

It's Time to Talk of Other Things: of Black Power, War, and Beauty Queens

by

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Abstract:

The history of military entertainment has become more popular in recent years as scholars have begun to identify the insights that studying entertainment reveals about culture and institutions. This thesis presents a piece of this growing historiography by analyzing the roles of three Miss Black America pageant winners who toured Vietnam in 1970, 1971, and 1972. Despite the variable and sometimes unclear roles of these women, they ultimately boosted the morale of black service members and became symbols of black power, black beauty, and black culture during their tours.

Introduction: Setting the Stage for Miss Black America in Vietnam

“Last Saturday Miss WASP America sold her body to the businessmen, and Miss Black America gave the clenched fist salute,” wrote a columnist by the name Gumbo in the *Berkeley Tribe* in September 1969, after the second annual Miss Black America beauty pageant.¹ Gumbo argued that sexist and capitalist motivations served as the guiding principles of the Miss America pageant, but that the Miss Black America pageant was distinctly different because of its relationship with black power movements across the nation and the activist role of the pageant winner. What Gumbo saw as an obvious difference between the two beauty queens, the Department of Defense (DoD) and the United Service Organization (USO) acknowledged as well as they decided to send Miss Black America pageant winners to Vietnam in 1970, 1971, and 1972 as a way to respond to black GI demands for more culturally relevant entertainment and mounting racial violence within the ranks. Miss America had fit easily into the tradition of using civilian women to entertain troops that had been characteristic of each war beginning with World War I. However, Miss Black America would not fit so readily into that tradition.

For each group, black GIs and Miss Black Americas, movements and efforts were rooted in an argument that protested a white dominated society. At the same time the Miss Black America demands for cultural acknowledgement from the Miss America pageant occurred, demands of black GIs for the same from the DoD were too. Their arguments were no longer about equal opportunity or integration—they became about the importance of black pride and black culture.² Both groups, black GIs and the Miss Black America pageant participants,

¹ Gumbo, Untitled. *Berkeley Tribe*, September 12-18, 1969.

² James E. Westheider, *The African American Experience in Vietnam: Brothers in Arms* (Plymouth: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc. 2008).

embraced this logic. Black GIs insisted on having culturally relevant merchandise in base stores and culturally relevant entertainment. The Miss Black America pageant was created in response to the same lack of cultural acknowledgement, in their case that their beauty was being ignored by the Miss America pageant. Gumbo pointed out that Miss Black America's distinction was her embrace of these claims to acknowledgement and the ideology of protest, unlike the generally agreeable Miss America. While the use of military entertainment was usually non-political, the Miss Black America pageant itself began in an ideology that highlighted black pride. The performances of Miss Black America in Vietnam became a reality because of black GIs who demanded more performances that featured black performers as an expression of black identity and recognition by the DoD and the USO who were worried about the rising power and vehemence of black anger within the ranks. The Miss Black America Pageant winners who toured Vietnam were three young women—Gloria O. Smith was the first to tour in 1970, Stephanie Clark was the second to tour in 1971, and Joyce Warner was the third to tour in 1972.

Despite the variable, and sometimes unclear, roles of these women in all three layers of their experiences they did ultimately boost the morale of black service members and become symbols of black power, black beauty, and black culture during their tours. What the responsibilities of the beauty queens were while they were in Vietnam appeared differently to various groups. The DoD believed that black women should shoulder the responsibility of boosting the morale of black men through their music performances. Black GIs viewed the beauty queens as symbols for racial pride and a way to have contact with American women. The queens themselves accepted the role of supporting black men by showing sympathy to their wartime situation as they protested their own mistreatment by the Miss America pageant. In line with this role, the three women who toured Vietnam openly displayed their ideology of black

power in Vietnam and their experiences during their tours often led to solidified anti-war sentiments. Potentially, their presence in Vietnam also influenced black GIs understandings of the role of women involved with the black power movement overall as figures that characterized black pride and culture. These points became further complicated when one considered the black beauty queens role in the context of the various other civil rights movements occurring in broader American society; specifically, their lack of acceptance by the Women's Liberation Movement.

These perceptions of Miss Black America in the context of civil rights movements and the Women's Liberation Movement revealed three things. First, the way that Miss Black America pageant winners and black GIs participated in their tours to Vietnam and simultaneously displayed black power movement ideology revealed complex layers of conflict pertaining to civil rights movements in the United States. Second, the history and context of the Miss Black America pageant itself provided an alternate framework for understanding the pageant winner's roles. Finally, the complications in the roles of these women were demonstrated in their personal lives and experiences during their tours. All of the perceived roles revealed additional intricacies in telling the story of how three Miss Black America pageant winners found themselves on stages in the middle of a foreign land surrounded by helicopters, Army green, and black troops with their fists held high with white troops sitting in the same audiences. Further, it brought to focus the question of why the DoD attempted to utilize entertainment as a way to calm racial tensions.

This time in American history was full to the brim with tumult and necessary clamoring for social change. With an understanding of the complexity of this time period, the purpose of this study is to build on the existing historiography of military entertainment and its importance

in examining the cultural aspect of warfare. Currently, there is an inadequate number of publications that speak to the historical context of military entertainment's purpose in detail. Books by James E. Westheider, Herman Graham III, and William Van Deburg include sections, chapters, or parts that begin to address the need for cultural acknowledgement through entertainment but that are more focused on the experiences of black men in the armed forces or in American society. These fail to include the perspectives of the entertainers themselves. Additionally, the publications that do incorporate the experiences of entertainers generally highlight the more popular and highly publicized white entertainers that toured, like Bob Hope and Marilyn Monroe. In particular, this thesis focuses on a marginalized sector of society in order to highlight the incongruent experiences of different Americans. Black men were not experiencing life in America as equals with white men and black women were not experiencing life in America as equals with, frankly, anybody.

The existing body of scholarship that addresses the history of the Miss Black America pageant is also limited. One book, published in 2002 and written by Maxine Leeds Craig, *Ain't I a Beauty Queen: Black Women, Beauty, and the Politics of Race*, addressed some parts of the history of Miss Black America, but only insofar as it related to the politics of black beauty. This thesis highlights some of the alienation that both groups experienced—beauty queens and soldiers alike—and focuses, particularly, on the tours of these women in order to supply a more in-depth analysis of a particular group of entertainers from marginalized society. This is especially due to the climate of civil rights movements that became increasingly militant and impossible to ignore for organizations like the DoD. However, the historiography has not yet developed to the point of fully analyzing the role of black women during the war in Vietnam in supporting black men and attempting to carry out the wishes of the armed forces and DoD in

order to calm tensions. Interviews of these women, the responses of black GIs after their performances, and administrative documents of the DoD showcased the tensions that these pageant winners navigated because of the ambiguous expectations of their roles. Entertainment became an important vehicle to effect change when it concerned culturally specific forms of music and dancing. Additionally, displays of support for the black power movement by the pageant winners during their performances and visits added to the relevance of their positions as entertainers.

The opening chapter of this piece provides an introduction to the violence occurring in the armed forces during the late years of the Vietnam War in the context of the black power movement in America. The second chapter outlines a brief history of the Miss Black America pageant and describes the unclear roles the women while entertaining the troops. Naturally, it is shorter than the first and third chapters to offer more room to the narrative aspects of the women's tours in Vietnam. The third chapter discusses the tours of the three pageant winners and how the unclear roles manifested through these tours. Ultimately, what follows is the story of black beauty queens who, undeterred by the balancing of contradictory expectations, proudly sported their afros, retro sunglasses, and black power fists to demand recognition and change history by bringing "soul" into warzones.

