

**MISS AMERICA: A REVIEW AND CRITIQUE OF HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVES OF THE
LONG-RUNNING PAGEANT**

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INTRODUCTION

Miss America. The title is a symbol for both national pride and at the same time epitomizes degradation of women from the perspective of many feminists. People have written a great deal about the pageant, which began in 1921 as an attempt by hoteliers to extend Atlantic City's summer tourism season (Stoeltje, 2007), but, as this author discovered, the amount of scholarly work regarding the Miss America pageant is lacking. Much of the literature available regarding the pageant is the result of newspaper and magazine articles or potentially pageant propaganda. The material available, however, provided interesting reading and viewpoints about pageants and the Miss America pageant in particular.

The author cobbled together historical perspectives of the Miss America Pageant in order to critique a portion of the body of work about the annual event. This paper will critique work on a variety of aspects including the following:

- Origins of Miss America
- Cultural shifts and pageant adjustments
- Feminists and Miss America

Additionally, the author will focus on the scarcity of work along with potential topics for future research.

ORIGINS OF MISS AMERICA

Atlantic City hoteliers established the original Miss America, a bathing beauty contest, as part of the Fall Frolic on the Boardwalk. The hoteliers wanted to capitalize on and expand the summer tourism season (Banet-Weiser, 1999; Banner, 2005; Hamlin, 2004; Stoeltje, 2007). In truth, the pageant was a minor part of the festival (Hamlin, 2004).

Hamlin thoroughly describes the origins of Miss America through a review of newspaper and magazine articles paired with pageant propaganda. These elements she then cross-referenced with historical information of the time in terms of what was happening socially and culturally within the United States at that time. She notes the passage of the Nineteenth Amendment and how that action likely played a role in the desire to hold an event that allowed women to be viewed as wholesome and simple with long hair, instead of the new flapper girls who wore shorter hemlines and sported bobbed haircuts.

Within Hamlin's work, she cites Banner (2005) several times. Banner's work in this case focuses on the social history of what beauty is and beauty ideals over two centuries in America. Most of the book focuses on changes in perceptions of beauty by various ideals throughout history, such as the voluptuous woman and the Gibson girl. A historian who focuses on gender studies and feminism, Banner used the research and criticisms of previous historians to shape her work on this subject of beauty in America. Conclusions also are based on images, newspaper articles, advertising, and oral histories. A chapter of *American Beauty* is dedicated to the discussion of pageants throughout history. Banner discusses beauty pageants originating from various local festivals, such as May Day planting and harvest festivals and Mardi Gras. Queens, Banner notes, provide the sense of upward mobility. Interestingly, Hamlin, in her work, discusses the ties of Miss America to pageants held by suffragists.

Suffragists used pageants for social and financial gain to support their mission for rights for women, specifically voting rights (Hamlin, 2004). Suffragists would create tableaux based on historic women, such as Joan of Arc, or virtues, like courage or justice. It's thought that these pageants assisted with the passage of the Nineteenth Amendment in 1920. While these pageants also helped build and developed comradeship between women, "the first Miss America pageants

pitted woman against woman and judged participants on physical attributes” (Hamlin, 2004, p. 28). These two types of pageants had little in common, but many may link them together because of timing and sashes. Additionally, the author notes that unless persons studied the suffragist movement, many may be unaware of pageants that do not involve the judging of beauty.

The Focus on Beauty

The focus historically with beauty pageants – specifically Miss America – has involved the bathing suit portion of the competition. Although sponsors and producers “presented their contestants as natural and unsophisticated” (Banner, 2004, p. 395), the initial run of the pageant ended in 1928. Both Banner and Hamlin note that the reason for the first ending of the competition is because hoteliers, who initially came up with the event, began arguing that the contest was now driving middle class customers away because they viewed it as immoral. Interested parties revived the pageant again in 1935, but these concepts fit into Banner’s idea that the Miss America pageant “is a striking example of both the breakdown of Victorian prudery in the early twentieth century and the strength of Victorianism in a specific setting” (p. 399).

