

ARTICLE

“A Colourful Crowning Ceremony”: Images of Class, Gender, and Beauty in World War II-Era Canadian Communism

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ON THE SURFACE, THE IDEA of Communist Party-run beauty pageants might seem odd. Yet the Communist Party of Canada (CP) and its affiliated unions often produced and promoted beauty contests during the 1940s and 1950s.¹ One particular instance – a beauty pageant held in Whitehorse, Yukon Territory, in early 1945 – shows the nature of CP “popular girl” contests. Vancouver-based Communist Party stalwart Tom McEwen was running for parliament in the Yukon riding. A group of Yukon-based, CP-affiliated trade unions sponsored a local carnival and the beauty pageant. The weekly newspaper for the British Columbia section of the Communist Party, the *Pacific Advocate*, asserted that the beauty contest had “done more to make the people union conscious than any other undertaking could have done.”² The article

1. I use the terms “beauty pageant,” “beauty contest,” and “popular girl contest” interchangeably throughout this paper. Scholars of this topic have used “beauty pageant” as a general term for these events, while mainstream organizers of events like the Miss America Pageant use the term “beauty contest.” For its part, the Communist Party of Canada frequently called their events “popular girl contests.”

2. The *Pacific Advocate* was the weekly newspaper of the British Columbia section of the Canadian Communist Party. In other regions of Canada, CP members read the weekly newspaper of their provincial CP branch. In spite of the CP’s reputation for being centralized and monolithic, the Canadian CP was fairly decentralized, with party leaders in Ontario often having little knowledge of Communist activities or writings elsewhere in Canada. The *B.C. Lumber Worker*, mentioned later in this article, was the newspaper of the CP-affiliated International Woodworkers of America (IWA) and was read by IWA members. Many, although not all, IWA leaders, members, and supporters were also CP members. Thus, the readership of

continued: the “girls” who participated “in the carnival queen contest have on several occasions appeared at theatres, and other packed public places” and “consistently gave their support to their union.” The *Advocate* noted that the finale of the pageant would consist of a “colourful crowning ceremony.”³

In her acceptance speech, winner Doris Lesanko, who was dressed in white furs, suggested that the carnival was “a splendid demonstration of what can be accomplished when a small community gets together.” She argued that “the same can be accomplished to help bring our boys back and to make sure that when they get back, they have more to come to than when they left.”⁴ In addition to their support for the war effort, CP members supported postwar help for veterans.⁵ Lesanko’s comments could easily have been made in a mainstream beauty pageant. Comments surrounding local patriotism, support for the war effort, and expressions of gratitude for Allied war veterans were commonplace in Miss America pageants and in smaller local contests.

What came next, though, differed from mainstream pageants. Lesanko argued that the community should “get together and build, support and maintain our unions. Let us maintain the same spirit that we have displayed during the carnival in the months to come.”⁶ The image of Lesanko dressed in white furs contrasted with her speech on the building and maintenance of trade unions. Lesanko’s costume, along with the other iconography surrounding this pageant, suggests both that many CP members held to mainstream ideas surrounding gender roles and that the women in these pageants were politically aware. Communist Party women used these pageants to realize a specific political goal: to help the CP, and the broader left-wing cause. As Joan Sangster has stated, it is possible that the CP used these beauty contests as part of their ongoing efforts to appear respectable. In effect, Communists utilized beauty pageants in order to appeal to mainstream Canadian society. Communists wanted to attract new members, and voters, to the party.⁷

However, these events were about much more than image and, on closer examination, we find deeper and more complex intentions. This article examines what the CP’s “colorful ceremonies” tell us about Communist culture by using World War II-era British Columbia, which was one of the centres of

labour movement newspapers and Communist Party newspapers overlapped, with many labour and CP newspapers featuring similar articles and ideas.

3. *Pacific Advocate*, 24 March 1945.

4. *Pacific Advocate*, 24 March 1945.

5. Peter Neary, *On to Civvy Street: Canada’s Rehabilitation Program for Veterans of the Second World War* (Montréal and Kingston: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2011), 281–288.

6. *Pacific Advocate*, 24 March 1945.

7. Joan Sangster, “‘Queen of the Picket Line’: Beauty Contests in the Post-World War II Canadian Labor Movement, 1945–1970,” *Labor: Studies in Working-Class History of the Americas* 5, 4 (2008): 92.

labour, left-wing, and communist activism in Canada, as a case study.⁸ This article interrogates the different views of women and beauty that Communist Party members – both female and male – held during the 1940s. I present two arguments. First, I argue that CP beauty pageants symbolized the contradictions inherent in the Communist Party's view of what Joan Sangster has called the “woman question” – the role that women were supposed to play in the Communist Party, in labour and left-wing movements in Canada, and in the broader Canadian society.⁹ Second, I argue that Communist men and women had different perspectives surrounding what these beauty contests meant for the party and for women. Male party members, particularly the CP leadership whose views the official party newspapers represented,¹⁰ saw the pageants as a method of using women's bodies in a conventional manner: the party chose beautiful women for the contests in order to raise publicity and money for the party. In contrast, female CP members did not view the pageants as being related to physical beauty at all. CP women argued that the pageants represented one area where women could step forward to assist in raising the party's profile, and to support issues – notably higher wages, union rights, and compensation for veterans – from the CP's platform.

Thus, CP beauty pageants had a two-sided and contradictory nature. On the one hand, we might see the pageants as positive for women. The pageants provided women on the left with an outlet through which they could support labour radicalism and leftist protest. Indeed, CP women appropriated the discourse and iconography of mainstream beauty pageants in order to present a modified pageant that challenged capitalism and argued for a socialist Canada.