Chapter I: Black Power—Rising Demands, Rising Protest

The subject of a December 1971 letter to the commanding officer at Qui Nhon Sub-Area Command in Vietnam was a “request for action on USO show recruiting.” Though the subject of the letter seemed administrative, the contents of this letter and the response it yielded were anything but ordinary.³

The special services branch during the war in Vietnam was responsible for coordinating entertainment for the troops within the army.⁴ The request letter drafted by one of their officers stated:

According to Special Services personnel there are very few black shows or for that matter shows in the USO circuit that would appeal particularly to any minority group. With the current push to bridge cultural and ethnic gaps this unit feels that diversified entertainment representative of all minority groups would be an excellent vehicle to effect better cultural understanding.⁵

This letter shows the ways by which the armed forces attempted to understand black Americans and implement culturally informed efforts to better integrate forces. This effort was also due to growing racial violence within the ranks. The armed forces’ aim to eradicate racial violence led to their expectations for the roles that the Miss Black America pageant winners would fulfill through their performances in Vietnam. However, the Miss Black America pageant winners and

³ Much of the information about entertainment in the military surrounding the topic is courtesy of Dr. Kara Vuic who provides sources that come from her unpublished manuscript that is under contract with Harvard University Press, *The Girls Next Door: American Women and Military Entertainment*.

⁴ John E. Oristian, “Subject: Request for Action on USO Show Recruiting,” General Correspondence and Memoranda of the Entertainment Branch, Special Services Agency (provisional) USARV, 1 Jan 1972—4 April 1972.

⁵ Ibid.

the black GIs themselves were becoming less interested in integration and demanded something more—recognition for black pride.

The focus by the DoD on marginalized groups and cultural understanding was a response to the Civil Rights movements occurring across the nation and requests by GIs themselves for entertainment that was representative of their culture. This chapter outlines the parallels that existed between black GIs and the Miss Black America pageant participants during the war in Vietnam as they shifted their demands for integration to these demands for recognition of black pride by describing the violence occurring in the military that led to the DoD's necessity for black entertainers. This shift in demands led to the creation of the Miss Black America pageant and eventually to the tours and performances of the pageant winners in Vietnam. The chapter begins by exploring the historiography of black men's experiences in Vietnam and continues with an explanation of the increasing racial violence within the military. It traces the rise of racial tensions in the military and the efforts that were made to combat those tensions and provides context for the Miss Black America trips to Vietnam. The chapter is organized in this way to provide an understanding of the context surrounding events that led up to the tours of the Miss Black America pageant winners. This further serves as context for chapter two's conversation about the origins of the various roles the pageant winners were expected to satisfy.

Military Violence

To say that black men experienced the Vietnam War in the same ways that white men did would be false. Black men faced racism and discrimination in the military just as they did in civilian society. Opposition to institutional racism led to high levels of racial tension and violence. Riots were springing up at many military bases around the world, the rate of desertion

was high, and underground publications and segregated hangouts were a shared experience for many black GIs.⁶ A black Marine pilot who led a squadron at Chu Lai, Lieutenant Colonel Frank Petersen, stated in 1970, “You have some very angry blacks who are here who are going to go back and are going to be more angry once they return. There is a hell of a chance that many of the blacks who are being discharged, if they encounter the right set of conditions, will become urban guerillas.”⁷ Black men were angry to be fighting a war, one that many viewed as a white man’s war, for a country whose society rejected and disrespected them.

A few scholars wrote extensively about the experience of black men during the war in Vietnam and submitted explanations and accounts of how military violence began. Offering some contextualization for the topic of military violence are the writings of William Van Deburg. He wrote a meticulously crafted account of the black power movement’s timeline, its major proponents and leaders, and how it was defined. To him, the black power movement was best defined as a cultural phenomenon. He wrote, “They used cultural forms as weapons in the struggle for liberation and, in doing so, provided a much-needed structural underpinning for the movement’s more widely trumpeted political and economic tendencies.”⁸ Essentially, he made the argument that the black power movement moved beyond the economic and political spheres of influence and could be taken up by more black Americans because of its cultural aspect—an aspect that translated easily to the black men entering the armed forces.

While Van Deburg’s writing explained the genesis of how the black power movement might pervade the ranks amongst black GI’s, another scholar, James E. Westheider, argued that

⁶ Mark Mericle, “Black Moon Rising the Face of Repression.” *The Minority Report*, 1 April 1970, 12.

⁷ Wallace Terry, “Bringing the War Home,” *The Black Scholar* 2, no.3 (1970) 9.

⁸ William L. Van Deburg, *New Day in Babylon: The Black Power Movement and American Culture, 1965-1975* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992) 9.

the conclusion of the draft and the war itself, in addition to military reforms that were instituted in order to create the previously mentioned equal opportunity apparatus, plus the “willingness of most blacks to work within the system” served as the preponderances to quieting racial violence and agitation from the armed forces.⁹ The reforms that Westheider mentioned included equal opportunity and race relations training courses that were required of all troops. Other reforms included the training and appointment of equal opportunity officers that were not Caucasian. Putting these equal opportunity officers in place allowed for grievances that were filed to be investigated by more than just white officers that may have been biased against any African American that filed the complaint.¹⁰ Westheider’s perspective offers a rounded view of how the armed forces began to better understand race relations by also including a discussion of the problems that the armed forces had with implementation of these reforms. The problem, he mentioned, was not with the substance of the reforms but with the “widespread ambivalence toward racial reform” that existed in the officer corps.¹¹ Westheider’s perspective is unique in that it is mostly positive in how it portrays the armed forces overall. The portrayal paints the armed forces as making an effort to change through reforms in training and in other policy-driven efforts such as increased entertainment meant for black Americans and making certain hygiene and beauty products available to those troops.

Other scholars offer more radical perspectives of black men’s experiences in Vietnam. Herman Graham III argued that despite limited efforts to improve race relations within the armed forces, the Department of Defense and the branches of the military failed to extend genuine

⁹ James E. Westheider, *Fighting on Two Fronts: African Americans and the Vietnam War* (New York: New York University Press, 1997) 168.

¹⁰ *Ibid*, 131-137.

¹¹ *Ibid*, 137-139.

support to black troops that left many black men feeling as if they had fought to improve their stations in life, and were not compensated appropriately—monetarily or even with societal respect.¹² Essentially, these men thought that joining the ranks would justify their respectability as men and help reshape the image of black men in the United States. However, throughout the book, he portrays the armed forces as having failed black troops in this capacity. Contrary to this, he writes that, while overstated “it [the military] nonetheless functioned as an imperfect refuge from racism that shielded African American men from many of the offensive racial indignities of black life in America.” He continued and wrote that many black men did, in fact, experience certain types of equality that they simply did not experience in American society.¹³ His negative portrayal still pervaded despite these acknowledgements as Graham more thoroughly explained the role that the black power movement played in the armed forces, which offered an interesting depth to the experience of those soldiers and the types of feelings they were entering and leaving the armed forces with. Understanding how the armed forces attempted to respond to racial inequality and violence is difficult because it must be contextualized in terms of what American society was experiencing at the time as well.

