

FORUM

FEMINISM, MISS AMERICA, AND MEDIA MYTHOLOGY

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“I’m not contemplating any Maidenform bonfires, but they could certainly use something around here”

—*Joanna (Katharine Ross) in The Stepford Wives (1975)*

When Joanna, the central protagonist in *The Stepford Wives*, utters these words in a conversation with her best friend, she is discussing the formation of a feminist consciousness-raising group. Both women feel stifled by the atmosphere in Stepford, Connecticut, the New York suburb to which they recently have moved with their families. In Stepford, as anyone familiar with the film remembers, formerly strong-willed, dynamic women are mysteriously transformed into perfectly groomed, robotic beings obsessed with housekeeping and the sexual satisfaction of their husbands, a fate that Joanna and her friend are desperate to avoid. *The Stepford Wives* was released in 1975, at the end of what historian Alice Echols has called the peak period of radical feminist activity in the United States,¹ and the second wave of feminism is, in many ways, the subtext required for making complete sense of the film. Seen in its original historical context, *The Stepford Wives* is a feminist horror film. It argues that American men, given the opportunity, would erase their wives’ individuality by literally killing them and replacing them with identical automatons dedicated to domestic chores and sexual service. Despite their invocation of feminism, Joanna and her friend are no match for the forces of evil, and both become Stepford wives by the end of the film. Indeed, after the film’s release, *Stepford wife*

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entered the American lexicon as a term referring to submissive, plastic-seeming women who were satisfied with the traditional domestic and sexual roles that second-wave feminism sought to challenge.

As a film, *The Stepford Wives* both contributed to and drew from popular notions of the purpose and meaning of second-wave feminist ideology and practices, and I invoke it here as a useful example of the ways that certain understandings of the second wave had solidified in public discourse by the mid-1970s. For example, Joanna's casual reference to "Maidenform bonfires" in the epigraph above is, of course, an allusion to the association of bra-burning with second-wave feminism, an association begun by media coverage of the 1968 protest by radical feminists at the Miss America pageant in Atlantic City.

This essay is an exploration of the legacy of that protest in media discourse about the Miss America pageant, and my highlighting of *The Stepford Wives* as part of that process is perhaps the perfect place to begin, as many of the issues raised by the film are similar, if not identical, to those raised by feminist protests against the pageant. Just as feminists charged that Miss America promoted an ideal of women as plastic, doll-like, submissive sex objects who paraded in swimsuits for the pleasure of men, *The Stepford Wives* took that vision to its nightmarish extreme by depicting a community in which women literally died so that their husbands could possess that ideal. Eerily, news discourse about the Miss America pageant in the 1990s has referred to "Stepford-Wife contestants," and a male pageant producer's comment in 1993 that he "didn't want these women looking like 45-year-old Stepford Wives marching like robots across the stage" was noted in reports on pageant reforms that were designed to "bring [the pageant] into the 90s."²

The legacy of second-wave feminism, and its echoes in popular culture, haunt public discourse about Miss America. In histories and memoirs of the second wave, the 1968 Miss America action is a source of both pride and regret: pride for the early visibility and membership it gained for the movement, regret for the unshakeable association of feminism with bra-burning that it fostered. This essay juxtaposes feminist discourse about the 1968 protest with mainstream public discourse about the Miss America pageant in the 30 years that followed, and I argue that these two groups of texts offer a useful case study of a key rhetorical strategy in mediated public discourse about contemporary feminism: the construction of female agency as an implicit repudiation of the feminist critique of patriarchy.

If the second-wave feminist mantra was the "personal is political," implying that women's individual problems were the outgrowth of their political status as an oppressed class, then the corresponding media mantra was precisely the reverse: the "political is personal," implying that the validity of feminist objections to a patriarchal system was easily discredited by the articulation of individual women's disavowal of that oppression. The implicit argument that sexism must not exist if even one woman denies that it does is hardly original; it has been used against feminist

claims since the beginnings of the first wave in the nineteenth century. However, the discourse surrounding the Miss America pageant is a compelling example of the reemergence of this strategy in the late twentieth century, and it illustrates the continuing difficulty presented by dominant media's personalization of claims by and about feminism and its implications.

Indeed, as I argue below, the evolution of media discourse surrounding the intersection of feminism and the Miss America pageant shows the functioning of the personalization problem in a variety of ways, the most obvious of which is the longevity of the bra-burning trope itself, which quickly became a synecdoche used to trivialize feminists' critique of beauty politics. Bra-burning, it was implied, was the desperate bid for attention by neurotic, unattractive women who could not garner it through more acceptable routes. Yet, once the feminist critique of Miss America became a ritualistic invocation in media discourse about the pageant, the personalization strategy took another turn, focusing on the contestants themselves. By the mid-1970s, media discourse exhibits an increasing emphasis on the personal agency of beauty contestants, an emphasis that works to refute feminist objections by implying that if women claim that they freely choose to participate in the pageant and refuse to claim that they are being exploited, we should believe them.

By the 1990s, most media discourse about the pageant adopts a bemused, ironic tone toward Miss America, a tone that acknowledges the pageant as an anachronism at the same time that it validates it as an empowering vocation for the women who continue to compete in it. That is, at the same time that media discourse shows clear agreement with aspects of the feminist critique of the pageant, it also insists on a kind of liberal, evolutionary narrative in which the pageant has, in some senses, *become* feminism for its contestants. Hence the irony. Yet this version of mass-mediated feminism is devoid of the wide-ranging critique of class, race, and gender oppression that motivated the original feminist protest against Miss America; indeed, it is devoid of any ideological substance save the notion that women who exercise agency on their own behalf are practicing feminism. As I discuss in the conclusion, the transformation of feminism from a systemic critique of patriarchy to the practice of individualism by women is not a unique strategy in media discourse since the second wave. However, the evolution of media narratives about the intersections of feminism and Miss America since 1968 allows useful discussion of the continuing problem that the mythology of individualism presents for feminism at the turn of the century.

MISS AMERICA AND THE BRA-BURNING MYTH

As the first major public protest staged by radical feminists of the second wave, the events in Atlantic City in 1968 provide an origins story for historical and biographical

accounts of contemporary feminism. The protest was mounted by the New York Radical Women (NYRW), an early radical feminist group that was formed in 1968 by several women who wished to extend the critique of other radical movements (civil rights, antiwar, and the New Left) to include an analysis of women's oppression. Robin Morgan, a member of NYRW and one of the key organizers of the protest, calls it "the first major action of the current wave of feminism in the United States." In her recent memoir of the movement, Susan Brownmiller writes that "the boardwalk hijinks and civil disobedience of the Miss America protest had global ripples as both national and foreign journalists seized on the story," and historian Flora Davis calls the protest the moment that "feminism suddenly burst into the headlines."³

Even Frank Deford, author of the laudatory history of the pageant, *There She Is: The Life and Times of Miss America*, wrote that, for Women's Liberation, "the skirmish at [Atlantic City's] Convention Hall is roughly analogous to the Boston Tea Party." In Alice Echol's germinal history of radical feminism, she notes that the protest "marked the end of the movement's obscurity"; similarly, in *The Sisterhood*, Marcia Cohen claims that the events in September 1968 were "a moment that changed the world's view of this rebellion—and therefore perhaps the rebellion itself—forever." Including a description of the protest in the chapter of her memoirs titled "The Origins of the Second Wave of Feminism," Sheila Tobias perhaps puts it most succinctly when she notes that the protest "both helped publicize and would later haunt the women's movement."⁴

