with civil servants, teachers, Pullman porters of good family background, domestic servants in the most elite white families, the more eminent and better educated ministers, a few doctors and an occasional lawyer" (Meier 1962). Middle-class African Americans also recognized their privileged status and many worked to assist their less fortunate sisters and brothers. African American women formed a significant group who directed their attention to other women of the race by underscoring the importance of presenting respectable representations of self in the quest for social, political and economic advancement (Brown 1994; Gilmore 1996; Higginbotham 1993; Wolcott 2001).

The history of beauty culture in America includes path-breaking studies by Lois Banner and Kathy Peiss. This scholarship re-ordered academic analyses of beauty culture by highlighting how changing notions of female beauty, gender norms, and cosmetic consumerism influenced modern constructions of womanhood. Focusing on the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, these studies further advanced inquiry into the business of corporate beauty culture and established the field as a reputable one (Banner 1983; Peiss 1998). As for the debates that persist among feminists, a dichotomized feminist vs. post-/anti-feminist position on beauty obscures the complexity and paradoxes involved. One such problematic is the historical exclusion of women of colour from ideas and ideals of female beauty. The rise of mass consumption during the early twentieth century - including cosmetic use, fashionable clothing

and consumer magazines - permitted some African American women access to some of the goods, if not the lifestyle, previously denied to them. In making themselves "beautiful," these women conformed to conservative gendered notions of beauty and femininity; yet, these images simultaneously challenged racist stereotyping of women either as asexual and unattractive mammies, maids and laundresses or as tragic mulattas and hypersexual Jezebels (Hill 2000; White 1985). African American models directly countered these images by advancing a public image of African American women as respectable, feminine and sexually attractive.

Scholarship on African American female beauty explores diverse aspects of beauty culture, including the manufacturing, consumption, and advertising of beauty products. Scholars such as Blackwelder, Walker, and Gill show that in segregated Southern communities, the beauty industry offered social and economic opportunities for women whose options remained severely curtailed, and that African American women took advantage of entrepreneurial opportunities in beauty culture to promote political and social activism. Perhaps the best-known example of activist entrepreneurship is Madame C.J. Walker, whose line of hair-grooming products made her the first African American female millionaire. Walker contributed to various African American institutions and ventures while directing a great deal of her race-proud rhetoric in efforts to "uplift" women of the race (Bundles 2001).

The significant body of work that explores the contested and politicized meanings of hair and hairstyles in African America, racial pride, and respectability, demonstrates how hair and good grooming were important signifiers of the multiple expressions of African American gendered identities as practiced by ordinary women. Women and men both endured the pressure to conform to certain respectable aesthetic standards, albeit to varying

degrees in different eras (Craig 2002; Jones 1985; Peiss 1998; Rooks 1996). As Maxine Leeds Craig notes with reference to women and hair, in a world in which notions of beauty and social class were linked to white skin, "the average black woman could not alter her skin color or facial features but she could effectively remove the curl from her hair" (2002, 26). The work on African American women's explicit efforts to construct new representations of race-proud womanhood is particularly noteworthy, including Craig's *Ain't I a Beauty Queen?*, a history of beauty pageants from 1891 to the late 1960s. She argues that women's participation in segregated and integrated beauty contests helped to "rearticulate" racial identity by presenting African Americans as feminine, sexual and beautiful women (Craig 2002). My work builds on this scholarship of women's participation in constructing new iconographies of African American womanhood. It is the first to study the work of African American models and the role of Barbara Watson in renegotiating race, class and gender politics on the eve of the civil rights era.

Professional modelling, long associated with immorality, gained legitimacy throughout the 1910s. According to historian Lois Banner, the emphasis on the restricted movement of the female body - in the pose or on the catwalk - removed any sense of sexual liberation, thereby eradicating the connection between sexuality and modelling (1983, 262-64). While Banner focuses on the work of white models and her study ends in 1921, the model's body, throughout the 1940s and 1950s, remained an object of display: it constantly called upon the spectator's eye. The post-World War Two era celebrated a voluptuous (fertile) female figure, and sexuality remained a key element in representing femininity and womanhood. Morality, or rather the seeming lack of it, remained tantamount in popular imaginings of models. As late as 1951, *Ebony*, an African American photographic magazine, queried: "Is It True What They Say About Models?" and then swiftly



dispelled the myth of loose morals among these women. Ebony worked hard to present African American models as diligent, sober-minded workers who differed little from the average urban woman. Still, the highly sexualized images left room for doubt. Models retained some dignity as professionals largely through the advent of modelling agencies, such as Brandford Models (Gross 1995; Quick 1997).

