

Reference image of Debra Snodgrass, Miss America 1968, on Jack Doroshov's desk as he prepares to reenact her 1968 farewell speech. Photo Julia Sherman.

THERE SHE GOES

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When research for an artwork led me to the women's liberation protests against the 1968 Miss America Pageant, I couldn't help imagine what my involvement would've been had I been alive at the time. As someone who's always touted her feminist identity, it seemed obvious that I would've assumed a place on the frontlines with ease. *But the more I learned about the event, its context and consequences, the less clear my allegiances became.*¹

The Miss America protest was a turning point, both for those involved and for the broader American public. Its media coverage drew national attention to the nascent women's liberation movement and (to a lesser extent) the sexism of beauty pageants. But it also bequeathed a disturbingly reductive binary to future generations: not only did the stereotype of the angry "bra-burning" feminist crystallize here² but the already dehumanized figure of the beauty queen was collapsed into the radical feminist's one-dimensional antithesis. While by far the most famous, the 1968 protest was by no means the sole critical response to Miss America: from the mid-1950s through the 1960s, a number of "spin-off" pageants emerged. The Hawaiian Miss Cherry Blossom Queen Pageant, the Miss Black America

Pageant, the Miss Indian America Pageant, and the Miss (Drag) America Pageant were all appropriations that destabilized a theretofore seemingly unflappable institution. The tension between the two modes of critique—the anti-pageant protest, on the one hand, and the alterna-pageants, on the other—can be read as an allegory of deep, long-standing divisions within the women's movement and of varying conceptions of political contestation.

This same tension, moreover, was present within the Miss America protest itself, which was organized by New York Radical Women, an early second-wave feminist cell active from 1967 to 1969. According to a former New York Radical, its members were responsible for developing the now widespread strategy of consciousness raising: in lieu of studying books or consulting experts, they endeavored to understand the causes and nature of women's oppression through personal experience and first-hand accounts. This soon led to "consciousness-raising actions," which were intended to move beyond the confines of private meetings to challenge and educate the public at large. The Miss America Pageant protest was the first of such actions.³

The first phase of the protest took place on the Atlantic City boardwalk outside the pageant, just before the nationally televised event began. The women performed a series of skits in a manner some of them later



"Freedom Trash Can" being used outside the Miss America Pageant. Photo Alix Kates Shulman. Courtesy David M. Rubenstein Rare Book & Manuscript Library, Duke University.

characterized as "filled with glee." There was a Freedom Trash Can for the disposal of "articles of female torture," such as high heels, *Playboy* magazine, *Ladies' Home Journal*, and, allegedly, those infamous burning bras. Original satirical songs were sung, and a live sheep was crowned queen as the growing crowd of spectators was enlisted to participate in these clever antics.

This phase of the protest resembled the actions masterminded by the first-wave suffragettes fifty years prior. Both used theatricality and spectacle to at once lure the media and engage a wide audience. In the late 1880s, the suffragettes formed "Broom Brigades," whose members wore dustpans with the letters "BB" attached to their skirts and performed military drills with domestic tools in lieu of rifles.⁴ They raised funds for their cause by selling tickets to suffrage balls and

performances, in addition to starting their own bi-weekly newspaper, *The Women's Political Union*. The suffragist Harriet Stanton Blatch said, "We learned that sermons and logic never convince, that human beings move because they feel, not because they think. For that reason we began to dance about our cause at great balls, instead of sitting in corners and arguing."⁵

Perhaps the most notable example of this strategy was the parade and pageant of 1913, held in Washington, DC, and organized by the Women's Political Union. Inez Milholland, the "official beauty of the parade," led the group on a white horse. She was followed by a procession of some eight thousand suffragettes streaming down Pennsylvania Avenue—some marching, adorned with the distinctive suffrage sash; others on horseback, acting as marshals and donning stylish adaptations of men's evening wear.⁶ The parade culminated in an allegorical tableau designed to demonstrate "those ideals toward which both men and women have been struggling through the ages." Dressed in the national colors, Columbia (a female personification of the United States who graces the Columbia Pictures logo) emerged from behind the great columns at the top of the Treasury Building steps, followed by Charity and Liberty, all of whom walked on a path of rose petals. Their entrance queued the "Triumphal March" from *Aida* and a white dove of peace was set free.⁷

