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# Book Review: Roberts, Blain. Pageants, Parlors, and Pretty Women: Race and Beauty in the Twentieth Century South

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Review of:

Roberts, Blain. *Pageants, Parlors, and Pretty Women: Race and Beauty in the Twentieth Century South*. Chapel Hill, North Carolina: University of North Carolina Press, 2014.

A women's beauty can affect her life in more ways than it should. This is more than true in the South. Arguably, the South puts more emphasis in a women's beauty than any other place in the United States. The 'southern belle' possesses absolute beauty and grace, hair and nail appointments are a weekly tradition, and that southern drawl can be heard even when they are whispering secrets to their friends. Most importantly, southern belles were white. Not only does the definition of beauty change when one looks more closely at race, but we see how important it was to culture and the racial divides that dominated the South in the twentieth century.

Raised in a small town in Louisiana, Blain Roberts saw how important beauty was in the South. However, it wasn't until she attended college in New Jersey that she saw how differently her southern female classmates presented themselves in comparison to those from other parts of the United States. She later returned to the South to earn her masters and doctorate degrees at UNC, Chapel Hill. Roberts examines everything from pageants and parlors to beauty products and clothing and the roles these things played in both sides of the racial divide. Female beauty was a lot more than just vanity; it had the ability to both strengthen and undermine the racial, class, and gender assumptions during the Jim Crow era (12).

The perfect stereotypical Southern woman always had her hair and makeup done. In the late nineteenth century, where Roberts starts her work, the South was rural. Beauty products and parlors were not easily accessible. Companies started marketing them as the perfect way to maintain one's elite white racial identity (18). In her first chapter, she begins by examining the beginning of the immense emphasis put on beauty in a purely racial way. Many early products

women used on their faces were often dangerous. Whitening enamel, which was lead-based, is only one example of the lengths taken to make sure that their skin remained untouched from the sun due to their worry that it would become darker.

The cosmetics industry skyrocketed in the United States with the beginning of the twentieth century, but that did not mean that the rural women of the South were buying them. In urban areas, like Birmingham and Atlanta, young elite women tracked the ads and bought products whenever they could. Roberts gives a short history as to how the cosmetics industry got its start as well as how the southern woman began playing into the idea of beauty. However, towards the end of this chapter she contradicts the notion she has made that elite women were the main users of cosmetics. She tells of women who were criticized for their use of makeup to ‘paint their faces.’ It is here she claims that the social elite put an emphasis on natural beauty. Roberts found an article from the *Baltimore Sun* that read, “No woman, in her natural desire to be beautiful, should seek outside aid when true beauty can be obtained through right living and right thinking, by observing the laws of nature and health, by living a useful, helpful life, and being content with that state of life into which it shall please God to call her” (33). Not only does this confuse readers, she perhaps misses a great opportunity to strengthen her work. It is at this point that she could have examined why the use of cosmetics gained such popularity when social elites supposedly believed natural beauty was more important.

It is not until the second chapter that Roberts examines beauty on the other side of the racial divide. Roberts claims that, “black southern women forged a more intimate and more active relationship with the burgeoning world of beauty than did white southern women” (59). This is proved by the popularity of the beauty parlor. A beauty parlor was considered a safe haven where African American women could really talk about the racial issues of the twentieth century. Furthering the importance was the emphasis that African American

leaders put on beauty, “by paying attention to physical appearance and health, poor southern blacks not only challenged stereotypes they also internalized the moral social virtues necessary for climbing the socioeconomic ladder” (65). Continuing in this chapter Roberts proves why beauty deepened the racial divide. The problem with African American leaders emphasizing beauty was that it further emphasized white beauty. The biggest and most common practice was that of straightening black women’s hair. While this is an important aspect of what many would say was a way of trying to control the African American population with beauty, Roberts puts too much importance on this one practice. Bleaching of the skin was not only dangerous, but unfortunately common and was also important in the case of African American women who attempted to strive for what was considered beautiful; white skin.

Chapters three and four examine the public rituals of beauty contests for white southern women and black southern women, respectively. In the seventies a pattern was noticed in the previously crowned Miss Americas; during the previous fifteen pageants over a third of the winners had been from the South. These pageants gained popularity because of their development in the rural areas of the South. In fact, it became tradition in many families for girls to start in baby pageants. Beauty queens were literally grown. Roberts shows here how the idea of southern beauty, at least for white women, became renowned and coveted in the modern era. For African American women however, these contests were more about race pride. These beauty contests were used to change the world’s views of the southern black woman. Assumptions were made all over the U.S. that these women were just “frazzled maids,” “overweight mid-wives” or “unkempt domestics” (150). It was efforts like these contests that helped to make the ideas of beauty that African American leaders wanted for women come to exist. Roberts could have tied in this chapter more closely with chapter two on the ideas of beauty these women had. More importantly she should have examined how these

contests paved the way for black women to be considered beautiful in their own right.

In the final chapter, “Bodies Politic: Beauty and Racial Crisis in the Civil Rights Era,” Roberts shines in her analysis of beauty in the racial divide and how it affected the Civil Rights movement. She sheds new light into the role African American women played in the fight for equal rights. The biggest focus is on that of college homecoming courts and pageants. First these students had their own contests and weeks to focus on black women. Then they took it to the rest of the campus. In the seventies black women essentially waged a war to prove their beauty. The focus of their campaigns was to get recognition of Afrocentric beauty standards (247). Many of the African American contestants won, too. Colleges like South Carolina and Alabama elected their first black homecoming queens in the late seventies.

Starting with the standards of beauty for white southern women in the late nineteenth century and chronicling throughout the twentieth century, *Pageants, Parlors, and Pretty Women: Race and Beauty in the Twentieth Century South* greatly examines the ideas of beauty. Unlike many southern women’s history books, Roberts gives equal attention to both races, successfully intertwining the standards of beauty with the politics and race war of the time. It is obvious that Blain Roberts is highly educated in this field and did extensive research for this work. While clearly written for academic purposes, this book exceeds those expectations. In fact, the way Roberts brings together her anecdotes, research, and analysis in an easily understood way, any amateur historian who is interested in this subject of beauty standards should put this book at the top of their reading list.

Claire Eagle