

On August 23rd, 1912, Madam C.J. Walker stood up in the crowd at the Thirteenth Annual Convention of the National Negro Business League and exclaimed, “Surely you are not going to shut the door in my face.” (154) She had been snubbed by Booker T. Washington, the leader of the NNBL on numerous occasions, and decided to seize her opportunity to speak rather than wait for Washington to grant it. (Bundles, 135) In the sexist and elitist environment where she and her beauty business were looked down on, Walker, in her straightforward manner, won over an audience of hundreds as she recounted her journey to success and her ambitions to empower and educate the people of her race. By refusing to let patriarchal institutions shut the door in her face, Madam Walker held the door open for underprivileged African American women to step onto the twentieth century political scene. Her fierce tenacity allowed her to break down some of the walls obstructing Black women’s access to power, and she revolutionized the entrepreneurial landscape in America.

The Freeman, an African American newspaper based in Indianapolis, called Madam C.J. Walker’s spontaneous presentation one of the highlights of the 1912 NNBL Conference, reporting that she “at once impresses an audience with the fact that she stands for concrete achievement rather than brilliance of oratory.” (Bundles, 136) Walker’s concrete achievements were a major focus of her speech, as she informed the crowd that, “I am a woman who started in business seven years ago with only \$1.50,” and have now seen “\$63,049, all told, made in my hair business in the city of Indianapolis. (Applause.)” (154) The fact that she provides a detailed list of her specific incomes every year, including the total from “this year (up until the 19th day of

this month—last Monday),” (154) demonstrates that Walker is involved in the day to day business of her company, and proves her economic acumen—a skill that was typically considered a man’s area of expertise. A shrewd businesswoman, Walker was well aware that money talks, often loud enough to cut through narrow perceptions and judgments, so she lays out her solid financial achievements early on. In the seven years leading up to her unplanned address of the NNBL, Walker had “diversified the black beauty industry to include not only the selling of products but also the selling of beauty, independence, and financial success,” (Gill, 19) and “preached a gospel of financial independence from the white world.” (Hine & Thompson, 194)

Walker was living the “American Dream” at a time when that was a slim possibility for most women, *Black or White*. Her detailed account of the money she made in every year of business is intended to impress the audience not only because of the considerable sums, but because her success proves that an uneducated, divorced, African American single mother had overcome major obstacles to now own a property valued at \$10,000, her own factory, and an automobile. (Walker, 154) Mrs. N.F. Mossell wrote in 1894, “The women of this race have been industrious but it is only in late years, that they have reaped the fruits of their own industry.” (24) This was true on a personal level for Walker too, who spent many years laboring in the cotton fields and over a scalding laundry tub, only to see her earnings barely provide for her most basic survival.

Although Madam C.J. Walker was eventually “the wealthiest black woman in America and the first self-made American woman millionaire,” (Hine & Thompson, 205) she took great pride in describing her meagre beginnings. As she announced to the audience of the 1912 NNBL Convention, “I am a woman that came from the cotton fields of the South; I was promoted from

there to the wash-tub (laughter); then I was promoted to the cook kitchen, and from there I promoted myself into the business of manufacturing hair goods and preparations.”(Walker, 154) Her use of the word “promotion” is critical, because it illustrates Walker’s choice to emphasize that she, a poor, uneducated woman, was capable of taking matters into her own hands and creating her own enterprise. It is also of paramount importance that shame and apology are absent from Walker’s description of her rise from the lowest rung of society. Although somewhat in jest, she presents the work of cotton-picking, laundry, and cooking as business industries worth the respect of any other, since these areas of good honest work were the stepping-stones to her wealth and achievement. She was not embarrassed to describe her past: she knew the desperation of poverty and thus understood perfectly the women she championed.

