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Beauty and Power: Beauticians, the Highlander Folk School, and Women's Professional Networks in the Civil Rights Movement

Abstract

In January 1961, fifty-two African American beauticians gathered at the Highlander Folk School, a tiny bastion of racial integration perched in the mountains of Tennessee. They had come to discuss their role in the struggle against American racism. While historians have long acknowledged the importance of gendered networks and women's organizing within the African American freedom struggle, the history of the beauticians who gathered at Highlander demonstrates the importance of professional networks as a bridge between different local struggles. In their skill at building networks, and their attention to the patient labor required of such building, beauticians were emblematic of the organizing prowess demonstrated by women throughout the civil rights movement. But unlike most African American women, beauticians had the economic independence and social prominence to gain positions of power usually reserved for men. The intersection of their class status and their gendered identity magnified the liminal status of beauticians—and gave that status special power. As they debated their role in the movement, the beauticians who gathered at Highlander struggled to navigate between autonomy and connection, and between participatory democracy and institutional hierarchy. Their struggles reveal the inevitable tension that marked social networks within a movement that challenged not only the forces of white supremacy, but also the inequalities of status and economic power that transcended the color line.

In January 1961, fifty-two African American beauticians gathered at the Highlander Folk School, a tiny bastion of racial integration perched in the mountains of Tennessee. They had come to discuss their role in the struggle against American racism. The meeting began with Mrs. Lillian Robinson, a renowned hair stylist from Chattanooga, celebrating the "new experience we are having with a workshop." Black beauticians had been gathering together for generations, but Robinson had good reason to proclaim, "This is a new day, this is a new era." While many of the beauticians were already contributing to the civil rights struggle, the Highlander workshop afforded them the opportunity to

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work together as a united force. If they could become "coordinated and organized" in their battle against racism, Robinson declared, they would "go down as making history." At the conclusion of the Highlander gathering, the beauticians decided to raise funds for a health center for African American sharecroppers who had been evicted after trying to register to vote. That effort, long delayed and only partially successful, might suggest that the gathering at Highlander had failed to make the beauticians "coordinated and organized." Yet the history of the beauticians at the workshop demonstrates that many were already "coordinated and organized," that African American beauticians had long worked together in opposition to white supremacy, and that certain kinds of coordination were more effective than others.[1]

For African American beauticians, the most powerful forms of coordination were the professional networks they had long cultivated and the ties they had to their own customers. When they extended beyond their professional networks and the communities they served, even the most dedicated and resourceful beauticians found it hard to achieve their goals. By contrast, it was when they served as links between their professional networks and their own local communities that beauticians were able to contribute most powerfully to the African American freedom struggle. In their skill at building networks, and their attention to the patient labor required of such building, beauticians exemplified the organizing prowess demonstrated by women throughout the movement. But unlike most African American women, beauticians had the economic independence and social prominence to gain positions of power usually reserved for men. The intersection of their class status and their gendered identity magnified the liminal status of beauticians—and gave that status special power. Across the movement, women often provided what sociologist Belinda Robnett has called "bridge leadership," connecting "prefigurative strategies (aimed at individual change, identity, and consciousness) and political strategies (aimed at organizational tactics designed to challenge existing relationships with the state and other societal institutions)." Highlander's beauticians' workshop reveals the complexities of such bridge leadership, and the challenges faced by Black women striving to cross borders of race, class, and gender in pursuit of transformational social change. While historians have long acknowledged the importance of gendered networks and women's organizing within the African American freedom struggle, the history of beauticians demonstrates the importance of professional networks as a bridge between different local struggles.[2]

Scholars have recognized the many contributions that beauticians made to the African American freedom struggle. Anyone who dared to oppose Jim Crow risked harsh economic reprisals, but beauticians were relatively free to challenge the white power structure because their income came from the African American community. In the words of historian Tiffany Gill, "Beauticians were so politically active because they were among the most economically autonomous members of the black community." That autonomy was the chief reason the director of Highlander, Myles Horton, decided to organize a workshop solely for beauticians. "They were entrepreneurs, they were small businesswomen," Horton later explained. "Most of all they were independent. They were independent of white control."[3]

What Horton failed to note, and what has been less acknowledged in the historical literature, is how the economic independence of beauticians was

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matched by the interconnectedness of their professional and social networks. Lillian Robinson, for example, participated in beauticians' organizations at the local, state, and national level. She served as president of her local chapter of the Chattanooga Cosmetologists, as president of the Tennessee State Beauticians Association, and as one of the national presidents of Alpha Chi Pi Omega, a sorority and fraternity for beauticians. Even more impressive is the list of affiliations of Mrs. Eva Bowman, another prominent beautician who attended the Highlander workshop. Bowman served as the president of the South Nashville Civic Club and the Women's Unity League; marshal for the State Federation of Colored Women's Clubs; committee member of the Tennessee Council for Registering and Voting; board member of the Grace Eaton Day Home; and member of the Nashville Community Relations Council, the United Council of Church Women, Spruce Street Baptist Church, the City Federation of Colored Women's Clubs, the Meharry Medical College-Hubbard Community Relations Council, and the Imperial Coterie Club. Robinson and Bowman were unusual in their stature—both professionally and politically. The *Chicago Defender* described Robinson as "one of the nation's leading hair stylists." Her salon in Chattanooga was "said to be among the finest in the country." Bowman was one of the first African American women to run for the Tennessee Legislature. But even if Robinson and Bowman were unusually distinguished, most beauticians were well connected in their own ways. Their livelihoods depended on their social and professional networks. Those networks in turn empowered their activism.[4]