Creating space for themselves and forcing their superiors to have conversations about race was a motivation for the creation of the USO shows that featured black artists. Those aims also fueled the motivation for various forms of black power movement mobilization. Graham comprehensively highlighted these in *The Brothers' Vietnam War* and mentioned that black men explored their masculinity and identities through the organization of counterhegemonic groups. He included the use of other forms of media, such as magazines and unofficially segregated

¹² Herman Graham III, *The Brother's Vietnam War: Black Power, Manhood, and the Military Experience* (Florida: University of Florida Press, 2003) 138.

¹³ *Ibid*, 23.

hangouts where groups met to discuss their ideas. The groups that he wrote of were mostly concerned with cultural awareness, but some were politically concerned or antiwar groups.¹⁴ Others claimed space by highlighting and bringing attention to the institutional racism that black GIs experienced from the moment they left boot camp. The space that was created by these organizations was fruitful as it led to the armed forces including Miss Black America in the entertainment groups to go to Vietnam. Some of those who found rising discontent within their units or ranks amongst black soldiers advocated for better entertainment that was not consisting of only white performers and country music.¹⁵

Primary accounts of the root of military violence also emerged through this scholarship. In 1970, Wallace Terry wrote “Bringing the War Home” in which he stated, “And the black soldier has begun to flex his new-found black pride, making him less likely to take without notice the cross burnings, waving of confederate flags and common use of racial slurs that have persisted among whites since American troops arrived in Vietnam in large numbers.”¹⁶ The way that black GIs responded to racial injustice began to change as the wave of black power movements gained influence across the United States.

Racial tensions in the military being a seemingly hot topic in 1970 led Hazel Guild of *Variety* to write a piece about the Department of Defense (DoD) efforts for better integration of clubs and entertainment overseas. They wrote about the efforts in Europe:

This is all part of the new “black is beautiful” and “tell it like it is” emphasis on black entertainment and black culture that is the highlight of the Department of Defense movement to combat racial unrest, particularly among the troops stationed outside the United States.

¹⁴ Graham, *The Brother's Vietnam War*, 100.

¹⁵ Oristian, “Subject: Request for Action on USO Show Recruiting,” 2.

¹⁶ *ibid*, 7.

The Dept. of Defense recently set up an Inter-Service Task Force on Education in Race Relations. And the impact is being felt in just about every area of living, working and entertainment with the black and white troops in Europe. The army is out to combat Ku Klux Klanism-Black Pantherism, racial tensions that have been resulting in gang wars in military night clubs and out on the economy.¹⁷

This being part of the “black is beautiful” and emphasis on black entertainment that Guild referenced as an attempt by the DoD to ease tensions is where the history of Miss Black America in Vietnam came to be.

These experiences are brought forward in an *Ebony* article from 1968 that discusses the black man’s experience with the draft and the augmentation of rising feelings that rejected the fighting of the war by civil rights leaders and figures. The article discusses the statistical evidence that black men were paying disproportionately for the war in the form of casualties and draftees and continues by offering more statistics about the high number of campus militants that were vehemently opposed to the war. It continues by including the perspective of one opponent who states, “We have a different reason for not going. We haven’t enjoyed the benefits of this society. The whites are resisting as citizens. We resist on the ground that we aren’t citizens. He who has no country should not fight for it.”¹⁸ The creation of groups that assisted in avoiding the draft began springing up to assist with this problem that many black communities felt threatening their lives.

An article in the *Soul City Times* out of Milwaukee discussed the organization of a group in order to assist black men in avoiding the draft. The article states, “Seventeen national and regional organizations have formed the International Committee of Black Resisters (ICBR) to aid Black men refusing to be drafted.” This article continues by discussing the aims of the group in

¹⁷ Hazel Guild, “Black Talent & Integrated GI Clubs Primed To Ease Army Tensions O’seas,” *Variety*, 1 July 1970.

¹⁸ McLean, L. Deckle, “The Black Man and the Draft,” *Ebony*, August 1968, 62.

order to reach a fairer representation of black men in the number of men fighting the war in Vietnam.¹⁹ This type of opposition to the war itself indicated a type of frustration that was likely contributing to the overall feelings of anger with fighting the war and racial inequality that led to military violence.

Other examples of violence within the military came out of Fort Dix in New Jersey. Twenty-one of the black men that were there for training were court marshalled and charged with the assault of five white men. They were part of the Special Processing Battalion which was said to be made up of countless anti-war and anti-military inclined black and Puerto Rican men who did not agree with the fighting the war. This case became so important in the news of what was happening in the military that the American Servicemen's Union spoke up, claiming that they would do whatever it would take to get the men out of trouble because they believed the whole situation to be based on racist accusations.

Additional reporting that came out of Fort Dix was from an underground paper entitled *Duck Power* that published heavily about anti-war sympathizing and published pieces like one entitled, "Black Vietnam Veteran Shot." This piece included a quote from the guard who shot the man he was supposed to be guarding in which he called him a "black bastard" and claimed that he should have just killed him instead of simply shooting him. Many other GIs responded to the situation and expressed much anger because of the unfair, racist, and dangerous treatment of the veteran that had been shot.²⁰

¹⁹ "Committee Formed to Aid Blacks Resisting Draft," *Soul City Times*, 1 April 1968, 62.

²⁰ -. "Black Vietnam Veteran Shot," *Duck Power*, December 1, 1969.

Countless scenes, such as the ones out of Fort Dix, existed within the ranks of the armed forces between men who were at military installations in the states and those who were off in Vietnam already. These accounts show that racist thoughts were still very much a reality for some GIs and other military personnel during the conflict. For many GIs, being both black and against the war made their experiences much more difficult and increased the number of people who viewed negatively.

Though there were efforts to improve the position of black men within the armed forces, they largely felt displaced as too many ended up leaving the armed forces with less than acceptable benefits to show for it and were not readily accepted into American society overall when they returned home. This experience many to embrace anti-war, especially those who believed that they were drafted unfairly and then had an ensuing experience that left them even further disadvantaged despite their continued participation in war efforts because of the draft.

Compounded with feelings of, to them, obvious mistreatment by the armed forces was the stance of many civil rights activists against the war. There were organizations of many efforts during the war to position the black community against the war in Vietnam, particularly during the times when black men were being disproportionately drafted and killed throughout the conflict. These organizations forced the armed forces to change their policies and work towards minimizing racial violence through additional methods.

During the war in Vietnam, the armed forces tried to strike a balance between the rumblings and requests of white GIs and black GIs who did not always agree on ways in which national or racial pride should be allowed to be displayed. For example, many black GIs were uncomfortable with the displaying and flying of the confederate flag. Because of this, the leader of the NAACP requested that the armed forces pursue disciplinary action against those who

displayed and flew the flag.²¹ This occurrence in 1966 showed that the armed forces were still grappling with GIs that held anti-black sentiments. In many ways, there was a feeling of separation between black and white GIs. However, by 1969, efforts made by the armed forces to put on shows that included black performers and allowing them to talk freely about their black pride was telling of an armed force that was making efforts to change.

This type of logic used by the black GIs was very similar to that of the Miss Black America pageant winners, who argued that the Miss America pageant did not represent or leave room for their values and their cultural history. The sheer complexity of the black power movement and the various perspectives of what “black power” meant and looked like signified its appeal to a large audience.²² It is not surprising that the black power movement served as a tethering relationship between young, black, male GIs and young, black, female pageant winners.