CULTURAL SHIFTS AND PAGEANT ADJUSTMENTS

Throughout the Miss America pageant, directors of the pageant implemented several changes. Most of these changes came under the purview of long-time pageant director Lenora Slaughter. Watson and Martin (2000) note that Slaughter took over the role when it re-emerged in 1935 and during her time as director, she looked to elevate the level of class tied to the pageant by adding the talent competition and college scholarships (Watson & Martin, 2000). Watson and Martin (2000) provide a general overview of the pageant that includes a thorough timeline, which was established through a review of Miss America propaganda, including work

by Bivans (1991). As a side note, while it is propaganda, Bivans's work receives a fair amount of attention from scholars because of its pageant timeline, material on scoring practices, and an appendix that includes the body statistics on contestant winners from 1921 through 1991. For their part, Watson and Martin reviewed a variety of material regarding the Miss America pageant from a popular culture perspective. It discusses how changes in the pageant can demonstrate changes in or serve as a barometer of societal views. One of the largest examples of this is the elimination of what many historians and pageant professionals call "Rule 7" (Banet-Weiser, 1999). The rule restricted the pageant only to white contestants and "up until the 1940s contestants were required to list their genealogy as far back as they could" (Banet-Weiser, 1999, p. 127). Banet-Weiser completed research regarding the topic of race within the Miss America pageant and other topics through field interviews and a review of historic documents from the perspective of gender and the impacts of the changing ideals of beauty over time along with the competition as a form of national identity. With this said, Banet-Weiser discusses that although Rule 7 was lifted, it still took until 1983 to crown a black Miss America and that came during a time when people began having concerns about political correctness and diversity.

Another example of change involves cosmetics and surgical enhancements. Watson and Martin's work notes the relaxing of rules as they applied to facial and body enhancements. In the 1940s, contestants were discouraged from using makeup to enhance their features. In modern pageant history though, contestants not only use make-up and a variety of other devices to help them look their best, but some have undergone surgical reconstruction. This likely is not what pageant originators had in mind given "their publicity stressed that none of the entrants wore makeup or bobbed their hair – symbols of 1920s modernity" (Banner, 2005, p. 395).

However, using makeup became commonplace and as more and more people used plastic surgery to improve their looks, fewer people took issue with it.

The most recent changes within pageant rules that caused recognized displeasure included the 1999 decision to lift the ban on divorcees and women who have had abortions for the 2000 Miss America pageant and moving forward. These rule changes resulted in the firing of the pageant's CEO Robert Beck, who only served in the role for one year (Watson & Martin, 2000). According to Watson and Martin, "former Miss Americas, state pageant directors, currently contestants, and former pageant boss Leonard C. Horn were outraged" (p. 119). Horn apparently stated that this decision would be the downfall of the pageant. In truth, the Miss America pageant has struggled since the late 1990s to find its footing and remain relevant.

Body Shape Changes

Wiseman, Gray, Mosimann, & Ahrens (1992) completed a quantitative study to understand better the cultural changes for female bodies noting that "historically, people, especially women, have tried to change their bodies to conform to the specific era's image of beauty" (p. 85). This study was completed by obtaining age, height, bust size, hip size, waist size, and weight of Miss America contestants between 1979 to 1985 along with *Playboy* magazine centerfolds between 1979 and 1988. Additionally, the researchers tabulated the number of articles focusing on diet-for-weight-loss, exercise, and diet/exercise articles published in *Harpers Bazaar*, *Vogue*, *Ladies Home Journal*, *Good Housekeeping*, *Woman's Day*, and *McCalls* between 1959 to 1988. The study found an increased number of articles during the same time paired with decreased body size between the same periods. The researchers noted a significant decrease in hip size for Miss America contestants.

