

“Racism With Roses”: Race and Femininity in the Second Wave and the Miss

America Protests of 1968

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The women's liberation demonstration at the Miss America Pageant of 1968 is a moment forever enshrined in popular memory. Often called the first significant action in the second-wave feminist movement, the theatrical performance on the Atlantic City boardwalk in New Jersey sought to protest the pageant's objectification of women, its endorsement of unattainable beauty standards, and its policies preventing the admittance of black contestants. On that same day, a few blocks away, the first Miss Black America Pageant was held at the Ritz-Carleton Hotel, and saw the crowning of sociology student Sandra Williams. While 1960s mainstream media sought to simplify the cause of the radical feminists as that of "bra and girdle burners... who do not want to be Miss America, and don't want anyone else to be either," and minimize black participation in the protests and Miss Black America as a whole, these two events stand as important case studies for the second wave, and the fight against national perceptions of femininity.¹ The Miss America protests are testaments to the ways in which female identities were challenged by different branches of the feminist movement and how, although the voice of the second wave was predominantly white, it would be an oversimplification to define the movement solely along the boundaries of race. There were many instances of similarity between the two events, which both sought to protest the enforcement of femininity and its construction within the politics of national identity. While the issues that they protested were not totally cohesive, and shifted depending on a group's social, economic, or racial background, the Miss America Protests of 1968 are exemplary of the ways in which second-wave feminists sought to define female identity on their own terms, free from the confines of the patriarchal gaze.

¹ AP, "Protests Mar Miss America Contest: Atlantic City, Sept. 8," in *South China Morning Post* (Hong Kong), Sept. 9, 1968.

A common critique of second-wave feminism is its portrayal as a white movement led by middle-class women seeking capitalist empowerment and its disregard for black feminists, as well as the correlations among racial, economic, and gender inequalities.² While this academic perspective is, at times, problematic in its oversimplification of complex racial tensions, it is correct in claiming that the dominant voices of the second wave expressed a predominantly white perspective. Betty Friedan, an author who stood at the forefront of the movement, is representative of the white feminist narrative, as she universalizes the strife of a housewife in her famous book *The Feminine Mystique*. Friedan attributes this inherent discontent, “The Problem That Has No Name,” to women feeling unfulfilled by their socially-sanctified roles as suburban caregivers and American sweethearts. The problem, according to Friedan, is “the voice within women that says: ‘I want more than my husband and my children and my home.’”³ Friedan’s emphasis on the constraints of a patriarchal family were catered to classes that could afford it in the first place. As illustrated by Elizabeth Spelman in “The Ampersand Problem,” Friedan’s failure lies in her attempt to universalize a privileged plight. According to Spelman, “the family may be the locus of oppression for white middle-class women, but to claim that it is the locus of oppression for all women is to ignore the fact that for Blacks in America the family has been a source of resistance against white oppression.”⁴ This argument is echoed by a multitude of feminist scholars as they, too, argue for tensions and divisions in the second wave on account of economic, social and

² Georgia Welch, “‘Up Against the Wall Miss America’: Women’s Liberation and Miss Black America in Atlantic City, 1968,” *Feminist Formations* 27. 2 (2015), 72.

³ Betty Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique* (New York: Norton, 1963), 32.

⁴ Elizabeth V. Spelman, “Gender & Race: The Ampersand Problem in Feminist Thought,” in *Feminism and “Race,”* ed. Kum-Kum Bhavnani (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 86.

racial differences.⁵ However, it is important to note that while these differences informed various branches in the movement, they did not draw clear racial divisions. While Friedan emerged as a dominant voice for white feminism, her painting of suburban plight did not stop racial minorities from engaging in the second wave as they, too, sought to express their experience and opinions through activism.

While common histories of the second wave often highlight the dominant white voice and the constraints of middle-class suburbia, it would be problematic to assume that women of color were overtly excluded from feminist circles. As expressed by Becky Thompson in “Multiracial Feminism,” this normative portrayal of a white-washed, dubbed “hegemonic feminism,” fails to recognize the centrality of women of color and the rise of a culturally-diverse feminism.⁶ Contrary to this common narrative, many groundbreaking black feminists, like Francis Beal, engaged with dominant voices and their critiques of the patriarchy while calling attention to the economic and social forms of oppression enforced primarily upon women of color. In her work, “Double Jeopardy: To be Black and Female,” Beal acknowledges Friedan’s arguments, describing a housewife’s “parasitic existence... as legalized prostitution,” while disputing its perceived universalism within the movement, writing that “black women were never afforded the phony luxuries (of suburbia).”⁷ Although Beal acknowledged the economic circumstances preventing black women from becoming housewives, she did not align with historian Benita Roth’s claim

⁵ Benita Roth, *Separate Roads to Feminism: Black, Chicana, and White Feminist Movements in America's Second Wave* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 10.

