Chapter Three

AIN'T I A BEAUTY QUEEN?

REPRESENTING THE IDEAL

BLACK WOMAN

See. Look at us. We have some beautiful black girls, too. Because there was a time when blacks couldn't get into the white beauty contests, so they developed their own and showed how beautiful we are.
—Beautician Barbara Williams, recalling black beauty queens in the era of segregation

Before civil rights legislation brought limited racial integration to the United States, African Americans lived and died in racially segregated settings. Under the conditions imposed by segregation, blacks found ways to resist racial oppression. Excluded from or mistreated by white churches, schools, newspapers, clubs, and funeral parlors, black men and women created their own institutions wherever and whenever possible. By 1910, there were 35,000 black churches in the United States.[1] African Americans established 106 colleges and more than 2,000 newspapers before 1950.[2] Black churches, newspapers, classrooms, radio stations, funeral parlors, and the streets of black neighborhoods were sites of cultural production. In these spaces and institutions, African Americans created and sustained symbols, meanings, and cultural rankings that countered dominant white views of blacks.

Expressing anger is one way to challenge white supremacy; refusing to accept the white world's image of oneself is another. Historian James C. Scott wrote about the ways in which slaves created, against all odds, safe places and secure ways to express their anger against their masters. He described the expressions produced in those sites as the "hidden transcript" of resistance.[3] Post-emancipation middle-class blacks were considerably less vulnerable than their

slave forebears. They were able to use black publications, colleges, and social clubs to disseminate alternatives to white portrayals of blacks. What they created was not so much hidden from whites as it was ignored by them. The black middle class produced a compelling record of racial pride, meaningless to their contemporary whites but vital to African Americans.

Members of the black middle class dominated black colleges, social organizations, newspapers, and large churches. Spokesmen for the black middle class were able to promote their versions of proud black identity through their dominance of these important sites of cultural production. As business owners or professionals serving black clientele, they had achieved some degree of material comfort but were still treated contemptuously by whites. Many members of the black middle class were eager to fight nonmaterial forms of racial domination. This chapter tells the story of a group of African Americans who, relative to other African Americans, were in advantaged positions. Their strategies of resistance sought to work within the disjuncture between black, middle-class life and the position of all blacks in a white supremacist symbolic order. A tension was built into these strategies of racial rearticulation that sought to elevate the position of the race by making claims of middle-class distinction. Efforts by elite blacks to assert the dignity of the race always drew upon dominant cultural codes that carried a host of conventional ways of thinking about class and gender. And, while contesting the racist devaluation of all blacks, many middle-class black cultural products reinforced the intraracial pigmentocracy that favored light-complexioned blacks. Photographs of glamorous and beautiful black women published by the black press circulated within black communities. Although many African Americans saw the photographs of beauty queens published in black newspapers and magazines, few had anything to do with their production. Though these images were part of black culture, they did not correspond to how all black men and women defined beauty. Nonetheless, they effectively communicated something simple: black women are beautiful, too. An African American woman who was simply showcased as pretty made an effective counterclaim to caricatures of black women as humorously or monstrously ugly.

Black beauty pageants constitute a complex history, stretching back over a century in which black institutions variously ignored, addressed, incorporated, contested, or rejected white standards of beauty and white depictions of blacks. Accounts of African American beauty contests, which predated attempts to integrate all-white contests, can be found in the black press as early as the 1890s. Articles on black beauty contests report sponsorship by black newspapers, black cosmetics or hair care companies, the music industry promoting black entertainers, fraternal orders, social clubs, the NAACP, and colleges. The contests varied according to whether or not they were explicitly framed as displays of racial pride, whether they incorporated images of Africa or Europe, whether or

not they promoted explicitly middle-class images of women, and whether they challenged or reinforced the African American pigmentocracy. Tracing the discursive strategies employed by African American contest producers and the press that reported about the pageants they produced, I will detail some of the varied ways in which African Americans created a transcript of racial pride.

Beauty contests projected ideal images of African American women, ideals shaped by a particularly male-dominated black, middle-class worldview. Middle-class black men, as journalists and community leaders, had a greater role than women as spokespersons for the race. Middle-class black women had significant leadership roles within certain circumscribed areas, but men dominated the wider black public arena. From editorial pages and podiums they called on women to embody particular definitions of black womanhood. The record of black beauty pageants is very often a narrative of how black men as cultural agents constructed black women as cultural symbols.