If the boardwalk protest of 1968 followed in the tradition of the suffragettes' wry theatrics, then the subsequent action that occurred inside the pageant was a radical break. The former deployed humor to entertain and enlighten, to draw its spectators—regardless of their background or feminist identification—into an awareness of society's sexism and the need for women's



Broom Brigade temperance march, Devils Lake, North Dakota, 1880s. Courtesy State Historical Society of North Dakota.

liberation. Turning from theater to PR-seeking shock tactics, the latter had the media as its intended audience. A faction of the group infiltrated the pageant. Just as Debra Snodgrass, the outgoing Miss America, began her farewell speech, she was interrupted by a banner unfurled from the balcony announcing, "Women's Liberation," accompanied by loud, repeated chanting of the phrases "Freedom for Women" and "No More Miss America."⁸ The media pounced on this gesture, using it to paint a picture of a throng of "anti-woman" activists intent on humiliating sweet Debra.⁹ The press release issued by the feminist organizers prior to the demonstration cast as wide as possible a net: "women's liberation groups, black women, high-school and college women, women's peace groups, women's welfare and social-work groups, women's job-equality groups, pro-birth control and pro-abortion groups—women of every political persuasion—all are invited to join us." But this appeal for a broadly inclusive feminism was lost in the second phase of the protest, lost on the public, lost to history, and certainly lost on Miss America herself.¹⁰

Reflections on the protest by its participants reveal regrets about the divisive legacy of the event and the selective media portrayal of a demonstration that took place in two distinct phases.¹¹ Only a small faction of the protesters supported the banner drop inside the auditorium; others questioned whether such a radical act would engage the public effectively or risk alienating it entirely. Ultimately, there was a lack of consistency in the women's gestures. Their stated goal was to critique the pernicious social structures underlying an American icon. Although they may not have intended to humiliate or target the contestants, the banner drop certainly didn't take their feelings into account; moreover, it opened the door for the mainstream media to selectively edit the event, constructing a narrative of an "anti-woman" movement threatening to the average American female. This coverage effectively squelched any sense of humor or bid for broad inclusion that was also part of the protest.¹² Eclipsed by a demonizing media, the debate within the New York Radical Women group remains as unresolved and relevant today as it was in 1968: on one side, we have militant, but inevitably reductive, forms of protest; on the other, efforts to further feminism's cause by acknowledging—and working through—the messier, at times even complicit, relationship women have toward patriarchal society.¹³

The latter clearly resonates with the constellation of spin-off pageants that presented a much more slippery critique through appropriation. The first Miss Black America Pageant was held just down the street on

the same September night as the 1968 Miss America Pageant. Although its motivation was clearly political, the pageant's founder, J. Morris Anderson, was quoted in the *New York Times* as saying, "We are not protesting against beauty. We are protesting because the beauty of the black woman has been ignored. ... We will show black beauty for public consumption—herald her beauty and applaud it."¹⁴ The pageant was lauded by the feminist protestors and the first Miss Black America, Sandra Williams, certainly shared some of their views.¹⁵ Still, this was not a wholesale rejection of the beauty pageant as form. It was, instead, a call to expand our notions of the paradigmatic American woman. Miss Indian America and Miss (Drag) America were both in their fourteenth year by 1968, asking their audience the challenging question of what it means to be American, feminine, or even talented. When I asked Jack Doroshov (aka Flawless Sabrina) what his political ambitions were in creating the drag pageant, he told me, "I was just trying to make a buck."¹⁶ Of course, when you watch a stage full of drag queens perform an impeccably choreographed ensemble dance to "You're a Grand Old Flag" in 1968, it's clear that there was more to it than the bottom line. The Miss America Organization later sued Jack for his wholesale appropriation of their name, an anecdote he clearly finds particularly pleasing.

On a recent January afternoon, I encountered a dozen twenty-something-year-old women on a subway platform, wearing winter jackets, accessories, and underpants. The group hopped on and off trains as they passed through the station in a manner that was obviously premeditated. I took note and kept moving, later struck by my own—and the general—apathy toward this flaccid shock tactic: like most others on the platform, I barely flinched at this quasi-subversive but aimless gesture. The semi-naked women themselves seemed unsure what to make of their act; they wore slightly confused expressions, as if waiting for a public or police response that never materialized. The event struck me as a fitting, if disheartening, emblem of the potential for theatrical protest today: How do you make a statement if spectacle doesn't garner a second look? This question seems to be on the minds of our feminist foremothers too. A short time ago, Carol Hanisch, a member of the faction who infiltrated the pageant auditorium, said, "We could certainly use another protest. If I could think of one, I would be doing it. I hope somebody does." (Hanisch recently dusted off the Freedom Trash Can for a US reunion tour).¹⁷

Hanisch's provocation was admittedly the cause for some anxiety on my part, given that the most visible



Miss Indian America 1968 Thomasine Hill, aka Ah-sowa-she-delish ("Everything I do, I do for the good of my people"), poses for a postcard commemorating her reign.