Figure 1 Brandford Charm School Director, Barbara Watson with models. Barbara Watson Photograph Collection. n.d.

Barbara Watson, an educated and elegant Harlemite, along with her partner and commercial photographer Edward Brandford, also African American, opened Brandford Models, the first African American modelling agency, in 1946. One newspaper heralded the event as "Another Step Up" and quoted actor Canada Lee touting the opening as "an historic moment in our lives, and also...a new era in the advertising field" (Lee 1946). Located in Times

Square, in the heart of New York City, Brandford Models symbolized an important change in African American consumerism. The agency's founding responded to the postwar need of corporate America to produce and disseminate race-positive images to sell consumer goods to the new "Negro Market" (Brooks 1991; Haidarali 2005, 10-37; Weems 1998, 32). Housed separately from the modelling agency, just off Park Avenue, the Barbara Watson Charm and Model School provided ordinary African American women instruction on the "use of make-up, diction, figure control, hair styling, correct posture," and other social graces that reinforced the increasingly consumer-based vision of urban, African American womanhood (Jet 1955). Together, both institutions helped shape the early postwar consumerist ideology and iconography of African American womanhood as feminized, urbanized and decidedly middle-class.

Like Madame Walker, Barbara Watson can be viewed as an African American entrepreneur who linked her work to race activism. Watson's modelling agency and Model and Charm School provided women with employment and training as the feminized professional, an identity intended to counter denigrating views of African American women as they moved within integrated and segregated urban workspaces. Watson noted that not all women sought careers as professional models, yet model training cultivated in women "a charming and pleasing personality and a good appearance"- characteristics Watson deemed necessary for "personal [and] professional relationships" (BWC 9:3). Watson linked the need to polish and define physical deportment and social skills directly to the increasingly public and professional role of urban African American women (Anderson 1982; Jones 1985). But Watson also envisioned, and marketed, the dual trope of poise and professionalism as a strategy for advancement to be used by all women of the race, regardless of socio-economic class or employment. Reflecting on the

types of women enrolled in the Charm and Modelling School, Watson stated:

We get women who want to know what to do to make the best of themselves...[A]pppearance and manners are very important to those who want to get ahead in their work in society. We teach our pupils the kind of hairdo that suits them best, we give them posture exercises, teach them how to move and give them advice as to the clothes that go best with their skin and figure. Don't forget that Negroesses have never before had a chance to take these courses. Women from all walks of life come to us - matrons, stenographers, actresses, maids. And we have seen plenty of proof that what we have taught them has given them greater poise and self-assurance, greater chances of asserting themselves.

(BWC, Dagens Nyheter 9:12)

Watson epitomized this poised and self-assured womanhood, a persona cultivated since childhood. Watson's Jamaican-born parents encouraged academic and social excellence in their four children who grew up on 120th Street, also known as Harlem's "Millionaire Row." Groomed on good manners, intellectual pursuit and social purpose, Watson envisioned her work at Brandford Models as a contribution to race progress, an activism that, after closing the agency in 1956, shaped her life's work as a diplomat. Her status as an educated, upper middle-class woman helped reinforce the professional face of Brandford Models.¹

Like other agencies, Brandford Models worked to secure bookings for its models, acting as the intermediary between worker and client. As businesses, both Brandford Models and Barbara

Watson Charm and Model School operated to gain economic profit while training and booking women for model work. While various packages were available for model training, the average woman paid \$55.00 to attend classes one evening per week. Over the course of eight weeks, she learned "the right way to good health, good looks, self-confidence and poise" (BWC 9:1). Ordinary women like Phyllis J. Hunt testified to the value of such training. In a 1949 letter, Hunt thanked Watson for "the nights you taught us to walk with our hips tucked under" while emphasizing her gratitude for the charm course. For Hunt, model training allowed her confidence, poise and dignity necessary to "conduct [herself] like a lady" in a workplace where she was "the only stenographer on this floor who is technicolored" (BWC 9:1; Haidarali 2005).