The armed forces, wanting to eradicate racism completely, tried to get rid of institutional barriers to equal opportunity and the individuals who only paid lip service to equal opportunity. At times, the armed forces failed to implement their new policies and to condemn individuals with bigoted tendencies. Perhaps sending over pretty women to sing and dance for the troops was only a last-ditch attempt to patch a Band-Aid over “the problem of race.” However, those within the armed forces who advocated for a better relationship were beginning to understand that any movement towards equality could be facilitated in more ways outside of the original policies of training programs. Better relationships included things like culturally relevant materials in the stores and, beyond that, culturally relevant entertainment. This became

²¹ “No Dixie Flag in Armed Forces,” *Baltimore Afro-American*, 19 February 1966, 3.

²² Deburg, *New Day in Babylon: The Black Power Movement and American Culture, 1965-1975*. 12.

evident in the letter that was sent from one officer of the Special Services branch to the other.

The Miss Black America pageant winners, like Sandra Williams, offer an image of the pageant as protest and introduce the reflection of the Miss Black America pageant winners as symbols for more than just beauty queens.

Military Entertainment

The entertainment that was provided by the USO during the war in Vietnam was highly lauded by most (white) Americans and many believed that the shows served to boost morale. These shows were also supported by military command overseas for similar reasons.²³ Often, these shows consisted of white comedians, actors and actresses, and performing artists. One author wrote of the USO shows of 1997 and recalled that the USO of Korea, Vietnam, and the Gulf War brought memories of Marilyn Monroe and Bob Hope to the surface for most Americans.²⁴ Another article, published in *Variety* during the war, listed other entertainers such as George Jessel, Martha Raye, and Raymond Burr.²⁵ While these entertainers were well-received by white GIs, many black GIs felt that their forms of entertainment did not appeal to black culture because they did not include music popular in black communities and the content did not reflect the reality of many black Americans' life experiences. These feelings led to requests for more culturally relevant entertainment by black GIs.

Entertainment was important mostly because it proved to boost morale and improve the attitudes of troops in Vietnam and it was an effective way to bring troops together during the

²³ "To Vietnam With Love." *New York Times* (1923-Current File), 7 November 1966.

²⁴ Millman, David. "Everyone's USO." *United States Naval Institute. Proceedings* 123, no. 12 (12, 1997): 74-76.

²⁵ "Vietnam Cues More USO shows." *Variety (Archive: 1905-2000)* 239, no. 11 (Aug 04, 1965): 65-66.

times when they were not fighting or performing duties. Sponsored entertainment could additionally keep the men from going off and getting into trouble at local locations that were not as appropriate as a very structured visit sponsored by the USO.

Historically, entertainment to military members had been organized by groups like the USO since WWI. The goals of these organizations were similar to that of organizations during the war in Vietnam—they offered contact with American women that helped keep their contact with foreign women at bay, they improved morale by demonstrating to the troops that the home front was supportive of them, and they further influenced how the roles of men and women were different during wartime.²⁶

The fact that the Miss Black America ended up in Vietnam was due to the requests of black GIs who believed that they deserved entertainment that acknowledged their culture, the rising racial violence that the DoD was forced to contend with, and a precedent of utilizing military entertainment as a way to boost morale.²⁷ The Miss Black America pageant supported these tours just as much because the women themselves wanted to participate in a way that demonstrated to black troops that there was support for them on the home front.

²⁶ Kara Vuic, *The Girls Next Door: American Women and Military Entertainment*, under contract with Harvard University Press, 2018

²⁷ Mike Davis, “Need More ‘Soul’ Shows: Tired GIs in Saigon Find Relaxation at USO Club,” *The Baltimore Afro-American*, 5 August 1967, 11.

Chapter II—The Creation of Miss Black America

The first Miss Black America pageant was produced on August 17, 1968. Sandra Williams was crowned queen and she had made history in a pageant that was meant to, “project the black woman in all her charm, poise, and beauty, and to provide her with a world-class event that would celebrate their standards, talents, and African heritage.” The initial desire to create the pageant was ignited out of feelings that the Miss America pageant did not represent the beauty and heritage of black women and that this influenced the black community to view their own physical features in a negative way. Therefore, the creation of the pageant was, in itself, a protest to white beauty standards fostered in the black community and an organization (Miss America Pageant) that did not value the beauty of black women.²⁸

The following year, 1969, an ad was posted in the *Milwaukee Star* on April 5, it stated:

Girls! Now is the chance to be the envy of your neighborhood! Mr. Alvin Cooperman, executive vice president of Madison Square Garden Center, Inc., announced that the Madison Square Garden Productions has concluded an agreement whereby it will present the ‘Miss Black America’ beauty pageant.²⁹

The show had been publicized in the media but this year the show would be televised for the first time. The pageant was televised nationwide and Gloria O. Smith was crowned. In the following year during her reign, she would tour Vietnam to entertain black GIs.

The purpose of this chapter is to contextualize the history of the Miss Black America pageant in American society in order to describe the varied roles of the three Miss Black America pageant winners who entertained troops in Vietnam. The chapter begins by discussing

²⁸ “The Beginning,” About, Miss Black America, Accessed April 6, 2018, <http://missblackamerica2017.com/about-us/the-beginning/>

²⁹ “Black Pageant, A Reality,” *Milwaukee Star*, April 5, 1969. 8.

the creation of the Miss Black America pageant and then analyzes the various perspectives that influenced the roles the women balanced during their tours and in their performances.

The creation of the pageant itself was rooted in claims of black pride. As their website stated, it was not necessarily the beauty standards imposed upon them by white Americans but rather, “The MBA Pageant was created more as a protest against the negative self-images that black people imposed upon themselves than against the powers which imposed those images.”³⁰ The pageant was not to fight against white racism or the standards that white Americans place on beauty. The purpose was to create a space and a pageant that celebrated black heritage and that reevaluated, within the black community, what beauty standards were for these women.

The Miss Black America pageant demonstrated how the winners of the pageant served as more than just beauty queens—their experiences highlighted a larger context of race and civil rights protest within American society. The inclinations of these women were not entirely unlike many of the thoughts of black GIs who also felt that they were not treated equally within the armed forces, or, like the pageant winners, within American society. In fact, the same way that black men struggled to contend with how they could define masculinity and how it was related to the black power movement, black women were also struggling with defining black femininity and how it was related to the black power movement.³¹

The Miss Black America pageant winners were known to be advocates for the black power movement and for civil rights in the United States just as black GIs were. Often, they were supportive of leaders like Malcolm X. One newspaper reported about Sandra Williams, the first winner of the Miss Black American Pageant (1968), “After going to college in Maryland

³⁰ “The Beginning,” <http://missblackamerica2017.com/about-us/the-beginning/>

³¹ Maxine Leeds Craig, *Ain't I a Beauty Queen: Black Women, Beauty, and the Politics of Race*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2002.

she encountered racial discrimination and this chnged [sic] her. Suddenly, she wanted to know more about her race. She began to read books on Black culture such as ‘The Autobiography of Malcolm X’ which had tremendous influence on her.”³² Williams’ public persona was one of advocacy for civil rights and for the black power movement as is demonstrated by her association with the writings of Malcolm X.³³ While Williams was not one of the winners to tour Vietnam, her speaking out for civil rights, her willingness to oppose the Miss America pageant, and her participation in advocacy for the demands of many black Americans leads clearly to the conclusion that the pageant winners were not simply showing off their naturally kinky hair or flat bellies for reasons of vanity. Beyond that, they aimed to reclaim space within American society. Their fight to reclaim space is similar to that of Black GIs that worked in Vietnam to have better leadership opportunities, fair benefits, and recognition once they came home.

