Race, space and Gender: African American Women Entrepreneurs in Detroit’s Informal Economy

This study looks at the haircare industry in one Detroit neighborhood as a way to explore how economic opportunities for black women in Detroit have changed over time and how it has impacted neighborhoods. I have chosen the haircare industry because of its historical importance. In part, demand for beauty services among African American women has been fueled by society’s insistence that African American women conform to white mainstream beauty ideals. This demand has been satiated by entrepreneurial African American women who have dominated the industry with successful and thriving beauty salons. These salons have played an important role in creating economic stability for African American families, economic advancement for African American women and vitality in African American communities. Using a mix of qualitative and quantitative data, this study reveals significant changes in the industry in one neighborhood, showing how registered storefront salons have disappeared and been replaced by “kitchen salons” in private homes. It explores why this change has happened and what the effects have been on these women, their families and the community.

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