⁶ Becky Thompson, “Multiracial Feminism: Recasting the Chronology of Second Wave Feminism,” in *Feminist Studies* 28, 2 (2002): 335.

⁷ Francis Beal, “Double Jeopardy: To be Black and Female,” in *Meridians* 8. 2 (2008), 167.

that white feminists “were trying to destroy a family structure that Black feminists were trying to protect.”⁸ Instead, Beal looked to capitalism, and “its afterbirth... racism,” as the fundamental cause for gendered oppression, a concept later echoed by the socialist feminists of the Chicago Women’s Liberation Union (CWLU) in 1972.⁹ The CWLU and its rhetoric of the oppressive “American situation” is, according to scholar Linda Gordon, exemplary of how the feminist majority were not “unconscious of the virulence and institutionalization of American racism” but rather sought combat it.¹⁰ Roth’s painting of divisions according to familial values and economic status, while reflective of mainstream dialogues, neglects the overlap of various branches in the feminist movement. As illustrated by Beal’s argument that the assertion of black women in “domestic, submissive roles assumes a counter-revolutionary position,” the second wave was informed by a broad spectrum of female experiences.¹¹

When examining a protest as cataclysmic as the 1968 Miss America Pageant alongside its lesser known contemporary, the Miss Black America Pageant, it would be easy to define these events as symbols of distinct race-based feminisms. However, as illustrated by dialogues and debates surrounding the diversity of the feminist movement and its various branches, these protests were, in fact, representative of a common critique of the feminine symbols put forth by the pageant, and its idealized figures of American beauty. A primary reason why the Miss America

⁸ Benita Roth, *Separate Roads to Feminism: Black, Chicana, and White Feminist Movements in America’s Second Wave* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2004), 102.

⁹ “Double Jeopardy: To be Black and Female,” *Meridians* 8. 2 (2008), 167; Booth, Heather et, al., “Socialist Feminism: A Strategy for the Women’s Movement,” (Chicago: 1972).

¹⁰ Booth, Heather et, al., “Socialist Feminism: A Strategy for the Women’s Movement,” (Chicago: 1972); Linda Gordon, “‘Intersectionality’, Socialist Feminism and Contemporary Activism: Musings by a Second-Wave Socialist Feminist,” *Gender & History* 28. 2 (2016), 342.

¹¹ Francis Beal, “Double Jeopardy: To be Black and Female,” *Meridians* 8. 2 (2008), 169.

Pageant incited the demonstration from New York Radical Women (NYRW) at the official event, and why the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) staged its black pageant, was precisely because Miss America herself was a symbol of national identity. Miss America, as the title itself implies, stands as a symbol for the ideal American woman and, as scholar Sarah Banet-Weiser argues, “a national utopic vision of ‘typicality’ and the ordinary.”¹² This vision of nationalism, expressed in the female body, is outlined in the “morality clause” attributed to director Lenora Slaughter, which barred any woman who had been or was married, borne a child, been pregnant, been arrested and, most notably, who was non-white, from entering the competition.¹³ This guaranteed, through a series of discriminatory selection criteria, that Miss America, in defining national identity, would embody an image of white, angelic purity that the country so valued.

Miss America’s representation of American womanhood and identity stood as an expansive issue in the second wave, as both black and white feminists sought to contest this definition and its oppressive constraints. Robin Morgan, a dominant voice of the Miss America protest, denounced the pageant’s representation of female identity, listing female “enslavement by ludicrous ‘beauty’ standards,” the portrayal of women as “inoffensive, bland, (and) apolitical,” and the unachievable “Madonna-Whore combination,” as points of protest.¹⁴ Morgan also listed “Racism with Roses” as a primary point of contention, acknowledging the absence of women of colour

¹² Sarah Banet-Weiser, “Miss America, National Identity, and the Identity Politics of Whiteness,” in *There She Is Miss America* ed. Elwood Watson and Darcy Martin (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), 70.

¹³ Elwood Watson and Darcy Martin, introduction to *There She Is Miss America*, ed. Elwood Watson and Darcy Martin (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), 4-5.

¹⁴ Robin Morgan, “No More Miss America!” (New York, 1968), 1.

from the “lily-white” pageant since its creation in 1921.¹⁵ While Morgan was certainly representative of the predominantly white presence at the protest, there were also black feminists, like activist and lawyer Flo Kennedy, who furthered Morgan’s critique of “Racism with Roses,” while playing an invaluable role in organizing and mobilizing the protest. In many ways, Kennedy stood as the go-between for black and white feminists, as she recruited black women to join the protest and even enlisted black residents of Atlantic City to provide protestors with a place to rest.¹⁶ According to Sherie Randolph, Kennedy’s role in the Miss America Protest, and the participation of the city’s black residents “complicates the then-familiar generalization that black women and men opposed the women’s movement.”¹⁷ Contrary to popular narratives of the time that frame civil rights and feminist movements against each other, white feminists in the Miss America Protest acknowledged and contested the pageant’s racial oppression, while black feminists, like Kennedy, engaged and even spearheaded the demonstration, illustrating a diversity often lost in scholarship and media portrayals of the time.