In 1891, *The Appeal,* a black newspaper published in Chicago, launched a beauty contest. Announcing the contest, the newspaper asked, "Who is the Most Beautiful Afro-American Woman?," and solicited participation from its readers.[4] The contest was open to "every Colored woman in America" and was primarily a gimmick to build circulation. One married and one single woman were elected by write-in ballots available in each copy of the newspaper. Buying the election (along with copies of the newspaper) by repeatedly voting for the same candidate was encouraged. "See that your friends all get *The Appeal*, and if they do not wish to use the ballot, ask them to save it for you." The *Appeal* did not defend the beauty of African American women; it took it for granted. The newspaper's assumption of black women's beauty has to be seen in the context of contemporaneously prevalent images of black women. In 1891, the most widely available images of African Americans were generated in the viciously antiblack post-Reconstruction South. There, an ideology of "retrogression" was used to characterize emancipated African Americans. In this view, the consequence of the emancipation of slaves was that blacks had lost the civilizing influence of their slave masters. Left to their own impulses, blacks were destined for savagery. In speeches, newspaper accounts, caricatures printed as postcards and illustrations, and in fiction, blacks were described as reverting to a state of barbarism. The black man was "a fiend, a wild beast, seeking whom he may devour," according to South Carolina senator Benjamin Tillman.[5] Northern white newspapers echoed the white South's slander. Writing about the black women of St. Helena Island, South Carolina, where former slaves lived in relative isolation from whites and successfully maintained African customs, a *New York Sun* reporter claimed: "Almost without exception the women of these islands who have Negro blood in their veins, are prostitutes. It is a hopeless task to endeavor to elevate a people whose women are strumpets."[6] Publications produced by whites were saturated with the message that black men

were beasts and black women were whores. The *Appeal*'s assumption that its entirely African American readership would be eager to honor the beauty of the women in their lives attests to the ability of African Americans to maintain a sense of their own worthiness. Despite the pervasiveness of gruesome white representations of blacks, the *Appeal* was so confident of black self-love that they sponsored a beauty contest to increase the paper's circulation.

From the 1890s to the early decades of the twentieth century, reader participation beauty contests were extremely popular, circulation-boosting features for newspapers throughout the country.[7] Photography studios and the Eastman company's new portable "Kodak" camera made it possible for members of the middle class to capture their own images in photographs. Newspapers took advantage of the widespread availability of snapshots by encouraging female readers to send in their photographs and be acclaimed as beauties. In 1914, the *New York Age*, one of the most prominent black newspapers in the country, joined the trend and infused their contest with a decided element of racial pride. They publicized the beginning of the contest with the declaration that "the most beautiful women in the world are those of the Negro race!" Unlike the earlier popularity contest sponsored by the *Appeal*, the *Age*'s "Chosen Fifteen Most Beautiful Negro Women in the United States" would be selected from photographs mailed in by the readers by a panel of twelve "disinterested and capable" judges. The two-column lead article closed by stressing the importance of the pageant: "The *New York Age* and the National Exhibition and Amusement Company are hoping that the contest will substantiate and prove beyond the slightest possibility of doubt that Negro women are the most beautiful women in the world."[8]

Week after week, from July through October, the *Age* built enthusiasm for the contest by reprinting photographs mailed in from places as varied as Pine Bluff, Arkansas, and Passaic, New Jersey. These pictures graced stories flagged with six and seven echoing headlines:

> Expressions of Approval and Commendation of Idea of Selecting Most Beautiful Woman of Race Are Received Daily
>
> "MOST IDEAL CONCEPTION"
>
> Correspondent Says Contest Is Most Ideal Conception Ever Inaugurated and That We Should Be Proud of Our Beautiful Women
>
> "I think that this Beauty Contest conducted by *The Age* is one of the most ideal conceptions ever inaugurated. It is all right. We should be proud of our beautiful women."[9]

In contrast to earlier contests that were produced by and for African Americans, the *Age* began to describe its pageant as if it were an event that could in-

fluence whites. They promoted the contest as an intervention in the process of collective definition: "The management of the Autumn Amusement and Advertising Festival, in connection with which the Beauty Contest is being conducted, furnish the information that they are being deluged with requests for information concerning the contest and there is every reason to believe that the eyes of the world will be opened as to the development of comely Negro women."[10] Coming from the contest's sponsors, the report of global interest in the contest was a mixture of optimism and self-promotion. Nonetheless, it reflects the aspirations of the editors and perhaps of their readers as well. The theme was repeated in the next week's beauty contest feature: "To show the world at large the development of physical and spiritual comeliness is an undertaking of considerable magnitude, but the results to be attained make the effort well worth while. It will counter-act the world's conception of the American Negro woman based on the caricatures and exaggerations published in the comic weeklies."[11]

The editors linked physical and spiritual comeliness, both of which were expected to be unmistakably evident in facial portraits. Beauty historically has been interpreted as a manifestation of inner moral qualities, and the belief in outer beauty as an expression of inner worth was particularly strong at the turn of the century.[12] In that context, demonstrating the beauty of the race was tantamount to establishing the inner worth of the race.