Some women who enrolled in these courses hoped to parlay such training into modelling for wages. Despite the need of white corporate America to reach the "new Negro market," the demand for African American models remained limited. By 1954, African American models, like their white counterparts, could hope to earn the hourly wage of ten dollars with a select few commanding twenty-five dollars per hour. Overall, the average model worked only intermittently, although some women did acquire full-time status as professional models. The success of an African American model depended on a number of factors, including the mainstay of the industry - physical appearance. When it came to skin colour or complexion, brown-skinned, as opposed to very light or very dark skinned, models enjoyed greatest success (Haidarali 2005).

Typically, the average African American model worked within her own community. In segregated urban spaces, she found work as an in-house fashion model, and participated in local church benefits, sorority fashion shows, beauty pageants and other community events. The public

spectacle of elegantly dressed and coiffed African American women in these local community events probably helped instill a sense of race-pride in the residents, one that was linked to class-based conduct, consumerism and ideals of feminized beauty. Conservative in its reiteration of traditional gender norms, these events allowed both model and community to enact and envision gendered meanings of racial identity (Craig 2002, 45-64; Summers 1998, 28-29).

African American models found greater exposure in the pages of mass-circulated consumer magazines like *Ebony*. First appearing in November, 1945, *Ebony* flourished as one of the most widely circulated African American popular magazines of the period, reaching a circulation of a half million in 1954. Fashioned after *Life*, the popular white photographic magazine that first appeared in 1936, *Ebony* engaged its readers by providing unfamiliar images - non-denigrating representations of African Americans. This glossy photographic magazine also promoted images of highly successful, middle-class people actively engaged in the consumerist ethic of postwar America. In so doing, *Ebony* effectively declared that in a nation that denied full equality, economic success within the capitalist order was possible (Wolseley 1971, 142). African American models allowed *Ebony* to meet its editorial aim by linking material success to feminized beauty, heterosexual status and product consumption.

Ebony courted African American readership at home, but also tapped into a wider international audience who could gaze upon pleasing images of African Americans disengaged from the economic and social reality of the majority of African Americans. Its inaugural editorial set the tone for its first decade of publication; it declared: "*Ebony* will try to mirror the happier side of Negro life - the positive, everyday achievements from Harlem to Hollywood. But when we talk about race as the No. 1 problem in

American, we'll talk turkey" (*Ebony* 1945). When early attempts to lure a white American readership failed, *Ebony* abandoned such efforts, but succeeded in attracting international interest. Between 1945 and 1954, letters to the editor came from readers in countries in the Caribbean, Europe and Africa. The photographic images of successful and respectable-looking African Americans contradicted white America's denial of full civil liberties, a refusal highly politicized and advertised during wartime.

In 1948, one Swedish newspaper, *Dagens Nyheter*, noted the impact of *Ebony* on white European readers, remarking that, "Somehow, the periodical seems upside down until one becomes accustomed to it. Everything that is white in our publications is black here - that's the key." The reporter described the cover of the magazine that presented "not just any Negroes," but Nat King Cole and his new wife, who is described as "chocolate colored compared with his ebony black." This particular issue of *Ebony* covered Cole's wedding in Mexico, a venue expressly chosen to subvert Jim Crow treatment. Astutely noting that the photographs showed Cole and his wife participating in "normal" middle-class activities such as sun-bathing, dining, dancing and sightseeing, the Swedish reporter surmised that "presumably this kind of publicity makes excellent propaganda." "When one sees young, smart, intelligent and sometimes very rich people who in other respects live happy lives," he continued, "one cannot help realizing how idiotic are the obstacles that we try to put in their way" and "how closely the Negroes resemble us and live in exactly the same way as the high and mighty whites" (BWC 9:12). *Ebony* regularly displayed the image of African American celebrities such as Cole to promote African American success.