Walker recognized that her rise to economic independence was not accessible to the majority of Black women, so she devoted much of her life to creating training and employment opportunities for women where they “made three or four times as much as they could make as maids [and] achieved a level of autonomy and respectability that they could not have aspired to as domestic workers.” (Hine & Thompson, 204) She knew from first-hand experience that the employment prospects for African American women in the twentieth century were bleak, as “Black women, restricted by race and gender, often struggled against the most discouraging and desperate circumstances to provide for their families.” (Cash, 17) Because of their “doubly disadvantaged status” (Jones, 2) Black women were confined to either domestic service or manual labor, and most of them made only a couple of dollars a week, all while shouldering “the extreme burden of being effective parents.” (Harris-Perry, 289) In the decade before Madam C.J. Walker opened her manufacturing company, ninety-one percent of Black women workers were

employed as domestics. (Davis, A. 93)

When Walker insistently spoke to the Convention of the NNBL on that day in 1912, she noted that her factory employed seven people “including a bookkeeper, a stenographer, a cook and a house girl.” (Walker, 154) But the truth is, her company provided employment for a much larger scope of individuals. In 1913, Walker recounted how over the past eight years, she had given employment to more than one thousand women “who are now making all the way from \$5, \$10, and even as high as \$15 a day,” (Walker, 210) and by 1916, the Walker Company had twenty thousand agents, most of whom were black women. (Hine & Thompson, 205) The significance of this is enormous. In an era where all women faced serious discrimination, lower to middle class Black women were especially marginalized since they suffered from “the triple threat of classism, racism and sexism.” (Williams, 12/13/12)

Walker herself won some triumph over this pervasive triple threat when she was finally invited to be an honored speaker at the Fourteenth Convention of the National Negro Business League in 1913 by Booker T. Washington. This was only one year after he had so publicly dismissed the achievements she had shared at the 1912 convention, failing to acknowledge that Walker had spoken at all, or that George Knox had vouched for her as someone providing serious financial support for the progress of the race. Eventually, Walker’s persistent correspondence paid off, and Washington had a shift in attitude towards her business, helped in no small part by the generous donations Walker made to the Tuskegee Institute, of which Washington was President. In her 1913 speech, she insisted that “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.” (Walker, 210) The vast majority of African American

women suffered intense exploitation “within the masculine world of the public economy,” paying the price of “long hours, substandard working conditions and grossly inadequate wages.” (Davis, A. 229) This abuse was aided by the popular propaganda that “represented the vocation of *all* women as a function of their roles in the home,” thereby denying working women the rights of a full wage employee, since they had dared to step out of their “natural sphere.” (Davis, A. 229) Walker challenged these notions by re-defining the public image of a working mother, and offered Black women financial autonomy through a career in the African American beauty industry—a business that by the 1920s was “controlled exclusively from top to bottom by black women.” (Jones, 164)

Madam C.J. Walker acknowledged her critics and their general elitist values when she declared that “the business of growing hair” is one “that is despised, that is criticized and talked about by everybody.” (154) Although some individuals saw her advertisements as encouragement for African American women to adopt a European American ideal of beauty, Walker reiterated on many occasions that she deplored “the erroneous impression that [she] straightened hair,” because she considered herself a “hair culturist,” (Bundles, 20) whose primary concern was aiding the growth of healthy hair. It is also important to note that while much of her criticism came from within the Black community, it was the White press who labeled her with derogatory nicknames such as the “de-kink queen.” (Bundles, 20) This exhibited an ethnocentric view held by many White journalists, who were certain that the only way an African American woman could find such success in the beauty industry would have to be through offering Black women the chance to look more White.