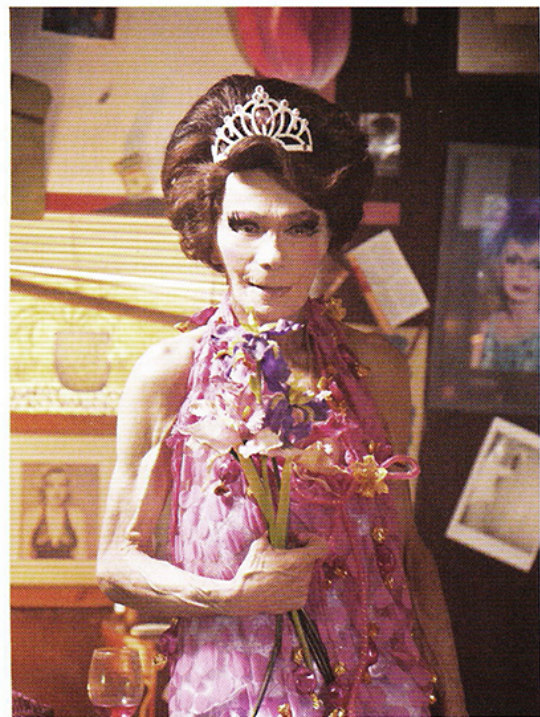


Sandra Williams, who did not shed a single tear

Sandra Williams, the first Miss Black America, poses in her crown, 1968.



Jack Doroshow hosts the Miss (Drag) America Pageant, while one of the contestants takes the stage. Prominent judges of the pageant included Andy Warhol, Jim Dine, and William Burroughs. Courtesy Jack Doroshow.



Julia Sherman, *Farewell Miss America*, 2012. Jack Doroshow, founder of Miss (Drag) America Pageant, performing Miss America 1968's farewell speech in his home.

protest of my generation hasn't taken patriarchy as its object. Rather, its target has been the "my-way-or-the-highway" stance of the radical second wave via a wholesale, irreverent rejection of feminism *tout court*. But what of the rest of us, who don't want to kill our mothers, but also don't want to become them? Our political wills haven't withered—as some older feminists claim—into vestigial organs shrouded by mini-skirts and hair extensions. It's simply that our definitions of "the political" extend beyond the picket line and agitprop into pop culture (including comedy) and its associated social spheres: spaces where people are able to engage with political content more readily and fluidly. Yes, it took radical action to pave the way (THANK YOU, for the record), but at what cost and to what end?

When I spoke with Judi Nash, the winner of the 1968 Miss America pageant, she reminisced, "In 2008, *Newsweek* flew me to New York, and we did a photo shoot with Robin Morgan, who organized all the protests, and I met her for the first time. She was really nice, and when we walked in she said, 'I just want you to know, it was nothing personal.' I said, 'It's not a problem, I didn't take it personally at all.'" In 1968, Morgan and Nash encountered each other across an auditorium's divide, behind their respective banners, as one-dimensional symbols; it took forty years for them to meet as flesh-and-blood human beings. It's hard not to wonder how feminism might have evolved if they'd gotten it right the first time.

1 In preparation for my 2012 show "Here She Comes," a multimedia installation exhibited at Recess, New York, I conducted archival research and interviews with a number of people who had been involved both directly and indirectly with the Miss America protest.

2 Countless news outlets reported this spectacle of arson, coining a term that would negatively define the feminist movement for years to come. This was perhaps the most iconic feature of the protest, but it never actually took place. Not having been able to secure a fire permit, the protesters did not ignite a single undergarment.

3 See Kate Sarachild, "Consciousness-Raising: A Radical Weapon," in *Feminist Revolution* (New York: Random House, 1979), pp. 144–150. Some accounts cite the discussion during a consciousness-raising session after a screening of *The Queen*, a 1968 documentary on the Miss (Drag) America Pageant, as the inspiration for the protest. Others mention Swedish experimental director Gunvor Nelson's film *Schmeerguntz*. Though Nelson did not identify as a feminist filmmaker, her work contrasts media constructs of femininity from the 1940s to the 1960s (including the Miss America Pageant) with the reality of a pregnant woman's decidedly mundane daily domestic routine.

