A PAGEANT POLITICIZED The Rise of Intersectional Activism in 1968

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ON SEPTEMBER 7, 1968, THE MISS AMERICA PAGEANT TOOK PLACE IN ATLANTIC CITY, NEW JERSEY, WHERE IT FACED TWO DISTINCT CO-OCCURRING PROTESTS. ONE WAS A SECOND-WAVE FEMINIST DEMONSTRATION THAT CRITICIZED THE PAGEANT FOR ITS SEXISM AND PROMOTION OF OPPRES-SIVE BEAUTY STANDARDS. THE OTHER WAS MISS BLACK AMERICA, AN ALL-BLACK RIVAL PAGEANT WHOSE ORGANIZERS CONDEMNED THE INHERENT RACISM OF THE MISS AMERICA INSTITUTION AND PUSHED THE LARGER PAGEANT TO INTEGRATE. ALTHOUGH THE MISS AMERICA PAGEANT WAS THEIR COMMON TARGET, THE TWO PROTESTS—WOMEN'S LIBERATIONIST AND BLACK NATIONAL-IST-OCCURRED SEPARATELY AND HAD DIFFERENT GOALS. UNDER THESE CIRCUMSTANCES, NEWS-PAPER COVERAGE PRESENTED THE WOMEN PARTICIPATING IN THE PROTEST AS ANTAGONISTIC TO EACH OTHER'S CAUSES. IN LIGHT OF FURTHER RESEARCH, HOWEVER, THIS PERCEPTION PROVES FALSE. CONSIDERING INFORMATION OMITTED FROM COVERAGE OF THE PROTESTS AND ARMED WITH AN UNDERSTANDING OF THE ERA'S JOURNALISTIC CONVENTIONS, IT APPEARS THE FEMALE PROTESTORS IN BOTH DEMONSTRATIONS INDEED SUPPORTED EACH OTHER'S GOALS, WHICH IN TURN SUGGESTS THAT RADICAL FEMINISM AND BLACK NATIONALISM OF THE LATE 1960S WERE MUTUALLY SUPPORTIVE MOVEMENTS.

"Women's liberation." "The women's movement." "Second-wave," "radical" feminism. By any of these names, it was clear that a particular something came into being—or, more accurately, announced its being to the nation—on the boardwalk of Atlantic City, New Jersey on September 7, 1968. This date marked the annual occurrence of the nationally-televised Miss America Pageant, which took place, in accordance with tradition, at Atlantic City's Convention Hall. Little else, however, was traditional about the pageant's circumstances that year: directly outside the venue, approximately one hundred women's liberationists staged a groundbreaking, provocative protest of the Miss America Pageant, primarily condemning its sexist objectification of women and its perpetuation of anti-feminist ideals.

The daylong demonstration was the foundational act of the Women's Liberation Movement, and the protestors involved were among the first to politicize and publicly challenge the beloved Miss America institution. The very concept of the protest was particularly audacious considering how benign the pageant seemed to most Americans-it was, after all, the only program that Richard Nixon allowed his daughters to stay up late to watch. Because the American public generally saw the pageant as harmless all-American entertainment, the protestors' intense criticism presented a rather shocking departure from the norm. It was this shock factor—combined with the purposely theatrical nature of the protest—that attracted the attention of the mass media, whose print coverage launched the Women's Liberation Movement into the public consciousness and affirmed its place amongst the various other movements of the late 1960s.

Members of the New York Radical Women (NYRW), a second-wave feminist group established in 1967, arranged the seminal women's liberation protest. One of the key organizers was Robin Morgan, a cofounder of the NYRW and author of the informational pamphlet "No More Miss America!" The brazenly-worded pamphlet contained an outline of the protestors' objections to the Miss America Pageant, as well as an invitation for women "of every political persuasion" to join in a variety of "boardwalktheater" activities in protest of the oppressive and unrepresentative image of Miss America, the nation's supposed "ideal." Morgan, who helped to distribute copies of the pamphlet to spectators on the boardwalk on the day of the event, presented the specific grievances of the women's liberationists in the form of a ten-point list. Targets for protest included: "The Degrading Mindless-Boob-Girlie Symbol" (the evaluation of contestants based

on their physical characteristics, which ultimately reduced women to farm animals), "The Unbeatable Madonna-Whore Combination" (the paradoxical necessity for women to be both sexy and innocent in order to win social approval), and "The Irrelevant Crown of the Throne of Mediocrity" (that only "unoffensive, bland ... [and] apolitical" contestants could win the contest because they behaved how society believed women were "supposed to"). The protestors—who would only speak to female reporters—also wielded signs reading "Miss America Is a Big Falsie" and "Up Against the Wall, Miss America," crowned a live sheep winner of the pageant and paraded it around the boardwalk, and chained themselves to a Miss America dummy to portray what Morgan called women's enslavement to "ludicrous 'beauty' standards."