Ebony, though consistent in its employment of celebrity images to advance the view of African American success, was not alone in this enterprise. As Penny Von Eschen shows, during the Cold War, the

display of African American culture formed a significant part of government strategy to counter charges of racism at home and interventionist practices abroad. She demonstrates how government officials promoted "the universal, race-transcending quality of jazz" as emblematic of a uniquely American culture, while at the same time relying on "the blackness of musicians to legitimize America's global agenda." But as Von Eschen shows, jazz musicians who helped create what government officials presented as "the most original product of American modernism" were not passive dupes but used the opportunity to advance their own agendas; for example, Duke Ellington's famous composition *Black, Brown and Beige* invoked colour-structured language to denounce racial hierarchies (2004, 4-23).

Brandford Models participated in the production of African American culture by creating pin-ups for soldiers of their race. In a 1952 press release, during the Korean War, African American marines expressed their gratitude to Brandford Models for obliging their "plea" to the agency to "secure some pictures...to decorate our nearly erected Recreation Hall." The request was made by Sergeant Watson at Camp Lejeune, North Carolina who lamented that while "pin-ups of white women" were "at his disposal," the marines of his unit wanted "some of our own girls too, God bless 'em all." The appeal of both race pride and patriotic duty worked. Watson admitted that while the request was somewhat unusual, the "girls rallied readily to the cause" and were "thrilled" to assist the men in this manner (BWC 9:9).

While photographic images of African American women adorned the walls of men's barracks, this iconography proved central to *Ebony's* representation of African Americans to the mostly African American audience at home. Often highly sexualized, these representations claimed attractiveness and beauty as the domain of African American

women. Indeed, the Swedish reporter commented on the proliferation of African American female models in advertisements as a "shock to the inexperienced Swedish reader." The particular issue reflected the regular content and format of *Ebony*, where "[a]ll the photographers' models for bras and cosmetics are beautiful young Negresses...everywhere pretty clothes are worn by coal-black beauties" (BWC 9:9). Obviously, the "shocking" nature of these depictions derived from the use of attractive, African American models to advertise consumer goods that advanced femininity, heterosexual appeal and fashionable consumption.

Barbara Watson, in addition to working at Brandford Models, also acted as Fashion Editor at *Ebony*. In 1948, she travelled to several Western and Northern European countries, including Sweden, in an effort to "study Swedish women's clothes in a search for ideas that can be adapted to suit the colored women of America." Described in one report as a "quiet, dark-skinned, tall, slim, chic girl," Watson commanded the attention of the Swedish press (BWC 9:12). One account summarized Watson's impact stating, "We always believed that Negro ladies in...candy pink coats were a picturesque splash of color in the streets of New York. But when we said that to Miss Barbara Watson...she made us realize that we must not think of the picturesque but rather of the women themselves" (BWC 9:12). By demanding recognition of African American women as individuals, Watson refuted the view of them as an exotic mass. But she also upheld traditional notions of demure and respectable dressing, especially in terms of colour. Her attitude reflected older notions that dark-skinned women should avoid brightly colored clothing. Since the Progressive Era, African American reformers and leaders rejected this type of dress as vulgar and immodest; such clothing threatened to "dissipat[e] the high ideals of young women" (Higginbotham 1993, 199-200). Watson updated these ideas by advocating some colour to grace the bodies of dark-skinned

women; still, she insisted that women of the race adhere to "milder colors ...[such as] [s]almon pink, lavender...clear green, blues and yellows" (BWC 9:12).

Another Swedish newspaper article that reported on Watson's colour code for dressing the African American female body drew a captivating image of her as a woman whose sense of "style and grace" made her "well worth a second glance." The reporter downplayed Watson's status as exotic other in Sweden, stating that "[y]ou would notice her even if you saw her in a crowd of hundreds of other black girls in Harlem." Unlike this fictional "other" group of women, Watson's dress reflected a "difference in clothes and color scheme." The news article synthesized what was undoubtedly Watson's viewpoint: "You can be sure that every vulgar, fussy garment produced by the American clothing industry comes to rest on these girls. Not because they have particularly poor taste or poor sense of color, but because this kind of junk is all there is to be bought in the stores in the Negro districts." The report concluded by asserting Watson's commitment to "give her colored sisters a superficial equality; she wants to teach them to make up skillfully, to move gracefully, to feel sure of themselves, thereby giving them a better chance to compete with white women" (BWC 9:12).