It was a combination of independence and connectedness that made beauticians such a force for change—and that made the workshop at Highlander so promising. A similar combination of autonomy and connectedness marked Highlander itself. Located for much of its history on a hilltop in the mountains between Nashville and Chattanooga, Highlander was physically set apart from the cities and towns of most of its students, and that physical isolation was important to the educational work of the school. For one thing, it made it possible for the school to remain racially integrated at a time when few southern institutions dared to straddle the color line. Founded in 1932, the school was originally focused on issues of class and labor. In the early 1950s, Myles Horton pivoted the curriculum toward the struggle against racism. Over the course of the 1950s and 1960s, Highlander hosted hundreds of civil rights activists, including Rosa Parks a few months before she kept her seat on a bus in Montgomery. Links between Highlander and civil rights were strengthened by Septima Clark, a teacher and veteran activist, who became the school's director of workshops after being fired by the state of South Carolina because of her support for the NAACP. Clark worked with Horton to make the school one of the nerve centers of the movement. That entailed not only providing a safe space away from Jim Crow, but also required cultivating strong connections with activists and community organizers across the region, and helping to foster new connections between workshop participants. Those connections—and the experience of living together in an integrated setting—were more important than any particular lesson or message conveyed at the school. Indeed, although segregationists often accused Highlander of indoctrinating its students, Horton and Clark shared a commitment to student-driven learning. Teachers "don't have to know the answers," Horton explained. "The answers come from the people."[5]

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The beauticians' workshop exemplified Highlander's focus on cultivating grassroots leadership and letting "the answers come from the people," but also revealed the difficulty of defining who constituted "the people" and the challenge of avoiding the hierarchical structures common in many educational institutions. Audio recordings of the beauticians' workshop captured conversations dominated by the most prominent, influential, and affluent members of the gathering—revealing the class distinctions that operated even within the cosmetology profession. Whereas some beauticians owned spacious salons and lucrative beauty schools, others worked out of their own homes. A vast world separated the fabulously wealthy Madame C.J. Walker from most of the women who peddled her products in the rural South. Lillian Robinson and Eva Bowman were nowhere near as wealthy as Madame Walker, but they were elites nevertheless—substantially more affluent and socially prominent than most beauticians, including the majority of those who attended the gathering at Highlander. That gathering reveals little of the "class and gender biases of middle-class reformers," to use the words of historian Joe Trotter. But examining the conversations of the beauticians at Highlander, as well as their activism in their own communities, reveals the challenges of cross-class collaboration in the struggle against Jim Crow.[6]

Historians have moved beyond the old declension narrative in which the civil rights movement was a unified struggle that fractured as a result of Black Power. Profound disagreements existed within the movement from the beginning, as African American activists, in the words of legal scholar Tomiko Brown-Nagin, "questioned the meaning of equality and the strategies necessary to obtain a share of the American dream."[7] What remains to be fully understood, and what the beauticians' workshop helps reveal, is how professional networks, many of them built by Black women, linked together people, organizations, and communities in a way that helped to foster the movement. The history of the beauticians who gathered at Highlander suggests a new way to think about the geography of the movement, in which professional women played a key role knitting together disparate local struggles. Such efforts involved more than patient labor; they were acts of imagination. Scholarship on the transitional dimensions of the Black freedom struggle has recognized the creativity with which African American women conceived and built transnational and global networks of resistance.[8] The beauticians who gathered at Highlander brought the same boldness and creativity to building their own more local networks of opposition to white supremacy. This is not, however, a triumphant story about the power of connection. As they debated their role in the movement, the beauticians at Highlander struggled to navigate between autonomy and connection, and between participatory democracy and institutional hierarchy. Their struggles reveal the inevitable tension that marked social networks within a movement that challenged not only the forces of white supremacy, but also the inequalities of status and economic power that transcended the color line.[9]

This essay begins by juxtaposing the activism of several beauticians in the years before the workshop with the history of Highlander's most ambitious educational endeavor—the citizenship schools. I argue that the beauticians, like the citizenship schools, combined autonomy and interconnectedness via social and professional networks. I then turn to the beauticians' workshop and use

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Highlander's audio recordings to examine how the beauticians themselves made sense of their unique role in the freedom struggle. While Highlander's educational approach was conceived as radically democratic, I argue that the workshop reveals the challenge of transcending class divides and moving beyond hierarchical forms of education and leadership. Finally, I trace the anti-racist efforts that emerged from the workshop. I contrast the problems the beauticians encountered while working to build the health center with the success of their efforts to advance the freedom movement as beauticians and within their own communities. Through the eyes of the beauticians, the civil rights movement emerges as a network of networks in which nodes of connection, like Highlander and the beauty salon, drew power from the depth of their roots as well as the breadth of their reach. Yet while the workshop at Highlander reveals the power of networks—and of women's professional networks, in particular—it also reveals the labor and creativity that was required to build and maintain those networks, and to mobilize them for the struggle against Jim Crow and all forms of American racism.[10]

Becoming Beauticians, Becoming Activists

In the summer of 1955, a beautician named Bernice Robinson traveled to Highlander to attend a workshop on the United Nations. Robinson had studied at the Poro School of Cosmetology, one of the largest beauty schools in Harlem, before opening her own salon in Charleston, South Carolina, where she had been born and raised. In Charleston, Robinson thrived as a businesswoman and as a civil rights activist. She encouraged her clients to join the NAACP and to register to vote. "It got to the point where we were working so hard getting people to register to vote," she later recalled, "that I would leave people under the dryer to take others down to the registration office to get them registered." Robinson recognized that her profession allowed her a freedom many others lacked. "I didn't have to worry about losing my job," she explained, "because I wasn't a schoolteacher or a case worker with the Department of Social Services or connected with anything I might be fired from." But as important as her autonomy were her connections, including her business connections. In her words, "I had my own business, supplied by black supply houses, so I didn't have to worry." In addition to such supply networks, Robinson had powerful social and familial ties that magnified her activism. Indeed, she traveled to Highlander with one of the most connected and influential social activists in Charleston, a veteran educator who happened to also be Robinson's cousin: Septima Clark.[11]

Their visit to Highlander would prove transformational for both Robinson and Clark. After being fired from her teaching position because of her activism, Clark would become one of the chief architects of Highlander's civil rights work. Robinson would also play a crucial role in Highlander's contributions to the movement. After returning to Charleston, she sent an enthusiastic letter to Myles Horton and his wife, Zilphia. "My trip to Highlander was one of the most wonderful experiences of my life," Robinson wrote. "Never before have I met so many people, at any one time, with so much information to impart." It was not merely the amount of information that struck Robinson as important. In many other settings, Robinson explained, "much of the information is lost because of the tenseness of the group as a whole and you cannot relax and receive what is