The *Appeal*'s 1891 contest did not explicitly present itself as a defense of the race. By contrast, the competition sponsored by the *New York Age* was promoted as a way to fight debased images of black women. Defending the race and defining the race go hand in hand. In the third week of the *Age*'s contest, Demond Lewis, one of the paper's readers, submitted a letter that was published on the front page.[13] Lewis suggested that the contest was an opportunity to establish an "ideal type of Negro beauty." In the ensuing weeks of the contest, the newspaper's coverage shifted from merely attesting to the beauty of the race to the establishment of an ideal representative who was not to be the most typical African American woman but her finest expression.

After publishing Lewis's letter, the *Age* featured a new caption under its weekly photographs of beauties that read: "Various types from which the Ideal American-Negro Beauty may be evolved." Prior to the publication of the letter written by Lewis, the *Age* used only the word "Negro" to describe the beauties sought. After his letter, the new captions under the pictures of contestants read "American-Negro." The letter Lewis submitted to steer the contest in the direction of finding an ideal type suggested what that type might be. The ideal Negro woman was of the "Egyptian" type, with a touch of the "Spirit of the New World." She would have

> a well balanced and symmetrical head, full slender neck, the features clear cut, with the appearance of being chiseled rather than cast; the

> forehead broad and slightly expansive, a fine Negro nose with a trace of the Egyptian and a slight aquiline curve; the mouth fairly small but well proportioned and a slightly pointed, round, firm chin; the eyes should be large but slightly elongated; surmounted by a fine brow that is not too sharp, delicately arched, and last but not least, with the marvelously fine curving eyelash of which the Negro race can be justly proud.

This "Egyptian" touched by the New World was a woman of mixed racial heritage. Her mouth was small, her features chiseled. Hair texture and skin color, two features that were often the focus of black racial shame, went unmentioned, yet the six contestants showcased in that edition of the newspaper were light complexioned with long hair. In 1914, the desirability of lighter skin and longer hair was so firmly established among middle-class African Americans that it went without saying. The editors of the *New York Age* unproblematically accepted blacks of mixed racial heritage as representative of the race. The *Age*'s switch to the phrase "American-Negro" in its contest features, after Lewis's letter was published, suggests that the mulatto was the ideal representative they sought.

Lewis's description of the ideal American-Negro woman as a descendant of Egypt reflects an American, turn-of-the-century fascination with Egypt combined with what historian Wilson Moses describes as the nineteenth-century black leadership's attachment to the idea of "civilization."[14] Egypt stood for a civilized, distant, royal, and light-complexioned Africa. By supplanting the West African origins of most African Americans with Egypt, Lewis Africanized his preference for light skin. His conception of the ideal Negro woman was compatible with the dominant discourse of beauty, which had long included a place for mysterious exotic beauties.[15] In dominant culture, the beautiful exotic woman was Oriental, and in 1914, the Orient extended in the western mind from Asia through Egypt. In the popular imagination, Cleopatra was the Egyptian woman. Difference could be beautiful if it was embodied in the form of a fascinating exotic woman. By having Egypt represent the African in the American-Negro, the *Age* was responding directly to racist descriptions of American blacks as barbarians. Egypt evoked images of grand civilizations of great wealth. In the popular imagination, the remainder of Africa was merely the jungle home of backward people. Guided by the popular social mapping of the continent of Africa, the *Age* claimed Egyptian ancestry for its ideal Negro woman.

Burlesque houses and carnival beauty pageants alike relied on the appeal of pretty women to draw crowds. Beauty contests have always existed on a thin line between soft pornography and family entertainment. Contest producers have attempted to distinguish themselves from more tawdry entertainment by promoting beauty instead of sex, linking beauty itself to inner worth and to

refinement, making appeals to national or racial pride, and surrounding contests in pageantry. The *Age* incorporated several of these strategies, fusing commercial interests, middle-class aspirations, and racial pride into a seamless whole. In the rhetoric of the *Age*'s contest, displays of refinement and wealth that the newspaper considered "culture" were evidence of the greatness of the race: "[An] effort [is] being made to let the world see the type of cultured and beautiful women developed in the race which has had to struggle for advancement and elevation under a handicap suffered by no other race in modern history."[16] Refinement, extravagance, and racial pride came together in the middle-class image it sought to promote. After months of build-up through the newspaper's pages, the *Age* encouraged its readers to attend the exhibition that would culminate with the selection of the "Chosen Fifteen" beauties. Readers were promised that it would be "without doubt the most pretentious venture ever promoted for the Negroes of New York."[17]