Although all of these activities were intentionally dramatic, the event that by far generated the most publicity was the assembly of a "Freedom Trash Can" into which bras, girdles, lipstick, false eyelashes, high-heeled shoes, copies of Playboy and other symbols of oppressive beauty standards were thrown. The protestors intended to draw a comparison to the burning of draft cards by setting the items on fire—just as draft cards represented a restriction of freedom, the various items in the Freedom Trash Can represented a restrictive standard of femininity. Local ordinances ultimately prevented this symbolic burning, but the media, having caught wind of the rumors, leapt at the opportunity for a scandalous story. Most reports on the protest thus falsely claimed that "several of the women publicly burned their brassieres," thereby creating the



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enduring stereotype of radical feminists as "misled" and unreasonably bitter bra-burners. The final event of the day occurred inside Convention Hall during the outgoing Miss America's nationally-televised farewell speech, when several protestors began shouting as they unrolled a large banner reading "Women's Liberation." Although police quickly arrested two of the women and forcibly removed the rest, the day's final act of protest helped to facilitate the overnight transformation of the fledgling radical feminist movement from essentially unknown to widely recognized.

As evidenced by its exclusion from most 1960s historical literature I have come across and the limited amount of scholarship I was able to find on the subject, few people today are aware that merely a few blocks from the women's liberation demonstration, a second protest of the Miss America Pageant occurred on the evening of September 7, 1968. This protest was the Miss Black America Pageant, an all-black answer to the blatantly racist Miss America Pageant, which had yet to produce a black finalist since its founding in 1921 (and had even introduced an official rule in the 1930s stating that "contestants must be of good health and of the white race.")

Due to the rapid organization of Miss Black America, the architects of the protest recruited only a dozen participants to compete in the talent, swimsuit, and evening-gown events held at the Ritz Carlton Hotel. The number of contestants was in any case secondary to the pageant's goals, which were to force the Miss America Pageant to integrate (ironically through separatist tactics) and praise black beauty and culture in their own right, instead of insisting upon their equality with Anglo-centric ideals. To emphasize this second point, the organizers of the event selected contestants with various skin tones and hair textures in order to demonstrate the diverse beauty of black American women. Nineteen-year-old Philadelphian Saundra Williams, who, according to The New York Times coverage, "[wore] her hair natural" and performed an African dance for the talent section of the competition, was

crowned the contest's winner. Like the women's liberationists further down the boardwalk, the organizers of Miss Black America understood that press coverage would transmit their message to a wider audience, and thus had intentionally concocted a "newsworthy" event. The intriguing combination of pageant and protest proved more than enough to attract the media, and in consequence what Americans read in the morning paper was almost unbelievable: the seemingly invulnerable, nationally-cherished Miss America Pageant had been challenged by not one, but two distinct protests.

Before moving on, it is important to determine the greater social and political movements behind these concurrent 1968 demonstrations. While women's liberation was clearly the larger movement behind the radical feminist protest, less clarity surrounded the coordination of Miss Black America. According to press coverage from 1968, as well as several contemporary sources drawing from that coverage, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) was responsible for the organization of the protest. Such reports suggested to readers that Miss Black America belonged under the umbrella of the Civil Rights Movement.