On the other hand, and in the context of World War II – with women coming out of the home in unprecedented numbers¹¹ – most male CP members' views

8. See especially Benjamin Isitt, *Militant Minority: British Columbia Workers and the Rise of a New Left, 1948–1972* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2011), 44–83; Maurice Rush, *We Have a Glowing Dream: Recollections of Working-Class and People's Struggles in B.C., 1935–1995* (Vancouver: Centre for Socialist Education, 1996), 4–45.

9. Joan Sangster, *Dreams of Equality: Women on the Canadian Left, 1920–1950* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2015), 13–24, Kindle edition.

10. A brief word is necessary regarding the sources used here. They have their limitations. This paper draws primarily on the CP's official press, that is, the propaganda newspapers that the party used to draw in supporters and members. These papers published mostly positive and pro-communist material. The paper also draws on oral interviews with Communist Party veterans, done many years after the events detailed here. All of the women were still CP supporters when the interviews took place. Thus, the interviewees were reluctant to offer any criticism of the party's male members for opposing women's advancement. I deeply respect the views of the interviewees and other party members. Nonetheless, I feel that the different sources used here show the different sides of CP attitudes toward women and beauty. See Brian T. Thorn, *From Left to Right: Maternalism and Women's Political Activism in Postwar Canada* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2016), 25.

11. On women workers during World War II, see Jeffrey Keshen, *Saints, Sinners, and Soldiers: Canada's Second World War* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2004), 145–193;

of women still reflected that of the dominant society. The CP's overall ideology, although radical in terms of labour politics and wage and class issues,¹² was only marginally better than traditional bourgeois notions of supporting and empowering women.¹³ This article joins with other recent scholarship on beauty pageants in interrogating what these pageants meant for women. Were these pageants purely indicative of patriarchal attitudes toward women? Or did they contain positive elements?¹⁴ This article extends the focus on beauty pageants back into the World War II years; other scholars of this topic focus largely on the post-1945 years. Similarly, the article builds on the scholarship of historians such as Linda Kealey and Joan Sangster in their work concerning women on the Canadian left. The article uses the Communist beauty pageant as a method of examining the gendered ideology implicit within the Communist Party of Canada, and within the broader Canadian left. In so doing, the article sheds light on left-wing visions of masculinity, femininity, and female beauty in 1940s Canada.

A brief word is necessary regarding mainstream gender ideology in World War II-era Canada. Women's entry into the workforce intensified gender anxiety for many men. If women worked in war industries for an overly long period, then they might become overly manly, or so the stereotype went. As Helen Smith and Pamela Wakewich have noted, newspapers produced and written by company management – that is, newspapers that management wrote to express the official views of the company's executives – expressed

Ruth Roach Pierson, *They're Still Women After All: The Second World War and Canadian Womanhood* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1986), 37–94; Helen Smith and Pamela Wakewich, "Trans/Forming the Citizen Body in Wartime: National and Local Public Discourse on Women's Bodies and 'Body Work' for Women during the Second World War," in Patrizia Gentile and Jane Nicholas, eds., *Contesting Bodies and Nation in Canadian History* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2013), 305–326.

12. See Ian Angus, *Canadian Bolsheviks: The Early Years of the Communist Party of Canada*, second ed. (Victoria: Trafford Publishing, 2004), 47–78; Ivan Avakumovic, *The Communist Party of Canada: A History* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1975), 1–17; Kevin McDermott and Jeremy Agnew, *The Comintern: A History of International Communism from Lenin to Stalin* (London: McMillan, 1996).

13. Sangster, *Dreams of Equality*, 224–238.

14. There are now a number of publications dealing with various kinds of beauty pageants. See, in particular, Tarah Brookfield, "Modelling the U.N.'s Mission in Semi-Formal Wear: Edmonton's Miss United Nations Pageants of the 1960s," 247–264; Mary-Ann Shantz, "Nudity as Embodied Citizenship and Spectacle: Pageants at Canada's Nudist Clubs, 1949–1975," and "CP women veterans," 226–245, both in Gentile and Nicholas, eds., *Contesting Bodies and Nation in Canadian History*; Susan L. Joudrey, "The Expectations of a Queen: Identity and Race Politics in the Calgary Stampede," in Alvin Finkel et al., eds., *The West and Beyond: New Perspectives on an Imagined Region* (Edmonton: Athabasca University Press, 2010), 133–155; Stephen A. Fielding, "The Changing Face of Little Italy: The Miss Colombo Pageant and the Making of Ethnicity in Trail, British Columbia, 1970–1977," *Urban History Review* 39, 1 (Fall 2010): 45–58; Sangster, "Queen of the Picket Line," 83–106.



The presence of women in the military, and in many other areas of society outside of the home, came as a shock to many. Although this image came from outside Canada, similar images existed in Canada, and images like this one had a profound influence on Canadians.

Image photo: papa/Adobe Stock/File#: 82816265.

an ambivalent view of women workers. For example, war plant newspapers portrayed women working outside of the home in what were, at the time, unconventional roles. At the same time, newspapers and bulletins often presented women in subordinate positions in industries, or as sex objects or curiosities. In their analysis, Smith and Wakewich argue that *Aircrafter*, a management-produced newspaper at Can Car in Thunder Bay, Ontario, ultimately reinforced a conservative, home-centered vision of a woman's role. Indeed, the newspaper presented women both as being innately suited to being housewives, and as sexual beings who could distract men from their work.¹⁵ We might think of this as a mainstream, middle-class vision of femininity. It is within this context that we examine the Communist Party's gendered discourse. Perhaps surprisingly, CP men, particularly those higher in the party's hierarchy, endorsed this middle-class view of gender.