On a Friday night in October 1914 at the Manhattan Casino, the judges announced the "Chosen Fifteen" and presented local winners with solid gold "One of the Chosen Fifteen" pins. Photographs of the winners were displayed in the casino and reproduced on the front page of the *Age*. The winners were all, not surprisingly, light-skinned women. The accompanying article described the winner's jeweled prizes in detail and thanked the dedicated and "disinterested" judges for their efforts, which had produced a selection that was "universally conceded to be beyond criticism."[18]

That, however, was not the last word on the "ideal type" of the American-Negro woman. Isaac Fisher wrote a letter criticizing the contest's outcome for publication in the *Negro Farmer*, a newspaper he edited at Booker T. Washington's Tuskegee Institute. The *Age* published a copy of his letter in its section of out-of-town news.[19] Fisher questioned the selection of mixed-race women as the ideal representatives of the race: "Here was one with the winsome, dainty grace of the frozen North countries—light hair and blue eyes. She had to be considered. American caste said: 'She belongs to the Negroes.' " He was not willing to accept as ideal representatives women who represented so few black women. Presaging the cultural nationalists of the 1960s, he implored artists to

> select some definite race type or types—types that retain the features of the race in softened, chastened, refined outlines. And these types we are going to print often in our newspapers, use on our calendars, put on our Christmas cards, hang on the walls of our daughters' rooms, place in the students' rooms in colleges, hang on the walls of our churches until a little colored girl, just becoming conscious of her youthful beauty, will go and stand before a picture of a beautiful girl type of her own race and decide to be like her.

The *Age*, a New York newspaper published by relatively privileged African Americans, testified to the glory of the race by flaunting middle-class achievement and promoting light-skinned women. Their "disinterested and competent" contest judges reinforced an image in which class and color were unproblematically fused under the rubric of a "cultured representative" of the race. Even the preference for racially-mixed women was incorporated into a discourse of racial pride by representing the African roots of American blacks as Egyptian. Writing in the *Negro Farmer*, Fisher represented another voice, one that questioned the privileging of mixed-race blacks but that nonetheless validated an atypically middle-class vision of African Americans. Few African Americans attended college or sent printed greeting cards in 1914. But Fisher separated class from color and urged African Americans who had access to the means of cultural production to do the same. Both Fisher and the editors of the *Age* sought to defeat racist caricatures of blacks. Neither perspective had an audience outside of African American communities for a long time to come. Less than a year after the contest, D. W. Griffith's spectacular *Birth of a Nation* used blackfaced white actors to portray dreadful stereotypes of black men and women. President Woodrow Wilson was so captivated by the thoroughly racist extravaganza that he said, "It's like writing history with lightning!" African Americans in northern cities responded to the film with picket lines and editorial condemnation, demonstrating that the self-respect reflected in the ignored transcript of racial pride was ready to be mobilized when provoked.[20]

African Americans successfully built autonomous institutions that were Afrocentric in the sense that they did not address whites. At times, some black publications did not even acknowledge the presence of a dominant white world. A May 2, 1925, item in the black-owned *Chicago Defender* did not mention race in its description of a black beauty contest in Baltimore, calling it "the first contest held in that city."[21] In the same year, the *Chicago Defender* sponsored its own beauty competition, the contest for the "Prettiest Girl."[22] The absence of named race was a reportorial style used by some writers in the *Chicago Defender* and other black newspapers. As black writers writing for black readers inhabiting a black social world, there was no need for the racial qualifiers used by white authors to distinguish the nonwhite other. Often, however, as in the *Age*'s "Chosen Fifteen" contest, the rhetoric and staging of black beauty contests were explicitly racial. In some cases, the rhetoric grew out of a deliberate effort to demonstrate the falsehood of white depictions of the black race. In other instances, producers framed their contests in the rhetoric of racial pride in order to lend greater dignity and significance to a commercial venture. Even white owners of businesses that marketed to blacks could use black racial solidarity to sell.

Historian Kathy Peiss has shown how the white, male owners of the Golden Brown Chemical Company, producers of a line of cosmetics for black women,

effectively created a false black identity for their firm. In 1925, the company sponsored the National Golden Brown Beauty Contest, which promoted Negro racial pride and, simultaneously, themselves as a "Negro" business.[23] The owners of the company masked their identity behind the fictional Madame Mamie Hightower, whose rags-to-riches biography echoed that of the real black cosmetics entrepreneur, Madam C. J. Walker. The Golden Brown competition combined a vote-buying popularity contest with a final selection by a panel of experts. Blank ballots came in bundles of fifty or one hundred with the purchase of varying sizes of Golden Brown cosmetics. The National Golden Brown Beauty Contest, which attracted more than one thousand mail-in entrants, is an early example of the manipulation of racial identity as a commodity. When the light-skinned Josephine Leggett, "striking artiste and star of the Shuffle Along Company," won the title by polling more than 300,000 votes, her achievement was extensively covered by the black press.[24] Promotional material for the competition hailed it as the first annual national Golden Brown contest. The first seems to have been the last.