On the contrary, recent scholarship by historian and feminist scholar Georgia Paige Welch has demonstrated that this was not the case. Welch consulted NAACP records in the Library of Congress, and discovered correspondence between local NAACP members and the executive director of the NAACP regarding the Miss America Pageant. The records revealed that top NAACP officials considered the pageant to be a trivial and local issue, and therefore did not help to organize or even sanction the Miss Black America protest. It was instead devised by Phillip Savage and J. Morris Anderson, who were affiliated with the NAACP but based in Philadelphia, a hotbed of black nationalism as opposed to liberal activism. Welch determined that it was not the famous civil rights group but the radically-inclined independent activists who were the driving force behind

Miss Black America. Furthermore, the participants in the rival pageant were exclusively black and competed in a pointedly separate contest in opposition to the Miss America Pageant. In combination with Welch's research, these organizational details indicate that the movement behind Miss Black America was black nationalism, which was more radical in nature than the Civil Rights Movement and often utilized separatist strategies.

The women's liberation protest and Miss Black America thus individually garnered attention for their critiques of the official Miss America Pageant, but did the women involved in these contemporaneous protests (and, by extension, other followers of their respective movements) support each other's goals? Or does the very fact that the two 1968 demonstrations, despite their simultaneous occurrence, shared location, and common target, occurred separately with no shared participants indicate a lack of mutual support, as was typical amongst so many of the decade's factionalized, polarized, and fragmented social movements? Although most print coverage from the time of the protests seems to suggest blatant antagonism between the two groups of participants, it becomes clear upon closer analysis that omission and journalistic framing conventions are responsible for this erroneous conclusion. Considering these factors, the women's liberation and Miss Black America protests—along with their respective parent movements, women's liberation and black nationalism—emerge as far more intersectional than press coverage indicated in 1968.

When reading various newspapers' coverage of the Miss Black America and women's liberation protests, it immediately seems evident that each group of participants was unsympathetic or, at best, ambivalent toward the other's cause. For example, New York Times reporter Judy Klemesrud wrote that Miss Black America winner Saundra Williams "looked bored" when questioned about the women's liberation protestors, and included a dismissive quote: "They're expressing freedom, I guess. To each his own." Charlotte Curtis, also from The New York Times, quoted women's liberation organizer Robin Morgan as denouncing "all beauty contests" including the black nationalist demonstration while hastily countering any racist overtones: "We deplore Miss Black America as much as Miss White America but we understand the black issue involved." Curtis also noted that "at least of the few [women's liberationist| pickets were Negroes" who were "aware of the Miss Black America contest, but . . . were not sure what they ought to do about it." She went on to quote "Negro

Bronx housewife" Bonnie Allen, who came across as confused and conflicted, "I'm for beauty contests. But then again maybe I'm against them. I think black people have a right to protest."

The women quoted in these articles appear to have either disassociated themselves from, failed to comprehend, or directly condemned whichever protest they were not involved with, which seems to confirm a lack of support between participants in the two demonstrations—and, by extension, between the women's liberation and black nationalist movements. Print media framing, however, can account for what initially appears to be conspicuous evidence against mutual support, as well as for other features that appear in the coverage of these two protests that seem to render their intersectionality impossible. As Welch has cautioned, "We must take the quotes from Morgan, Williams, and Allen—as compelling as they are—not as selfevident utterances that reveal the meaning of the protests and their relationship to each other, but as props" used to support late-1960s journalistic conventions.

Perhaps the most standard of these reporting practices was to seek out and focus on conflict, which journalists easily achieved by framing two events in oppositional or antagonistic terms. The majority of articles covering the Miss Black America and the women's liberation protests adhered to this strategy in various ways. One was the manipulation of layout, which allowed for certain events to be distinguished as separate or conflicting even before readers consumed the content of the articles. *The New York Times*, for example, ran a separate piece on each protest and a third on the Miss America Pageant itself; as a result,



ACTIVIST ROBIN MORGAN BEING ARRESTED AT ONE OF HER PROTESTS (COURTESY OF WIKIMEDIA COMMONS)

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The oppositional framing and distinct treatment of race and sex additionally contributed to print media's "white-washing" of the women's liberation protest—as well as the overall movement—despite the participation of black female protestors. Because issues of race and sex could not coherently intersect according to journalistic convention, reporters covering the two protests attempted to maintain a racial divide between the women's liberationists and Miss Black America participants. To do so, they characterized the radical feminist protestors as all-white and unconcerned with racial issues, and any black women who joined them as misguided pseudo-feminists. In other words, journalists emphasized a link between whiteness and feminism by undermining both the anti-racism of white feminists and the feminism of black feminists.