The generalization of feminist movements along color lines and the deemphasis of black feminism in the second wave as a whole were overtly expressed in mainstream media portrayals of the Miss America protest and its demonstrators. The patronizing tone of most of the articles and the dramatization of acts of protest were common tropes in media coverage of the demonstration. While a 1965 article from *The New York Times* reveals a growing public criticism for the

¹⁵ Robin Morgan, “No More Miss America!” (New York, 1968), 1; Robin Morgan, “Women vs. the Miss America Pageant, 1968,” in *the Word of a Woman: Feminist Dispatches 1968-1992*, ed. Robin Morgan (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1992), 25.

¹⁶ Sherie M. Randolph, *Florynce "Flo" Kennedy: The Life of a Black Feminist Radical* (North Carolina: University of North Carolina Press, 2015), 5; Flo Kennedy, *Color Me Flo* (New York: Prentice Hall, 1976), 33.

¹⁷ Sherie M. Randolph, *Florynce "Flo" Kennedy: The Life of a Black Feminist Radical*, 16.

pageant, describing contestants as “girl-like products synthesized from flesh-like plastic,” media coverage of the 1968 protest still trivialized the demonstrators’ calls against impossible beauty standards and sexist oppression.¹⁸ A *New York Times* article painted the demonstrators as attention-seeking “bra-burners,” whose organization consisted of “middle-aged careerists and housewives with a sprinkling of 20-year-olds and grandmothers... who came from New York in busses driven by male drivers.”¹⁹ The attention paid to the male bus drivers and the irony of them transporting radical feminists sought to undermine the legitimacy of the women’s protest.

The media also often neglected black voices of the protest. Flo Kennedy, one of the few demonstrators to speak to reporters, went unacknowledged by the media, which overlooked her in favor of younger white feminists.²⁰ The same *New York Times* article also included a brief paragraph on the Miss Black America Pageant that occurred on the same day, echoing similar, and arguably more concentrated, tones of condescension. The article undermined the authority of Miss Black America and its candidates by contrasting the modest privacy of the Miss America contestants with the finalists of Miss Black America. In stating that the eight finalists “were out on the town acting like beauty queens,” the article suggested that the status of a true beauty queen was only awarded to white contestants.²¹ While media portrayals of the Miss America protests of 1968 often sought to trivialize and oversimplify the demonstrations, it is important to

¹⁸ John Canady, “What Miss America Is Made Of,” *New York Times Sunday Magazine* (New York), Sept. 18, 1965.

¹⁹ Charlotte Curtis, “Miss America Pageant Picketed by 100 Women,” *New York Times* (New York), Sept. 8, 1968.

²⁰ Sherie M. Randolph, *Florynce "Flo" Kennedy: The Life of a Black Feminist Radical* (North Carolina: University of North Carolina Press, 2015), 17.

²¹ Charlotte Curtis, “Miss America Pageant Picketed by 100 Women,” *New York Times* (New York), Sept. 8, 1968.

note how, in drawing attention to the idealized figure constructed by the pageant, the protest intensified cultural conversations that challenged the pageant, and inspired eventual reform.

In the same *New York Times* article covering the theatrical demonstrations on the Atlantic City boardwalk, titled, “Miss America Pageant is Picketed by 100 Women,” Morgan is quoted denouncing the Miss Black America Pageant that was taking place a few blocks away. As reported by journalist Charlotte Curtis, Morgan said that, “we’re against all beauty contests. We deplore Miss Black America as much as we deplore Miss White America but we understand the black issue involved.”²² While Morgan’s response could be read as a clumsy attempt to clarify her intent as radical rather than racist, Georgia Welch argues that the printing of Morgan’s utterances exemplify the ways in which feminist movements were framed by 1960s media.²³ According to Welch, articles like Curtis’ *New York Times* piece present a “grand cat fight,” where, “instead of presenting a unified front against all women’s oppression, the protestors came off as hecklers of other (beautiful, feminine, respectable) women.”²⁴ While Morgan’s quote suggests a denunciation of all pageants as a symbol of sexist oppression, the article fails to acknowledge how Miss Black America sought to address, in part, the same issues of national identity raised by the NYRW. In many ways, Miss Black America was both a critical address of the Miss America Pageant and its feminine symbols, as well as an affirmation of pride in black beauty and womanhood.

²² Charlotte Curtis, “Miss America Pageant Picketed by 100 Women,” Sept. 8, 1968.