4 As described in Horace Bushnell's historic tract, *Woman's Suffrage: The Reform Against Nature* (New York: Charles Scribner & Co., 1869), Broom Brigades predate the suffrage movement: they were first deployed by American women raising money for charity in the 1870s and, later, in the 1890s in protests on behalf of workers' rights and in pro-union demonstrations. The suffragette brigades performed in "pageants" meant to entertain their audience, while raising awareness of their cause. Bushnell's book was re-released in 2012 by Ulan Press.

5 See Robert P. J. Cooney, Jr., *Winning The Vote: The Triumph of the American Woman Suffrage Movement* (Santa Cruz, CA: American Graphic Press, 2005), p. 204.

6 Kimberly A. Hamlin has suggested that the iconic Miss America sash directly echoes those worn by the suffragettes. See "Bathing Suits and Backlash: The

First Miss America Pageants, 1921–27," in Elwood Watson and Darcy Martin, eds., *There She Is, Miss America: The Politics of Sex, Beauty, and Race in America's Most Famous Pageant* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), p. 28.

7 For a detailed description of the pageant, see Sheridan Harvey, "Marching for the Vote: Remembering the Woman Suffrage Parade of 1913," <memory.loc.gov/ammem/awhhtml/aw01e/aw01e.html>.

8 See the website of Jo Freeman, feminist protestor and organizer, <jofreeman.com/photos/MissAm1969.html>.

9 In 2012, I spoke with Debra Dean Barnes (*née* Snodgrass) extensively about her experience of this event. She insists that she did not see the banner or the demonstrators at all, blinded as she was by the stage lights. Archival footage of the pageant indicates that the sounds coming from the balcony certainly interrupted her speech.

10 In 1968, Barnes was studying piano and music education at Kansas State College of Pittsburg. Today, she is an associate professor of piano studies at Missouri Southern State University. While Barnes took the pageant seriously, both as a means of showcasing her achievements (for the talent section, she performed an original arrangement of "Born Free" on the piano) and furthering her career (by securing the ample scholarship that came with the Miss America title), she was also precisely the kind of woman whose consciousness the protesters were hoping to raise. In a 2008 NPR story on the protest, Barnes said that if the feminists wanted her to join them, "they should've asked me."

11 Indeed, these regrets were almost immediately felt. Later in 1968, Carol Hanisch, the self-proclaimed "originator" of the Miss America protest and a member of the faction who infiltrated the pageant auditorium, penned a searching self-analysis, "What Can Be Learned: A Critique of The Miss America Protest," <carolhanisch.org/CHwritings/MissACritique.html>.

12 In the press coverage, the banner drop, along with the mythic bra burning, overshadowed all other aspects of the protest.

13 Indeed, within that seminal consciousness-raising group meeting, almost all of the members of the New York Radical Women admitted to watching the annual show alongside the rest of the country. As Hanisch recalled in "A Critique of the Miss America Protest," when feminist comrades at New York Radical Women went around the room so that each activist could express her relationship to the pageant, they "discovered that many of us who had always put down the contest still watched it. Others, like myself, had consciously identified with it, and had cried with the winner."

14 Charlotte Curtis, "Miss America Pageant Is Picketed by 100 Women," *The New York Times*, 8 September 1968. See <library.duke.edu/digitalcollections/missamerica_maddc02019>.

15 "They are expressing freedom, I guess. To each his own," Miss Black America noted of the Miss America Pageant protestors in a Q&A session after her coronation. As reporter Judy Klemesrud observed, later comments by Williams struck an explicitly feminist note, as when she suggested that husbands and wives should do the same amount of housework: "I think the male is getting awfully lazy," she said, drawing boos from the men." *The New York Times*, 9 September 1968, p. 54.

16 Doroshow lives on the Upper East Side of Manhattan and continues to be politically active to this day. He has been a strong supporter of Hillary Clinton, and he serves as something of a godmother to the young queer community.

17 <npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=94240375>.

opposite: Julia Sherman, *Judi's Still Got It—Miss America 1969, 2012*. Nash performed a trampoline routine during the pageant.