As Maxine Leads Craig mentions in *Ain’t I a Beauty Queen*, “The...pageant challenged racial conventions, reinforced gender norms, and celebrated middle-class aspirations all at the same time.”³⁴ The show itself being a complex layering of varying degrees of radicalism and attempts at liberation demonstrate how the appearance of Miss Black America in Vietnam was further complicated.

The judges for the pageant were often prominent supporters of civil rights movements and figures within the black community. The judges of the pageant in 1970 included figures like Jesse Jackson, who at the time was the national director of “Operation Breadbasket,” a nonviolent organization that worked to secure better jobs and pay for black Americans by

³² “Miss Black America Pageant Becomes a Reality,” *Milwaukee Star*, March 29, 1969.

³³ “Girl Discovers Pride, Wins Beauty Contest,” *Milwaukee Star*, March 8, 1969.

³⁴ Maxine Leads Craig, *Ain’t I a Beauty Queen*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2002.

negotiating, demonstrations, and reconciliation. Other judges included Jackie Robinson, the baseball star who paved the way for black men to participate in major league baseball, and was a major figure for black men to look up to at the time, Fannie Lou Hamer, the vice chairman of the Mississippi Freedom Party, which fought for civil rights to improve black representations within the political climate of Mississippi.³⁵ All three of these judges were popular figures within the black community during the conflict in Vietnam.

The centrality of the pageant further supports the idea that the majority of black Americans—beauty queens and soldiers alike—were concerned about racism and race relations. As Maxine Leeds Craig wrote in *Ain't I a Beauty Queen*, “The racialized symbols and practices that were challenged by the Civil Rights and Black Power movements never conveyed race alone. They were simultaneously expressive of meanings about class and gender.”³⁶ For example, the Miss Black America pageant was not solely to enforce the idea that “black is beautiful” but also to show black female figures as strong and redefine what it meant to be a successful black woman. The armed forces themselves, responded to the demands of the populace and began attempting to build a relationship between black performance art (and artists) and their troops in Vietnam.

The role of black pride and black power in the creation of the Miss Black America pageant underscored a notable difference between the role of the Miss Black America pageant winners as compared to their Miss America counterparts. The Miss Black America pageant participants certainly looked different from the white participants of the Miss America pageant.

³⁵ “Fannie Lou Hamer Receives Delta Award,” *Milwaukee Star* (Milwaukee, Wisconsin), 30 August, 1969. 10.

³⁶ Maxine Leeds Craig, *Ain't I a Beauty Queen: Black Women, Beauty, and the Politics of Race*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2002. 14.

However, the significance of their differences moved beyond their opposition to white beauty standards. The Miss Black America pageant further symbolized a radical opposition to the inequality experienced by black Americans overall. Opposition to this inequality led to a rise in military violence and, perhaps not coincidentally, this opposition served as the impetus for creating the pageant itself.

Big Roles to Fill

A good portion of what makes this occurrence interesting is that it intertwines the aims of three different groups of people. The first being the pageant winners and the pageant itself. The second, being the black GIs fighting in Vietnam. The third, being the Department of Defense and the armed forces. Where the aims of these groups meet is exactly where the Miss Black America pageant winners were positioned. They balanced the different perceptions of each group in order to perform effectively, in a manner that satisfied the interests of each one.

In many of the interviews conducted with the pageant winners, they cited supporting black GIs as their main goal. It was important to ensure that black men overseas felt as if they were being supported by black women. The pageant winners mentioned and acknowledged this during their tours and were often cited as saying that they were happy to go over in order to show black men that they cared about them and wanted to support them in whatever ways they could—in this case singing and dancing and just spending time speaking with them. For the black GIs, the women demonstrated something different. To many black men, these women were part of the mobilization of the black power movement and stood as symbols of this cause.³⁷ Additionally, the women being in Vietnam gave the men access to speaking with and seeing American women. As far as the DoD

³⁷ Wangari Komaae, “Confrontation,” *Milwaukee Star*, 3 January 1970.

and the armed forces were concerned, the role of the Miss Black America pageant winners was to calm racial tensions through their performances by letting black GIs know that the women were there as an effort of the USO.

One example of how the women balanced these roles is seen in an *Ebony* article that features Gloria O. Smith where she is quoted as saying, “I was well received by blacks and whites, but many of the men question why they are there. Many of the blacks feel especially tense, knowing that things are the way they are back home. There are two wars going on—a black and white one and the other one.”³⁸ The last quote from her at the end of the article expressed her empathy for the troops after visiting Vietnam and she went so far as to say that she wished they would come home too. This same article also highlighted a moment where a black GI expressed his sentiments about simply being able to look at a black woman and admire her beauty. For him, it was not all about the black power movement, but instead, to claims of black pride. Part of his interest was in the representation of black women in Vietnam.³⁹ This snapshot of Smith’s experience shows briefly how the women balanced each role. Smith performed as a way to demonstrate support to the troops, she provided a morale boost to the troops who were able to view her much to the approval of the DoD, and to the black men she offered a view that was not a white country artist performing music they could not relate to.

What role the women would fill was not always clear, as the interests of each individual group were different. Through their shows, however, they demonstrated that they were capable of fulfilling all three.

³⁸ “Miss ‘Black America’ Takes Soul to Vietnam,” *Ebony*, May 1970, 88-94.

³⁹ *Ibid.*

Chapter III: Beauty Queens in Vietnam

After her tour in Vietnam, *Ebony* published an article about Gloria O. Smith that stated, “Both black and white will appreciate the true beauty of the black woman as exemplified by Miss G.O. Smith.” The article showed images of her tour and highlighted the ways that she helped boost the morale of the men that were able to attend one of her shows.⁴⁰ Of the three pageant winners to tour Vietnam, Gloria Smith’s tour was the most highly publicized. However, the tours of Stephanie Clark and Joyce Warner included many moments within them that demonstrated the various roles that the women filled as was discussed in chapter two.

The purpose of this chapter is to describe the three Miss Black America pageant winners that toured Vietnam and their tours in order to analyze the contexts through which they performed in their roles. It describes and analyzes the complexities of the beauty queens’ experiences in Vietnam related to using oppositional entertainment as a way of dealing with the problem of racial division in the armed forces. Further, this chapter includes the stories of the three tours that were taken by the Miss Black America pageant winners.

The purpose of this structure is to maintain the narratives of individual experiences that speak to a wider set of questions that are essential for understanding cultural aspects of war and society.⁴¹ The necessity of the armed forces to respond in this way to race relations is crucial to picking up on the relationship between the beginnings of the Miss Black America pageant, how the black power movement affected those within the ranks of the armed forces, and how the

⁴⁰ “Miss ‘Black America’ Takes Soul to Vietnam,” *Ebony*, May 1970, 88-94.

⁴¹ Much of this section that ties the tours to broader questions about war and society are drawn from work completed by Dr. Beth Bailey that is unpublished.

Department of Defense tried to bridge the gap that existed between races through culturally relevant entertainment.

Gloria O. Smith (1970 Tour)

G.O. Smith, as she was frequently called, was from New York and won the title of Miss Black America in 1969. In a Pacific Stars and Stripes spread spanning four pages, Gloria O. Smith—the second woman to be crowned Miss Black America and the first to tour Vietnam—was quoted, saying that she wanted to be called “black” instead of “negro” or “African-American” because to her “black seems most appropriate and quite adequate.” Later in the same spread she adds, “[the Miss America pageant] certainly doesn’t represent black America and I’m not certain it represents white America, either.”⁴² Smith’s comments here, highlighted a theme that emerged from her tour—be polite and powerful at the same time.