National black contests were not seen again for decades, but local black beauty contests remained popular and continued to be venues for celebrating and thus defining black beauty. Throughout the 1920s, fraternal groups such as the Knights of Pythias sponsored pageants, northern black enclaves of Louisiana migrants crowned queens at Mardi Gras balls, and black newspapers continued to boost their sales by combining themes of racial pride with photographs of beauties (see figure 3.1). "Ladies, Girls Rescued at Last by Alluring Offer," proclaimed the *Oakland (Calif.) Western American* in 1927.[25] The paper purported to "save" the colored women of California by giving them the chance to be beauties in its Miss Golden State beauty and popularity contest. Each year, "seventy-five girls are chosen and sped to Atlantic City for the title of Miss America. Girls from hill and dale are entered . . . but what about the poor colored girl?" The editors asserted that the Miss Golden State contest would undo the annual insult of the exclusively white Miss America Pageant by creating an alternative for colored women.

Noting the proliferation of beauty contests in which "only the pecuniary returns are cared for," the *Western American* insisted that it had different goals. Its contest was "an exaltation of the womanhood of our group." Although they used the noble rhetoric of racial pride to generate interest in the competition, the contest was built atop a financial scheme. At a dance at the contest's end judges would select the winner of the beauty component of the contest. The winner of the popularity contest would be the young lady who could get her supporters to buy the greatest number of votes. Two dollars and fifty cents bought three hundred votes and a year's subscription to the *Western American*; nine dollars procured nine hundred votes and a four-year subscription.

Week after week, the newspaper featured a changing array of photographic

Figure 3.1. Amelia Ramey, "Mardi Gras Queen," Oakland, California, circa 1920s. Courtesy Oakland History Room, Oakland Public Library.

portraits of the contestants along with their mounting tallies of votes. As a popularity competition, the contest recorded popular tastes and consequently showcased a spectrum of skin tones. The paper encouraged this visual challenge to the pigmentocracy in its promotional material: " 'Do you allow brown skin women to enter the contest?' inquired one attractive Miss. . . . The *Western American* . . . want[s] the women and girls of California to know that they stand solid against any form of racial bigotry and welcome all of our race regardless of color or complexion."[26] Text that accompanied the photographs highlighted the differences in skin color of the racial "types" who competed in the contest. The 1920s had been a decade in which the somewhat submerged conflicts about skin color within black communities were brought to the fore by "Back to Africa" movement leader Marcus Garvey, which may explain why the *Western American* questioned the pigmentocracy that had been silently reinforced by the producers of earlier contests. The editors played with the issue of pigment, at one point bemoaning the bleaching of the race yet at another writing effusively about the good looks of a society Creole. In the end, the pale-skinned Mrs. Richard York won the popularity contest by having her supporters buy the largest number of subscriptions.[27] The judges awarded the somewhat darker but still light-brown Marilyn Adams the beauty prize based on a formula that avoided the thorny issue of color: 40 percent posture, 25 percent gait, 15 percent facial expression, 10 percent personality, and 10 percent public opinion.

It has become commonplace to observe that until the ascendancy of the black consciousness movement in the late 1960s winners of African American beauty contests were light-skinned women. However, Isaac Fisher's 1914 letter of complaint regarding the light complexions of the *New York Age*'s "Chosen Fifteen" and the popularity of brown-skinned Miss Golden State contestants indicate that the prizing of light skin within black beauty contests was questioned long before the 1960s. African American critiques of their own community's preference for lighter-skinned women formed a steady counterhegemonic part of the complex picture of African American social rankings. These alternative valuations, usually muted by the dominant belief in the superiority of light skin, occasionally rang out. On those occasions, the diversity of African American views and the popular rejection of the pigmentocracy could be clearly heard.

One of these moments came in 1947, in Harlem's Golden Gate Ballroom. At the time Harlem was full of World War II veterans who were impatient with American racism after having fought to defend American freedom. In an upset to the pigmentocracy, a dark-complexioned woman was crowned as a beauty queen after a Harlem audience rose up in protest at a black beauty contest. Buddy Johnson, leader of the band that made the tune "Miss Fine Brown Frame" a hit, presided over Harlem's Miss Fine Brown Frame contest. Johnson

and a panel of judges bypassed Evelyn Sanders, a curvaceous dark-complexioned woman who was the audience's favorite, to award the title to a light-complexioned woman.[28] As was reported in the May 1947 issue of *Ebony*, "The audience would have none of it, however, and articulately let Maestro Johnson and his judging board know that, for once, white standards of beauty would not be forced upon them." The judges attempted to quiet the audience by splitting the Miss Fine Brown Frame title from the contest's $300 prize by offering the title to the light-skinned contestant and the cash to Evelyn Sanders. The attempt to bribe the crowd's favorite while bestowing the honor of the title on the judges' light-skinned choice only further antagonized the spectators. When the judges saw fists waving in the audience, they capitulated and named Sanders Miss Fine Brown Frame.