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being offered. This is not true there at Highlander for there is no tension at all and one can absorb more easily."[12]

Robinson's emphasis on the communication of information was fitting. She was herself a master communicator. Robinson used her communication skills to great effect as the first teacher in the citizenship schools, a radical program of adult education that Highlander helped bring into being. In the following section of this article, I juxtapose Robinson's work in the citizenship schools with the activism of several of the other beauticians who attended the Highlander workshop. As the historian Clare Russell has argued, Robinson was different from many other beauticians in at least three ways: her varied educational and professional background, the fact that she had spent years in New York, and her willingness to transgress "social and gender norms." While Robinson successfully transitioned from being an activist-beautician to being a full-time activist educator and organizer, I argue that the majority of beauticians found their path to the freedom struggle as beauticians.[13]

It is important to avoid generalizing about what was a massive and diverse profession. By 1940, there were over 16,000 African American beauticians. The total number might have been even higher, given that many beauticians operated small shops out of their own homes. According to one estimate, cosmetology was the third most profitable profession within the African American community (after insurance and mortuary services). One proud beautician suggested that over eight million dollars were earned in 1947 alone. These profits were not shared equally, as some beauticians grew wealthy while many struggled. Levels of activism and civic engagement also varied among beauticians. How many actively supported the freedom struggle is impossible to assess, in part because of the variety of the struggle and its constantly evolving character, but also because of the transgressive dynamism of many beauticians. Assessing the activism of beauticians requires challenging narrow definitions of what it means to be an activist, as Bernice Robinson's work with the citizenship schools makes clear.[14]

The idea of the citizenship schools came from a former student of Septima Clark named Esau Jenkins, who operated a bus that took African American workers from Johns Island to Charleston, South Carolina. When one of his passengers expressed the desire to learn how to read in order to pass the literacy test necessary to vote, Jenkins began offering lessons on board his bus. Ambitious and determined, Jenkins expanded the program with the help of Clark and of Myles Horton. Because standard teaching methods might backfire with adults, Jenkins, Clark, and Horton all agreed that the first teacher needed to be someone who had strong communication skills but was not trained as a traditional teacher. Bernice Robinson proved ideal. "All I knew at the time," she later recalled, "was that these people wanted to learn and I was going to find a way to teach them if I had to move mountains to do it." Rather than rely on primers designed for young children, Robinson taught literacy with materials relevant to her students, such as money orders or voter registration forms.[15]

In addition to teaching on Johns Island, Robinson continued her activism in Charleston. She collaborated with another beautician named Marylee Davis, who had also participated in a workshop at Highlander. When Davis used her salon as a meeting place for a citizenship school, Robinson volunteered to teach the twelve women who became students at the school. In many cities, beauty

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shops were markers of class status. While certain salons catered to elites, many poor women did their own hair or went to unregistered beauty shops run out of homes. In her work on Johns Island, as well as her activism in Charleston, Robinson aimed to transgress those class boundaries. She embodied the promise of the citizenship schools to provide a kind of education that fought against inequalities of class as well as of knowledge.[16]

Beauticians often occupied an in-between place in the class hierarchy. As historian Victoria Wolcott has explained, "Since African American women lacked other viable job opportunities and access to higher education, receiving a cosmetology degree took on a symbolic importance in the African American community." Many Black women discovered, in the words of Wolcott, "that working in beauty parlors was a route to economic independence outside of the unstable and unpopular field of domestic service." Such independence, vital for anyone challenging Jim Crow, also afforded more dignity on a daily basis. In 1939, a WPA interviewer, Vivian Morris, overhead one beautician explaining that her work was hard but that at least "you don't have no white folks goin' around behind you trying to find a spec of dirt."[17]

While the majority of beauticians were economically and socially in the middle, a few managed to become elites, and those figures were over-represented in the leadership of professional organizations and social societies. Consider the career of Eva Bowman. The first African American Inspector and Examiner of Cosmetology for the state of Tennessee, Bowman studied at Madame C.J. Walker's Lelia College before founding Bowman Beauty and Barber College. Running a beauty school expanded Bowman's public profile—and her pocketbook. In 1947, she told a gathering of beauticians in Atlanta that they "must seek more specialized training so as to raise the standards of their profession by putting thought and skill into their work as an artist does to his pictures." There is a kind of self-respecting power in Bowman's comparison between cosmetology and art. Yet there is also something self-serving in her admonition that younger beauticians seek the kind of specialized training that she profited from offering. Bowman proudly noted that the beauty industry was the third most profitable profession within the African American community, but did not discuss the fact that some beauticians garnered far more of those profits than did others. Noting her silence on the class inequalities among beauticians should not detract from the important community-building and network-building Bowman was helping to accomplish, nor should it obscure the primary emphasis of her address, which concerned much more than the ability to earn money. "We are living in an age where one must become a definite character and make a definite contribution to society," she told her audience. She refrained from any explicitly political comments, and her talk in Atlanta made it seem as if professional success was the key to making a "definite contribution to society." Nevertheless, the social and administrative skills she gained as a businesswoman and through beauticians' organizations would eventually allow her to contribute to the civil rights movement.[18]

Like Bowman, Lillian Robinson developed leadership and networking skills by serving in beauticians' organizations. In July 1948, Robinson attended a meeting of the Mississippi Independent Beauticians Association, and was identified by the *Pittsburgh Courier* as a "national figure." That fall, she organized a gathering of beauticians in Knoxville. In 1957, she helped to organize a similar