Walker deeply resented having her products misconstrued as tools to undermine the

African American race, and W.E.B Du Bois confirmed that she “did not intend to imitate white folk,” crediting her with “revolutionizing the personal habits and appearance of millions of human beings” by educating them about hygiene and grooming. (Bundles, 20) In a 1929 advertising pamphlet entitled The Key To Beauty, Success, Happiness, the Madam C.J. Walker Manufacturing Company espouses the philosophies, “cleanliness is next to godliness,” (16) and that “half the battle of achieving success is to look successful.” (2) As Carole Marks explains, What Madam Walker had discovered in her hair-care and cosmetic business...was a secret ingredient of race pride. She argued strongly that she was not trying to make her customers white but to instill in them pride and self-worth, to make them feel good about being black and about being women...She stressed the importance of helping black American women to find their own unique style, not a derivative one. (69) Walker stood up for her industry both literally and figuratively when she proclaimed to the Thirteenth Annual Convention of the NNBL, “I feel that I am in a business that is a credit to the womanhood of our race.” (154) She firmly believed that her “Wonderful Hair and Skin Preparations” were “working to glorify the womanhood” of her race, (Lake, Fig. 3.8, 66) and sought to enhance African American beauty rather than erase it. Walker’s argument that, “it is important to use only preparations designed *for* our people *by* our people,” (Walker Manufacturing Co, 16) was obviously aligned with promoting her own interests, but she was also operating in an era where there were no regulations for the standards of cosmetics, and a number of the products marketed to Black women were extremely dangerous. This was a consumer climate that boasted such products as “Black-No-More,” a toxic mixture of bi-chloride of mercury tincture and benzoin, which claimed to “transform the blackest skin into the purest white without pain, inconvenience or danger,” but in fact caused severe skin

damage. (Lake, 53)

In examining the rhetoric of the Madam C.J. Walker Manufacturing Company, it is evident that Madam C.J. Walker promoted racial uplift and early feminist values through every avenue of her empire. She tirelessly defended the dignity of her work, and in her impromptu speech to the NNBL in 1912, Walker was so determined to bring the world's attention to her cause that she insisted, "Please don't applaud—just let me talk!" (154) Madam C.J. Walker empowered Black women on many levels, and although the concerns of appearance may seem superficial on the surface, Melissa Harris-Perry points to the political significance of African American women taking control of their own beauty:

It is an act of resistance for a black woman to demand that her body belong to herself for her pleasure, her adornment, even her vanity, because in the United States, black women's bodies have often been valued only to the extent that they produce wealth and pleasure for others. (280)

Standing in the crowd at the Thirteenth Annual Convention of the NNBL, demanding the room's attention, Madam C.J. Walker declared: "I am not ashamed of my past; I am not ashamed of my humble beginning. Don't think because you have to go down in the wash-tub that you are any less a lady! (Prolonged applause)." (154) With this statement, Walker denounced the elitist attitudes that often plagued the groups concerned with racial uplift. Despite her generous contributions to organizations like the YMCA, The Frederick Douglass Preservation Fund, and the Tuskegee Institute, Walker "was not completely accepted by the black bourgeoisie society." (Cash, 51) Hard-earned respect and membership in the National Association of Colored Women did not exclude her from the "cross-class prejudice and in-group distinctions among the

club leaders [which] were interwoven within their community efforts.” (Cash, 7) Nevertheless, Madam C.J. Walker was a staunch supporter of many institutions within the Black community, and eventually donated two-thirds of net corporate profits from her company to charity and civil rights organizations. (Levering Lewis, 110) She emphasizes her philanthropic commitment to the National Negro Business League in 1912 when she proclaims, “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 part of what I make in trying to help others.” (155)

Walker was infuriated by Booker T. Washington’s perpetual dismissal of her, and she alludes to this when she faces the crowd and remarks, “I have been trying to get before you business people and tell you what I am doing.” (154) With this statement, she signals to the audience of the 1912 Convention that she is persistent, and that her achievements are just as important as any other business endeavor being presented to the National Negro Business League. Walker also tramples on elitist ideals when she shares that she knows how to grow hair as well as she knows how to grow cotton, (154) because many of the delegates at the NNBL were of a Northern, educated class who perceived themselves to be superior to the African Americans who were migrating from the Southern states to Northern cities. She is essentially pointing out that she has toiled under the most extreme oppression and still managed to ascend the business ladder to great heights.