One publication whose coverage of the protests exhibited such race-sex framing was the *New York Times*. In her article on the Miss Black America Pageant, Klemesrud described the women's liberation protestors using the racial modifier "mostly white." In her report for the same publication, Curtis separated race and sex by questioning Allen, a black participant in the women's liberation demonstration, only on issues of race. Additionally, Curtis wrote that besides their feminist objections to the Miss America Pageant, the women's liberationists "denounced the beauty contest's 'racism.'" By pointedly enclosing the word "racism" in quotation marks, Curtis undermined the feminist demonstrators' earnest anti-racist position, and thus further polarized the issues of race and sex.

Furthermore, by focusing primarily on Morgan as a leader of the women's liberation demonstration and quoting her the most extensively, Curtis assigned a white woman's face and voice to the fledgling radical feminist movement. Other publications did the same. Louise Cook of The Boston Globe described and quoted only Morgan when providing details about the imminent feminist protest in an article published the day before the demonstration, and Pauline Tai of The Wall Street Journal explicitly called Morgan the "organizer of the protest." Print media outlets therefore utilized various race-sex framing strategies when covering the protests to perpetuate the view that feminism was synonymous with (and therefore only relevant to) white women-and consequently, as Dow puts it, "almost entirely insensitive to racial issues." By differentiating and separating issues of race and sex despite their frequent intersectionality, the press misleadingly implied that the women's liberation and Miss Black America protestors did not support each other's goals.

each group of protestors was forced to comment on the other (and on the official pageant) from physically separate stories dedicated to distinct reasons for protest. Life magazine took a similar approach by including a separate photograph and caption for each of the three events, thereby reporting the proceedings of September 7, 1968 through what Welch has called "the paradigm of a three-way competition." Coverage in The Washington Post followed suit, printed beneath a photograph of Saundra Williams was an article on Miss Black America, which appeared directly alongside a story on the official Miss America Pageant and a portrait of Judith Anne Ford, the blonde and smiling winner. A considerably shorter third article on the women's liberation protest occupied the space beneath these two pieces, thereby creating a triangulation of three seemingly-independent events. As evidenced by these examples, various publications used layout to frame the Miss Black America and women's liberation protests as ideologically unrelated and thus oppositional by summarizing them in separate articles that in some cases physically opposed each other on the page.

Another late-1960s journalistic convention was the framing of race in opposition to sex. According to Bonnie J. Dow, Professor of Communication Studies at Vanderbilt, the press used "claims of racism", which were well-established by the end of the decade due to years of activism, to "discredit claims of sexism," which represented a newlypoliticized (and thus narrowly recognized) set of complaints. In short, radical feminists "were fighting for precisely the kind of recognition of their grievances that civil rights [and black nationalist] activists had already achieved." Both print media outlets and society at large thus failed to "[understand the] interrelationships" between race and sex, viewing them instead as separate issues of unequal gravity. Art Buchwald expressed this attitude in his column of The Washington Post, declaring that "[i]f the women in Atlantic City wanted to picket the Miss America beauty pageant because it is lily-white, that is one thing . . . [b]ut when they start asking young American women to burn their brassieres ... dissent in this country has gone too far." Although his column was satirical, Buchwald ridiculed the belief that race was a more important issue than sex, thereby demonstrating the prevalence of that very conviction in American society. Therefore, because the Miss Black America and women's liberation protests focused primarily on issues of race and sex respectively, the press—drawing from both popular opinion and standard journalistic practices—framed them as incompatible at best and contradictory at worst.

"The necessity to present conflict ... meant that journalists overlooked the intersectional politics existing between the Miss Black America and women's liberation protests."

The necessity to present conflict whether between the two protests or between issues of race and sex meant that journalists overlooked the intersectional politics existing between the Miss Black America and women's liberation protests. Instead, journalists presented an inaccurate and grossly oversimplified picture of mutual antagonism. Consequently, the quotes from Allen, Williams, and Morgan that seem to support this view cannot be accepted at face value. They must instead be evaluated against the backdrop of oppositional framing, a convention of late-1960s journalism that rendered the support for both anti-racist and feminist causes incomprehensible and divided the two issues along racial lines. Framing in these aforementioned forms can thus account for the portrayal of Allen as politically confused, as well as Williams's apparent ambivalence toward the women's liberation demonstrators, and Morgan's seeming disregard for racial causes.

