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Topic statement: How did the 1968 Miss America Pageant protests exemplify the values of women during this time period, and how did the feminist movement affect other civil rights movements at the time?

### Protesting Miss America

“The 4-H club county fair, [a place] where the nervous animals are judged for teeth, fleece, etc., and where the best ‘specimen’ gets the blue ribbon.”<sup>1</sup> This was the metaphor published in the *New York Free Press* by the Women’s Liberation Movement describing the Miss America Pageant in 1968. The Miss America protests were used by women as a way to gain acceptance and support for women’s equality. The women of the Women’s Liberation Movement felt that the Miss America Pageant was sexist, racist, and held women to an unrealistic beauty standard. National media coverage allowed women to exemplify their values of equality, opportunity, and natural beauty, and launched the beginning of the feminist movement we know today. Because of the success women attained during this time period, other civil rights movements were encouraged to continue their fight and achieve a success of their own.

The Miss America Pageant was created as a way to reflect the gradual successes women were having in the United States by expanding both their political and social rights. In Atlantic

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<sup>1</sup> Women’s Liberation, “No More Miss America,” *New York Free Press*, September 5, 1968.

City in 1921, several businessmen put on an event titled “Fall Frolic” in order to lure vacationers into their area and increase their personal revenue.<sup>2</sup> This pageant-like show demonstrated women’s “professional beauties, civic beauties and inter-city beauties,” and became a huge success as the event grew larger and more popular each year.<sup>3</sup> The newspapers and media at the time portrayed these new pageants as popularity contests and began to enter in contestants of their own in order to increase awareness and popularity for their personal benefit. As time went on, the media’s reports gained the attention of both men and women, and controversy grew as the pageant attempted to adapt to the economic struggles of the Great Depression and the hardships of World War II.<sup>4</sup>

In 1968 a small group that called themselves the New York Radical Women began gathering to discuss the unfair treatment they were receiving in male dominated anti-war and civil rights movement groups. As the common theme of sexism and racism arose, the women began sharing personal experiences and struggles from throughout their childhood. The women believed that they were not being fairly treated in comparison to men, expected to work for them and receiving fewer opportunities outside of the home, and that the Miss America Pageant was a very clear representation of the unrealistic standards they were being held to.<sup>5</sup> The result of these

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<sup>2</sup> "Our History." Miss America 2.0. Accessed November 18, 2018. <https://missamerica.org/organization/history/>.

<sup>3</sup> Tracey, Sara. "Miss America: How Beauty Standards Have Changed the Pageant." Press of Atlantic City. September 01, 2015. Accessed November 19, 2018. [https://www.pressofatlanticcity.com/missamerica/miss-america-how-beauty-standards-have-changed-the-pageant/article\\_ef2e72de-5022-11e5-8e0e-a3f612388c01.html](https://www.pressofatlanticcity.com/missamerica/miss-america-how-beauty-standards-have-changed-the-pageant/article_ef2e72de-5022-11e5-8e0e-a3f612388c01.html).

<sup>4</sup> "Our History." Miss America 2.0.

<sup>5</sup> Allison McNearney, "I Was There: The 1968 Miss America Pageant Protest." *History.com*. September 7, 2018. <https://www.history.com/news/miss-america-protests-1968>.

shared beliefs led to the idea of taking action by raising awareness with a public pageant protest. While several women in the group felt that they were not yet prepared for a protest, the majority believed in immediately making a difference, so the Radical Women began planning a picket protest at the Atlantic City Boardwalk for the 1968 Miss America Pageant and started what is now called the Women's Liberation Movement.

Newspaper articles and fliers were quickly published in order to advertise the planned protest. The New York Free Press published an article written by the Women's Liberation Movement describing their famous ten points, or reasons for protesting. Terms used to describe the pageant in these ten points included "Mindless-Boob-Girlie-Symbol, Racism with Roses, The Unbeatable Madonna-Whore Combination, and The Irrelevant Crown on the Throne of Mediocrity."<sup>6</sup> in 1968 Miss America was illustrated as a perfect woman because of her perfect beauty and figure. She was someone that was often on television, making appearances to show off the things that she had. Women felt as though the contest portrayed women as simply "a mindless conformity" and that the Miss America Pageant was an "acceptance of racism" since the pageant had never crowned a non white participant.<sup>7</sup> They felt that the essence of the Miss America Pageant was a "degrading and ludicrous image of American womanhood" that set unreachable, high social expectations that women felt enslaved to.<sup>8</sup> Radical feminists presumed

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<sup>6</sup> Women's Liberation, "No More Miss America," *New York Free Press*, September 5, 1968. [https://library.duke.edu/digitalcollections/wlmpc\\_maddc04036/](https://library.duke.edu/digitalcollections/wlmpc_maddc04036/).