As most of these accounts acknowledge, what "haunted" the women's movement was the image of bra-burning. Those knowledgeable about the history of second-wave feminism are well aware that no bras were burned at the 1968 protest; indeed, feminist historians, as well as participants and observers of the protest, have made considerable efforts to dispel the myth.⁵ Regardless, bra-burning became what historian Ruth Rosen has called "the most tenacious media myth about the women's movement," and she maintains that, "in a breast-obsessed society, 'bra-burning' became a symbolic way of sexualizing—and thereby trivializing—women's struggle for emancipation."⁶ Certainly, trivialization is a crucial implication of the "sexy trope" of bra-burning;⁷ when Senator Jennings Randolph characterized feminists as "braless bubbleheads" two years after the protest in his widely reported response to the Women's Strike for Equality in 1970, he surely meant to trivialize them.⁸ As Rosen points out, part of the issue is media conflation of the so-called "sexual revolution" with women's liberation, as if the women at the protest were fighting primarily for the right to go braless so that they could be more sexually available.⁹ Susan Douglas agrees, arguing that "women who threw their bras away may have said they were challenging sexism, but the media, with a wink, hinted that these women's motives were not at all political but rather personal: to be trendy, and to attract men."¹⁰

Bras were only one of many items that were tossed into a "freedom trash can" on the boardwalk in Atlantic City on September 7, 1968: also included were girdles,

high heels, cosmetics, eyelash curlers, wigs, issues of *Cosmopolitan*, *Playboy*, and *Ladies Home Journal*—what feminists termed “instruments of torture” to women.¹¹ The trash can was never lit on fire, but the rumor that it would be—and the later assumption that it had been—was begun by protest organizer Robin Morgan’s discussion with a *New York Post* reporter a few days earlier. In that conversation with *Post* reporter Lindsay Van Gelder (who later became an active feminist), Morgan identified herself as a member of the Yippies (Youth International Party) and drew connections between the Miss America action and other New Left protests. Seizing on these links, Van Gelder wrote a lead to her story that read as follows: “Lighting a match to a draft card or a flag has been a standard gambit of protest groups in recent years, but something new is due to go up in flames on Saturday. Would you believe a bra-burning?” Further heightening the effect, the *Post* gave the story a headline that read: “Bra Burners and Miss America.”¹²

As the Miss America protest occurred less than two weeks after the tumultuous 1968 Democratic National Convention in Chicago, and given that the majority of the members of NYRW were or had been aligned with civil rights, antiwar, and New Left movement groups, Van Gelder’s analogy to the burnings of draft cards and flags was not out of place. But that context disappeared in later allusions to bra-burning, when it became less a symbolic act of political defiance—as other burnings had been—and was used more to symbolize feminists’ personal disdain for conventional femininity. This is a crucial difference: it is the difference between a critique of an established system that oppresses women—much as the burning of draft cards was a critique of the military industrial complex—and a trivial gesture that dominant media used as evidence that feminists had so little of substance to complain about that they were concerned with undergarments.

Before, during, and after the protest, feminists did take pains to make their systemic critique. The memoir of Carol Hanisch, one of the members of NYRW and a participant in the protest, notes that NYRW held a consciousness-raising session about the Miss America pageant, concluding that the protest would be an ideal way “to unite women by taking on those issues that spoke to the oppression we all experienced in our daily lives.” Robin Morgan’s description of the protest, written in 1968 and published in various New Left outlets, defended the pageant as a fitting target because of its “perfect combination of American values—racism, militarism, capitalism—all packaged in one ‘ideal’ symbol: a woman.” As she pointed out, in addition to the pageant’s propagation of the “Mindless Sex-Object Image,” a black woman had never been a finalist, the winner would entertain the troops in Vietnam, and “the whole gimmick of the million-dollar pageant corporation is one commercial shill game to sell the sponsor’s products.”¹³

Morgan’s analysis, reflecting perspectives developed in other radical movements, indicates the kind of systemic critique the feminists meant to offer through the protest. The account of the protest included in the October 1968 issue of *Voice of the*

Women's Liberation Movement, one of the first of the more than 500 feminist publications that would spring up over the next two years, was even more direct about this intent. The account noted specifically that "Our purpose was *not* to put down Miss America but to attack the male chauvinism, commercialization of beauty, racism and oppression of women symbolized by the pageant." The press release distributed in advance of the protest also outlined the critique of racism, militarism, and capitalism; in addition, it argued that the contest promoted the "'win-or-you're-worthless' competitive disease," the ideal of women as "young, juicy, and malleable," and the "Madonna-Whore combination" within which women must be both "sexy and wholesome." Moreover, the release charged that the pageant encouraged women to be "inoffensive, bland and apolitical" because conformity was "the key to the crown," and it made clear that "real power to control our own lives is restricted to men, while women get patronizing pseudo-power, an ermine cloak and a bunch of flowers." Finally, the feminists charged that the pageant "exercises thought control . . . to enslave us all the more in high-heeled, low-status roles; to inculcate false values in young girls; to use women as beasts of buying; to seduce us to prostitute ourselves before our own oppression."¹⁴

Not surprisingly, on the day after the pageant, the crowning of the new Miss America was a bigger story for the *New York Times* than was the protest. The crowning of Miss Illinois as the new Miss America was covered on page 54 of the paper, and there was no mention of the protest in an article that proclaimed that the key triumph for the winner was that she was the first blonde to win the title in 11 years. The account of the protest appeared on page 81, and it contained a small sidebar in which Miss America was asked for her reaction. She replied that "It was just too bad. I'm sorry it happened."¹⁵

Charlotte Curtis, the society reporter from the *New York Times*, had been dispatched by her paper to cover the crowning of the new Miss America, but she was forced to cover the protest as well, because the feminists had made it clear that they would not talk to male reporters. Susan Brownmiller later described Curtis's coverage as "colorful and sympathetic"; indeed, the first three paragraphs of the *Times* story managed to convey the activities at the protest as well as to include the protesters' critique of beauty politics, the racism of the pageant, and their intent to boycott pageant sponsors. Curtis's lead included a description of the "freedom trash can" and its contents as well as noted that the women were "armed with a giant bathing beauty puppet." She later described the chains encircling the puppet and included the feminists' claim that they represented "the chains that tie us to these beauty standards against our will." The entire first half of the news story provides a vivid picture of the protest, describing the live sheep (which Curtis called a ram, but was actually a ewe) that the protesters crowned "Miss America," noting that the women were peaceful and stayed behind police barricades, and detailing the generational and geographical diversity of the participants. The story also included Robin Morgan's assurance that

the day's activities were designed as peaceful protest, as they "didn't want another Chicago," and there had been no intent to go beyond a "symbolic bra-burning," as the mayor of Atlantic City was concerned about the highly flammable boardwalk.¹⁶

Curtis's account was written before the day's events ended; during the pageant itself, several feminists entered the auditorium, unfurled a banner reading "Women's Liberation" over the balcony, began chanting "No More Miss America" and "Freedom for Women," and released stink bombs, supposedly containing Toni Home Permanent Solution (Toni was a pageant sponsor) before they were ejected by police and at least one of them was arrested. The network television cameras never wavered from the stage.¹⁷

In typical journalistic style, Curtis included a depiction of the public reaction to the protest in the latter half of her story. She described the spectators as "generally unsympathetic," and quoted one that called the protesters "vulgar" because of their signs that read "Miss America Sells It," and "Up Against the Wall, Miss America." Another man was quoted as telling the feminists to "throw yourselves" into the freedom trash can because "it would be a lot more useful." Perhaps most interesting was the description of three counter-pickers, including a 1967 Miss America runner-up, who wore a sign reading "There's Only One Thing Wrong with Miss America. She's Beautiful." Curtis dutifully noted that the sign was pinned to the woman's dress with a "Nixon for President" button.¹⁸