Moreover, additional research reveals that none of the media-constructed characterizations of these three women were accurate. Allen's role in the women's liberation protest involved chaining herself to a Miss America puppet, thereby representing her own double "enslavement" to sexually and racially imposed beauty standards. Her politics were not confused, but instead were interconnected. Williams certainly did not support the anti-feminist beauty ideals that Miss America perpetuated, and stood against them in a way that was specifically relevant to her race. Finally, Morgan, who was both a leading radical feminist and a veteran of civil rights activism, specifically included "Racism with Roses" (the fact that no black contestant had ever won the Miss America crown, nor a woman of Puerto-Rican, Hawaiian, Alaskan, or Mexican-American descent) amongst her ten criticisms of the pageant. While all three of these women supported both anti-racist and feminist causes, journalists rendered their politics contradictory by adhering to the era's standard reporting practices. Print media framing thus worked to perpetuate a false account of the women's liberation and Miss Black America protests (along with their respective movements, women's liberation and black nationalism) as mutually exclusive—or even, as Welch has argued, "inimical to each other's aims."

Framing was not, however, solely responsible for the apparent discord between the two protests of the Miss America Pageant and their corresponding parent movements. Another equally important factor was omission. When covering the events of September 7, 1968, iournalists from various publications selectively excluded certain information that would otherwise have disturbed their presentation of the two demonstrations as unrelated and oppositional. For example, journalists failed to recognize Morgan's history in civil rights activism despite selecting her as the face of the women's liberation protest and instead included other biographical details, such as her irrelevant stint as a child actor and her interest in poetry. Similarly, stories on the Miss Black America protest naturally included a discussion of Williams's racial advocacy, but did not mention that she also rejected the Miss America Pageant's sexist values. The calculated erasure of Florynce Kennedy, however, was by far the most glaring of these omissions.

Florynce "Flo" Kennedy was a poster child for intersectional politics. She was a black radical activist committed to fighting race, sex, and class oppression. She participated in a range of movements including civil rights, consumer rights, black nationalism, and second-wave feminism during the 1960s. She was also a foundational member of the October 17th Movement (later called "The Feminists"), which broke off from the liberal feminist National Organization for Women (NOW) in 1968 to become one of the first radical feminist groups.

Kennedy believed that oppression in its various forms could best be attacked through coordinated activism, and often worked to build connections among different movements. She was a catalyst for intersectionality who brazenly invited white women's liberationists to Black Power meetings, challenged NOW to adopt black nationalist views, and encouraged black radicals to embrace feminism. Thanks to Kennedy and her inclusive brand of activism, Black Power and black feminism had an early influence on the Women's Liberation Movement, and a generation of young activists involved in various other movements were exposed to feminist ideology.

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Kennedy was not only a feminist and racial activist but also a prolific lawyer, famous for representing Black Power leaders Assata Shakur and H. Rap Brown as well as the radical feminist Valerie Solanas, who attempted to assassinate pop artist Andy Warhol in 1968. Notably, Kennedy's defense involved depicting Solanas as a radical feminist who had armed herself against the injustices of sexism. In addition to her provocative activism and legal prowess, Kennedy was known for hosting television and radio shows and writing newspaper columns—in short, as her biographer Sherie M. Randolph has claimed, "Kennedy was the most well-known black feminist in the country" during the late 1960s.

As Dow has pointed out, Kennedy's heavy presence in politics and in the media should have made her "as recognizable [to journalists] as Morgan was." Indeed, The New York Times had reported on Kennedy and her provocative protest strategies no less than three times in the few months before the 1968 Miss America Pageant demonstrations occurred. Furthermore, Kennedy was one of the primary organizers of the women's liberation protest. She brainstormed protest tactics, contributed to drafts of Morgan's "No More Miss America!" pamphlet, provided legal advice, and helped coordinate the busing of participants to Atlantic City. Her absence from all newspaper coverage of the protests is therefore shocking. Despite Kennedy's social prominence and her critical role in organizing the women's liberation demonstration, the closest that any publication came to mentioning her was a Wall Street Journal article in which Morgan explained that "lots of women lawyers" would be present at the feminist protest.



