

Blain Roberts. *Pageants, Parlors, and Pretty Women: Race and Beauty in the Twentieth-Century South.* Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2014. 384 pp. \$39.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-4696-1420-5.

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Published on H-Florida (January, 2015)

Commissioned by Jeanine A. Clark Bremer



Veiled Politics: The Business of Beauty in the Twentieth-Century South

Pageants, Parlors, and Pretty Women is an important book of American social history and a fine addition to the literature on women of the South in the years between the institution of Jim Crow and its demise. It covers new ground, highlighting sectors of the southern economy and American culture seldom considered seriously by scholars. The story centers on the pursuit of southern female beauty (hair, faces, and figures) and the impact of that pursuit on women, men, and contemporary politics. Even more than in other parts of the country, both black and white women sought an ideal veneer of glamour or appealing respectability, and the culture in which they lived buttressed, appropriated, and justified this pursuit. That the business of feminine beauty was used both to uphold and to challenge the South's racist power structure is a primary message of this book; author Blaine Roberts impressively substantiates her thesis with a wealth of data and personal stories from her research.

The first two chapters set the stage for the surprising turns of the last. Chapter 1, subtitled "The Democratization of the Southern Lady," takes us from the demure white beauty who satisfied the moral strictures of the late nineteenth century to the cosmetics and bobbed hair that characterized the interwar period, though southern women modernized late—a symptom of slow urbanization in the region—and rural women always lagged behind for economic reasons. The transition from skin whiteners to suntan creams as the cosmetic of choice for white women (interestingly accompanied by the intro-

duction of swimming pools) was an important mark of these changes. Chapter 2 introduces us to black beauty culture, and especially to the significance of the beauty parlor in black women's lives during the years of Jim Crow as a place of comfort and support, a free space apart from white dominance. "Inside black beauty shops, Roberts writes, "rituals of beautification converged with rituals of socialization" (p. 96). Her discussion of debates about the ethical problems inherent in trying to "look white" by pressing hair and using skin whiteners, and of the various advertisers of products used in these processes, black and white, helps us to understand the dilemma of black women before the 1960s. Most of us remember the Angela Davis Afro of the 1970s, but few realize what a monumental change this was in the way black women approached hair care. Chapters 3 and 4 are about the beginnings of beauty contests in the South. In white society this meant rural queens of cotton, tobacco, and similar products in contests that grew out of state fair activities and promoted the agricultural base of the local or regional economy. The success of these contests prompted some imitation in the African American community, but many "respectable" middle-class black women were more interested in fashion shows or the exhibitions at college May Days or Homecoming games).

Chapter 5, "Bodies Politic," begins with a comparison of two Mississippi beauty queens: Lynda Lee Mead, Miss America 1971, and Anne Moody, queen of her school's homecoming court in junior high. Mead, finely coifed

and smiling “beneath a sparkling tiara,” defended her state’s honor despite its horrific civil rights record, becoming a symbol of massive resistance. Moody, on the other hand, had led a sit-in at the Woolworth’s in Jackson a few years before. “Dirty and disheveled” after the gross mistreatment she received, she had stopped at a beauty shop on the way back to Tougaloo College so she would be presentable when she faced colleagues or reporters. The two women disagreed on almost everything, “but on one thing they might have agreed: beauty had a place in the civil rights movement.” The owner of the shop also agreed: she asked if the young woman had been part of the sit-in. When Moody nodded affirmatively, the woman moved her to the front of the cue, removed her torn stockings, and “washed my legs while my hair was drying” (p. 193). This chapter takes us further into the subject of southern beauty pageants and queens and the ways in which white superiority and white supremacy was reinforced and maintained by the adulation of the white southern beauty—not only in the South, but as a national ideal. In this chapter Roberts also discusses the reconceptualization of black beauty during the late years of the civil rights movement and the Black Power era. A concluding section begins with the oft-told tale of the 1968 Miss America protests and the nearby Miss Black America contest sponsored by the NAACP, and ends with the story of Mary Kay cosmetics—a new twist, in the 1970s, on women’s entrepreneurship in the beauty industry.

Although the author discusses some famous women (Madam C. J. Walker and Mary Kay Ash, most impor-

tantly), few of the familiar civil rights heroines or segregationist leaders of the period, black or white, find a place here. Bernice Robinson, the hairdresser who became an important freedom school teacher in the 1960s, is a rare exception to this rule. The book’s female protagonists of both races are owners of beauty shops and their customers, purveyors of beauty products, rural wives and daughters, contestants in beauty contests, college girls, promoters—everyday folks. Books like John Dittmer’s *Local People* (1994), Glenda Gilmore’s *Gender and Jim Crow* (1996), or Nancy Hewitt’s *Southern Discomfort: Women’s Activism in Tampa, Florida* (2001) come to mind, books that explore southern working- or middle-class ways of living or grassroots activism. Such books require prodigious research, and *Pageants, Parlors, and Pretty Women* is no exception; the breadth of Roberts’s research, especially her use of copious manuscript collections, newspapers, and journals, is very impressive. This reader found two minor mistakes that a copyeditor should have caught: Booker T. Washington was not alive to “be convinced” in 1917 to include beauty culture classes at Tuskegee (p. 72); and Valena MacArthur Jones, a respected young black teacher for whom a New Orleans school was named, married not a “Presbyterian bishop” (the Presbyterian Church does not have bishops) but a minister who became a Methodist bishop three years after she died in 1917 (p. 185). These are very small caveats for a book whose important facts are very well documented. *Pageants, Parlors, and Pretty Women* is highly recommended for students and teachers of American social history, southern history, and the history of black and white American women.

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Citation: Sarah H. Brown. Review of Roberts, Blain, *Pageants, Parlors, and Pretty Women: Race and Beauty in the Twentieth-Century South*. H-Florida, H-Net Reviews. January, 2015.

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