²³ Georgia Paige Welch, “Up Against the Wall Miss America!: Women’s Liberation and Miss Black America in Atlantic City, 1968,” *Feminist Formations* 27. 2 (2015), 88.

²⁴ Georgia Paige Welch, “Up Against the Wall Miss America!: Women’s Liberation and Miss Black America in Atlantic City, 1968,” 89.

While many radical feminists argued that a pageant's performance of beauty objectified women, the display of overt femininity in Miss Black America sought to challenge racist treatments of black women and their exclusion from concepts of femininity in American society. Black women suffered a long history of systemic oppression, as their bodies in the 1960s were defined according to roles of submission, whether sexual, for the white man, or in domesticated labor as the "mammy," or cleaner. Therefore, as Valerie Kinloch argues in "Beauty, Femininity, and Black Bodies," Miss Black America stood as a site for the dismantling of this racist social narrative as "the discourse of power in feminine acts engaged in a denigration of black bodies because nationalism and racial wholesomeness have always been imagined as white."²⁵ This argument for the portrayal of the feminine in black women as a revolutionary act is echoed by historian Maxine Craig, who writes that "an African American woman who was simply showcased as pretty made an effective counterclaim to caricatures of black women as humorously or monstrously ugly."²⁶ On the surface, Miss Black America began as a means of contesting the banning of black women from Miss America's stage. However, it also established an institution of black pride that not only affirmed the beauty of black women in a society that pursued its ruin but sought to deconstruct concepts of femininity in a landscape that otherwise prevented black women from being considered feminine in the first place.

In exhibiting black femininity and defining it outside the confines of white femininity the Miss Black America Pageant sought to reclaim black female bodies and their beauty in many

²⁵ Valerie Felt Kinloch, "The Rhetoric of Black Bodies: Race, Beauty, and Representation," in *There She Is Miss America* ed. Elwood Watson and Darcy Martin (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), 97.

²⁶ Maxine Craig, *"Ain't I a Beauty Queen?": Black Women, Beauty and the Politics of Race* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 46.

ways. An important factor in the pageant's promotion of racial pride was its ties to politics of respectability. A popular aspect of the civil rights movement of the 1950s and '60s, respectability politics sought to legitimize the movement through the respectability garnered from dignified protesters, especially black women who appeared "lady-like," and their contrast against rabid white segregationists. Discourses on hair in African-American communities especially exemplified the significance of respectability. Prior to the late 1960s, straightened hair, light skin, and middle-class dress were seen as requisite markers of Black racial dignity as they echoed white concepts of beauty.²⁷ However, this sentiment is symbolically challenged by the pageant, and their crowning of Sandra Williams as the first Miss Black America. While Williams dressed herself like any white Miss America hopeful, she wore her "natural" hair, performed an African dance as her featured talent, and explicitly defended black women as beautiful. During the question and answer session, Williams also supported the second-wave movement by calling for an equal distribution of housework between the sexes.²⁸ As the first Miss Black America, Sandra Williams set a precedent for racial pride, as the crown perched atop her natural hair stood as a public act of self-acceptance, and community solidarity, as well as a radical challenge to the oppressive constraints of white femininity.

The Miss America Pageant Protest and the Miss Black America Pageant of 1968 are important symbols for redefining feminine identities and the multitude of voices that contributed to the second-wave feminist movement. While the dominant voice was that of white, middle-class women and there was certainly no cohesive call for reform, it would be an oversimplification to

²⁷ Georgia Paige Welch, "'Up Against the Wall Miss America': Women's Liberation and Miss Black America in Atlantic City, 1968," 73.

²⁸ Judy Klemesrud, "There's Now Miss Black America," *New York Times* (New York), Sept. 9, 1968.

define the second wave solely along color lines, as activists like Robin Morgan recognized racial dynamics and black feminists, like Francis Beal and Flo Kennedy, made large contributions to the movement as a whole. These protests not only challenged the objectification of female bodies in popular culture and the male gaze that defined them; they fostered new definitions of femininity and female pride. While the protests were large contributors to the momentum of the second wave, discourses and debates on womanhood and the autonomy of the female body still occur today. The Miss America Pageant, clinging to a veneer of inclusivity and empowerment, still stands, to many, as a symbol of female oppression. This is seen, quite famously, with the crowning and subsequent dismissal of the first black Miss America, Vanessa Williams, in 1984 on account of leaked nude photos in *Penthouse* magazine. The year that followed saw the crowning of Sharlene Wells, a twenty-year-old white Mormon from Utah, whose stereotypical image of white, angelic purity contrasted Williams' black, sexual body. This event is representative of the way in which Miss America continues to promote a national identity of domesticated femininity, and a preference for the symbol of the white, virginal queen. While many significant advances have been made for women's rights since the second-wave in the 1960s, it's important to consider what remains unchanged and remember those first, brave "bra burners," freedom fighters and passionate crusaders for female liberation.

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