The implication that feminists were motivated primarily by envy, and that their critique of Miss America was directed at contestants themselves rather than at the patriarchal system that had created the pageant, was buttressed by some of the tactics of the protesters described elsewhere in the article. These included the representation of Miss America as a sheep, the signs mentioned earlier, and a protester's claim that the only "'free' woman is 'the woman who is no longer enslaved by ludicrous beauty standards.'"¹⁹ The protesters also sang songs with such lyrics as "Ain't she sweet/makin' profit off her meat/Beauty sells she's told, so she's out pluggin' it/Ain't she sweet."²⁰ Indeed, two months later, one of the protest participants, Carol Hanisch, penned a critique of the events in Atlantic City in which her primary objection was that "a definite strain of anti-womanism was presented to the public to the detriment of the action" because "Miss America and all beautiful women came off as our enemy instead of as our sisters who suffer with us." For example, according to Hanisch, "crowning a live sheep Miss America sort of said that beautiful women *are* sheep," and such signs as "'Miss America Is a Big Falsie' hardly raised any woman's consciousness and really harmed the cause of sisterhood."²¹ Moreover, lines from the "No More Miss America" press release, such as "the Pageant contestants epitomize the roles we are all forced to play as women" and "Miss America is a walking commercial for the Pageant's sponsors. Wind her up and she plugs your product on promotion tours and TV" could be used to support Hanisch's analysis that contestants were depicted as both brainless and brainwashed.²²

However, Hanisch perhaps laid too much blame for such misapprehensions at the protesters' feet. The cultural beliefs that women are inherently competitive with other women and that any critique of beauty politics was motivated by envy was hardly invented by feminists. Indeed, spectator reactions to the protest that were reported in the women's liberation press, such as hecklers who shouted "'You're just jealous—you couldn't be Miss America if you were the last man [?] on earth'" and "'Get back on your broom,'" as well as the suggestion that the protesters must be lesbians, are evidence that it took little encouragement for onlookers to resort to the "envy" explanation.²³ A few days after the protest, a column by the *New York Post's* Harriet Van Horne offered further elaboration on this perspective. Calling the protesters "sturdy lasses in . . . sensible shoes," Van Horne wrote that she discarded her invitation to attend the protest because "this lady of the press usually has something nicer to do on Saturday night than burn her undergarments on the boardwalk in Atlantic City. And I suspect the deep-down aching trouble with these lassies is that they haven't." She thus neatly forwards the bra-burning myth as well as the notion that the protesters were driven less by ideology than by their failure in heterosexual romance, concluding that "my feeling about the liberation ladies is that they've been scarred and wounded by consorting with the wrong men."²⁴

If it were the case, as one of the protesters later remarked on the David Susskind show, that "'[e]very day in a woman's life is a walking Miss America contest,'"²⁵ then one of the unfortunate perceptions created by the events in Atlantic City was that feminists were disgruntled because they could never win such a contest. That many feminists refused to participate in beauty politics was a clear message of the protest; at issue was their motivation. Two years later, the incoming president of the National Council of Women was asked her opinion about feminism and remarked that not only did she not believe that women faced discrimination, but that "so many of them [the feminists] are just so unattractive . . . I wonder if they're completely well." The implication, of course, is that protesting had become a way of getting the attention that ugly women were otherwise denied; as Susan Douglas astutely notes, "feminists were cast as unfeminine, unappealing women who were denouncing the importance of the male gaze, yet who secretly coveted that gaze for themselves by protesting in public. These poor girls, it was suggested, sought to get through political flamboyance what they were unable to get through physical attractiveness." Within this logic, bra-burning was simply a desperate bid for attention rather than a symbolic act of political defiance, and the feminists were little different from the women parading down the runway: they were simply less attractive.²⁶

MISS AMERICA'S MEDIA MAKE-OVER

The 1969 cover stories in *Life* and the *New York Times Magazine* on the emerging women's liberation movement would both begin by recounting the events in

Atlantic City in September 1968.²⁷ No one could doubt that the Miss America protest had put women's lib on the map, and feminists even predicted that it might not be long before the pageant was closed down entirely.²⁸ In 1969, a group labeled the "Women's Liberation Front" received a brief *New York Times* mention for its picketing of the pageant, and, in 1974, the National Organization for Women held its annual conference in Atlantic City in September and invited the Miss America contestants to attend their meetings and workshops. The *New York Times* article on the NOW conference noted that "the 'Miss America's swimsuit competition has been one of the targets for attack by women's liberation groups," and included a remark by the producer of the pageant that the swimsuit competition was not the "favorite operation" of the pageant, although he defended it as "a great test of poise."²⁹

Although the prediction that feminists would shut down the pageant has not been realized, it is easy to link feminist pressure—and the general influence of feminism on American culture—with changes in the Miss America pageant since 1968. Despite media dismissal of the political significance of feminists' critique of beauty politics, the Miss America organization clearly felt pressure to update its image. In the last 20 years, the pageant has decreased the importance of the swimsuit score in the overall competition; banned professional hairdressers and makeup artists from the pageant; stopped announcing contestants' breast, waist, and hip measurements; started requiring that contestants choose a social issue for their "personal platform"; and even ceased requiring that they wear high heels during the swimsuit segment.³⁰ Most important for this analysis, however, is the fact that media coverage of Miss America began implicitly—and sometimes explicitly—making feminism a consistent subtext in discussion of the pageant. Equally as consistent, however, is the persistence of the personalization strategy: rather than engaging with feminists' charges about the hegemony of beauty standards, media discourse instead began to emphasize the personal agency of the Miss America contestants, putting to use the well-learned lesson that the most efficient way of refuting feminism was to feature individual women's disavowal of its claims.

In such a way, media professionals were able to congratulate themselves for taking Miss America to task on feminism's behalf while simultaneously eliding the larger implications of the feminist critique. This shift is clearly signaled by a 1974 story in the *New York Times* headlined "For Miss America '75, the Questions Get Tougher." Part of that curious genre of reportage in which a journalist attempts to describe the tactics of other members of her tribe, this story focuses on the strange situation at the 1974 pageant created by the fact that the National Organization for Women was holding its annual conference in Atlantic City at the same time. The lead for the story introduces this theme: "Miss America of 1975, clutching her chaperone's hand, walked nervously through the lobby of a hotel that was also housing 2,000 feminists," and the story went on to maintain that "what perhaps makes her

more newsworthy [than past Miss Americas] is that she was crowned in a year when 2,000 feminists staged a 'Wonder Woman' parade down the boardwalk" as part of their conference titled "Wonder Woman Conference: No Myth, America." These few fragments from the story establish a narrative in which the newly crowned Miss America herself, not what the pageant symbolizes, becomes the "nervous" target of feminist wrath.³¹