<sup>7</sup> Washington's Women Liberation, "Slavery Exists: Miss America Is a Slave." 1968. Duke Digital Collections. Accessed November 18, 2018. [https://library.duke.edu/digitalcollections/sizes/wlmpc\\_maddc01003\\_maddc010030010/](https://library.duke.edu/digitalcollections/sizes/wlmpc_maddc01003_maddc010030010/).

<sup>8</sup> "Against Beauty Show," *St. Joseph News-Press*, September 5, 1968. [https://library.duke.edu/digitalcollections/wlmpc\\_maddc04042/](https://library.duke.edu/digitalcollections/wlmpc_maddc04042/).

that “ social, cultural, economic, and political structures would all have to be reshaped to acknowledge female power and admit female voices” in order to make any progress throughout the country.<sup>9</sup> The New York Radical Women were not afraid to share exactly how they felt; therefore, they took part in press interviews in order to ensure that women across the country were aware of their upcoming protest and would be able to support them in some way. The massive use of media was crucial not only by gaining the attention that the protest needed in order to succeed, but also as a platform for women to express their beliefs and value of American womanhood.

On September 7, 1968, the same day that the next Miss America was planned to be crowned, hundreds of women joined the New York Radical Women at the Atlantic City Boardwalk to picket the pageant as a part of the Women’s Liberation Movement. Women of old and young, both black and white, gathered to support equality for women alongside the protesters. Outside of the pageant’s Convention Hall women picketed and held signs reading, “can makeup cover the wounds of our oppression?” and “all women are beautiful.” They marched while singing anti-Miss America songs, announced a boycott of the pageants sponsors’ products, and threw items such as false eyelashes, girdles, and hair curlers into what they called a “freedom trash can” to represent the disposal of female “enslavement” to unrealistically high expectations and to emphasize the importance of natural beauty.<sup>10</sup> One of the more theatrical symbols used during the protest was a live sheep held on a leash. The sheep was meant to

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<sup>9</sup> Kreydatus, B. "Confronting The" Bra-Burners:" Teaching Radical Feminism with a Case Study." *The History Teacher*. 41, no. 4 (2008): 489.

<sup>10</sup> Charlotte Curtis, “Miss America Pageant is Picketed by 100 Women,” *The New York Times*, September 8, 1968.  
[https://library.duke.edu/digitalcollections/sizes/wlmpc\\_maddc02019\\_maddc020190010/](https://library.duke.edu/digitalcollections/sizes/wlmpc_maddc02019_maddc020190010/).

represent the unfair treatment women received as pageant contestants, and how they are paraded around while wearing swimsuits and shown off like livestock. These guerrilla theater tactics were intended to attract the audience's attention. In addition, photographers, news reporters, and camera men arrived to capture the entirety of the protest, and women were quick to show off and "escalate their activities" because they knew that media coverage could potentially bring them greater success.<sup>11</sup>

The New York Radical Women's hard work had paid off and the protest was declared a huge success for the Women's Liberation Movement. While the women may have received conflicting responses from those who did not support their point of view, the media's attention and portrayal of their pageant protest grew the size of their next women's meeting. Fifty years later, Robin Morgan is still able to remember this surprising result. The week following the protest, "the 13 New York Radical Women met again, but this time, 250 more women showed up."<sup>12</sup> Their bold protest that depicted the unfair treatment of women lured in many supporters. Their values of equality and opportunity for all women and the emphasis they put on natural beauty strengthened their new organization.

But they did not stop here. The women continued to campaign for their rights and advertised throughout the year. Women in this time period appreciated that someone was finally speaking out.<sup>13</sup> It was not common during this time for women to express their opinions so freely which is partly why the protest gained so much attention. The country was shocked, but women

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<sup>11</sup> Charlotte Curtis, "Miss America Pageant is Picketed by 100 Women."