During her tour, Smith performed with an all-black troupe that included Moses Dillard and the “Tex-Town Display,” who were from Greenville, South Carolina. The after-action reports of her tour cited that she was a talented singer and performer and that she was received extremely well by all who were able to attend her shows.⁴³



Figure 1: A series of photos of G.O. Smith performing from the Special Services Agency general administrative records.

⁴² Sid Schapiro, “Miss Black America” Pacific Stars and Stripes, 14 December 1969.

⁴³ After Action Reports, “Re: USO Tours in Vietnam. Miss Black America,” RG 472.

A biography written of Smith, circulated to officers who would soon receive the Miss Black America USO tour in their area of operation, stated, “Miss Smith feels that the highlight of her year as ‘Miss Black America’ is this USO tour to entertain the troops in Vietnam, and the troops will certainly share her enthusiasm.”⁴⁴ In fact, the troops did share her enthusiasm. All of the after-action reports that were submitted after her and her groups’ performances raved about how well-received the show was what a stage presence Smith had. Some even referred to it as the best show to have come to Vietnam.⁴⁵ One example of this was a summary report written by Frank Cici, an officer who reviewed the show. He stated, “What made this show outstanding is the attitude that the individuals have, they are here to entertain the troops of all races and nationalities.”⁴⁶ Gloria Smith managed to surprise everyone who viewed her show in Vietnam with her grace and stage presence.

⁴⁴ After Action Reports. “Re: USO Tours in Vietnam. Miss Black America.” 22 January 1970.

⁴⁵ After Action Reports. “Re: USO Tours in Vietnam. Miss Black America.” 6 January 1970.

⁴⁶ After Action Reports. “Re: USO Tours in Vietnam. Miss Black America.” 22 January 1970.



What was interesting about the Miss Black America performances by Gloria Smith was not just the sets themselves, but also the audiences for these performances. In the figure above, there is an audience that seems to circle the stage that Gloria Smith is performing on. In the audience, one can identify both black and white audience members for the performance. What is the significance of having white audience members at a Miss Black America performance? It showed, in part, that the main purpose of these performances was to create unity and not to single out any one racial or ethnic group. The way that white GIs decided to spend their recreational time is important to understanding how the black GIs might have previously felt underrepresented and excluded from these performances if they had all been previously geared toward the entertainment interests of the white GIs. Additionally, it shows that the Miss Black America winners performances created an opportunity to showcase their talents to audiences that had traditionally not paid them their dues.

Her relationship to the black GIs was one of support and solidarity. In one after action report, an escorting officer by the name of Rey Gonzales Lice wrote, “The entire show was

successful. It added to the morale of the troops by their audience participation and talking individually to as many of the troops as possible.⁴⁷ Her relationship to the USO and DoD was one of respect and pride. By openly and candidly discussing her pride in being black, she opened a doorway for black GIs to view her performances as one meant to acknowledge their culture.

Being a very active Miss Black America and going to Vietnam, Smith showed her support to black troops, who often received special permission to go to the Miss Black America show.⁴⁸ She constantly expressed her thoughts about black pride in interviews. For example, in one interview, she was asked for her opinion about what the role of the black woman was in “helping her man” she responded by saying “she ought to give him that extra push, that support, love, and understanding,” and most importantly “remind him that he is black and proud.”⁴⁹ This clarity in her intentions showcased her support for black pride movements and for black, masculine figures in Vietnam.

Gloria Smith’s show led to more requests and opened a conversation about why sending more like it could be beneficial in amending some of the DoD’s shortcomings and lack of willingness they had occasionally displayed to including more culturally relevant shows. Col. Jerome B. Coray, Director of USO shows, made a statement that they were “proud to add the name of Miss Black America, Miss G.O. Smith, to the growing list of well-known personalities who have toured overseas to entertain our American Military.”⁵⁰

⁴⁷ After Action Reports. “Re: USO Tours in Vietnam. Miss Black America.” 15 January 1970.

⁴⁸ Westheider, *Fighting on Two Fronts*, 96.

⁴⁹ General Correspondence, Entertainment Branch. “Re: USO Tours in Vietnam. Miss Black America.” N.d.

⁵⁰ General Correspondence, Entertainment Branch. “Re: USO Tours in Vietnam. Miss Black America.” N.d.

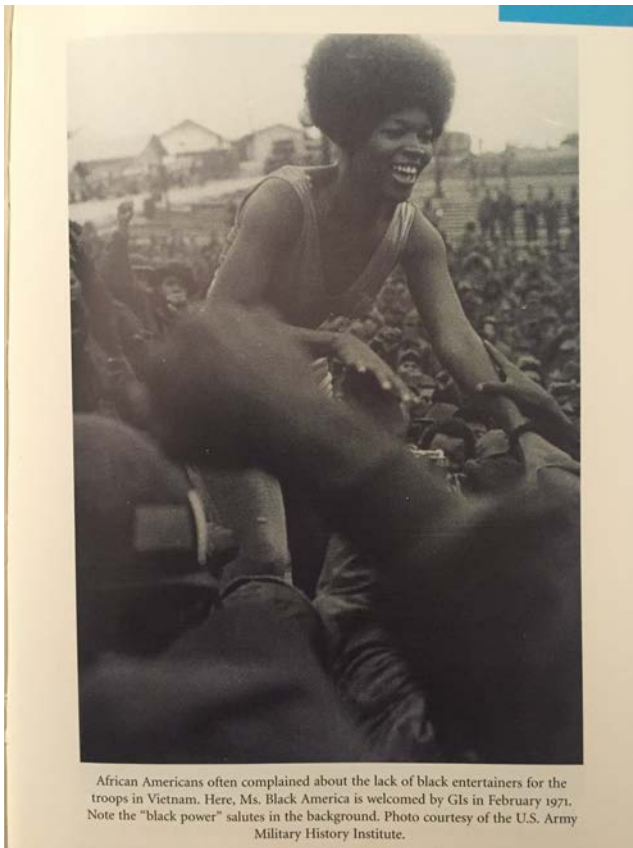
By openly discussing her feelings of black pride and black nationalism, Gloria Smith set a precedent for the two Miss Black America pageant winners that were to follow—Stephanie Clark and Joyce Warner. She further set expectations for future Miss Black America tours by representing herself, black women, and the pageant in a graceful and respectful way that still encouraged black GIs but did not incite any sort of Department of Defense restriction on the content of their future shows.

The relationship that these black women had to the armed forces and to black GIs by becoming the intersection of two groups that struggled with policy, violence, racism, and radicalism did not mean that the armed forces were suddenly without racism. Managing to see the intersection of these two groups through the pageant winners allows outsiders to see the pressure that was placed on the DoD that forced them to contend with ideas of race relations for their service branches if they wanted to continue to survive—and thrive—for years to come. The increased violence and radical ideals that had marked the relationship between GIs in Vietnam was not cured by the diversified entertainment efforts, but certainly, as G.O. Smith shows, the necessity for culturally relevant entertainment exemplified the necessity of the armed forces to come up with a solution for racial tensions in Vietnam. Gloria Smith effectively assisted in boosting the morale of the troops in Vietnam, displaying her pride in her blackness, and making black troops feel as if they were appreciated back home.