Observing that reporters "seem to have grown more aggressive in their questioning of Miss Americas" and were leaving behind the "slightly worshipful quality" of questions in years past, the story notes that Miss America was asked for her opinion on the ERA, Watergate, amnesty for draft dodgers, and, of course, the feminist presence at the pageant. With regard to the latter, Miss America is quoted as expressly denying that pageant officials forbade her from attending events at the NOW conference (to which all contestants had been invited); rather, she "simply didn't have any time—there were so many rehearsals" for the pageant. Asked specifically about the women's movement, she replied that "that is their thing . . . and this is my thing. I respect what they're doing and I hope they can respect me for what I'm doing." Her responses to later questions, however, imply a somewhat stronger negative reaction to feminism, as she announced that she did not believe in living together before marriage, that she would take her husband's name after marriage, and that she preferred "Miss" to "Ms." The story concludes with a description of events at the NOW conference, including an incident in which several feminists attempted to enter the guarded room where the Miss America contestants were having their farewell brunch, so that, as the reporter put it, they could get "a glimpse of 'Them,' as they called the beauty queens." Further reinforcing the impression that the feminists, in contrast to Miss America, were hardly respectful of women's individual differences, one of the NOW members was quoted as saying that, though she would "like to try to rap" with the contestants, that they were "impenetrable. They're surrounded by plastic."³²

Two months before the intersection of the pageant and the NOW convention in Atlantic City, the *New York Times* ran another story on Miss America, titled "Miss America: She's Always on the Road," a sort of "day-in-the-life" chronicle of the reigning queen's activities. The topic of the women's movement loomed large in this story as well, indicating that the physical presence of feminists protesting was not a necessary prerequisite to interrogating Miss America about her opinion on the movement. In this story, Miss America emerges as a sort of proto-feminist who eschews radicalism while displaying no shyness about her own ambitions. What becomes clear in this story is that, for the *New York Times*, personal ambition counts as feminism. The section of the story treating the women's movement begins as follows: "As for the women's movement, Miss King said she regards herself as 'middle of the road,' even though she is one of the few Miss Americas ever to talk constantly about wanting a career." Positing support for careerism even more firmly as an indicator of feminism,

Miss King is further quoted as saying that “if a woman wants to stay at home, fine, and if a woman wants to be a lawyer, fine.” As her successor in Atlantic City would, this Miss America takes the position that women’s different choices should be respected; interestingly, however, she goes on to assert that her role as a beauty queen is an effective feminist platform: “Maybe I’m not as radical as some, but I do feel I’m in a position to do some good for women. Every day I speak with business people and community leaders—people in a position of power to help women. I feel I can do more this way than by carrying a picket sign.”³³

The genius of this story is that it suggests that, given the right young woman, being Miss America can be the equivalent of feminist activism. Indeed, it might even improve on feminism, as it avoids disruptive tactics like picketing and has the advantage of attractive packaging in a “blonde, 5-foot 9-inch, 125-pound queen.” In this article, even the swimsuit segment becomes simply a means to an end. Asked if she felt that the Miss America contestants were treated as sex objects, Miss King replied that “I’m not sure I even understand what that is. . . . I’m very proud of being a woman. I don’t feel I’m exploited.” Perhaps backtracking a bit from the implication that displaying one’s body in a swimsuit is a sign of pride in womanhood, she goes on to insist that she “got involved for the scholarship money,” which she would use toward a law degree, and that “after Atlantic City, you never again have to appear in a swimsuit.” The article’s discussion of feminism concludes with Miss America’s opinions on marriage, in which she notes that, while she expects she will marry someday, “I certainly want to fulfill myself and be my own being at the same time.”³⁴

This article is perhaps the exemplar of its type, as it defines the contours of what would become the dominant approach to the continuing problem that feminism presented for Miss America. First, in such stories, patriarchy was not the target of feminists; rather, it was Miss America herself, as embodied by the young women who vied for the crown. Those young women’s defense of their own self-determination became the ritualistic response to feminist charges. Second, and related, these stories thus framed feminism as a battle between different *types* of women, rather than a struggle on behalf of *all* women against an oppressive system that maintained that it was somehow appropriate to judge women’s qualifications for scholarship money through their appearance in swimsuits and evening gowns. This narrative was briefly ruptured in 1984, when Vanessa Williams, the reigning Miss America and the first African American woman to wear the crown, was forced to resign after nude photographs of her engaging in lesbian sex were published in *Penthouse*. Feminists defended Williams against what they labeled the hypocritically puritanical pageant promoters who had forced her out, arguing that the Miss America pageant itself was simply a softer version of pornography.

Indeed, 16 years earlier, the 1968 “No More Miss America” press release had made the point that “Miss America and *Playboy’s* centerfold are sisters over the

skin,” and Robin Morgan herself made the case again in 1984 in a column in *Ms.* magazine on the Williams scandal:

For almost two decades, the Women’s Movement has been exposing *connections* in the exploitation of women: how the pornographer and the puritan need each other to thrive. Pornography requires an atmosphere of sexual repression so that it can market sex as forbidden fruit; the puritanical sensibility needs to view sex as wicked so that it can measure its own Moral Majority fake wholesomeness in contrast. Both dehumanize women, whether through the applehood and mother-pie “good girl” image, or the plastic sex-doll centerfold fetish. Neither reflects real female human beings—our concerns, our bodies, our sexuality, our lives.³⁵

Much as she had 16 years earlier, Morgan delivered a structural analysis of the pageant’s sexism, racism, homophobia, and economic exploitation of women, making clear that feminists opposed the institution, not the women who participated in it. As she argued, “women who enter beauty contests and women who work in the pornography industry do so from simple economic necessity. Until we all have genuine equal access to education, who dare blame a woman for seeking the scholarship money such pageants proffer? Or blame a woman posing nude when her alternative still is earning only 60 cents to the dollar a man earns at ‘legitimate’ jobs?”³⁶

Severely truncated versions of this analysis appeared in mainstream media outlets such as *Newsweek* and *U.S. News*, but feminists’ support for Williams was easy to dismiss as a version of “the enemy of my enemy is my friend.”³⁷ A perfect symbol of the pageant’s hypocrisy, the treatment of Williams was a magnet for feminist outrage, but the media visibility it provided for the feminists’ case was short-lived. By the end of September 1984, the pageant appeared to have triumphed over the scandal, when *Newsweek* ran a feature story titled “A Controversial ‘Spectator Sport,’” for which the subtitle read: “Despite Vanessa Williams and attacks by feminists, the love affair with beauty pageants is going strong.” The suggestion that pageants are “sport” runs throughout the article, which carries the theme that contestants train for pageants like ambitious athletes, honing their skills in lesser pageants and working with professional coaches. “Physical perfection is no longer enough,” the article notes. “These days they must also be career-oriented and academically distinguished.” As one state pageant chairman insisted, ““The girls who were winning pageants 10 years ago couldn’t make the top 10 now. . . . They’re better trained, they’re better physically, they’re smarter, they’re more sophisticated.” And they know just what they are getting into. Apparently asked the by now predictable question about exploitation, Miss America 1983 just as predictably replied: “If this is being exploited, I hope every woman can be exploited like this.” The story ends on an ironic note: “With this Saturday’s passing of the tiara, one more Miss America will have that chance.”³⁸

By this point in the 1980s, media's tendency toward personalization has elided the feminist critique of beauty pageants. The discourse implies that, while pageants are still "going strong," they are hardly cause for concern; rather, they are just another example of free enterprise at work. As the *Newsweek* feature points out, pageants are a multimillion-dollar business in which the rules for success are increasingly obvious, and the women who participate in them have learned those rules well. The danger that feminists identified is past, this discourse suggests, because the women who chase the crowns are no longer in the grip of some romantic illusion about being chosen the "most beautiful girl in the world"; they are clear-headed, ambitious contenders who have chosen to play this game and are intent on playing it to win. Miss America 1988, Kaye Lani Rae Rafko, succinctly summarized this perspective in an article in the *Washington Post*: "I've been working toward this moment for six years—well, more. I won my first local when I was 17 and I'm 24 now. I participated in Miss Ohio in '83, and the Michigan pageant three times. I've already earned about \$11,000 toward my nursing career. . . . This money [a \$30,000 scholarship] will really come in handy." The logic of this kind of discourse is that these women are hardly being exploited; indeed, it is almost the reverse. As another *Washington Post* story concluded, they have learned the logic of the pageant system, and "instead of blaming the rules for their misery, they have decided not only to play by them but to win."³⁹