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conference in San Francisco. In July 1960, six months before the Highlander workshop, she was one of the featured guest instructors at a major gathering in Indianapolis to mark the 60th anniversary of the Madam Walker Company. Robinson often collaborated with Marjorie Steward Joyner, the national supervisor of the United Beauty School Owners and Teachers Association and a leading figure in Alpha Chi Pi Omega. Bowman, Robinson, and Joyner were part of a small group of especially successful beauticians. Yet the organizations they supported often brought together hundreds of women, and influenced thousands—not just other beauticians but also the people and communities they served. That service became increasingly politicized during the civil rights movement. In 1960, the year in which sit-ins spread across the American South, Robinson chaired a convention of beauticians from Tennessee. The theme of the gathering was "The Beautician's Responsibility in a Changing Society." It would be a mistake to suggest that it was the student movement—or any other branch of the struggle—that galvanized beauticians into action. Beauticians had fought against white supremacy for generations. As historian Tiffany Gill has argued, "By the 1950s, beauticians were well known and respected for supporting causes to dismantle racism." Importantly, it was as beauticians that many had long subverted the Jim Crow order—distributing NAACP literature, for example, in their salons. It is with good reason that one beautician proudly declared, "We supported every effort to free our people. We have taken advantage of the time that only a beautician has."[19]

The independence of action demonstrated by many Black beauticians was, in many cases, evident in their relationships with their husbands. Many of the most prominent beauticians had equally established and influential husbands. Robinson's husband, for example, Clarence "C.B." Robinson, was a teacher and school principal, and a leading figure in the Tennessee Voter's Council, a statewide organization that aimed to expand suffrage rights and to encourage African Americans to vote. In 1941, he served as plaintiff in an NAACP lawsuit aiming for the equalization of teacher salaries in Chattanooga. In 1974, he was elected to the Tennessee legislature. The Robinsons supported each other's careers and their social activism, but not all beauticians benefited from such help. Many supported the movement independently of husbands or other male family members. Eva Bowman's husband was a dentist and the treasurer of the National Baptist Sunday School Publishing. But the couple was estranged, and Eva Bowman's career and her activism did not receive her husband's regular support.[20]

In the summer of 1960, six months before the Highlander gathering, Bowman announced her candidacy for a seat in the Tennessee Legislature. Her campaign made national news, and she was lauded in the Black press as the first African American woman to run for the Tennessee legislature. She had long been connected to powerful politicians. In 1950, she was able to recruit Tennessee's Governor, Gordon Browning, to serve as the keynote speaker at the commencement of Bowman Barber College. Now it was her turn to run for office. She used her candidacy to champion "legislation offering hope for relieving problems facing our children and senior citizens and for measures to give substantial salary increases to our public school teachers." While foregrounding relatively non-threatening goals such as improved education and better care for the elderly, Bowman did not hesitate to speak out against racism. In February 1960,

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she gave a blistering speech at a "Negro History Week" gathering at Spruce Street Baptist Church in Nashville. The event was sponsored by the Masonic Temple Association and the Association for the Study of Negro Life and History. "You talk about Little Rock," Bowman declared, "It's right here in Nashville." While "Little Rock" has come to represent the struggle for school integration, Bowman's comments were not focused solely on education. The African American newspaper, the *Tri-State Defender*, reported that Bowman decried the lack of job opportunities for African Americans "in sharp and bitter terms." She reminded the audience that the nearby Ford Glass factory had offered a thousand good jobs to whites, while hiring only two African Americans as sweepers. Linking educational inequity to job discrimination, she asked, "Is that what you educate your boy and girl for?" Bowman announced that she was working to establish an Urban League branch in Nashville in order to fight against employment discrimination.[21]

Bowman's speech and her candidacy for office reveal the ability of some beauticians to redefine themselves professionally in ways that empowered their activism. Recognizing the power of beauticians as beauticians should not entail obscuring the successes of dynamic women like Eva Bowman and Bernice Robinson whose work and activism exceeded their professional identity. As the workshop at Highlander makes clear, many beauticians held expansive visions of social change, and were eager to link their networks to other communities of resistance. The audio recordings of the gathering capture dedicated activists debating how to direct their energy toward an ever-shifting movement. Their combination of autonomy and interconnectedness as beauticians would remain a powerful asset, but many felt the need to take on a project that extended beyond their professional networks.

The Workshop

By the time they arrived at Highlander in January 1961, many of the beauticians were, like Robinson and Bowman, already seasoned activists. That is why they were invited to Highlander in the first place. In her invitation letter, Septima Clark praised the cosmetology field as "one of the professions which offers to its members great freedom for leadership in community action." The beauty salon was, in Clark's words, a "center of communication and influence" in the movement—not unlike Highlander itself. Both the salon and the school provided a protected space in which people could gather, share ideas, and build community. The combination of distance and proximity, being set apart and yet being deeply enmeshed in networks of change, allowed the salon and the school to serve as effective sites of education within the movement. By connecting these different nodes of movement education, the beauticians' workshop revealed the layered geography of communication within the freedom struggle. Many scholars have portrayed movement education as a process of diffusion in which ideas like nonviolence were disseminated through hierarchical channels, from prominent leaders down to the masses. This interpretation reinforces a hierarchical, male-centered conception of charismatic leadership, and devalues the vital role of bridge leaders like the beauticians. To Highlander, the beauticians brought their own networks that they strove to knit together within the contours of the larger struggle. They also brought a fierce independence of

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mind. Their conversations at Highlander do not reveal passive vessels of diffusion but creative leaders ready to debate and to reimagine their own roles in the movement. Yet as the following section reveals, the beauticians were not entirely free of the power of hierarchies and more traditional forms of top-down education.[22]

Myles Horton welcomed the beauticians by noting that "so many of the people who were taking courageous and imaginative leadership roles were beauticians." He encouraged the workshop participants to identify the "unique and distinctive role that the beauticians can play" in the movement moving forward. "I think of you as a vanguard," he declared. Whereas the African American community was once led by "the ministers and the teachers and occasionally some businessmen," a new kind of leadership had emerged. "The kind of leadership that is important today is the kind of leadership that is independent," Horton explained. It was independence—rather than interconnectedness—that Horton emphasized. "You are distinctively independent," he told the assembled beauticians. "There are very few of you who have to kowtow to some white person." Beauticians were not the only Black professionals whose work provided some degree of autonomy from white control. It is striking that Horton and Clark dedicated a workshop for beauticians rather than for Black barbers, doctors, mortuary owners, or insurance agents. In addition to their autonomy, it is the fact that so many beauticians had combined that autonomy with expansive professional networks—and that they used those networks to contribute to the movement—that explains why they were invited to Highlander. By emphasizing the economic independence of beauticians, Horton inadvertently obscured the fact that their interconnectedness was equally important to their impact as agents of change in the struggle against racism.[23]

