Susannah Walker's new book, *Style and Status: Selling Beauty to African American Women, 1920-1975*, offers an excellent history of black beauty culture in the United States from the rise of a mass consumer market in the 1920s to the emergence of Black Power. Defined as the "tools, methods, and business practices of altering and caring for women's appearance," beauty culture, according to Walker, was not experienced by white and black women in the same way (pp. 2-3). For black women, beauty culture carried significant political implications since dominant aesthetic standards were often rooted in white ideals. Given this fact, Walker carefully examines the images and rhetoric of black female beauty employed by the beauty industry.

Unlike white business interests, black manufacturers tended to cast the pursuit of beauty as the handmaiden of racial uplift. Not only was an attractive appearance attainable, they argued, but it was also a valuable asset, allowing black women the power to claim respectability in a world loath to concede it. As self-employed businesswomen, beauticians also emphasized the opportunities that beauty culture afforded for economic independence, philanthropic work, and political activism. Yet black entrepreneurs could not entirely escape the contradictions that their goods and services represented. Beauticians, for example, maintained that their most popular service--pressing hair--was not an acquiescence to white standards but was instead a sign of black women's modernity, claims that did not, as Walker demonstrates, always bear the test of scrutiny. Not until the late 1960s, when Black Power gave birth to the "black is beautiful" mantra, were these claims seriously challenged. Walker portrays this development, too, as more complicated than it might appear at first glance. Though many black women who wore Afros did so as a political statement against white ideals, the beauty industry itself quickly commodified the look, transforming it into just another style that black women could adopt in their quest to be attractive.

Walker also offers an astute analysis of the ways in which black beauty culture reflected larger questions about black consumer culture and economic nationalism. On the one hand, African American political leaders desperately wanted white companies to recognize the needs and purchasing power of blacks, portraying this recognition as a civil rights issue. On the other hand, many leaders worried about the consequences of white encroachment in the beauty product market, one of the few areas where African American entrepreneurs had established a solid
footing. This tension lasted until the 1950s, when postwar prosperity and the civil rights movement, especially, made the potential of the black beauty market manifest to white manufacturers. As some had predicted, this development proved a bittersweet victory. By the 1970s many black-owned beauty businesses could no longer compete.

Walker reconstructs this history by focusing on urban spaces, thus leaving out the story of how rural black women--not an insignificant demographic--experienced the forces she describes. Still, her investigation of the larger implications of black beauty culture is well researched and thoughtfully executed and represents a deft combination of business, cultural, and social history.

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