Thus, the potential for exploitation is soundly trumped by their belief in their individual agency and the worthiness of their goals, a perspective well expressed by Mary Ann Mobley, a former Miss America as well as a former host of the pageant. In 1988, in an impassioned defense of the swimsuit segment, which she called "morally right and honorable," she added that "I firmly believe you can't exploit me unless I allow you to," going on to imply that wearing a swimsuit is a small price to pay for the possibility of winning scholarship money.⁴⁰ Bolstering this theme, a spectator at the 1988 pageant, an aspiring Miss America herself, described her ambitions and her past pageant experience in terms of a blue-collar work ethic, concluding that "it's a business, just like a business."⁴¹ By 1995, within this emerging ethic of free enterprise and free choice, the pageant directors decided to submit the question of whether to eliminate the swimsuit segment to the viewing public's wisdom. The underlying rationale for this decision was somewhat paradoxical. On the one hand, by the 1990s, the pageant organizers were forced to admit that the pageant needed to become "more hip, more relevant," and that the swimsuit competition was a "major Achilles' heel."⁴²

On the other hand, pageant producers have long believed that the swimsuit segment was a key reason that the pageant attracted television viewers; as Leonard Horn, president of the Miss America organization put it, "A lot of people who watch this program want to see a swimsuit competition. . . . So I don't think it's wise to eliminate it. Not as long as having lots of people watch the show is important."⁴³

The implication here is that, left to their own devices, pageant directors would prefer to focus on the less pulchritudinous aspects of the competition, but they were forced to be accountable to their public. Thus, the reasoning goes, if the viewers are the ones who want it, let them decide. Not surprisingly, the swimsuit referendum conducted during the 1995 pageant (in which viewers were encouraged to call in their opinion by telephone, at a cost of 50 cents per vote) revealed that 79 percent of the million Americans who responded approved of the swimsuit competition.⁴⁴ The deck was stacked in two key ways. First, the sample was biased in that only viewers voted, making it hardly representative of national sentiment. Second, the week before the pageant, the Miss America organization released the results of a poll of the pageant contestants themselves on the swimsuit issue. Of the 50 contestants, 42 voted to retain the segment. In a quotation from a contestant who had abstained from the vote, the *New York Times* highlighted the pragmatic attitude that had become commonplace in media depictions of Miss America hopefuls: “I’m comfortable either way. . . . If they want me to do it [wear a swimsuit], I’m going to do it. It is a means to an end.”⁴⁵

In 1997, a change in pageant rules allowed contestants to wear two-piece swimsuits, rather than the modest one-pieces that had been de rigeur for over 75 years. This move was defended by the pageant president as another effort to recognize the contestants’ individuality and to allow them to exercise personal choice. As he claimed, “I just thought the girls would feel better if they could wear what they’d normally wear when they went to the beach or the swimming pool.” The subtext here, of course, is that the “girls” need to “feel better” because they are still being forced to parade their bodies in a “scholarship” pageant; as always, the solution is to emphasize the illusion of agency that choosing their own swimsuit can provide. Certainly, there was no downside for the pageant; the appearance of bikinis in the 1998 pageant was a sure boost for the ratings.⁴⁶

Generally, by the late 1990s, an ironic tone suffuses media discourse about Miss America. The pageant still receives ritualistic coverage in major media, but the aim of that coverage is to de-romanticize the pageant, to strip off its veneer of wholesomeness and reveal the contradictions underneath. The harshest coverage the pageant receives treats it as a shameful anachronism, a ritual unworthy of a culture that supposedly has accepted the basic logic of feminism. As one journalist argued,

After more than 30 years of feminism, Americans have been trained to say that we value the same attributes in women as we do in men. But we’re like a family trying to convince everyone we’ve moved beyond our hillbilly roots. We’ve got the Chippendale tables, the Lexus in the garage, the European kitchen fixtures. But somebody forgot to take the pink flamingos off the lawn. Miss America is like a pink flamingo on America’s lawn, exposing us for what we still are.⁴⁷

The lion's share of reflective media discourse about the pageant in the 1990s is hardly as judgmental, however. With irony as its controlling trope, it is more likely to suggest the ways that Miss America, while perhaps a symbol of patriarchy, is also its antidote. Likewise, while acknowledging the long-running feminist critique of the pageant, media discourse also suggests that Miss America contestants have become living instantiations of the progress of women. For example, relying on the analogy to sports that has appeared in various stories about the pageant, the author of a book about the pageant critiqued the disdain for beauty contests in the *New York Times*:

Reporters from the East and West Coasts can't understand what it is to be an ambitious young lady from Middle America who doesn't have a lot of options. . . . Let's face it: the opportunities for boys and for girls in Middle America are not the same. The girls aren't going to have the football scholarships, the hockey scholarships. Maybe the father is more interested in sending the son to Harvard than the daughter. Miss America is a way out. It's a way of achieving the American Dream.⁴⁸

Frank Deford, a former Miss America judge and the author of another book about the pageant, echoes this analysis in a *New York Times* feature in which he described the pageant as a "kind of" contest: "you're kind of good looking, . . . you're kind of talented, you're kind of smart. If you were superior at any of these things, you wouldn't need to bother with this." Frank Rich put it a bit more bluntly in his *New York Times* column defending the swimsuit segment. Acknowledging the argument that "Miss America is, after all, a competition for a scholarship, and that surely the contestants should be judged on their talent and intelligence, not their behinds," he countered with the claim that "Miss America wannabes know what they're getting into—the pageant is held on a burlesque ramp before hundreds of leering high-rollers in Atlantic City, after all—and that if the contestants were all so brilliant or talented they'd either be earning grants from bona fide academic institutions, if not the Citadel, or starring in a road company of 'Cats.'"⁴⁹

All three of these commentaries coalesce around the notion that the Miss America pageant provides an opportunity for the kind of ordinary girl with a pretty face and nice body who gets left behind in a culture in which prospects for such women are limited. In a 1998 story on the pageant, this perspective is granted academic credibility when a professor of popular culture is quoted as commenting that the pageant is "a legitimate, structured entry into society that gives women the visibility and potential for big bucks that professional sports does for men." The peculiar logic to this strain of argument is thus clear: the pageant, while it relies on patriarchal values vis-à-vis the importance of women's appearance, is actually a vehicle for women's empowerment in a culture in which the playing field between men and women is not yet even. What gets lost here, obviously, is the possibility

that continued feminist activism dedicated to expanding women's opportunities might be a better solution to this problem than the perpetuation of the pageant system. Yet, the transmutation of Miss America into a sort of antidote to the unfairness of patriarchy gains added weight when the longtime director of the pageant, Leonard Horn, claims that it is "no longer about a silly beauty contest," but, rather, that Miss America is "a relevant, socially responsible activist whose message to women all over the world is that, in the American society, a woman can do anything and be anything she wants."⁵⁰