Horton encouraged the beauticians to exercise their independence at Highlander by taking ownership of the workshop. "I have only one condition for working with people," he explained: "depend on your own leadership and not depend on white leadership." That included his own. Horton made clear that he did not want to control the direction of the conversation. But he did encourage the participants to remain focused on action, and to avoid any initiative that primarily entailed talking rather than doing. Moderate white liberals had long embraced "race relations" seminars and polite interracial dialogue. Horton yearned for a more radical approach to education, and framed his vision in terms of the necessity of Black-led movements. It wasn't only the "bad white people" in "the klan, the white citizens council" who were dangerous. Horton was equally concerned with the so-called "good white people" who were always trying to "slow this thing down." "Good white people are the ones we have to watch," he said. Horton was confident that the beauticians would avoid deference to white liberals. "I have tremendous respect for your potential," he told the fifty-two women sitting in Highlander's main building. By embracing their potential and working together, the beauticians would not only help to free African Americans but would also "free the white people." "I can't be free if you're not free," Horton stated. Then he passed leadership of the gathering to the beauticians themselves. "It's your show from now on," he declared.[24]

Horton repeatedly demonstrated his commitment to having the beauticians lead the workshop. When an unidentified man began talking about registering voters, Horton asked, "Are you suggesting the beauticians" take such an action?

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It is unclear how many men and how many non-beauticians attended the workshop, but what is clear is that Horton strove to keep the focus on what beauticians could do. At another juncture, he interrupted another non-beautician: "Let's let the people who are going to have to carry the burden see if they can work this thing out." "Us men are used to running things," he added, "this is going to be their show." When the beauticians decided to create a board of directors to wage their collective efforts, one woman suggested that Horton be on the board. He declined and suggested that only beauticians serve on the board. His decision could be seen as indicating a paternal assumption that if he was on the board the other members would defer to his judgment. Indeed, there is a tension in the degree to which Horton guided the workshop even while repeatedly stating that he wanted the beauticians to be in charge.[25]

Horton's insistence on the beauticians' leadership of the workshop obscured the question of which beauticians would take the lead. As their decision to create a board of directors reveals, the beauticians embraced traditional forms of hierarchical organization. While their conversations included many voices, only a few women were given the opportunity to offer extended comments. Not surprisingly, those women were among the most socially and economically prominent figures in the group. When it was her turn to speak, Lillian Robinson emphasized responsibility. "There can be no accomplishment unless there is the awareness of the responsibilities," she stressed. Eva Bowman lectured on the subject, "Women, This is Your World—Reach as Far as You Can." According to press reports, she "stressed the importance of civic service as a responsibility of the beautician." Both Robinson and Bowman emphasized responsibility and personal initiative, traditional themes for middle-class reformers. They overlooked the inequalities that divided the beauticians themselves and the way such inequalities shaped the resources and opportunities each workshop participant could bring to the movement.[26]

In their work with beauticians' organizations, Robinson and Bowman had both learned to use hierarchical organizational forms, and they turned to similar structures to guide the workshop. But as with all Highlander workshops, there was also time set aside for small group discussion in which everyone was encouraged to contribute. The beauticians divided into three groups, each responsible for addressing a different avenue of action. The first group discussed the possibility of addressing a local injustice: the eviction of hundreds of African American tenant farmers in Fayette County and Haywood County, Tennessee. The farmers had been evicted for trying to register to vote. Like the beauticians themselves, the farmers were connected through several organizations, particularly the Fayette County Civic and Welfare League and the Haywood County Civic and Welfare League. Both groups had launched voter registration efforts in 1959. When local whites would not allow Black voters to participate in the Democratic primary, members of the leagues sued the Democratic Party using the Civil Rights Act of 1957. It was in response to such determined efforts that local whites decided to use their economic strength to punish African Americans who had registered to vote. In the winter of 1960, white landowners forced hundreds of Black farmers to leave their homes. The local African American community responded by establishing "tent cities" on Black-owned land. They used army-surplus tents and, with the support of Black journalists like Ted Poston, appealed to the nation for support.[27]

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At Highlander, the beauticians discussed what they could do to help the evicted farmers, and decided to establish a medical center at one of the tent cities. The committee that focused on that effort was chaired by Eva Bowman. In reporting the committee's discussions, Bowman explained that the plan involved creating an organizational infrastructure with local chapters and leaders. They would also solicit help from the Alabama State Beauticians Association and would ask doctors and nurses for advice on establishing medical services at the clinic they were planning to build. All of these plans revealed their belief in the power of organization and expertise. From Highlander, the beauticians contacted the Tennessee Beauticians Executive Meeting in Nashville, which accepted their proposal for the health center. While working within established organizational structures, the beauticians did not ignore the importance of mass engagement and local knowledge. They organized visits to Tent City in order to ensure close collaboration with local leaders. And even among themselves, they strove to wield rules of order in a democratic fashion. After Bowman shared a report on her committee's plans for the medical center, all of the assembled beauticians voted on whether to accept the report. Yet while Bowman, Robinson, and other prominent beauticians recognized the importance of mass engagement, they also believed in the authority of elites and the power of top-down systems of leadership. Bowman was selected to serve as chairman of the Board of Directors that would oversee the construction of the medical center. Other members of the board included Lillian Robinson and Mrs. Johnnie Fowler, a beautician based in Winchester, Tennessee.[28]