In words and in pictures, *Ebony* reported the upset to the pigmentocracy in a manner that ultimately reinstated the African American class/color hierarchy. Sanders was described as the darkest among a decade of Harlem beauty queens and the most "exotic," a pairing of black skin tone with brazen sexuality that parallels the dominant white culture's association of purity with white women and uncontrolled sensuality with black. Evelyn Sanders was a high school graduate who seemed to be between jobs, an "ex-beautician" who aspired to be a model. She also wished to study dance with Katherine Dunham. She was defined by desire rather than by accomplishment. *Ebony* described her as a natural woman of the people who sewed her own daring bikini, loved to eat, and eschewed exercise and cosmetics. Sanders won on the basis of her body, a judgment graphically reinforced by *Ebony*. The lead photograph of the story was peculiarly cropped: The queen had no head. What readers saw was her fine brown frame labeled with boxes attached by pointers to the tip of one breast, her belly button, buttocks, and thigh reading 35", 23", 38", and 23".

Compare the way Sanders was portrayed to the images of women in the early black beauty contests. Those entrants were known by their faces, which were scrutinized by the judges for qualities of physical and spiritual beauty. When Demond Lewis described his detailed vision of the ideal Negro woman, he described a face. The value of having the right kind of face is evident in an advertisement found in the middle of *Ebony's* Fine Brown Frame story. The advertisement, which is for a skin bleaching cream, showed a woman's face but not her body. It was the face of a light-complexioned bride being kissed. Beauty Star Skin Whitener promised "thrilling new hope for lighter, brighter skin. . . . Here's your chance for a complexion that invites and holds romance."[29] The advertisement promised marriage, the right kind of love, for women who could achieve the right, light kind of face.

In the photograph that cropped off Sanders's head, she was a body only. According to *Ebony,* Sanders won on the basis of her sassy walk; her homestitched, revealing bikini; and the raw sexiness of her natural body—she nei-

ther dieted nor exercised. Hers was a very different queendom than that ruled by "cultured" representatives of the race. *Ebony* reported this popular challenge to the pigmentocracy in a way that reinforced the association of dark skin with sex, light skin with goodness; dark skin with shameless sensuality, light with cultivation.

Though middle-class institutions like *Ebony* continued to uphold the pigmentocracy, by the late 1940s there was wide popular support for diverse images of beauty among African Americans. The crowd in the Golden Gate Ballroom showed their enthusiastic appreciation of a dark-skinned woman and revealed the heterogeneity of African American social rankings. In interviews with African American women who came of age in the 1950s and 1960s, I was told of many women who did not meet hegemonic beauty standards but who were considered beautiful by men and women in their communities. The upset at the 1947 Miss Fine Brown Frame contest indicates that by that year the connection between skin tone and beauty was no longer as tightly linked as it had been in 1914, when the *New York Age* speculated about an ideal type of black woman. The insurrection in the Golden Gate Ballroom differed from Isaac Fisher's 1914 letter of protest in yet another way. Not only did the audience refuse to allow the crowning of a light-skinned woman, but they also showed no respect for middle-class comportment. They had no desire to prove to the world that they were "cultured."

The controversy surrounding the Miss Fine Brown Frame contest was unusual. African American beauty contests, as described in the black press, continued to be conventional institutions that upheld middle-class propriety. *Our World* was a short-lived, New York–based magazine that attempted to compete with the Chicago-based *Ebony*.[30] In 1950, *Our World* launched the "Most Beautiful Negro Woman" contest. In most respects, this contest employed conventions and rhetoric that had been used in African American beauty contests since The *Appeal*'s 1891 search for the most beautiful Afro-American woman. *Our World* declared that the time had finally arrived for Negro beauties: "For centuries women of color have made their mark on history. Beautiful Candace, Queen of Ethiopia; sensuous Cleopatra; Josephine, the creole belle who roped the man who conquered Europe—Napoleon. Negro women here have never received the recognition they deserve for their beauty. . . . *Our World* is convinced that now is the time to glorify the Negro woman and make her proud of her unusual beauty."[31] One of the techniques beauty contests use to transform common-born women parading in rented halls into ersatz royalty is to evoke distant glamour. In *Our World*'s contest, racial pride was made compatible with glamorous Europe. The "Most Beautiful Negro Woman" would receive a "$1,000 wardrobe and a gown fashioned by one of Paris' greatest dress designers" along with a "trip to Paris, the Riviera, Rome and London." The only references to Africa were to Ethiopia and Egypt of long ago.