That Horn describes the pageant as "no longer" a beauty contest, is an indicator of the evolutionary narrative that emerges in recent discussion of Miss America. As the *Washington Post* claimed, "the Miss America Organization has changed over the last decade, transforming itself into a financial savior and empowering vehicle for hundreds of girls." The consistent emphasis on the contestant's professional ambitions, and on scholarships as their motivation for entering the competition, supports this interpretation. Indeed, one journalist implied that feminist opposition to the pageant was somehow anti-education, because, as he argued, those who claim that the contest "exploits women," "seldom note that it is the biggest font of scholarships in the world." And he goes on to insist that every contestant he has talked to claims that she got involved "for the scholarships."⁵¹

Yet another journalist suggests that Miss America contestants are more liberated than most women in that, "like every over achieving woman, Miss America is full of ambition—but, unlike many over achieving women, isn't afraid to admit it." For this journalist, Miss America is ultimately "a reflection" of the modern, ambitious woman; "ridicule her, and we ridicule every American woman who's ever tried to be a simultaneous genius, prom queen, and saint; every woman who has tried to have—no, to *be*—it all."⁵² The implication here that pageant contestants represent the legacy of feminism is expressed even more strongly in a 1995 story which claimed that "although feminists have been unable to wipe out pageants and their destructive messages, their one secret weapon is the contestants themselves. The increasingly ambitious, educated and independent competitors may play the game to win scholarships or fame, but many are unwilling to buy in wholesale" to the pageant's image.⁵³

MISS AMERICA AND MEDIA MYTHOLOGY

So the Miss America pageant soldiers on, transformed over 30 years from the target of feminist protesters to a symbol of the success of feminism. This media-constructed narrative is partially a product of the pageant organization's own publicity machine, which always sought attention for the regular "updating" of its image. The shift from a "beauty contest" to a "scholarship pageant," and the concomitant requirements that contestants be enrolled in college, that they demonstrate social

awareness, and that the majority of their pageant scores be determined by the talent and interview competitions, as well as the submission of the swimsuit segment to public judgment, indicate that the pageant organization took the feminist critique as seriously as it could without sacrificing ratings or risking extinction. Indeed, in 2001, an employee of the Miss America organization, discussing yet another round of pageant “updates,” remarked that “[f]or the longest time, the Miss America Organization has been misunderstood, and we really couldn’t understand why people didn’t realize that she’s not just a bathing beauty.”⁵⁴ Yet the evolution into a feminist success story took more than the pageant organization’s own flexibility; it also required an increasingly flexible media discourse, in which what counted as feminism was as subject to reinvention as the pageant itself. To be fair, media discourse about the pageant contributed to public literacy about some aspects of the feminist critique, which was usually distilled down to the basic notions that such contests objectified women, created unrealistic expectations for young girls who watched them, and perhaps contributed to rising rates of plastic surgery and eating disorders.⁵⁵

It is hardly remarkable that dominant media oversimplifies feminism; in the case of Miss America, however, the version of feminism that media accounts emphasized created the conditions for its own refutation. That is, if the crucial problem was that pageants objectified and exploited their contestants, that they emphasized beauty over brains, and that they promoted the false belief that beauty could compensate for a lack of other, more substantive qualities, then it made perfect sense to have the contestants themselves defend the pageants. Who, this strategy implies, would know better than the women themselves if they were being exploited? Surely not feminists, who still suffer under the stereotype begun in 1968 that they oppose beauty contests because they cannot compete successfully in them. When contestants become the best judge of the worthiness of the pageant system, the feminist argument that the mere existence of pageants is *de facto* evidence of inequality, that however much good they do for individual participants is largely beside the point, and that it is their *symbolic* function as a condensation of ideologies about race, sex, and commodification that is at issue, gets trumped by media’s pervasive and persuasive arguments for individual agency.

Thus, as is too often the case, feminists are portrayed as the ones who don’t take women seriously and who wish to make contestants into victims against their will by never wavering from the opinion that pageants are exploitative. In 1995, one columnist made the argument that the Miss America organization’s continued attempts to please “pageant-hating feminists” had damaged the pageant because it leaves contestants “with no clue how to prepare.” Such changes are pointless, he argues, because “the folks at Miss America could eliminate the swimsuit competition, even institute a requirement that all contestants have crooked teeth and be 30 pounds overweight, and the people who detest the pageant would still detest it. . . .

These people deplore the very idea of pageants; fine-tuning the competition, even eliminating the elements that they consider most blatantly sexist, will not appease them.” In essence, this is an accurate description, but its point is to depict feminists as intractable, as dogmatic, and, as the conclusion to the column makes clear, as anti-woman: “Whoever becomes Miss America on Saturday, this much is certain. She will be smart, talented and articulate. She’ll probably be beautiful. She might even look terrific in a swimsuit. One other thing: The pageant-bashers will have no use for her.”⁵⁶

Ultimately, public discourse about the Miss America pageant throws into relief several key issues related to the construction of feminism by dominant media. First, and particularly clear in this case, is the difficulty of maintaining a systemic critique in the face of general media norms toward personalization, a problem made even more acute when the topic at hand lends itself so easily to a focus on the personal. In the case of beauty pageants, the cultural beliefs that women compete over appearance and that they envy and dislike those more beautiful than they become a key frame for interpretation, as early reactions to the ’68 protest indicate. As time passed, for journalists seeking a personal angle for their stories about Miss America, the contestants themselves provided an alluring prospect. Despite feminist insistence that the target is the pageant and what it symbolizes and not the contestants themselves, the easiest narrative for journalists to construct is one in which feminists are pitted against specific women and in which those specific women are eager to defend themselves.⁵⁷

Second, and related, is the difficulty for feminists of being cast as unwilling to recognize women’s right to make their own choices and to judge their own oppression. It has never been difficult to find women who see no need for feminism, who either claim that they do not experience sexism or that they have triumphed over it without the aid of feminism. The resulting implication in media discourse is that feminists think they know better than ordinary women, whom they must believe to be suffering from false consciousness, or, who, in the worst-case scenario, are just too stupid to realize what’s going on. This interpretation relies on a tendency toward dualistic thinking characteristic of media discourse; that is, not only are there two sides to every story, but there are usually *only* two.

Once the contestants’ personal agency and disbelief in their exploitation has been established in media discourse, the two sides emerge: either these bright, articulate, ambitious women are fooling themselves, or feminists are out of touch with the average woman, are clinging to an out-of-date, extreme position, and are stubbornly unwilling to modify it in the face of progress. Indeed, the role of agency within feminist theory is complicated. On the one hand, if patriarchy were as powerful as is sometimes implied, women’s agency (and, by extension, feminism) could not exist. On the other hand, if women’s agency were as powerful as is sometimes implied, there would be no need for feminism. The truth lies somewhere between the two:

patriarchy is powerful, but not so much so that resistance is impossible, and women do exercise agency, but often within a limited field (limited not just by patriarchy, but by race, class, and sexuality as well). Such subtleties do not work well within media's evolutionary narrative about Miss America, in which evidence of women's agency is used to put the lie to the notion that structural sexism still exists; indeed, it is used as evidence of the success of feminism. Is this not what feminists have fought for, media discourse implies: women's right to make their own choices, to pursue their ambitions, to use their talents however they choose? If the Miss America pageant were still so oppressive, would it attract such women in the first place? The answer, supplied by a slightly different media narrative, is that of course it would, because we live in a culture in which women's opportunities are more limited than men's. Yet even in this narrative, the Miss America pageant is hardly the problem; rather, it is part of the solution, and the implication is that feminists who want to eliminate it do not realize that they would be eliminating a vehicle for women's empowerment. Certainly, feminism is about agency in many ways, and women's right to make choices to better their lives is central to feminist ideology of all stripes. But feminism is also a collective politics, and it recognizes that the exercise of agency by individual women does not substitute for nor even necessarily contribute to the subversion of patriarchy or the expansion of choices for women as a group.

