

Madame C. J. Walker

The Hairdresser

(1867–1919)

Madame C. J. Walker, née Sarah Breedlove, made beauty her business. If we were to write a political history of African Americans based on changes in hairstyles, ranging from kinky and short to kinky and long, from greased and “pressed” (with a stocking cap) to straightened, waved, or jerry curled, Madame C. J. Walker would be the one for better or worse, who “made straight hair ‘good hair’” and, in doing so, made a fortune for herself as well as a decent living for a workforce of agents that numbered twenty thousand in the United States and the Caribbean.

With the exception of Maggie Lena, “madame” of insurance and banking, no African-American woman other than Mme. C. J. Walker became a self-made millionaire in the first half of the century. Walker essentially invented the modern black hair-care and cosmetics industry. Hers is the quintessential American story: Owen and Minerva Breedlove were slaves who gave birth to Sarah Breedlove on a cotton plantation near Delta, Louisiana, in 1867; they died from yellow fever in 1874. Orphaned at age seven, she and her older sister survived by working in the cotton fields around Vicksburg, Mississippi. At fourteen she married Moses McWilliams, a Vicksburg laborer, to escape abuse from her cruel brother-in-law. McWilliams was killed in an accident six years later. Widowed at twenty with a daughter to take care of, she moved to St. Louis, Missouri, where she earned a subsistence living as a laundress. Seeking to supplement her income—and cure her own case of alopecia, or baldness, commonly suffered by black women at the time because of scalp diseases, poor diet, and stress—Breedlove became an agent for Annie Turnbo Pope Malone’s Poro Company, selling its Wonderful Hair Grower. Realizing the potential of these