THE FORMER RITZ CARLTON IN ATLANTIC CITY, NJ (COURTESY OF WIKIMEDIA COMMONS)

As Dow has explained, a basic element of journalistic protocol is to "seek out the most recognizable figures present to give focus to a story." The press certainly recognized Kennedy and was familiar with her newsworthy actions-why, then, was she erased? The only logical explanation is that her intersectional brand of politics conflicted with the era's standard journalistic practices of framing racism against sexism and black activism against feminism. Kennedy was an outspoken black feminist whose role in the women's liberation protest was too important to be adequately downplayed as Allen's had been, and therefore news workers could not report on her involvement without allowing issues of race and sex to intersect. Kennedy was also inarguably dedicated to both black nationalism and women's liberation, and as a black woman she embodied the intersection between the two movements. Journalists therefore could not have included her in their coverage of the Miss Black America and women's liberation protests without acknowledging that the two demonstrations—and the ideologies behind them—were not antagonistic. Kennedy was, in short, a problematic case: framing strategies were not enough to rationalize her interrelated politics, and so the press's solution was to omit her crucial role altogether.

As demonstrated, omission and various forms of framing permeated print media coverage of the Miss Black America and women's liberation protests of September 7, 1968. These two factors combined to construct an erroneous account of mutual opposition between the two demonstrations and their respective parent movements, black nationalism and women's liberation. Importantly, and unfortunately, this misleading version of events may seem accurate to readers who have no knowledge of late-1960s journalistic conventions; without such information, the reports on these two influential protests cannot be truly understood. For instance, uninformed readers might easily assume based on press coverage that in 1968, race and sex were separate issues, radical feminism was solely relevant to white women while black women were only concerned with racial causes, and that black nationalism and women's liberation (represented by the Miss Black America and women's liberation protests) were mutually exclusive, competing movements.

Although these false conclusions inaccurately represent the relationship between women's liberation and black nationalism in 1968, some of them have nonetheless persisted in modern historical scholarship. As Randolph has noted, "most contemporary observers and scholars see

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[black nationalism and radical feminism] as inherently oppositional movements;" additionally, most "scholarship ignores or undervalues the connections between black [nationalism] and feminist struggles." Likewise, historian Wini Breines has criticized "the accepted historical narrative of youthful second wave feminism" as a movement in which "Black women were not welcome or were repelled by white women's racism." Furthermore, Kennedy's omission from print coverage on the two protests has been reproduced in modern scholarship. As Randolph has pointed out, Kennedy's "activism is marginalized or completely erased from most histories of 'second-wave' feminism," which is just one example of the overall "exclusion of key black feminist organizers from most feminist scholarship on the movement."

The fact that historical scholarship has been influenced by misrepresentative print media accounts of the 1968 women's liberation and Miss Black America protestsaccounts that arose, as I have demonstrated, through omission and framing—underscores the importance of considering journalistic conventions when analyzing press coverage as a primary source. To put it simply, what was reported cannot be isolated from how it was reported, and certain journalistic practices may be specific to certain eras. Taking this into account alongside other aforementioned details that suggest mutual support, a very different picture of the women's liberation and Miss Black America protests emerges. According to my research, the participants in each protest were largely supportive of each other's goals. By extension, the women's liberation and black nationalism movements were not mutually antagonistic but mutually supportive, and their paths, as well as the politics of their respective followers, often intersected in the late 1960s.

ENDNOTES

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- 2. Georgia Page Welch, "'Up Against the Wall Miss America:' Women's Liberation and Miss Black America in Atlantic City, 1968." Feminist Formations 27, no. 2 (2015): 78.
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- 20. "Women's Liberation Group Protests Beauty Pageant," The Washington Post, Sep. 9, 1968.
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- 32. Dow, Watching Women's Liberation, 36.
- 33. "The Winner, a Rival in Black, and Some Ribroast Ribbing," Life Magazine, September 1968.
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- 41. Louise Cook, "Is 'Miss America'—Phony?", Boston Globe, Sep. 6, 1968.
- 42. Pauline Tai, "Miss America Pageant Chosen as the Latest Target of Protestors: 'Women's Liberation Groups' Set Rally at 'Coronation' Tomorrow in New Jersey," Wall Street Journal, Sep. 6, 1968.
- 43. Dow, Watching Women's Liberation, 39.
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- 45. Morgan, "No More Miss America!", 410.
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