Third, and also related, the linkages between feminism and Miss America in mass media discourse point to dominant media's tendency to promote a particular version of liberal feminism—one that emphasizes individualism, self-actualization, and achievement within existing social hierarchies—as the *only* feminism. Thus, even if it is the case, as Sarah Banet-Weiser argues in her ethnography of pageant contestants, that “beauty pageant contestants . . . perform liberal narratives about women's rights, individual achievement, pluralism, self-determination, and voluntarism in a similar way and on similar grounds as liberal feminists articulate these very same narratives,” such a realization does little to answer radical feminist claims that the pageant system as a whole is deeply complicit in upholding patriarchal notions of gender identity. Banet-Weiser enjoins that “the ways in which beauty pageant contestants imagine agency should not be dismissed as either ‘false consciousness,’ or, worse, a bit of commercialized fluff,” and, indeed, I do not mean to dismiss them, but, rather, to interrogate them and to recognize their limitations. I posit that pageant contestants in the 1990s would not so easily produce “a liberal feminist rhetoric that relies on particular fantasies of agency, voice, and citizenship,” had the ground for such articulations not been laid by more than two decades of mass media appropriation and interpretation of second-wave feminist rhetoric.⁵⁸

Ultimately, only in a media culture in which the concept of sisterhood is always treated with skepticism, in which feminism is always about *women*, not *patriarchy*, and in which the romantic mythology of individualism controls our narratives about everything from welfare reform to comparable worth, could Miss America

contestants become poster children for feminism. The feminist protest at the Miss America pageant in 1968 was, in many ways, the public beginning of the second wave of feminism, and its importance for our understanding of dominant media's relationship to women's liberation goes beyond the specificity of the bra-burning myth. Rather, it is the exemplar of a brand of media logic that has come to dominate treatment of feminism in the last 30-plus years, a logic within which the political must always be personalized, in which "divide and conquer" is a reliable strategy, and in which the articulated quest for self-actualization is the same as liberation, packaged as a rhinestone crown.

NOTES

1. Alice Echols, *Daring To Be Bad: Radical Feminism in America, 1967–1975* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989).
2. Joan Ryan, "Be All That You Can Be (And Never Forget to Smile): Sorry, Folks, But They've Put the Bikinis Back," *San Francisco Chronicle*, September 21, 1997, 10/Z1; Rick Marin, "Ms. America: Making Over an Icon Very, Very Carefully," *New York Times*, September 13, 1993, B1; see also Nathan Cobb, "Next They'll Call Her Ms. America," *Boston Globe*, August 4, 1993, 65.
3. Robin Morgan, *The Word of a Woman: Feminist Dispatches, 1968–1992* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1992), 21; Susan Brownmiller, *In Our Time: Memoir of a Revolution* (New York: Dial, 1999), 41; Flora Davis, *Moving the Mountain: The Women's Movement in America Since 1960* (New York: Touchstone, 1991), 107. See also Jo Freeman, *The Politics of Women's Liberation* (New York: Longman, 1975), 112.
4. Frank Deford, *There She Is: The Life and Times of Miss America* (New York: Viking, 1971), 256; Echols, *Daring To Be Bad*, 93; Marcia Cohen, *The Sisterhood: The True Story of the Women Who Changed the World* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1988), 149; Sheila Tobias, *Faces of Feminism: An Activist's Reflections on the Women's Movement* (Boulder, Colo.: Westview, 1997), 86.
5. See, for example, Brownmiller, *In Our Time*; Echols, *Daring To Be Bad*; Joanna Foley Martin, "Confessions of a Non-Bra-Burner," *Chicago Journalism Review* 4 (July 1971): 11, 15; Robin Morgan, *The Word of a Woman*; Ruth Rosen, *The World Split Open: How the Modern Women's Movement Changed America* (New York: Viking, 2000); Lindsey Van Gelder, "The Truth About Bra-Burners," *Ms.*, September/October 1992, 80–81; Suzanne Braun Levine, "The Truth Was Burned," *Media Studies Journal* 12 (1998): 110.
6. Rosen, *The World Split Open*, 160–61. The tenacity of the bra-burning trope is made clear by a September 2000 item in *Newsweek* noting the recent marriage of prominent feminist Gloria Steinem. The item described the ceremony as follows: "The sunrise ceremony, held in Oklahoma, was part Cherokee, with 'a lot of burning stuff,' said bud-of-the-bride actress Kathy Najimy. Like those old bras, huh?" See Alisha Davis, "A Surprise Hitch," *Newsweek*, September 18, 2000, 92.
7. Rosen, *The World Split Open*, 160.
8. See Bonnie J. Dow, "Spectacle, Spectatorship, and Gender Anxiety in Television News Coverage of the 1970 Women's Strike for Equality," *Communication Studies* 50 (1999): 143–57.
9. Rosen, *The World Split Open*, 160.
10. Susan Douglas, *Where the Girls Are: Growing Up Female with the Mass Media* (New York: Random House, 1994), 160.

11. Judith Duffett, "WLM vs. Miss America," *Voice of the Women's Liberation Movement*, October 1968, 4.
12. Van Gelder, "The Truth About Bra-Burners," 81.
13. Carol Hanisch, "Two Letters from the Women's Liberation Movement," in *The Feminist Memoir Project: Voices from Women's Liberation*, ed. Rachel Blau DuPlessis and Ann Snitow (New York: Three Rivers Press, 1998), 198; Morgan, *Word of a Woman*, 25–26. Ironically, 1968 was the first year of the Miss Black America pageant, which was held four blocks up the boardwalk in Atlantic City on the same night as the Miss America pageant. The newly crowned Miss Black America, Sandra Williams, seemed to agree with the feminists' critique of the racism of the Miss America pageant in her comment in the *New York Times* that "Miss America does not represent us because there has never been a black girl in the pageant. With my title, I can show black women that they too are beautiful even though they do have large noses and thick lips." However, the *New York Times* article goes on to note that Williams looked "bored when asked about the 100 women demonstrators, mostly white, who had picketed the Miss America Pageant," and her only comment was that "They're expressing freedom, I guess . . . To each his own." See Judy Klemesrud, "There's Now Miss Black America," *New York Times*, September 8, 1968, 54.
14. Duffett, "WLM vs. Miss America," 4; "No More Miss America," in *Sisterhood Is Powerful: An Anthology of Writings from the Women's Liberation Movement*, ed. Robin Morgan (New York: Vintage, 1970), 586–88.
15. Charlotte Curtis, "Along with Miss America, There's Now Miss Black America," *New York Times*, September 8, 1968, 54; "Illinois Girl Named Miss America," *New York Times*, September 8, 1968, 81.
16. Brownmiller, *In Our Time*, 40; Charlotte Curtis, "Miss America Is Picketed by 100 Women," *New York Times*, September 8, 1968, 81.
17. Brownmiller, *In Our Time*, 40; Hanisch, "Two Letters from the Women's Liberation Movement," 199.
18. Curtis, "Miss America is Picketed by 100 Women," 81.
19. Curtis, "Miss America is Picketed by 100 Women," 81.
20. Duffett, "WLM vs. Miss America," 5.
21. Carol Hanisch, "What Can Be Learned: A Critique of the Miss America Protest," in *Voices from Women's Liberation*, ed. Leslie Tanner (New York: Signet, 1970), 133–34.
22. "No More Miss America," 586.
23. Duffett, "WLM vs. Miss America," 4.
24. Harriet Van Horne, "Female Firebrands," *New York Post*, September 9, 1968, 38.
25. Hanisch, "Two Letters from the Women's Liberation Movement," 198.
26. Lacey Fosburgh, "Traditional Groups Prefer to Ignore Women's Lib," *New York Times*, August 26, 1970, 44; Douglas, *Where the Girls Are*, 156.
27. Sara Davidson, "An 'Oppressed Majority' Demands its Rights," *Life*, December 12, 1969, 66–78; Peter Babcox, "Meet the Women of the Revolution, 1969," *New York Times Magazine*, February 9, 1969, 34ff.
28. Duffett, "WLM vs. Miss America," 7.
29. "Michigan Girl Chosen Miss America," *New York Times*, September 7, 1969, 68; Carlo M. Sardella, "Miss America Faces Ms.," *New York Times*, September 1, 1974, 54.
30. In August 2001, pageant officials announced another round of changes designed to update the pageant. Among them were the renaming of the swimsuit, evening gown, and talent segments, which would henceforth be called "Lifestyle and Fitness," "Presence and Poise," and "Artistic Expression,"