<sup>12</sup> Allison McNearney, "I Was There: The 1968 Miss America Pageant Protest."

<sup>13</sup> Waxman, Olivia B. "Miss America Protests: The Women Who Took on a Pageant." Time. September 07, 2018. Accessed November 19, 2018. <http://time.com/5387623/miss-america-protest/>.

were appreciative because they finally had a place where they could speak out and make change for themselves. One year after the original 1968 Miss America Protest, the women planned another. A press release was distributed on August 28, 1969 announcing a similar protest with “escalated tactics” at the Atlantic City Boardwalk.<sup>14</sup>

The women’s persistence and continuous efforts formed what we know today as the feminist movement. In addition to this, other civil rights movements during this time period were encouraged by the Women’s Liberation Movement’s progress. African American women started a Miss America pageant of their own in order to emphasize equality and recognize their ignored beauty, but still joined the Women’s Liberation Movement in protesting in Atlantic City.<sup>15</sup> The women’s fearlessness was inspiring to African Americans following the assassination of Martin Luther King Junior. During this time African Americans were still being persecuted and whites were still getting used to the process of integration across the country. The Women’s Liberation Movement also inspired Americans that did not support the Vietnam War. They believed that the winner of the Miss America Pageant was sent overseas unreasonably and forced to annually encourage war and “collaborate” with the troops fighting the “bloody” war in Vietnam.<sup>16</sup> The Women’s Liberation Movement demonstrated boldness to those who were oppressed and facing violence because they believed that they too were oppressed by impossible beauty standards.

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<sup>14</sup> Women's Liberation Movement. "Miss America Demonstration Press Release, Aug. 28, 1969." News release. Duke University Libraries. Accessed November 19, 2018. [https://library.duke.edu/digitalcollections/wlmpc\\_maddc05049\\_maddc050490010/](https://library.duke.edu/digitalcollections/wlmpc_maddc05049_maddc050490010/).

<sup>15</sup> "The Beginning." Welcome to the Miss Black America Pageant,. January 22, 2015. Accessed November 19, 2018. <http://missblackamerica2017.com/about-us/the-beginning/>.

<sup>16</sup> Lindsay Van Gelder, “Women March on N.J. to Liberate Miss America,” *New York Post*, September 6, 1969. [https://library.duke.edu/digitalcollections/wlmpc\\_maddc06055/](https://library.duke.edu/digitalcollections/wlmpc_maddc06055/).

These women hoped to show people that if you work hard speak up for what you believe in, change can eventually happen.

Overtime, the Miss America Organization made an effort to decrease its emphasis on beauty standards and focus more on the diversity and intelligence of women. The talent portion of the competition was added along with contestant interviews with the judges in order to provide more speaking opportunities for contestants. In 1943 Jean Bartel became the first Miss America Pageant winner with a college degree, and in 1983 the first African American Miss America was crowned. These advancements demonstrate great success that the Women's Liberation Movement was fighting for.

This year the Miss America Pageant organization announced some astounding changes for its annual event. Fifty years later, in 2018, the Miss America Pageant finally got rid of the controversial swimsuit competition that women in 1968 called a "cattle auction,"<sup>17</sup> and after 97 years, the pageant is now being called "Miss America 2.0." Contestants have been told that they are no longer being judged on their outward appearance; therefore, pageant participants have the option to wear whatever they feel expresses their individuality the most. Along with cutting the swimsuit portion of the competition, contestants are going to take part in leadership workshops and media coaching with mentors in order to prepare themselves for the stage. It might have taken fifty years, but the 1968 Miss America Pageant protest is finally seeing results.

The new wave of feminism that was created in 1968 sparked change for women in the United States. In the last 50 years women have achieved great successes and made a way for themselves in today's world. The audacious and inspiring attitudes displayed by the thirteen New

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<sup>17</sup> Waxman, Olivia B. "Miss America Protests: The Women Who Took on a Pageant."

York Radical Women who started this movement have left a lasting legacy on our country.

While we may still be battling against beauty standards today, gradual success has been occurring as a result of the protests by the Women's Liberation Movement.