The Origins of the Communist Party of Canada and Mainstream Beauty Pageants

THE COMMUNIST VIEW ON WOMEN emerged from the Canadian party's broader origins. Influenced by the revolutionary fervour that emerged from the Russian Revolution of 1917, activists such as Florence Custance, Jack MacDonald, and Maurice Spector founded the CP in 1921, near Guelph, Ontario. Rhetorically, the party argued that only a socialist revolution, propagated by the working class, could lead to positive changes for all in the context of capitalist society. Theoretically, Canadian Communists, like Communist parties all over the world, followed the model of the Communist Party in the Soviet Union. Canadian CP members fought for a "Soviet Canada," where the CP would control the levers of state power. Yet the CP followed a relatively moderate approach on the level of everyday tactics. The party primarily worked through electoral politics in an attempt to elect CP members to various levels of government. Even the illegal activities that CP members participated in during the 1920s and 1930s, such as rent strikes and protests for higher wages, were largely non-violent.

Thus, the CP's ultimate goal involved a revolutionary change in the nature of Canadian society – a move away from capitalism and toward a socialist society – while the party's tactics on a day-to-day level consisted primarily of pragmatic activities, such as involvement in elections, and non-violent protest in support of workers' rights, better housing conditions, and increased old-age pensions, among other things. Indeed, the CP and the social democratic Co-operative Commonwealth Federation (CCF) had more in common

15. Helen Smith and Pamela Wakewich, "Beauty and the Helldivers": Representing Women's Work and Identities in a Warplant Newspaper," *Labour/Le Travail* 44 (Fall 1999): 71–72, 79, 89–90.

than either admitted. Both endorsed similar policies and fought over a similar voting and supporter bloc.¹⁶

While the various CP branches participated in local struggles, the party leadership often followed the dictates of the Communist International (Comintern) in Moscow, the governing body of Communist Parties across the world until Josef Stalin dissolved it in 1943. For example, the Canadian CP initially opposed entry into World War II due to the party's view that World War II was an imperialist conflict. As a result, the Canadian government introduced a law in 1939 that outlawed the CP and temporarily imprisoned or forced Communists underground. With the Nazi invasion of the Soviet Union in the spring of 1941, CP members became enthusiastic supporters of the war effort, and emerged from illegality with the proviso that the party change its name to the more moderate-sounding Labor Progressive Party (LPP). As part of its support for the war effort, the CP made common cause with mainstream political parties, notably the CCF and the governing Liberal Party.¹⁷

Throughout the labour movement, the CP organized in ethnic organizations, such as those led by leftist Ukrainians and Finns, and raised funds from sympathetic individuals and organizations.¹⁸ The beauty pageant was one event through which the party raised money and publicity. Although Communist-run pageants were different from conventional beauty contests, the CP borrowed much symbolism and discourse from mainstream pageants. Mainstream beauty pageants emerged in a particular historical context. Although the first Miss America, Margaret Gorman, was proclaimed in 1921, the fame and cultural importance of the Miss America pageant did not emerge until the late 1930s and early 1940s. During this time, the pageant's fame began to grow and organizers established the contest's official rules. The pageant's guidelines, which remain largely the same today, required that all contestants

16. The information from this section introducing the CP's ideology can be found in Angus, *Canadian Bolsheviks*, 2–48, 250–264; Avakumovic, *The Communist Party of Canada*; Candida Rifkind, *Comrades and Critics: Women, Literature, and the Left in 1930s Canada* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2009), 3–11, 149–160; William Rodney, *Soldiers of the International: The Communist Party of Canada, 1919–1929* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1968).

17. Fernando Claudin, *The Communist Movement: From Comintern to Cominform, Part Two: The Zenith of Socialism*, trans. Francis MacDonagh (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1975), 307–315, 590–597; John Manley, “Does the International Labour Movement Need Salvaging? Communism, Labouring, and the Canadian Trade Unions, 1921–28,” *Labour/Le Travail* 41 (Spring 1998): 148–152; Manley, “Moscow Rules? ‘Red Unionism’ and ‘Class Against Class’ in Britain, Canada, and the United States, 1928–1935,” *Labour/Le Travail* 56 (Fall 2005): 9–50. A useful look at the tension between local CP movements and the need to follow Soviet/Comintern directives, in the American context, is Bryan D. Palmer, “Rethinking the History of United States Communism,” *American Communist History* 2, 2 (December 2003): 139–173.

18. See, for example, Joan Sangster, “Robitnystia and the Porcupinism Debate: Reassessing Ethnicity, Gender and Class in Early Canadian Communism,” *Labour/Le Travail* 56 (Fall 2005): 51–89.

be unmarried women between the ages of 17 and 24.¹⁹ Moreover, the rules declared that candidates must never have been married, divorced, pregnant, or separated from a spouse. Pageant organizers dictated that candidates had to adhere to a strict standard of sexual morality. In 1937, the organizers introduced a rule barring contestants from attending night clubs, bars, inns, or taverns throughout the duration of the competition. All contestants had to attend church, refrain from drinking alcohol, and were required to plan to attend college or university. Additionally, the pageant organizers stated that contestants could not have any contact with men, including the contestants' fathers and brothers, during the period of the competition.²⁰ Miss Canada pageants, established after World War II, followed similar guidelines.²¹

Local organizers established similar rules for smaller state, provincial, and municipal pageants. The majority of women in all pageants came from well-established, middle-class families. In many cases, the contestant's father held a large amount of influence in the region's social hierarchy. The young women participated in activities such as cheerleading, sports, and church youth groups.²² Until recently, traditional beauty contests also reflected dominant racial hierarchies. There have been only four African American Miss Americas – the first African American woman only participated in 1970 – and one Jewish winner.²³ As Patrizia Gentile has argued, beauty contests promoted

19. This was not true of all beauty pageants. For instance, in the 1970s, Miss Nude World pageants put on events where the contestants could be married or single women, aged 18–30. See Shantz, "Nudity as Embodied Citizenship," 233.