These accounts underscore Watson's vision of advancing social equality for African American women through proper dress, cosmetic use and deportment. Indeed, the message to look and act like a model extended to all African American women as a means for social advancement. One may not necessarily work or seek employment as a model, but the tenets of proper deportment, stylish dress and careful cosmetic use were advertised to female readers of mass-circulated magazines like *Ebony* to which Watson contributed. Here, women received instruction about correct forms of consumption. This "superficial equality" as dubbed by Watson, initially

puzzled one Swedish reporter who appraised the democratizing influence of clothes and makeup as "what one might call an American point of view." But the reporter reflected further, agreeing that "clothes play a vital role" in "bolstering the colored women's self-confidence...to be able to assert themselves with regard to the whites" (BWC 9:12). Watson's particular mode of advancing racial equality through proper self-presentation commingled with older, accepted notions of respectability and good grooming. But it also reflected the growing consumerist ethos in postwar America that reworked basic understandings of self-presentation as a mode for advancement.

Watson's visit to Sweden and her interactions with Swedish reporters also demonstrate the international reach of fashion and its ability to transcend racial boundaries. Watson's European tour and her attempt to modernize and stylize "women of the race" involved a transference of European styles to African American female bodies. Of course, this look to Europe to update or define women's fashions was not confined to African Americans, but Watson's emphasis on presenting women of the race as chic, urban, modern and elegant resisted the long history of the degradation of African American women as workhorses, sexual consorts, and asexual mammies. Certain women found the "different" European look racially liberating.

One such woman was African American model Dorothea Towles, who began modelling in the late 1940s without the help of New York based-agencies like Brandford Models. Towles encountered few barriers to modelling in her home state of California; she attributed this luck to being light-skinned in a place "where you have a lot of dark-skinned people, a lot of Mexicans." Towles accepted any job offered to her, including local fashion shows "in churches or with sororities where you would bring your own clothes." By the early 1950s, Towles made her way to Europe where she attained phenomenal success working as a house model for

designer Christian Dior. African Americans at home learned of Towles through magazine and newspaper articles, and when she returned to the United States a few years later, she did so as a minor celebrity. Back in the United States, she travelled widely, participating in hundreds of fashion shows for sororities and historically black colleges (Summers 1998, 197-203).

Towles' foray into the French fashion industry permitted a unique perspective of African American modelling and of African American women. Consistent with Watson's view of European clothing, Towles asserted her difference through her style of dress. As a model, Towles benefited from deep discounts on designer clothing, and her European style made her a touch more fashionable than other African American women and models. Towles recalls that

[B]ack in the States, I outshot all the Blacks, put them away in the shade, because I'd gotten all this fantastic experience. I feel that my going all over America with my show had a great influence on American Black women dressing differently and feeling good about themselves. I saw them dressing more creatively, more internationally. They could say, if she could do it, I can too.

(Summers 1998, 203)

In some respects, Towles followed the precedent set by the first generation of African American models who, like Madame C.J. Walker, used their own image as testament to the advertised product. Walker's rags-to-riches story is extremely well-known, but the use of her image to sell her own hair-grooming products is particularly noteworthy here. Like Walker, Watson and Towles helped to define African American beauty as something that one could achieve through proper consumption and

judicious display. But while Walker's earlier campaign rested on the social advancement of women through proper grooming, Watson and Towles helped cultivate a more rigidly middle-class, chic, urban representation of African American womanhood as an avenue to social and economic success.

The work of the professional African American model in early postwar America extended far beyond the simple pose to advertise a consumer product. The modelling of African American womanhood evoked feminized, heterosexually appealing and socially mobile consumerist images that reflected the era's hope for full democratic rights. The opulence of this iconography, like the expectancy of the period, waned by the mid-1950s; the militancy of the later decades presented new challenges for women of the race and new constructions of African American female beauty. Despite its seemingly narrow and conservative representation of womanhood as feminized, heterosexual and consuming, model work remains central to understanding the gendered representations of an attendant middle-class African America.

Endnote

1. In 1953, the agency changed ownership and title becoming Barbara Watson Models, although the nomenclature of "Brandford Girls" followed these pioneering models. Watson's closing of the agency in 1956 marked her return to the study of law and the beginning of her career in politics. In 1977, President Jimmy Carter appointed Watson to the position of Assistant Secretary of State (Consular Affairs).

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