Stephanie Clark (1971 Tour)

Stephanie Clark was one of eleven children and a talented singer and performer. She was crowned Miss Black America by Gloria O. Smith in 1970 after winning the pageant to many

other talented young women.⁵¹ The most vocal winner of the Miss Black America pageant, she did not shy away from expressing her support for the black power movement during her time there. Clark, was very outspoken about her more radical beliefs against war and of black pride. When asked by the Los Angeles Times, she stated, “[I’m] going to Vietnam and Thailand to bring a little inspiration to the lives of some soldiers—to show them someone does care.”⁵² Her outward support of black pride, her participation in the pageant itself, and the armed forces willingness to allow her to tour Vietnam show a change in what the armed forces was beginning to deem acceptable in the name of equal opportunity.



Stephanie Clark being welcomed by a sea of GIs in February of 1971. Of note is the black power salutes in the background of the photo.

⁵¹ “It’s Time to Talk of Other Things, of Love and Pride and Beauty Queens,” *Pacific Stars and Stripes*, 10 January 1971.

⁵² “Pacifist Beauty Hopes to Inspire the Troops,” *Los Angeles Times*, 1971.

Stephanie Clark's outward support of black power becomes most apparent through a photo of her surrounded by black GIs. The constant requests of black GIs to provide black entertainers in Vietnam led to a warm welcome for Stephanie Clark when she arrived in Vietnam. A photo of Stephanie Clark smiling with a hand reaching down to shake the hands of black troops from February of 1971 has, at the very center of the photo, a black GI holding up his fist to symbolize his support of the Black Power movement. Behind his hand, we can see the image of Stephanie Clark against a backdrop that reveals a sea of black GIs also raising their fists in symbolic protest and pride.⁵³ This image of Miss Clark, housed at the U.S. Army Military History Institute, reveals some information about the relationship that the Miss Black America pageant winner had to the troops—her purpose was not solely to entertain the troops, but to offer them a moment through which they could express pride in their blackness, as the black power fist often symbolized. Stephanie Clark's position in Vietnam was not simply to show off her beauty, as one would often associate with the purpose of a beauty queen, but was further to stand as a figure for black nationalists and black power ideologies that forced the armed forces to come up with solutions leading to better equal opportunity that included ideas of cultural relevance.

During her time in Vietnam, Clark performed with an entirely black troupe consisting of other Miss Black America contestants such as Miss Black Alabama, Miss Black Utah, and Miss Black North Carolina. For the troupe, bringing a soulful show was important but it was not as important as showing pride in their race and culture.

⁵³ Westheider, "Fighting on Two Fronts," 98.

Many articles in the popular military newspaper “Stars and Stripes” display images of Stephanie Clark performing for black troops. One such example of this is from March 15th, 1971. A spread in the newspaper entitled “Sailors Get a Taste of ‘Soul’” includes a few words about Clark’s performance and surrounds them with pictures of the performance. The article discusses Clark’s discussion and interaction with the members of the crew.⁵⁴ Another article includes a



Figure 2: A spread from the Pacific Stars and Stripes publication.

quote from Clark through which she expresses her support for black troops by saying, “A Miss Black America is definitely a necessity to give a black man a chance to see his woman in a place of honor.”⁵⁵ Another publication included phrases referring to Clark as “the black beauty.”⁵⁶ These three articles by *Stars and Stripes* seem to be minor, however, their consistently positive

⁵⁴ “Sailors Get a Taste of ‘Soul’” *Pacific Stars and Stripes*, 15 March 1971.

⁵⁵ It’s Time to Talk of Other Things, Of Love and Pride and Beauty Queens” *Pacific Stars and Stripes*, 10 January 1971.

⁵⁶ “Beauties, Band on Tour” *Pacific Stars and Stripes*, 22 January 1971.

coverage of Clark and her accolades, often focused on her “black beauty” show that even when the audience of the publication was predominantly white Americans—unaccustomed to the standards of black beauty and entertainment preferences—the portrayal of the armed forces support was still improving.

The experiences of the Miss Black America Stephanie Clark hearkened to each of the roles that she had to perform in. As a connector between each of these organizations she was being a representative for the black community and women of color, an empathizing woman to black GIs, and a representative for the USO and their willingness to provide culturally relevant entertainment. She embodied all of these representations in a way that was unique and that brought soul, power, and black excellence to Vietnam.

The armed forces and the USO were sending more people of color to entertain GIs. Stephanie Clark, as a figure that emerges from the unique phenomenon of using entertainment to help dampen racial violence and repair racial tension, proves herself to be vocal and proud about pacifism, blackness, and support of black GIs.

Joyce Warner (1972 Tour)

At the end of November in 1971, *Stars and Stripes* published a spread all about Joyce Warner and what it meant to be Miss Black America 1971. The spread included countless photographs of her “shapely 37-25-38 figure,” Warner’s responses to questions about race and gender, and a snapshot of what was set before her-- 8,000 dollars, personal and television appearances, and a trip to Vietnam “with several other contestants to entertain the troops.”⁵⁷ The

⁵⁷ Sid Shapiro, “Miss Black America: Joyce Warner” *Pacific Stars and Stripes*, November 28 1971.

author, Sid Shapiro, managed to create a catchall that captured the essence of what all three of the Miss Black America pageant winners who toured Vietnam embodied.

In the same article, when asked about the position of women she began to respond by advocating for women, but qualified the statement and concluded that for women, it is all about being loved. She stated, “Staying home is not enough for many women... I don’t know. The black woman sticks to her man and can’t afford to be too independent. We enjoy being loved and cared for. Really, that’s what it’s all about.”⁵⁸ Her response yielded an understanding of the Miss Black America pageant tours as being representative of a set of understandings and norms that reinforced her role as a supporter of black men and a symbol of black pride.

⁵⁸ Sid Schapiro, “Picking Miss Black America,” *European Stars and Stripes*, November 7, 1971.



Figure 3: Photos from a Pacific Stars and Stripes spread the year Joyce Warner was crowned Miss Black America. 1971.⁵⁹

In *Women, Race, and Class*, Angela Davis discusses the ways that, historically, the women's movement had shown traits of racism and classism that did not allow room for black women to fully participate in it.⁶⁰ This was the same with the black power movement that often positioned women as still inferior and less valued than the men of the movement. When viewed from this perspective, the phenomenon of sending Miss Black America pageant winners to Vietnam becomes increasingly singular because it uncovers many of the layers of cultural movements, norms, and understandings that contributed to the use of black women's bodies to precipitate change for the DoD and black men.

⁵⁹ Sid Schapiro, "Joyce Warner: Miss Black America," *Pacific Stars and Stripes*, 28 November 1971.

⁶⁰ Angela Y. Davis, *Women, Race, and Class*, New York, NY: Random House, 1981.

One stark difference in Warner's trip to Vietnam from her predecessors came to light via an article published after her time as Miss Black America. The article, published in the *Bay State Banner* included testimony by Warner that claimed the pageant coordinators did not fulfill all of their promises and that Warner decided to discontinue her participation with the pageant because of their failure to follow through. She explained:

I had to discontinue my work for the pageant because I felt that I would be hurting black people rather than helping them by continuing to support the pageant, which I feel is not operating in their best interests... It is not the idea of the pageant that I am against or wish to see destroyed...I am for anything if it is geared toward getting our people together or if it is a sincere effort to help black people...But it is hard for me to turn my back on the fact that thousands of girls each year, across the country, are being used by people who claim to be black and who see in being black a means of getting ahead.⁶¹

Her testimony, whether it was substantiated or unsubstantiated, brought forward a critical view of the pageant. This critical view showed how that roles of these women could be defined differently even amongst those belonging to the same organization and would only further complicate what the actual role and purpose of the pageant winners being in Vietnam was.