20. A.R. Riverol, *Live From Atlantic City: The History of the Miss America Pageant Before, After, and in Spite of Television* (Bowling Green: Bowling Green State University Press, 1992); Sarah Banet-Weiser, *The Most Beautiful Girl in the World: Beauty Pageants and National Identity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 31–57; Sangster, "Queen of the Picket Line," 89.

21. For the Canadian context, see Candace Savage, *Beauty Queens: A Playful History* (New York: Abbeville, 1998); Patrizia Gentile, "Queen of the Maple Leaf: A History of Beauty Contests in Twentieth-Century Canada," PhD Thesis, Queen's University, 2006.

22. See Robert H. Lavenda, "It's Not a Beauty Pageant! Hybrid Ideology in Minnesota Community Queen Pageants," in Colleen Ballerino Cohen et al., eds., *Beauty Queens on the Global Stage: Gender, Contests, and Power* (New York: Routledge, 1996), 33–38.

23. Banet-Weiser, *Most Beautiful Girl*, 58–80, 125–129. The ethnic hierarchy changed over time, and, by the 1960s and 1970s, different ethnic groups had their own beauty contests as well. See Fielding, "The Changing Face of Little Italy," 49–55; Christine Yano, *Crowning the Nice Girl: Gender, Ethnicity, and Culture in Hawaii's Cherry Blossom Festival* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2006). By the 1960s, in Canada and the U.S., some First Nations women were involved in beauty contests and there were specific contests for First Nations women. See Gentile, "Queen of the Maple Leaf," chapter three. We must be conscious of the racialized and romanticized elements involved in white men observing and judging First Nations women and, by extension, First Nations culture. See Joudrey, "The Expectations of a Queen," 136–145. There were also beauty contests, such as the Miss United Nations pageant, designed to promote the perceived Canadian values of "multiculturalism" and tolerance. See Brookfield, "Modelling the U.N.," 247–248.

capitalist values of consumption, competitiveness, possessive individualism, respectability, and conformity.²⁴ In contrast, Communist Party beauty pageants borrowed from mainstream pageants, yet offered a hybrid vision.

Women in the CP and the Challenge to Conventional Gender Boundaries

THE CP'S APPROPRIATION OF CONSERVATIVE elements from beauty pageants symbolized the party's struggles with the woman question. During the 1920s, party organizer Florence Custance worked with the already established Women's Labor Leagues (WLL), which Custance helped to bring under the Communist Party's influence. WLL branches across Canada fought for such issues as higher wages for working women and for recognition of the "double day" of labour for women. The CP's Women's Department, established in 1922 with Custance as its driving force, argued for the introduction of more women into the party. Some members of the Women's Department even expressed progressive views on birth control and abortion. During the period from the 1920s to the 1940s, the party attempted to organize women using motherhood as a key theme. In a number of instances, CP women presented themselves as innately mothers and wives during protests against the high prices of foods like bread and milk.²⁵ In effect, CP organizers saw women's domesticity as an element that would assist in introducing women to the party.²⁶ In much the same way, CP women used beauty pageants to raise interest in radical ideas related to the oppression inherent in capitalism, especially ideas about low wages and poor working conditions. We might see CP beauty pageants as an example of what Susan Prentice has termed "strategic essentialism": the use of a narrow definition of a woman's role in a particular context, with the intention of extracting concessions from the dominant system.²⁷

During World War II, with many women coming out of the home and into the paid workforce and the armed services, both mainstream and leftist organizations expressed concern. A moral panic ensued over the fact that women took on roles, in factories and in the military, previously assumed to be the sole domain of men. Some commentators even asserted that women might become too much like men or turn to homosexuality.²⁸ Many CP members

24. Gentile, "Queen of the Maple Leaf," 3.

25. Brian Thorn, "Women Are Truly Wonderful in their Ingenuity: Radical Housewives and Consumer Protest during the Cold War Era," *Left History* 18:1 (Spring/Summer 2014): 9-12.

26. Joan Sangster, "The Communist Party and the Woman Question, 1922-1929," in Joan Sangster, *Through Feminist Eyes: Essays on Canadian Women's History* (Edmonton: Athabasca University Press, 2011), 97-110, 121-123.

27. See Susan Prentice, "Workers, Mothers, Reds: Canada's Postwar Daycare Fight," *Studies in Political Economy* 30 (Fall 1989): 115-141.

28. The term "moral panic" refers to a situation where some sort of condition, person, or group

held conventional views surrounding a woman's proper place in society. For example, a number of male CP members had multiple sexual partners. In contrast, CP leaders expected female members to be chaste wives and mothers.²⁹ Similarly, most CP members saw sexual freedom and promiscuity as a "bourgeois deviation" from real issues such as workplace justice and higher wages.³⁰ In short, the CP's view on women's roles in society was relatively traditional. During the 1920s and 1930s, some party members expressed progressive views on women's concerns;³¹ however, during the post-World War II years, a conservative ethos surrounding gender came to dominate. In the context of revolutionary leftist movements, the CP's view on women was hardly radical. For example, the anarcho-syndicalist Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) held a more progressive view on women.³²

Communist Party Men and Standards of Beauty: Reflecting Traditional Mores?