At Highlander, Fowler led the second committee, which was focused on "the beauty salon as a center of communication." For most Black women, the salon was rivaled only by the church as a site of socialization. Like the pastor, the beautician was a trusted figure who was in regular contact with many people throughout the community. Whereas many church gatherings were structured around sermons, the kind of communication in the salon was more dialogical. For a beautician, conversational skills were just as important as being able to properly cut and style hair. Yet rather than focus solely on verbal communication, the committee took a broader view of the transmission of knowledge by emphasizing the importance of beauticians themselves taking action in the struggle against Jim Crow. Fowler noted that "beauticians have a way of getting close to people," and declared, "We talk to people for hours and hours." But such proximity to others would not amount to much if beauticians were seen as all talk and no action. "We are independent women," Fowler declared, and "because of our independence we have the power to act." While the first committee had focused on a service-oriented project—the establishment of the medical center—Fowler's committee discussed more confrontational forms of action, such as protests to integrate schools, buses, and lunch counters. While they considered how to teach others from the safety of the beauty salon, they realized that they also had to provide direct lessons in courage by initiating protests and claiming for themselves the right to occupy public spaces beyond the salon.[29]

The third committee looked broadly at how to attack the relationship between housing segregation and educational segregation. One approach would be for local groups of beauticians to approach elected officials to press for an end to both kinds of segregation. The members of the committee knew it would not be easy to move such officials to action, especially given the intractable nature of

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the problems. They discussed the imminent threat that "urban renewal" presented to Black communities, and used the example of Chattanooga, in which local African Americans were being forced to make way for freeway construction. They recognized that urban redevelopment weakened their voting power by breaking up Black neighborhoods. Whites, meanwhile, had fled to the suburbs. Discussing white flight, one of the participants stated that "most of the white people have moved out, but they can't continue to run forever." Or could they? Lillian Robinson decried the connection between urban renewal, white flight, and the persistence of segregation. "They're moving all the whites to the north side of Chattanooga," she explained, "and all the Negroes to the southside." "We're not going to be able to do very much with our desegregation of schools," she declared, "until we get this housing pattern changed."[30]

From such large-scale social analysis to the individual power of particular beauticians, the Highlander workshop ranged in scope and focus. Given that the majority of participants were already actively engaged in local civil rights struggles, what was most novel about the gathering was the idea of a collective project undertaken by the beauticians as a group. Yet that project would reveal the limitations of their power—limitations related to their class status and to the fact that when they decided to build the medical center in Tent City they stepped away from the true source of their power as beauticians: the local ties they had forged through their salons. The limited progress the beauticians made in helping the residents of Tent City contrasts sharply with the remarkable contributions many of them made in their local communities. Ultimately, the varied legacies of the Highlander beauticians' workshop reveal the importance of local action that capitalized on the unique strengths that beauticians brought to the fight against Jim Crow.

Educating Others, Educating Themselves

The beauticians' workshop was reported by several African American newspapers including the *Baltimore Afro-American* and the Memphis-based *Tri-State Defender*. Several accounts highlighted the plans to create a new health center for the evicted farmers in Fayette County. Early reporting described the goal as a tent "where first aid and sanitation education will be provided for the evicted Negro share croppers." But the beauticians soon raised their ambitions. Rather than erecting a tent, they envisioned constructing a more permanent building with space for more patients and medical equipment. In February, many of the beauticians returned to Highlander to discuss how to move forward with their plans. In order to raise the necessary funds, they agreed to place donation boxes in their shops. They also decided to use the statewide beauticians' association to solicit donations from other cosmetologists. But they knew that small donations would not be enough to accomplish their vision.[31]

To raise additional funds, Lillian Robinson traveled to Boston to help organize a benefit tea. She co-directed a committee of some twenty-one women who organized the gathering at Boston's Freedom House, a community center in Roxbury. The renowned singer Sylvia Mars performed, and the audience was also treated to a panel discussion on "The Struggle for Equality." Speakers included Alan Gartner of the Congress of Racial Equality and James Loue, a graduate student at Harvard who spoke of his experiences in the sit-ins in Nashville.

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Dr. Martin Kilson, a research fellow at Harvard, moderated the conversation and compared the struggles of African Americans with African independence movements. The event linked fundraising and education in a way that was akin to what many of the beauticians were trying to accomplish within their own salons.[32]

While their fundraising efforts gained momentum, the beauticians recognized that time was running short. The evicted farmers continued to struggle without access to quality medical care. Concerned that their ambition had become a liability, Septima Clark wrote Eva Bowman to suggest that the beauticians focus on providing immediate relief. "Buy a tent and get to work on the things needed in the community now," she urged Bowman. "Then later push the county to get a building and maintain a clinic or integrate the one they have." Clark argued that the local people themselves could help expand the health center. "As they vote they can push the county to give them a health center," she explained. But the shortcomings of the beauticians' efforts were not solely a result of excessive ambition. Part of the problem was that the Fayette County Civic and Welfare League split after an acrimonious dispute among its leaders. The confusion and disagreement among local community members made it hard to direct funds to improving the lives of those living in Tent City.[33]

Despite overreaching in their ambitions and despite the challenge of a fractured local leadership, the beauticians' efforts were not in vain. Construction on the health center began in November 1962, and much of the money that was raised by the beauticians was eventually put to use on behalf of the evicted farmers. Nevertheless, the difficulties they faced when trying to work together to build the medical center contrast sharply with the relative success of beauticians working independently within their own communities. Some of that success was clearly driven by the relative autonomy of beauticians. In Greenwood, Mississippi, for example, it was a beautician, Miss Hattie Miller, who housed young civil rights workers when no one else would dare. Such courageous independence also allowed beauticians to serve as centers of communication. As Myles Horton later recalled, "We used to use beauticians' shops all over the South to distribute Highlander literature on integration." The example of Hattie Miller and Horton's statement that Highlander worked with beauticians "all over the South" suggests an expansive geography to the networks of activist beauticians. This is certainly not a story limited to Tennessee. Yet for many of the beauticians who attended the Highlander workshop, their activism was strongly shaped by local and state-wide politics. Their professional networks operated at multiple levels and helped bridge those distinct geographies. While their economic autonomy provided protection for beauticians willing to confront Jim Crow, it was their skills at building networks and coalitions that made their autonomy so powerful. That combination of autonomy and networking is evident in the ways that many of the beauticians who had come to Highlander continued to contribute to the freedom struggle. I have argued that it was as beauticians that many of the women who attended the Highlander workshop were most effective as agents of social change. Yet as the following pages make clear, we should not ignore the ways that some beauticians capitalized on their status as prominent professionals to contribute in diverse ways to the struggle against white supremacy.[34]