- respectively. Even more interesting, however, was the announcement that that the pageant would adopt some of the conventions of “reality television,” made familiar by programs like *Survivor* and *The Weakest Link*, including a quiz on historical and current events trivia (called the “Knowledge and Understanding” segment) and the creation of the “so-called Eighth Judge, a segment that will gather votes from non-finalists, making up 10 percent of the final tally. The cameras will periodically check into a ‘jury room’ and follow the runners-up as they watch the proceedings on a monitor.” Interestingly, given the Miss America organization’s commitment to its reputation as a scholarship pageant, the response of the executive director of the *Miss Illinois* program to the “Knowledge and Understanding” segment was that “I know it makes for good TV, but I don’t know what it has to do with the skills one needs to be a good Miss America.” See Andrew Jacobs, “Here She Comes, Miss America, Hoping Not to Be the Weakest Link,” *New York Times*, August 15, 2001, 15.
31. Judy Klemesrud, “For Miss America ’75, the Questions Get Tougher,” *New York Times*, September 9, 1974, 40.
 32. Klemesrud, “For Miss America ’75, The Questions Get Tougher,” 40.
 33. Klemesrud, “Miss America: She’s Always on the Road,” *New York Times*, July 4, 1974, 9.
 34. Klemesrud, “Miss America: She’s Always on the Road,” 9.
 35. Robin Morgan, “The Vanessa Williams Controversy: What’s a Feminist to Think?” *Ms.*, October 1974, 154.
 36. Morgan, “The Vanessa Williams Controversy,” 154.
 37. See Melinda Beck, “For Want of a Bathing Suit,” *Newsweek*, August 6, 1984, 23, and “Beauty Contests—The Stakes Are Big,” *U.S. News and World Report*, August 6, 1984, 14.
 38. Melinda Beck, “A Controversial ‘Spectator Sport,’” *Newsweek*, September 17, 1984, 56, 59, 60.
 39. Eve Zibart, “Just What the Judges Ordered: Miss America 1988: The New Ideal,” *Washington Post*, September 21, 1987, B1; Henry Allen, “They’re Back on the Runway! In Atlantic City, It’s Miss America’s Class of ’88,” *Washington Post*, September 21, 1987, C1.
 40. Ann Trebbe, “Miss America: Substance vs. Swimsuits,” *Toronto Star*, September 9, 1988, C1.
 41. Allen, “They’re Back on The Runway!” C1.
 42. Marin, “Ms. America: Making Over an Icon Very, Very Carefully,” B1; see also Cobb, “Next They’ll Call Her Ms. America,” 65.
 43. Cobb, “Next They’ll Call Her Ms. America,” 65.
 44. Frank Rich, “There She Is,” *New York Times*, September 20, 1995, A21.
 45. Frank Bruni, “Here She Is, Miss America, Whose Ideal?” *New York Times*, September 16, 1995, A1.
 46. Bill Kent, “Mr. Miss America,” *New York Times*, September 13, 1998, 14NJ: 1.
 47. Ryan, “Be All That You Can Be (And Never Forget to Smile),” 10/Z1.
 48. Marin, “Ms. America: Making Over an Icon Very, Very Carefully,” B1.
 49. Bruni, “Here She Is, Miss America, Whose Ideal?” A1; Rich, “There She Is,” A21.
 50. Kent, “Mr. Miss America,” 14NJ: 1.
 51. Michael Colton, “The Cookie-Cutter Contestants: At Miss America Pageant, It’s the Same-Mold Story,” *Washington Post*, September 19, 1998, B01; Bob Curran, “They’re in It for the Scholarships,” *Buffalo News*, September 12, 1995, 2D.
 52. Tish Durkin, “There She Is—Again,” *Mademoiselle*, September 12, 1995, 44.
 53. Rachel Giese, “Here She Comes, Miss Identity Crisis,” *Toronto Star*, October 27, 1997, A17.
 54. “Miss America Pageant Changing?” August 14, 2001, <<http://www.cnn.com/2001/SHOWBIZ/News/08/14/miss.america.changes.ap/index.html>>. Retrieved August 15, 2001.

55. See, for example, Dan Vergano, "There's Less of Miss America to Love," *USA Today*, March 22, 2000, 6D.
56. Bill Thompson, "No Change Will Ever Suit Miss America's Critics," *Tampa Tribune*, September 16, 1995, 11.
57. A recent example occurred on an episode of CNN's *Crossfire* the week after the 2002 Miss America pageant, when the exchange below took place between Margot Magowan (a cofounder of the Woodhull Institute, a think-tank for women leaders) and Erika Schwarz Wright (1996's Miss Louisiana and a 1997 Miss America runner-up). It demonstrates the continuing durability of the journalistic strategy of pitting feminist critics of the pageant against specific contestants, as well as the difficulty feminists have in mounting systemic critiques of the pageants when faced with the disavowal of exploitation by contestants:

Magowan: Women learn to objectify themselves just like men learn to objectify women. And Miss America teaches us that. It teaches us that no matter what, we are going to be rated by how we look. If we want to be successful, we better do what Erika Schwarz did and dress right and look right because that's how we're . . .

Schwarz Wright: But the question is, Margot, what is right? I mean, I didn't dress like everyone else. I dressed like an individual and how I wanted to dress. No one told me what to wear. No one told me what to do.

Earlier in the segment, *Crossfire* host Tucker Carlson encouraged this conflict, issuing the following challenge to Margot Magowan after Erika Schwarz Wright praised the pageant for providing the scholarship that allowed her to attend law school:

Now Margot Magowan, I can't imagine how, as a committed feminist, you could in any way criticize what Erika Schwarz just said. I mean, this gave her an opportunity to go to law school, which she finished. And in return she did nothing embarrassing. She wore a bathing suit much more modest than most people wear on South Beach in Miami. I mean, what in the world is wrong with this?

See "Miss America: Is She Out of Step?" September 23, 2002, <<http://www.cnn.com/2002/ALLPOLITICS/09/23/cf.opinion.miss.america/index/html>>. Retrieved September 23, 2002.

58. Sarah Banet-Weiser, *The Most Beautiful Girl in the World: Beauty Pageants and National Identity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 208, 210.