DESPITE THE CP'S CONVENTIONAL orientation on gender issues, Communist Party-led beauty pageants reflected a different ethos than mainstream contests. Still, the party created guidelines about who could compete. Contestants had to be supporters of a left-led, CP-endorsed trade union or someone who

of people comes to be seen as a threat to the dominant society. Moral panics often result from anxiety over changes in society related to class, race, and gender issues. See Stanley Cohen, *Folk Devils and Moral Panics: The Creation of the Mods and Rockers* (Oxford: Martin Robinson, 1980), 9; Mariana Valverde, *The Age of Light, Soap, and Water: Moral Reform in English Canada, 1885–1925*, rev. ed. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2008), 77–79, 100–103. On women during World War II, see Pierson, "They're Still Women After All," 129–168; Paul Jackson, *One of the Boys: Homosexuality in the Military During World War II* (Montréal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2010), 39–40, 60–62, 81–84; Nancy Olson, "Assembling A Life: The (Auto) Biography of Alexis Amelia Alvey, 1942–1945," MA Thesis, Simon Fraser University, 1998.

29. Kathleen A. Brown and Elizabeth Fae, "Social Bonds, Sexual Politics, and Political Community on the US Left, 1920s–1940s," *Left History* 7, 1 (2000): 9–45; Ellen Stafford, *Always and After: A Memoir* (Toronto: Viking, 1999).

30. On the double standard regarding male and female members' personal lives, see the CP memoirs Louise Watson, *She Never Was Afraid: The Biography of Annie Buller* (Toronto: Progress Books, 1976); Dorothy Ray Healey and Maurice Isserman, *California Red: A Life in the American Communist Party* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1993).

31. Sangster, "The Communist Party and the Woman Question."

32. The IWW had no official position on women's roles in the movement, or in society in general. IWW members and supporters possessed a variety of views on the role of women. Yet, prominent "Wobblies" like Elizabeth Gurley Flynn argued that women should be permitted to choose whether or not they worked outside of the home, rather than being forced to do so because of family poverty. See Heather Mayer, "Beyond the Rebel Girl: Women, Wobblies, Respectability, and the Law in the Pacific Northwest, 1905–1924," PhD Dissertation, Simon Fraser University, 2015, 97–98.

worked for a trade union.³³ The daughters or wives of male CP members also qualified as contestants. The CP used women to entice party members to come to social gatherings and to promote a vision of feminine respectability that aped mainstream views of women living within the home and the nuclear, heterosexual family.

Indeed, traditional ideas surrounding feminine beauty were very much present in CP beauty pageants. In one case, the *B.C. Lumber Worker* described the International Woodworkers of America's (IWA) winning candidate for the 1944 Klondyke Karnival Pageant as "an attractive red-headed Princess," while describing other candidates as pretty, popular, and lovely.³⁴ In another caption, regarding Princess Valerie Hamilton of Duncan, the author remarked that "Princess Valerie was the popular choice of the students of Duncan high school."³⁵ The idea of young women being "popular" and "attractive princesses" suggests that the CP borrowed much of the discourse of beauty and popularity from mainstream beauty contests. In 1945, the IWA planned to hold a "Lumber Queen" contest on 2 July as part of the Duncan Dominion Day Carnival. Prior to the event, the CP newspaper featured an advertisement using language identical to the *Pacific Advocate's* description of the Whitehorse pageant winner's "colourful crowning ceremony".³⁶ Here, too, CP beauty pageants borrowed much of their iconography and symbolism from mainstream pageants, which held similar ceremonies.³⁷

Later in the summer of 1945, the *B.C. Lumber Worker* advertised an event: "a contest for the most popular girl – the Miss United Nations contest." The contest was part of the CP's annual summer United Nations Picnic, held in Confederation Park, North Burnaby.³⁸ The picnic featured "all sorts of entertainment for all sorts of people, from nine to ninety, from all the nationalities that make up our cosmopolitan city of Vancouver." The event became "one of

33. There were many of these, notably the IWA, the International Union of Mine, Mill, and Smelter Workers, the United Fishermen and Allied Workers Union, and the International Union of Electrical, Radio, and Machine Workers. There were also many rank and file Communists in unions like the United Auto Workers, although the UAW's leadership consisted mainly of mainstream social democrats and liberals. See Irving Martin Abella, *Nationalism, Communism, and Canadian Labour: The CIO, the Communist Party, and the Canadian Congress of Labour, 1935–1956* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1973), 164–167; Burt Cochran, *Labor and Communism: The Conflict that Shaped American Unions* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1977); Wendy Cuthbertson, *Labour Goes to War: The CIO and the Construction of a New Social Order, 1939–1945* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2012); Steve Rosswurm, ed., *The CIO's Left-Led Unions* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1992).

34. *The B.C. Lumber Worker*, 4 September 1944.

35. *The B.C. Lumber Worker*, 18 June 1945.

36. *The B.C. Lumber Worker*, 18 June 1945.

37. Riverol, *Live From Atlantic City*; Savage, *Beauty Queens*, 113.

38. *The B.C. Lumber Worker*, 30 July 1945.

the red letter days of the year for thousands of Vancouver workers and their families.³⁹ The *Pacific Advocate*, the official propaganda organ of the CP's British Columbia section, noted that the event was "expected to be the most successful picnic yet held in Vancouver."⁴⁰ The *B.C. Lumber Worker* asserted that the "popular girl" contest was part of the "lighter side" of the picnic's highlights, along with music, dancing, singing, and "a contest for the best national costume," which the paper expected to be "colorful and interesting."⁴¹

The casual language used here suggests how male CP members viewed women's presence in the movement. Writers for CP and union newspapers presented women's activity in the party as "interesting" and part of the lighter side of the party's activity, but never as something serious or as contributing to the political activities of the CP. CP men often portrayed women's activities as a kind of sideshow to the real work of organizing workers or helping to promote CP rallies.