Research by Freese and Meland (2002) utilizes similar data as Wiseman, et al. However, their focus was to dismiss discussion about American heterosexual male's preferences regarding women's waist-to-hip ratios. This report, however, lacks a robust literature review. This makes it difficult to comprehend fully the researchers' issues with the discussion.

These articles provide interesting insight into the changing views of what is beautiful as it applies to body image. While many deplore the focus of the Miss America pageant and other pageants on the human form, the pageant's decision to gather body measurements of contestants provides tangible material about the changes in what society may have seen as beautiful.

FEMINIST VIEW OF THE PAGEANT

A fair amount of literature exists as it applies to the second wave feminist movement and the Miss America pageant. For purposes of this assignment, most of the attention will be on Dow (2003) and Tonn (2003).

Dow's research focuses on how the media interpreted the 1968 Miss America pageant and the protests led by second wave feminists outside and inside the pageant. In her research, Dow took into consideration coverage of the event at the time, including an account published by *Women's Liberation Movement*. The information Dow lays out through media coverage demonstrates a society that is unwilling to see the complexity of women and, many times, is uncomfortable with people unwilling to adhere to what many consider social norms. While Dow notes that some coverage stuck to what was happening, many journalists felt the need provide their thoughts on the women protested the Miss America pageant. Dow (2003) quotes New York Post columnist Harriet Van Horne who wrote that she had been invited to the protest but had better things to do on a Saturday evening and went on to write that the protestors did not. This causes the author to think about what Hamlin (2004) previously noted in terms of beauty contests

putting women against each other. What Dow demonstrates is how that pitting does not end on stage, but how the media and other can perpetuate stereotypes and pit women against each other within society. This provides a different view of the nature of people along with traditional gender roles in our culture.

Tonn (2003) expands on this discussion by responding to Dow's work in an essay where she focuses on her personal changing view of the Miss America pageant from her time as a child to an adult. Much of Tonn's focus is on the idea of the pageant stating it is dedicated to the academic achievement of women while at the same time having beauty heavily weighted during the judging of the competition. As a result, Tonn (2003) notes, a contestant cannot simply win on smarts and wit alone. The fact is, judges must consider a contestant beautiful by societal standards. Tonn (2003) cites other works to note that a newer generation of feminists consider taking back Miss America viewing it as a feminist symbol, but ventures to write: "a sign of how far we have to go is that we live in a media culture that still searches, as I did in 1968, for images of female emancipation that come packaged with a rhinestone crown" (p. 159).

SCARCITY OF SCHOLARLY WORK

Banet-Weiser (1999) noted a lack of scholarly work about pageants in her book. The reasons she provides is that many scholars view pageants as frivolous and as a result are "unworthy of serious and sustained intellectual scrutiny" (p. 4) or consider pageants as "too 'low' to merit serious investigation or so obvious and opaque that vigorous interrogation would be both uninteresting and unnecessary" (p. 4). Through a review of books, articles, and material, the author agrees with Banet-Weiser's assessment. Much of the scholarly material gains its base through using articles published in newspapers and magazines. There is some crossover of work and referencing of other material, especially Banet-Weiser (1999) and Banner (2005). However,

there is little discussion among academics when this seems like it potentially could be a ripe for debate among historians and anthropologists.

Other authors have published books since Banet-Weiser's account, specifically the book of essays regarding the Miss America pageant edited by Watson and Martin (2004). However, the historical viewpoints about and continual changes with the Miss America pageant to meet the changing ideal and values of the country make the topic worth revisiting, evaluating, discussing, and debating.

Potential Research Topics

While literature available provides interesting discussion regarding the Miss America pageant as a historical institution, continued discussion should happen. Researchers have the opportunity to evaluate and discuss a myriad of topics and viewpoints as it pertains to one of America's longest running pageants. Research topics could include the following.