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On April 16, 1961, a few months after leaving Highlander, Lillian Robinson helped organize a major NAACP gathering that featured Jackie Robinson. To a crowd of over a thousand people in Chattanooga's Memorial Auditorium, the renowned baseball player praised the sit-ins. "We are going to get our rights," he declared. "If the adults won't do it, our young people will." Robert E. Watkins, president of the local NAACP youth group, added that recent stand-in demonstrations were designed "not only to gain admission to the theatres but to make the public aware of social injustices against us." Such a broad vision of the civil rights struggle resonated with Lillian Robinson, the only woman featured on the program. Press reports identified her as the president of Chapter 1 of the Chattanooga Cosmetologists, and acknowledged her donation of $250 to the NAACP. Such a moment of public acclaim solidified her status as an elite member of the community, but also demonstrated the way she used that status to contribute to the ongoing struggle.[35]

In 1962, Robinson participated in the convention of the Tennessee State Council on Human Relations held in Chattanooga. At the convention, workshops and discussions addressed "health, education, employment and many fields" in which African Americans were "subjected to discriminatory practices." In September 1963, she spoke at the state NAACP gathering on the campus of Lane College in Jackson, Tennessee. The keynote address was given by Ruby Hurley, the veteran civil rights activist who was then serving as the Southeastern Regional Director of the NAACP. On a panel entitled "Women on the March for Full Emancipation," Robinson discussed the fight to desegregate public accommodations.[36]

Robinson was but one of many beauticians who contributed to the movement by working within the NAACP and other civil rights organizations. Beauticians' organizations also remained important actors. In October 1962, Highlander hosted a leadership workshop in collaboration with the Tennessee State Beauticians League. Another workshop on voter education was offered with support from the Chattanooga branch of the league. Highlander's connections with the league continued into 1964, and focused primarily on voter education and mobilization.[37]

Bernice Robinson remained Highlander's most direct link with the advocacy of beauticians. Yet despite her background as a beautician, Robinson spent most of her time building bridges across professions and backgrounds. In Beaufort, South Carolina, she worked with a group of African American oyster factory workers. Traditionally, each worker had been allowed to bring home a jar of oysters. When white officers of the Forestry and Fishery Commission charged a Black woman, a citizenship school veteran, with illegally selling her jar of oysters, she contacted Robinson. Robinson and Esau Jenkins came and spoke with the local civil rights organization (affiliated with the SCLC). They offered advice but let the local people take ownership of the process. According to Robinson, "They raised their own funds, hired their own lawyer, and during the trial filled the courtroom." The all-white jury ruled in favor of the woman. According to Robinson, "This history-making verdict grew out of the fact that the people knew their rights and stood up for them." It also resulted from the citizenship classes serving as nodes of communication, not just information being distributed to students from teachers like Robinson, but grievances and

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complaints being transmitted in the other direction in ways that empowered the students as agents of change.[38]

In June 1962, Robinson advised a cohort of young activists, all associated with SNCC, who were planning an organizing campaign in Mississippi. She talked about her experience teaching at the first citizenship school on John's Island. "I was sent out, the same as you were, to enter a community, to help people prepare to qualify for registration," she explained. Robinson stressed the importance of "cooperating with an organization that is already in the community." "You are not selling an organization," she stressed. "You are selling an organizational program." That same month, Robinson helped lead a voter education workshop in Tougaloo, Mississippi. "In our workshops, we like you to feel among family," she told the students. Everyone should be "relaxed" and should feel free to ask questions. "We don't tell you what needs to be done," she said, "we give you questions and we want you to question those questions." In this way, Robinson shared the Highlander philosophy she had long helped bring beyond the school and into the movement.[39]

Closer to Highlander itself, the beautician Johnnie Fowler fought against systemic racism with the same courage and respect for collaboration that Robinson brought to her work with the citizenship schools. During the workshop, Fowler had chaired the committee focused on "the beauty salon as a center of communication," and had challenged the other workshop participants to go beyond talking by communicating with their actions their willingness to confront Jim Crow. She lived up to her own advice. Fowler served for years as a vice chairman of the civil rights organization, the Tennessee Voters Council, and worked with Septima Clark and Scott Bates, a professor at the University of the South, to establish an NAACP chapter in Franklin County. Bates remembered Fowler as a "force of nature." She was also a master networker. One of her contacts was the African American lawyer Avon Williams. Fowler and Williams worked together to integrate the local schools. They launched a lawsuit, paid for by the NAACP, that would eventually force desegregation. Compared to Lillian Robinson or Eva Bowman, Fowler was far less prominent within beauticians organizations. Yet like Robinson and Bowman, she demonstrated the power of connecting multiple networks while remaining deeply rooted in her local community.[40]

Conclusion: Leadership and Education

Many observers were skeptical when Myles Horton invited beauticians to a school designed for radical activists. "They thought that I was bringing these beauticians together to talk about straightening hair or whatever the hell they do," Horton later explained. His comments suggest that the work of the beauticians could be separated from their contributions to the movement. But it was as beauticians that they made those contributions. The beauticians brought with them to Highlander a range of skills and contacts that they had developed through their professional work. When they tried to work together on a project that did not involve their work as beauticians, they struggled. But when they focused on deepening their power within their own communities, they succeeded.[41]

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A few days after the first beauticians' workshop in January 1961, Bernice Robinson participated in another conversation at Highlander focused on "Training Leaders for Citizenship Schools." "The first thing a School ought to do," she told the workshop participants, "is help people feel that they have a responsibility to the community they live in, and that until they are registered voters, and can read and write and participate in public affairs, they aren't living up to their obligations." Such a school did not need to exist in a building. As Robinson knew, beauty parlors could and did encourage such a community responsibility—as did Highlander itself. Workshops at Highlander would continue to discuss the power of beauty shops as locations of communication and coordination within the civil rights movement. That summer, in August 1961, at a workshop featuring the Reverend Wyatt T. Walker, conversation turned to the power of beauty shops as key sites of education and recruitment for the movement. These conversations reveal that many civil rights activists recognized the importance of beauticians. They also demonstrate the interconnectedness of beauticians with other non-traditional educators—including the staff of Highlander and the citizenship school teachers Highlander helped recruit and train across much of the South.[42]