The CP press' use of language and the party's view of female beauty can be analyzed and better understood through a Foucaultian lens. Michel Foucault argued that modern forms of surveillance made men and women into "docile bodies" who would adhere to commonly accepted sexual mores. As applied to Communist beauty pageants, Foucault detailed how ideas became commonly accepted through the populace endorsing concepts as normal rather than deviant.⁴² Communist beauty pageants reflected mid-20th-century perceptions of female beauty. As illustrated in the work of neo-Foucaultian scholars Patrizia Gentile and Jane Nicholas, among others, most CP women and men failed to go beyond the gender binary put forward by contemporary media.⁴³

Pioneering feminist film scholar Laura Mulvey, using Sigmund Freud's ideas about female sexuality, has suggested that film and, by extension, other forms of media endorse traditional gender roles.⁴⁴ According to Mulvey, Hollywood films present men as sexually active and "lookers," while showing women as passive and "looked upon" sexual objects. Mulvey implies that film symbolizes a larger gendered order whereby women have no agency, sexual or otherwise, in society. Women become part of an active-passive value system where men observe them in a voyeuristic manner. Similarly, Mulvey suggests that women

39. *The B.C. Lumber Worker*, 30 July 1945.

40. *Pacific Advocate*, 21 July 1945.

41. *The B.C. Lumber Worker*, 30 July 1945.

42. Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Pantheon Books, 1977), 149–156, 174–175, 200–202; Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Volume 1: An Introduction*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Vintage Books, 1990), 92–105.

43. On contemporary media, see Gentile and Nicholas, *Contesting Bodies and Nation in Canadian History*; Smith and Wakewich, "Beauty and the Helldivers."

44. I say "pioneering" because Mulvey was the first scholar to examine Hollywood films from the feminist perspective in this manner.

have a “fetishistic” relationship to men whereby men fear castration at the hands of women.⁴⁵ In the context of CP beauty pageants, CP men hoped that contestants would be passive. We can see this in the portrayal of contestants as pleasant and non-threatening.

If CP men did not fear literal castration, women’s increased visibility outside of the home during World War II certainly threatened Communist men’s sense of identity and the communist view of the heterosexual family. CP attitudes toward the family were complex and contradictory. In fact, many male CP members had several different, female sexual partners over the years.⁴⁶ Publicly, however, as Joan Sangster and Janice Newton have noted, the CP endorsed the monogamous, nuclear family and railed against capitalism for failing to provide an adequate wage for men. Higher wages for male workers would allow working-class wives to remain in the domestic sphere.⁴⁷ Thus, male CP members tacitly supported male promiscuity while condemning female promiscuity, echoing mainstream ideas about women and men’s sexuality. We can see this ideology reflected in CP men’s views on the beauty pageant. While CP women used the beauty pageant in more positive ways and in ways that were different from mainstream pageants, CP men’s support for the pageants reflected dominant sexual mores, unlike other groups on the radical left.⁴⁸

Some CP men endorsed another standard of beauty, seeing Soviet women as a model for Canadian women workers. Prominent CP member Jonnie Rankin argued that male Communists valorized Soviet women, viewing them as strong and supportive of socialist values, while portraying Canadian CP women as frivolous and overly concerned with appearances. Illustrating this point, Rankin shared the following story:

One fella, who was an old time left-winger, called me bourgeois. He was always telling me about the Soviet women. The Soviet woman as far as he was concerned was always in love with a tank as far as I could see. And we used to wear these awful overalls, and so I used to put a big ribbon on my hat to sort of doll up this overall a little bit. He was always telling me about Soviet women fighting on the front, which they did, and organizing the factories and everything else. But they were never frivolous according to him.⁴⁹

Showing the double-sided nature of women’s war work, Rankin, who worked as a “passer girl” in the North Vancouver shipyards, suggested that she found

45. Laura Mulvey, *Visual and Other Pleasures* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2009), 14–26.

46. See Stafford, *Always and After*.

47. Janice Newton, *The Feminist Challenge to the Canadian Left, 1900–1918* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1995), chapter three; Sangster, *Dreams of Equality*, 38–42, 158–160.

48. Again, the rww had a strong critique of middle-class ideas about marriage and family. See Mayer, “Beyond the Rebel Girl,” 53, 68–80.

49. Jonnie Rankin, interview by Sara Diamond, Summer 1979, Simon Fraser University Archives (hereafter SFU Archives), Women’s Labour History Collection (hereafter WLHC).

the actual work empowering, stating, “[I] learned more in two days than I’d learned in twenty years someplace else.”⁵⁰ Still, her comments suggest how many leftist men viewed women, even women on the left: as non-political individuals, whose main contribution lay in their physical attributes. Indeed, CP men frequently bemoaned Canadian women’s perceived lack of knowledge of political or class-based issues.⁵¹

While acknowledging that women had taken on new roles outside of the home during World War II, the CP-led Boilermakers and Iron Shipbuilders of Canada argued that having women in the workplace did not change male attitudes. In an example of CP men’s views on women, a male writer for the Boilermakers’ Union bulletin emphasized the link between working women and conventional standards of beauty. In one case, the writer introduced a scenario: “welder’s wife to neighbor: I don’t like this business of women working in the shipyards. You know how attractive my husband is.”⁵² The comment implies that working women frequently worried about physical appearances and expressed jealousy toward other women. In another edition of the bulletin, a male writer, using the voice of a woman, argued that women might lose their femininity if they worked in industry for too long:

They found a woman in the States who is sorry she went to work in the shipyards. I should have got a nice easy job in an airplane plant. I went to the dance the other night, and I had on an evening gown, sleeveless and low in the back. The men were all complimenting me on the fine muscles I had on my shoulders and arms. One stoop even told me I had a manly walk. Now I gotta practice at home to walk like a lady.⁵³