- A review, survey and exploration of on-stage questions posed to contestants and their responses could provide insight into cultural changes of how others viewed women's roles and what contests considered their role to be within society. Since on stage interviews have been part of the pageant since the 1950s. Another research topic of this could be from changes in speech patterns and voice over several decades.
- A historiography focused on changes in popular fashion based of various attire worn by pageant contestants as well as emcees and judges. This also could include styling of hair and makeup choices as well.
- Continued discussion on gender roles within as they pertain to beauty contests. Some modern feminists see opportunity to turning the Miss America into a

symbol for feminism. A review of history may allow for the opportunity to find out if that is a feasible idea

- How the pageant potentially has established interesting allies in the past. Feminists objected to the objectification of women as it pertains to Miss America, while conservative church groups took issue with a lack of modesty. Research regarding this and historical perspectives in this area could provide some interesting information.

CONCLUSION

The Miss America pageant has a storied and interesting past. The event provides an opportunity to glimpse into our nation's pastime and serves as a national, albeit divisive, symbol. Scholarly work about the pageant is limited, yet, the material available provides interesting insight and contemplations about the Miss America pageant. Given the dwindling interest regarding the pageant, as demonstrated by a decline in television viewership, now would be a good time to dig into continued discussion about the pageant and how it applies to general roles and beauty from historical and anthropological view points as well as popular culture.

Although some scholars may consider the pageant low-hanging fruit, one has to wonder then why not take on the challenge of historically reviewing the Miss America pageant and noting how it can reflect on our society as a whole.

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The pageant protest was organized by New York Radical Women, a group active in the civil rights, anti-war, and New Left movements. Garnering most of the attention at the event was the "Freedom Trash Can," a bin in which protestors deposited false eyelashes, dish washing detergent, copies of women's homemaker magazines and Playboy, high heels, curlers, wigs and girdles. They also threw bras into the bin. Although nothing was burned, a rumor spread that the underwear had gone up in flames and reporters promulgated the phrase "bra burners" to describe the protesters. It was no doubt seen by the Post Miss USA, TGPC published a critique on the Q/A round which was quite popular. On public demands, we are doing the same for Miss America 2015. We are here presenting the question, the answer, our comments and a possible Ideal answer. Now please note here that Ideal answer is ideal in our perspective. We have followed pageants since years and we have certain understanding about Q/A rounds. Still at the end of the day, Q/A answers are a matter of perspective. At best, we can provide our opinions on the same. But yes, these opinions are quite confident and full of high self-esteem. The questions and answers can be seen in the video. In the description, they are paraphrased. Video Credit: MyBeauty Official Channel on YouTube. Storied 1968: Miss America Pageant Protest. Miss America Pageant Protest of 1968. Transcription. Contents. Outgoing Miss America Snodgrass said that the protesters were diminishing the hard work of thousands of competitors who were attending school and had put a lot of effort into developing their talents.[7]. Origin of "bra-burning". The dramatic, symbolic use of a trash can to dispose of feminine objects caught the media's attention. "What Can Be learned: A Critique of the Miss America Protest", 2009, Web. 2 Feb 2012. <http://carolhanisch.org/CHwritings/MissACritique.html>. ^ Confronting the "Bra-Burners": Teaching Radical Feminism with a Case Study, Beth Kreydatus, The History Teacher, Vol. 41, No. 4 (Aug., 2008), pp. 489-504. In the critique she talks about positive as well as negative aspects of the action. Fran: September 2003 marks the 35th Anniversary of the legendary 1968 protest of the Miss America beauty pageant in Atlantic City. Flashed on the news across the country and worldwide, the protest denounced the fake ways women were expected to look and act, and announced the arrival of a new movement, Women's Liberation. What happened at this legendary action in 1968, in the convention hall and on the boardwalk, outside the Miss America Pageant? Carol: Well, there were more than 100 picketers there, we picketed all afternoon. We did some street theatre which included throwing 'instruments of f