Like the organizers of the *Age's* 1914 contest, *Our World* named Cleopatra as the ancestor of modern Negro beauties. Yet times had changed since the *Age* sought to define a singular ideal type of American-Negro beauty. By 1950, even the middle-class black press accepted that there were multiple ways to define Negro beauty and that the beauty standard included a spectrum of skin shades. Writing about the development of the facial cosmetics industry, historian Kathy Peiss argues that the industry has "taken discourses of class, ethnicity, race and gender—discourses that generate deeply held conscious and unconscious feelings of fear, anxiety, and even self-hatred—and displaced them onto safe rhetorical fields, in this case a language of color and type."[32] In black beauty contests, color was potentially a huge issue. Many black pageants avoided public contestation of the issue by limiting participation to light-skinned women. When, after the Second World War, middle-class arbiters of Negro beauty began to acknowledge a broader definition of beauty by including an occasional dark-skinned woman among the larger group of light-skinned women, they made discursive room for her with the innocuous language of type.

Unlike the *Age*, which in 1914 sought to define one ideal type, *Our World* appeared to be more inclusive. They launched the contest with an article on the varieties of Negro beauty, illustrated by ten "types." "It's time to glorify the Negro woman. . . . The truth is Negro beauty has no pat definition. We refuse to accept it on the basis of a Roman nose, a Grecian Neck, or an olive skin." In the following captions, *Our World* employed an inclusive rhetoric of pride in all of the race's varieties to describe photographic portraits of ten "types" of Negro beauties:

> Barbara Trevigne, the light-skinned exotic type, obviously had Caucasian background.
> Lena Horne is the olive tan sophisticated type.
> Mary Smith, New York model, is the fair-to-white sexy type. Stacked in the right places, Mary is the kind that attracts many wolf-calls. She's often mistaken for white. Has no trouble passing.
> Mildred Smith is the light brown sparkling type.
> Edith Chandler is the sweet nut brown type.
> Carmen de Lavallade is the graceful creole type.
> Ann Lamb is the dark seductive type. Ann has that dreamy eyed quality, flawless complexion and a body to fit.
> Valencia Butler is the light fragile type.
> Jane White, daughter of NAACP secretary Walter White, is the light entertaining type.[33]

Our World's beauty typology is evidence of a black beauty standard, held by middle-class African Americans, that had become more inclusive than the "ideal type" described in the *New York Age* in 1914. Still, light-skinned women were

disproportionately represented. Only two of the ten types had brown skin and only one of those two had a dark complexion. Complexions were stereotypically paired with personality traits. The typology's wording, such as "olive tan sophisticated type," implied that personality traits flowed naturally from complexions, a dangerous discursive strategy given the ways in which racist ideologies have relied on forging links between skin color and social rankings. Under closer examination, *Our World*'s typology, when applied to light-skinned women, has little coherence. Light women are described as fragile types, sexy types, exotic types, and entertaining types. However, the position of the lone dark woman is disturbingly familiar. She is the dark, seductive type who has a flawless body, a description that harkens back to the depiction of the earlier dark-skinned queen—Miss Fine Brown Frame.

Black beauty queens of the 1950s and early 1960s shared the pages of black newspapers with coverage of the emergence of the Civil Rights Movement. Miss Negro Press Photographer's Ball, Miss Bronze California, and its offshoot, Miss Bronze Northern California developed into stable annual events (see figures 3.2, 3.3, and 3.4). Miss Negro Press Photographer's Ball began in the mid-1940s, Miss Bronze California in the 1960s. Both contests were slow to respond to political currents. Lee Gilliam, a hairstylist who groomed the participants in the Miss Bronze California contest, recalled that in the years of his involvement, between 1966 and 1974, all but two of the winners had light skin.[34] By the 1950s, the crowning of yet another light-skinned beauty queen no longer appeared to contest organizers, the press, or a wider audience as an event that defended the glory of Negro women. Discussion of the issue of skin color, even in the attenuated language of type, disappeared from reports of beauty contests. If controversies arose in the contests, they did not capture the interest of the black press. For almost twenty years after the 1947 Miss Fine Brown Frame revolt, neither *Ebony* nor *Jet*, the two most popular black magazines, discussed skin tone in a report of a beauty contest. The attentions of black reporters were focused elsewhere. Brief announcements of beauty contest winners were overshadowed in the black press by reports of civil rights victories and of the violence faced by civil rights activists. The black press reduced its coverage of all-black contests as their attention was drawn to what they considered more newsworthy racial breakthroughs in white contests. For almost two decades, black contests were treated as pleasant but insignificant events, rendered trivial by the efforts of black beauty queens to gain entrance to white contests.