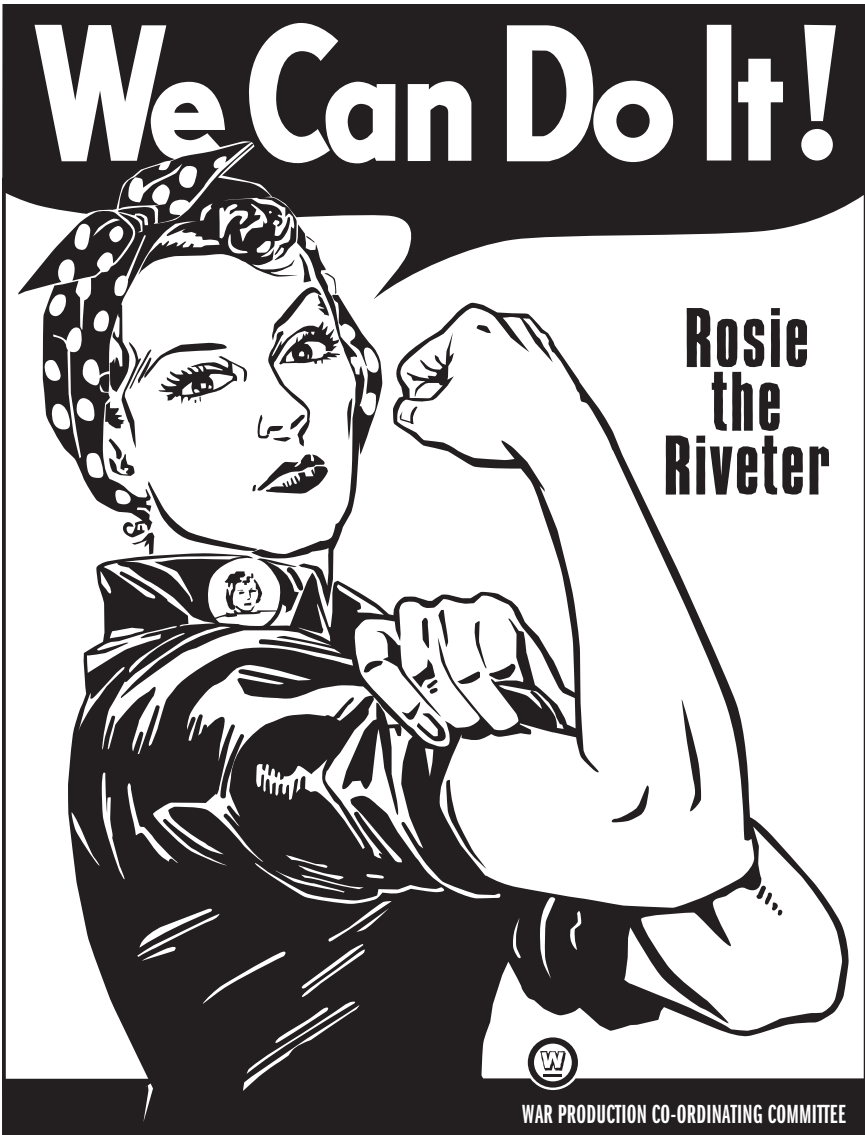
The writer asserted that wearing sleeveless gowns represented proper attire for women at formal dances. Similarly, the author implied that a respectable way of walking existed for women. The comments, which represented the general view that CP men held about women’s concerns and women’s presence in paid work and in trade unions, show clear support for a normative vision of female beauty.

50. Jonnie Rankin, interview by Sara Diamond, Summer 1979, SFU Archives, WLHC. Rankin worked with the Marine and Boilermakers Union and later married Harry Rankin, who became well-known as a left-wing member of Vancouver City Council. See Rush, *We Have a Glowing Dream*, 176–178.

51. Thorn, *From Left to Right*, 116–117.

52. Boilermakers and Iron Shipbuilders of Canada, Local No. 1, Bulletin No. 10, 14 April 1943, Tom McEwen Fonds, Box 2, File 5, University of British Columbia, Special Collections Division (hereafter UBCSC).

53. Boilermakers and Iron Shipbuilders of Canada, Local No. 1, Bulletin No. 9, 7 April 1943, Angus MacInnis Memorial Collection, Box 34, File 2, UBCSC.



Images like the well-known “Rosie the Riveter” photo were very common as part of the American war effort. Images like this one demonstrated that views of women, and female beauty, were slowly changing, both in Canada and the United States. RetroClipArt/Adobe Stock/File#: 74233240.

Communist Party Women and Beauty Pageants: Appropriating Dominant Ideals?

WHEN DISCUSSING THE EXPERIENCES of CP women, a different perception of the beauty pageant emerges. CP women participants did not see their involvement as sexist or as downplaying women's roles in the CP. For these women, social activism, not working as a housewife or participating in church and community groups, symbolized feminine virtue. In one case – the 1945 Miss United Nations contest – we can see that party women had a different perspective on beauty than CP men. The British Columbia Communist party's newspaper noted that all the contestants were "involved in the trade union and progressive movement."⁵⁴ The list of candidates and the organizations that sponsored the contestants read differently from a mainstream pageant. Instead of a group of women that was completely Anglo-Saxon, the list of Miss United Nations pageant contestants read that "Vera Olzewski as Miss USSR" was sponsored by the Communist Party's Ukrainian and Russian Club. At the same time, "Miss Y. Sertic as Miss Yugoslavia" was sponsored by the Georgia LPP club, and "Margaret Chepak as Miss Hungary" by the Hungarian Democratic Circle. "Rose Nicolette as Miss Italy" was sponsored by the Grandview LPP club, and "Mae Neveroski as Miss America" by the North Burnaby club. Finally, "Dawn Yip as Miss China" was sponsored by the Ginger Goodwin and West End LPP clubs.⁵⁵

