

Steel Magnolias



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Joy, Belonging, and the Black Beauty Shop

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When Annelle first appears in Truvy's beauty shop at the beginning of *Steel Magnolias*, her sole focus is landing a position as a shop assistant. Given the sudden and curious changes in her circumstances, her singular determination to secure employment does not register as surprising or gratuitous. What the recent trade school graduate soon discovers, however, is that Truvy's is so much more than a run-of-the-mill salon for those who frequent it. Indeed, for the women who move in and out of the space nestled in the fictional town of Chinquapin, Louisiana, the shop is both an indispensable source of joy and a vital locus of belonging.

Beauty shops have long held special meaning for women in the United States. African American women, in particular, have routinely turned to and relied on these enterprises to cultivate and embody new possibilities for individual and communal care, expression, and revitalization. In her book *Beauty Shop Politics: African American Women's Activism in the Beauty Industry* (2010), the historian Tiffany M. Gill traces the manifold ways that African American women have engaged the business of beauty to bolster their economic autonomy, while also calling forth new social, cultural, and political paradigms. During the height of the Civil Rights activism of the 1950s and 60s, for example, many movement leaders sought out African American beauticians to help organize and fundraise for various efforts aimed at amplifying and emboldening the fight for Black liberation. Beauty salons "functioned as asylums for Black women ravaged by the effects of segregation and served as incubators of Black women's leadership and platforms from which to agitate for social and political change," Gill writes. In so doing, they materially contributed to the dismantling of the racial status quo in the nation.

Of course, the post-Civil Rights era would witness and engender extraordinary changes in African American life. This was particularly true of the 1980s, the period in which *Steel Magnolias* is set. The rapid rise of hip hop from a subcultural movement originated by youth in New York City to a global phenomenon would coincide with various bedrock African American institutions—magazines like *Ebony* and *Jet* and the Historically Black Colleges and Universities that inspired the fictional Hillman College on the television show *A Different World* (1987-1993), among them—accruing fresh significance. At the same time, the devastation wrought by the intersecting crises of the HIV/AIDS epidemic, the proliferation of crack cocaine, the rise of mass incarceration, and the bogus trickle-down economic policies touted by many in power would be felt and experienced intensely within Black communities across the country.

Meanwhile, complex representations of African American women abounded in the media and popular imagination. The launches of the Black Entertainment Network (BET) on cable television in 1980, *The Cosby Show* on NBC in 1984, and Oprah Winfrey's nationally syndicated talk show in 1986 served to highlight the fact that, much like the characters in *Steel Magnolias*, African American women ran businesses, married prominent politicians, had families, enjoyed successful careers, and sometimes became grouchy as they grew older. What "The Hairpiece" exhibit from George C. Wolfe's groundbreaking satirical play, *The Colored Museum*, which premiered in 1986, helped further underscore were the ways that hair and beauty remained key topics of conversation and sources of pleasure for African American women grappling with larger existential questions and concerns in anticipation of the arrival of a new decade, century, and millennium.

What no doubt continues to resonate about *Steel Magnolias* are the ways that, amid many pivotal life events—romances, weddings, births, and premature deaths—the characters in the play somehow always manage to find their way back to joy. And to Truvy's beauty shop, which, decades after it was first introduced to audiences, continues to reveal itself as a potent site for community-building and, indeed, worldmaking.