One thing that separated Madam C.J. Walker from many of the elite African American women who participated in socio-political movements was the fact that she did not tout an educated background or lean on the support of an influential husband. As Darlene Clark Hine and Kathleen Thompson write in A Shining Thread of Hope, “Walker was born in a

sharecropper's shack, and her husband benefitted far more from his association with her than the other way around." (203) Named Sarah Breedlove McWilliams when she married Charles Joseph Walker, she took his name and added the title "Madam" as she adopted a new entrepreneurial persona. Although she held onto his name, she did not hold onto the man: Madam C.J. Walker left Mr. C.J. Walker after he was unfaithful and attempted to take advantage of her business. Having been orphaned at the age of six and widowed at twenty with a two-year-old daughter, Madam C.J. Walker was no stranger to forging a path on her own. She exceeded all expectations of a Black woman's capabilities in the business world, and "at a time when it was widely believed that women were neither emotionally nor physically suited to be involved in the world of commerce, she had long ago stepped beyond the circumscribed 'natural role' of wife and mother." (Bundles, 120)

Sharing Anna Julia Cooper's conviction that "Black women could be the agents of change in this society," (Williams, 10/25/12) Walker was determined that the agents of the Madam C.J. Walker Manufacturing Company would be actively involved in political movements surrounding the uplift of the African American race and womanhood. She held the first convention of the Madam C.J. Walker Hair Culturists Union of America in 1917, where the agents shared their personal triumphs, and listened to a number of keynote speakers including George Knox, S. Willie Layton, and Madam C.J. Walker herself, who presented a speech entitled "Woman's Duty to Woman." (Bundles, 211)

Passionate about a broad range of causes, Walker did not limit her focus to the plight of African American women. "Indignant over the War Department's segregationist policies, Madam Walker [had] led a delegation of women to see President Wilson," (Levering Lewis, 110) only to find the

president unwilling to discuss or acknowledge the fact that the government was asking Black men to fight in Europe to protect democracy, when they couldn't even be protected from lynching on their home soil. "Undaunted by Woodrow Wilson's rebuff," Walker preached to the two hundred delegates assembled at the inaugural meeting of the Mme C.J. Walker Hair Culturists Union: "this is the greatest country under the sun. But we must not let our love of country, our patriotic loyalty cause us to abate one whit in our protest against wrong and injustice." (Bundles, 212) Motivated by Walker's speech and her experience in Washington, the agents penned a telegram to the White House urging President Wilson and Congress to enact laws that would prevent the disgraceful violence of lynching. They outlined their protest "against this continuation of wrongs" in the United States, and "with that gesture, the association had become what perhaps no other currently existing group could claim: American women entrepreneurs organized to use their money and their numbers to assert their political will." (Bundles, 212)

In spite of the fact that Madam C.J. Walker was incensed by Booker T. Washington's reluctance to acknowledge her as a key figure in the African American community, she still wanted to become associated with Tuskegee University. Washington was the leader of Tuskegee, and time after time, rebuked Walker's overtures suggesting that a hair culturist trade school be incorporated into the Tuskegee program. Walker chose not to fixate on Washington's rejection of these proposals, and instead told the audience of the NNBL that "the real ambition of my life, the all-absorbing idea which I hope to accomplish...[is] to build a Tuskegee Institute in Africa! (Prolonged applause.)"(155) By sharing this lofty goal with the attendees of the Thirteenth Annual Conference, Madam C.J. Walker is announcing that she has her sights set on global