Women were at the center of those radical educational networks. In April 1960, the renowned organizer Ella Baker sent a moving letter to Septima Clark. "I have a deep and abiding interest in the work you have done, and are doing," Baker wrote. "I don't think I ever told you," she continued, "but several years ago, when I first read the thrilling account of your experiences in promoting citizenship schools on the Sea Islands in South Carolina, I yearned for the opportunity to meet you." Under the aegis of the NAACP, Baker had traveled across the South encouraging "ordinary" people to embrace their leadership potential and to mobilize against Jim Crow. The same month she wrote Clark, Baker played a key role in the creation of a new civil rights organization, the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC). A key meeting to plan for the creation of SNCC occurred at Highlander, where Baker herself would come repeatedly. "Little did I dream," she wrote Clark, "that we would have an occasion to work together here in our beloved Southland. So you see, I have long since been committed to the idea of 'teaming-up' with you."[43]

Women leaders like Baker and Clark—and like the beauticians featured in this essay, especially Lillian Robinson, Eva Bowman, Johnnie Fowler, and Bernice Robinson—all demonstrate the power of a certain kind of leadership. For historian Charles Payne, it would be more accurate to say that they demonstrated the power of a certain kind of organizing. It was not by giving prominent speeches or making headlines that most of these women contributed to the struggle against white supremacy. Yet as historian John Kirk has argued, many Black women "served as both leaders and organizers, including many varieties of involvement within these two categories." As Kirk argued, "Overlooking the experiences of black women in the civil rights struggle who operated outside of a traditional woman's sphere of influence, and failing to recognize that that sphere was itself a product of choices influenced by gender, risks losing sight of the important role played by some of the most influential women in the movement."[44] The history of beauticians complicates the idea of "a traditional woman's sphere of influence." In some ways, the beauty salon was the epitome of a woman's domain, and the work of beauticians was obviously and profoundly

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gendered. Yet as successful entrepreneurs, many beauticians pushed beyond the traditional limitations placed on women's economic initiative. Within the historical literature on women in business, the role of African American businesswomen remains understudied. I argue that activist beauticians made use of spaces reserved for women—not just the salon but also the many overlapping organizations and networks central to this article—in order to challenge the borders of gender as well as race.[45]

Beauticians had played key roles in the movement long before the Highlander gathering. Indeed, several of the women who attended the gathering were already seasoned activists. What then was the importance of the workshop? Who was learning and what were they learning? Lillian Robinson was right when she proclaimed that there was something new about their gathering at Highlander, something new in the effort to organize beauticians as beauticians for the struggle against Jim Crow. But could a week-long workshop motivate less-active participants to do more? Could it provide new skills or tactics to achieve their goals? Could it help transform, deepen, or expand those goals? The beauticians' workshop reveals the power of knowledge and education within the civil rights movement—but not because of any particular lesson the beauticians learned at Highlander. Rather, what the workshop reveals is the power of protected spaces for cultivating learning. We tend to think about networks as bringing together but what Highlander and the beauticians reveal is that networks also rely on distance. Ultimately, the significance of the workshop resulted from its role in linking together a variety of pre-existing networks, and providing space for beauticians to think more deeply about their ultimate goals.[46]

The beauticians did not come to Highlander to be taught what to do. They came to rethink their own goals and the best methods of achieving those goals. While their deference to traditional forms of institutional hierarchy echoed the class distinctions they brought with them, there remained a certain rebellious autonomy in their debates. There remained what Saidiya Hartman has called "the utopian longings and the promise of a future world that resided in waywardness and the refusal to be governed." That "waywardness" empowered the beauticians to fight against oppressions of many kinds. As the historian Robin Kelley has written, "Radical black feminists have never confined their vision to just the emancipation of black women or women in general, or all black people for that matter." Many of the beauticians who came to Highlander were not always radical, especially in regards to their class status. But most were, in the words of Kelley, "proponents of a radical humanism committed to liberating humanity and reconstructing social relations across the board." More than their economic autonomy or their networking skills, the most valuable resource the beauticians brought to Highlander was the courage to fight for a liberation that went beyond even their own dreams.[47]

While they reimagined their role in the movement, the beauticians also reimagined the movement itself—and particularly the role of education within the struggle against Jim Crow. From the freedom schools to workshops on nonviolence to what historian Charles Payne has called "the organizing tradition," radical education was integral to the civil rights movement. The beauticians' workshop reveals that movement education was less about the transmission of knowledge than the co-production of knowledge bound up with networks of

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action. Such networks required autonomous nodes that were at least partly protected from the power of white supremacy. Historian Davarian Baldwin has argued that "to develop any comprehensive framework for examining the production of knowledge, one must consider all of the realms and forms in which ideas are created, have force, and engage with other ideas." Such an expansive conception of knowledge production is central to understanding the role of education within the African American freedom struggle. As Baldwin's work has shown, many of the most profound African American artistic, cultural, and intellectual achievements were located in "cinemas, beauty salons, Sanctified churches, and sports stadiums." All of these spaces defied the standard structures of education and created opportunities not just for the transmission of information but the production of new ways of thinking—the kind of engaged thinking that the staff of Highlander aimed to cultivate. The beauticians' workshop at Highlander demonstrates the necessity of writing the intellectual history of social movements beyond narrow conceptions of the intellectual or the academic. Even more than Highlander, the beauty salon embodied the radical educational potential of spaces that were both autonomous and connected. But it was up to the beauticians to build such spaces with a combination of courage and creativity. Like the embodied art they produced in their salons, the activism of beauticians was ultimately a labor of imagination.[48]

Endnotes

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