One small newspaper item about an all-black contest of the 1950s did record a significant change. In 1957, a notice in the New York–based *Africa Weekly* announced that "Miss Danlyn Lee, 24 years old, and from the Bronx, was crowned Miss Africa 1957 in New York on Marcus Garvey Day"[35] The meaning of black and of Africa had so shifted that an American woman from the

Figure 3.2. "Miss Refreshing Smile," a part of "Miss Bronze Northern California," circa 1964. Courtesy San Francisco African American Historical and Cultural Society Library.

Figure 3.3. Program of the 1964 Miss Bronze Northern California beauty pageant. Courtesy San Francisco African American Historical and Cultural Society Library.

Figure 3.4. Program of the 1965 Miss Bronze Northern California beauty pageant. Courtesy San Francisco African American Historical and Cultural Society Library.

Bronx could be proud to be crowned "Miss Africa." Her identification was with the continent, not just the ancient civilizations of the Nile. The 1957 Miss Africa contest was substantially ahead of its time. In the 1950s, black media attention focused on beauties challenging segregated contests. All-black contests generally represented only the complacency of the black middle class. The all-black Miss Africa contest did not fit into either the integrationist frame or into the somewhat elite black social world that sponsored most black contests. The Miss Africa contest was neither a civil rights news item nor proper material for a newspaper's society pages, and so it was ignored by most of the black press.

This chapter looked at all-black contests from the end of the nineteenth century through the late 1950s. Middle-class blacks built separate black institutions as nonconfrontational ways of displaying racial pride during an era in which legal and de facto segregation was the norm. It is possible to divide black resistance to white domination into the two strategies of separatism and integrationism, though the categories are of limited use when considered without context. From the perspective of late twentieth-century black nationalism, separatism is the more radical stance, but in the context of legal segregation, blacks who built separate institutions were often taking the path of least resistance. Assimilation through integration has been considered an abandonment of race loyalty for the sake of individual achievement, yet the first occasions of integration were always the result of collective actions taken at great risk. The Civil Rights Movement and earlier strategies of "racial uplift" were most often simultaneously assimilationist and collective. Both the separatist and the integrationist strategies sought, either directly or indirectly, to regain control over social identity, and both, I would argue, met with some success. Many black leaders pursued both strategies, helping to maintain the strength of black institutions while fighting for integration. In 1954, *Brown v. Board of Education* signaled the start of a new era in which race leaders increasingly looked outside of the boundaries of their communities for symbols of achievement. The next chapter follows the efforts black women put forth to be recognized as what the entire nation celebrated as beautiful. The black press championed their ascent until hard-won fights to end racism changed the political landscape again and the all-black contest reemerged as a vehicle for racial pride.

This brief survey of black beauty contests demonstrates the multiplicity of cultural rankings available within black communities. The contests were the products of black institutions and provide strong evidence that African Americans prized their own beauty. By their very existence, black beauty contests countered depictions of African American women as ugly and indecent. The culture that the black middle class produced, as seen in beauty contests, was never a simple replica of the dominant culture, which itself was heterogeneous. As black community institutions, beauty contests were neither fully autonomous nor fully dominated; they incorporated but altered prevailing discourses

of race, gender, and class. Searches for the ideal Negro woman maintained some connection with the African origins of the race, but the allusions were almost always to a mythical version of North Africa. They frequently created symbols of black achievement by reinforcing hierarchies of class and color. Their "disinterested" black, middle-class judges found beauty according to the tastes of their class. Research shows that middle-class men favored light-skinned women in that everyday beauty contest, the marriage market, and so it is not surprising that lighter women won formal contests of beauty. However, as public spectacles, beauty contests themselves were ultimately subject to the judgment of a black public, many of whom resented the continuous succession of light-skinned beauties. The record of black beauty contests up to the 1950s cannot simply be described as a legacy of self-love or self-hate. It is a record of a struggle against white characterizations of blacks and an internal dialogue about who represented the race. The contests conveyed, altered, and reinforced standards of beauty and shifted the cultural orientation of black identity toward the allure of the ancient Nile, European glamour, American citizenship, or the entire continent of Africa. They promoted particular class orientations. Although for many years in most contests light-complexioned women won the prizes, their victories represent only a partial view of the valuation of black women in black communities. The pigmentocracy was occasionally questioned inside contests and often outside of them. The next chapter chronicles the integration of formerly white beauty contests. In these contests, race took precedence, eclipsing issues of color and class.