possibilities, and in a sense, one-upping Washington. With her unwavering conviction that she will succeed in building an industrial school in Africa with “the help of God and cooperation of my people in this country,” (155) Walker infuses her plan with a sense of humility and camaraderie. Suggesting that faith in a higher power guides her ambitions, Walker affirms her role as a religious woman, which was of great import in many circles of the Black Community. Although Walker’s dream of a Tuskegee Institute in Africa was never realized, she invested considerable funds in educational institutions in the United States. Madam C.J. Walker understood that “the addition of beauty culture treatments into college curricula validated the dignity of the profession,” and by placing her training programs in these Black colleges, Walker allowed many girls with a “particularly uncertain” social and financial position to claim the status of college educated. (Gill, 28) Walker had little formal education until her adult years when she attended night classes while saving every penny to keep her daughter Lelia in a prestigious private school. She placed great value on her own education, and the education of all Black women, and “Walker’s presence in various black colleges demonstrates her far-reaching impact on African Americans not solely with regard to beauty culture but also in the realm of education.” (Gill, 29)

The fact that Madam C.J. Walker stood up and delivered an unscripted speech to hundreds at the Thirteenth Annual Convention of the National Negro Business League illuminates her refusal to adhere to the restrictions of a sexist and classist society. As she recounted her beginnings in abject poverty and described her road to great fortune, she silenced elitist critics, who could hardly argue with the indisputable accomplishments she presented. Walker’s impromptu speech was revolutionary because she was a Black single mother from a

humble background who was speaking out in a setting where she was completely uninvited. Her bold pronouncements earned her a featured spot in the Fourteenth Convention's line up, and by 1915, "Walker's female-dominated profession was so respected that the NNBL chose the Beauty Parlor Business as the theme of the sixteenth annual convention." (Gill, 24)

Upon Walker's death in 1919, W.E.B. Du Bois wrote in *The Crisis*, "It is given to few persons to transform a people in a generation. Yet this was done by the late Madam Walker." (Bundles, 276) Deemed "the herald of a new social order in which women will be independent and the oldest form of property will vanish forever," (Bundles, 276) Madam C.J. Walker was celebrated as a tireless advocate for the uplift of her people and the rights of Black women. She became a symbol of economic independence, and "tens of thousands of black women were able to escape from the limitations of domestic work through her company." (Hine & Thompson, 203) She also forced members of the predominantly male black business community and the elite black female club network to reevaluate their understanding of the beauty business and its role in racial uplift. (Gill, 18) Walker's political activism is often overshadowed by misconceptions surrounding her beauty business, but it is impossible to deny that she and her industry propelled women into "the center of the discourse on race and entrepreneurship in the early twentieth century." (Gill, 8) This was facilitated by her unflinching determination, and the fact that Madam C.J. Walker was unafraid to stand up to powerful men, insist that she be heard, and forge a flourishing independence on her own terms.

The Central Narrative: An impromptu speech made by C.J. Walker at the 13th Annual Convention of the NNBL in Chicago, Illinois, on August 23rd, 1912.

Transcribed on October 17th, 2012 from:

Report of the 13th Annual Convention of the National Negro Business League held at Chicago, Illinois, Aug 21-23, 1912, p. 154-155, Schomburg Micro R-6636, Reel 2 (Frame 0567)

Madam C.J. Walker, Manufacturer of hair goods and hair preparations, Indianapolis, Indiana: Surely you are not going to shut the door in my face. I feel that I am in a business that is a credit to the womanhood of our race. I am a woman who started in business seven years ago with only \$1.50. I went into a business that is despised, that is criticized and talked about by everybody—the business of growing hair. They did not believe such a thing could be done, but I have proven beyond the question of a doubt that I do grow hair! (Laughter and applause.) The first year I was in business I took in \$1,366; the second year I took in \$3,652; the third year I took in \$6,672; the fourth year I took in \$8,782; the fifth year I took in \$10,989; the sixth year I took in \$13,586; and this year (up until the 19th day of this month—last Monday) I had taken in \$18,000. (Prolonged applause.) This makes a grand total of \$63,049, all told, made in my hair business in the city of Indianapolis. (Applause.) I have been trying to get before you business people and tell you what I am doing. I am a woman that came from the cotton fields of the South; I was promoted from there to the wash-tub (laughter); then I was promoted to the cook kitchen, and from there I promoted myself into the business of manufacturing hair goods and preparations. Everybody told me I was making a mistake by going into this business, but I know how to grow hair as well as I know how to grow cotton, and I will state in addition that during the last seven years I have bought a piece of property valued at Ten Thousand (\$10,000) Dollars. (Prolonged applause.) I have built my own factory on my own ground, 38x208 feet; I employ in that factory seven people, including a bookkeeper, a stenographer, a cook and a house girl. (Prolonged applause mingled with laughter.) I own my own automobile and runabout (Prolonged applause.) Please don't applaud—just let me talk! (Laughter.) I am not ashamed of my past; I am not ashamed of my humble beginning. Don't think that because you have to go down in the wash-tub that you are any less a lady! (Prolonged applause.)