The coverage of Warner's experience or expectations for touring Vietnam in order to entertain the troops was similar in many ways to that of Gloria Smith and Stephanie Clark. Both of her predecessors mentioned their ideas of black femininity in comparison to black masculinity and their ideas of showing those who came after them that black is beautiful. However, her choice to quit and her testimony after the pageant revealed the intricacy of the roles that these women participated in whether they believed in them or did not believe in them.

⁶¹ "Miss Black America Denounced as Fraud by Winner." *Bay State Banner* (1965-1979), Aug 31, 1972. 10.

Naturally, discussions and analyses of these women's tours should take into consideration also the state of black media at the time. Most popular publications meant for black audiences would have been disinterested in publishing stories that showed any disconnection and disagreement in the black community. This served as a way to protect the black community's culture and values from even further scrutiny by polite white society and could have affected the way that the pageant winners were covered in their publications. If the women were critical of the pageant and their roles in Vietnam it would be difficult to come by.

The media coverage of the women's tours was favorable in publications from *Ebony* to *Stars and Stripes*. The consensus reached after all of the women's tours was that they had performed at high levels, displayed pride, and added to the experiences of all GIs that came to their performances. The women had effectively filled their roles

Conclusion

“It’s Time to Talk of Other Things: of Love and Pride and Beauty Queens” was the title of a 1971 article about the Miss Black America pageant. The article, written about the Miss Black America pageant during the year that Stephanie Clark was crowned, states, “As Miss Black America, Stephanie hopes to do justice to ‘the beauty, the intelligence and the manner of black women.’ She showed little sympathy for the women’s liberation movement. ‘It doesn’t concern a black woman.’ Miss Clark said, ‘She already knows her obligation—to stick with her man to uplift his pride.’”⁶² In many ways, this quote highlighted the contradictions of the women’s liberation movement and the black power movement and showed the ways that the Miss Black America pageant winners contended with their roles during their tours—as women, as beauty queens, as activists, and as supporters of black men.

Even with opposing roles and viewpoints being thrust upon them, the women persisted and served greatly as entertainers, activists for black power, and supporters of black troops. They performed in engaging ways by bringing soulful music with them. They performed in politicized ways by claiming space for black beauty and frequently displayed black power fists. Finally, they performed as supporters of black troops by consistently reminding them that black women back home were in support of their efforts and their work.

At this time in U.S. history, this type of conversation about race, culture, and war was emerging and becoming more prevalent in the media. These three women found ways to navigate their media coverage and associate themselves with Malcolm X and others within the black power movement, advocate for the acknowledgement of black beauty, and demonstrate

⁶² “It’s Time to Talk of Other Things, Of Love and Pride and Beauty Queens” *Pacific Stars and Stripes*, 10 January 1971.

their support of GIs. They frequently cited the need for higher visibility within American society for black beauty and black pride as being the major reason they stood behind the Miss Black America pageant and largely as a reason for their participation. Due to this, the armed forces, during the war in Vietnam had to respond to these civil rights movements and sentiments occurring both inside and outside of their organization because their ranks were made up of black men who were not going to allow themselves to be disadvantaged any longer without standing up against the system that continued to treat them unfairly.

In order to do so, they responded in a way that was meant at the most to eradicate racism and at the least to ease racial violence. Making culturally relevant entertainment available to black GIs did not cure the “problem of race” but it did show that the armed forces accepted, at least in part, that extensions of culture—like those expressed by the Miss Black America pageant winners during their tours—were an important part of decreasing racial violence within their ranks. The DoD’s funding of these womens’ tours demonstrated, at times, a genuine desire to improve race relations within the armed forces and at other times, tours like these showed a form of appeasement that attempted to co-opt the aims of various aspects of the black power and civil rights movements within American society in order to stifle the racial violence occurring among American soldiers in Vietnam who felt that they were not treated fairly. What emerges alongside these experiences is a better picture of how some American institutions began to understand and relate to American society.



Figure 4: January 10th 1971 Pacific Stars and Stripes spread. "It's Time to Talk of Other Things Of Love And Pride And Beauty Queens"

To be clear, these women were not just parading themselves around a stage in order to gain a title that simply complimented their body measurements or swimwear. To them, it was important that they express pride and to pave the way for future black women and black Americans who they believed deserved better civil rights. These women carried themselves across the stage with pride. They were speaking out against social injustice and pursuant of traditions that continued to encourage black pride. They were actively involved in the labor of supporting and advancing black

Americans and for the pageant winners,

the tours to Vietnam offered additional ways that they could participate in this process. They were far more than beauty queens to be gawked at.

Gloria Smith, Stephanie Clark, and Joyce Warner, as advocates for black power and black pride and symbols for an improved relationship between black Americans and the armed forces, toured Vietnam in an effort to support the "brothers" who were fighting a war that they did not always agree with and demonstrated a deep investment in increasing black visibility and space for black Americans' demands for more culturally relevant entertainment. These demands

were just some of the ways in which the Department of Defense and the Armed Forces were forced to acknowledge and contend with race relations.

Obviously, the experiences of these women are not representative of all groups and experiences of black American's during this time in American history. The ways in which these women were perceived were not unanimous among all of those who viewed their shows. Despite differences in perception, the idea that the experiences speak to a more general effort to improve the dynamic of race relations within the armed forces remains true. These entertainers being included in the lineup of shows sent over to Vietnam show an integral aspect of the efforts for unity that are seen from the armed forces. Previously, shows that included white performers and mostly country music that black GIs did not feel included their musical or entertainment interests were the major source of entertainment. In sending over the Miss Black America pageant winners, cultural attributes, movements, and preferences that a sector of society maintained were noted. This bolstered and facilitated morale amongst "brothers" who often felt as if their masculinity and position in U.S. society was not respected. This is a realization that was not widely utilized during previous times of conflict.

Being young and proud of their blackness meant that the Miss Black America pageant winners were more than just beauty queens and black GIs were more than just soldiers. They were symbols of change within a longstanding United States organization and set of accepted behaviors. They stood against "hypocritical" organizations that did not always afford them fairness.⁶³

⁶³ William Van Deburg. *New Day in Babylon: The Black Power Movement and American Culture, 1965-1975*. Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1992.

The role of black, female entertainers and black pride in military efforts to combat racial divides and violence to help cure the feelings of alienation that black men were experiencing during the war and in American society showcase a disconnect in the way that civil rights movements interacted.

The importance of events like this are not often included in conversations about tactics, or strategy, or operations. However, they are integral to understanding the dynamic impetuses of the men who fought and how that may have impacted any layer of combat. Further, they add to the important history of how black women contributed to the war effort as entertainers while concurrently bearing the weight of their roles within the black community to be champions of black pride and positive role models for future generations of black Americans.

These young women and men fought to be respected, to be compensated, to be valued, and to be treated truly equally. Therefore—to revive the essence of a 1971 Stars and Stripes article title much more forward-thinking than it was intentioned—It is time to talk of grander themes: of black power, war, and beauty queens.

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