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. Perhaps many of you have heard of the real ambition of my life, the all-absorbing idea which I hope to accomplish, and when you have heard what it is, I hope you will catch the inspiration, grasp the opportunity to do something of far-reaching importance, and lend me your support. My ambition is to build an industrial 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! (Prolonged applause.)

Bibliography

- Bundles, A'Lelia. On Her Own Ground, The Life and Times of Madam C.J. Walker. New York: Scribner, 2001.
- Cash, Floris Loretta Barnett. African American Women and Social Action, the Clubwomen and Volunteerism from Jim Crow to the New Deal, 1896-1936. Westport: Greenwood Press, 2001.
- Davis, Angela. Women, Race and Class. New York: Random House, 1981.
- Davis, Elizabeth Lindsay. Lifting as They Climb. Washington DC: National Association of Colored Women, 1933.
- Davis, Marianna W. Contributions of Black Women to America, Vol. I. Columbia, SC: Kenda Press, Inc, 1982.
- Gatewood, Willard. Aristocrats of Color. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990.
- Gill, Tiffany M. Beauty Shop Politics, African American Women's Activism in the Beauty Industry. Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2010.
- Harris-Perry, Melissa V. Sister Citizen. Shame, Stereotypes, and Black Women in America. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011.
- Hine, Darlene Clark & Thompson, Kathleen. A Shining Thread of Hope: The History of Black Women in America. New York: Broadway Books, 1998.
- Jones, Jacqueline. Labor of Love, Labor of Sorrow. New York: Basic Books, 2009.
- Lake, Obiagele. Blue Veins and Kinky Hair: Naming and Color Consciousness in African America. Westport, CT: Praeger Publishers, 2003.
- Levering Lewis, David. When Harlem Was in Vogue. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., 1981.
- Lowry, Beverly. Her Dream of Dreams: The Rise and Triumph of Madam C.J. Walker. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc, 2003.
- Madame C.J. Walker Manufacturing Company, The Key to Beauty, Success, Happiness. Pamphlet, 1929.
- Marks, Carole. The Power of Pride: Stylemakers and Rulebreakers of the Harlem Renaissance. New York: Crown Publishers, 1999.

Minutes of the Eleventh Biennial Convention of the National Association of Colored Women held at Washington, DC, July 8-13, 1918. Reel 1. Schomburg Microfilm.

New York Age, 1857-1953. NYU Bobst Microform.

Mossell, Mrs. N. F. The Work of the Afro-American Woman. New York: Oxford University Press, 1988.

Report of the Thirteenth Annual Convention of the National Negro Business League held at Chicago, IL, Aug 21-23, 1912. Reel 2. Schomburg Microfilm.

Report of the Fourteenth Annual Convention of the National Negro Business League held at Philadelphia, PA, Aug. 20-22, 1913. Reel 2. Schomburg Microfilm.

Schoener, Allon. Harlem on My Mind. New York: New Press, 1990.

Vassell, Olive. "Madame C.J. Walker's Triumph Over the Odds." Afro-American Red Star. Washington, D.C. 10 Feb. 1996.

Williams, Tracyann F. Class Lectures 10/25/12, 12/13/12. Narratives of Black Women. The New School, New York, NY