Clearly, CP pageants had a more diverse ethnic base than mainstream beauty contests. On one level, this simply reflected the different ethnic backgrounds from which the CP drew its membership. Immigrant men and women from the Scandinavian nations, Italy, and various Eastern European countries, as well as Jewish migrants, joined the CP in disproportionate numbers compared to what the overall makeup of Canada's population might have suggested.⁵⁶ In a sense, the CP beauty contests were alternative pageants to those of the dominant culture. CP pageants reflected the internationalism of the communist movement – its support for a worldwide revolution that would overthrow capitalism in all nations – in opposition to mainstream events such as the Miss America or Miss Canada pageants, which reflected a specifically nationalist orientation. The party's pageants reflected the CP's opposition to

54. *Pacific Advocate*, 28 July 1945.

55. *Pacific Advocate*, 28 July 1945.

56. Avakumovic, *The Communist Party in Canada*, 11–14; Sangster, *Dreams of Equality*, 42–54. Immigrants numbered around 35 per cent of the CP membership. It is hard to give an exact amount for the number of women in the CP. Women were perhaps 30 per cent of the entire CP membership, which numbered only a few thousand at most. With this said, there would have been many more people who had been in the party at one point or another, as well as a large number of "fellow travellers," that is, men and women who sympathized with the goals of the CP but never officially joined the party. See Thorn, *From Left to Right*, 23–30.

capitalist culture and suggested that the party had a different conception of female beauty, one that included non-Anglo-Saxon women.

We can see the CP's explicit internationalism as a repudiation of the Canadian nation-state's concept of citizenship, which included white Anglo-Saxons only.⁵⁷ The CP provided a space, however imperfect, for non-Anglos, and even non-whites, to express an alternative to the dominant capitalist ideology. The CP's racial and ethnic composition and viewpoint were, implicitly, anti-racist. Communist support for immigrant workers carried more weight because the Canadian federal government at various times deported or interned CP members and other leftists from foreign countries. Thus, ideology and ethnicity went hand-in-hand for the Canadian state. The federal government viewed immigrant leftists as a threat, owing to perceived ethnic and ideological differences.⁵⁸ The CP's embrace of immigrant workers was unique in Canadian society during the 1920–1950 period; arguably no other political organization in Canada welcomed working-class immigrants to the same degree that the CP did. In this way, CP beauty pageants reflected the fact that the party stood at the fringe of Canadian society in many ways. The CP's outsider status related to issues of race and ethnicity. Immigrant minority workers found a home in the CP that did not exist elsewhere in Canadian society.

Canadians of British background looked upon Scandinavians and, especially, "white ethnics" such as Italians and Slavs as peoples who needed to be integrated into Canadian life, and preferably made to learn English and take on Canadian – that is, Anglo-Saxon – values.⁵⁹ Similarly, as Franca Iacovetta has noted, Canadian federal government administrations worked to exclude or marginalize leftist and pro-Communist immigrants during the post-World War II period.⁶⁰ The CP explicitly stood against this assimilationist approach and celebrated the different ethnic groups found within the party.

The showcasing of non-Anglo-Saxon women suggests the profound differences between CP concepts of beauty and mainstream views, notwithstanding the conservative opinions of many CP men. The Miss United Nations pageant expressed support for the Allied war effort: the women chosen represented nations who fought against Germany and Japan. Thus, the Miss United Nations contest was a cultural representation of the CP's support for communist internationalism, world revolution, and the goal of winning the war.

57. Sunera Thobani, *Exalted Subjects: Studies in the Making of Race and Nation in Canada* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2007), 67–85.

58. Donald Avery, *Reluctant Host: Canada's Response to Immigrant Workers, 1896–1994* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1994), 75–80, 113–115.

59. Franca Iacovetta, *Gatekeepers: Reshaping Immigrant Lives in Cold War Canada* (Toronto: Between the Lines, 2006), 85–101.

60. Iacovetta, *Gatekeepers*, 103–134. I realize that Iacovetta's work deals with the post-1945 years, but I feel that her views on the federal government's treatment of immigrants apply to earlier years as well.

Elsewhere, the class-based nature of CP beauty contests came out more fully. The *B.C. Lumber Worker* noted that:

On Sunday, August 1, Confederation Park in Burnaby will be the scene of one of the feature picnic events of the year. The United Nations Picnic, sponsored by the Communist-Labor Total war Committee, will have as one of the major attractions the selecting of a Miss United Nations. Mona Morgan, popular secretary to Ernie Dalskog in loggers Local 1-71 and an Icelander, is representing the Scandinavian countries as Miss Scandinavia. This is one case where the 'buying of votes' is legitimate and every woodworker will be interested in supporting this candidate.⁶¹

Mona Morgan (née Bjarnason), wife of IWA President and CP member Nigel Morgan, would not have been permitted to participate in a mainstream beauty pageant given her married status, position as a left-wing woman, and job as secretary to a well-known trade unionist. Morgan was born in 1913 and was 30 years old when the pageant took place.⁶² Indeed, many CP women were wives and mothers. Most came from working-class families, and, as we have seen, many came from immigrant families from southern and eastern Europe.

Beauty pageants highlight the phenomenon of the "communist family." The fairly small group of CP women who lived in Vancouver during World War II had similar backgrounds to one another: in addition to their class status and experience as immigrants, many met their husbands through leftist activism. Many continued in left-wing activity for much of their lives. The idea of the communist family – families where all or most members were involved in CP-oriented or leftist protest – provided an antidote to more conventional middle-class, conservative families. CP families had a different definition of familial respectability than mainstream, Anglo-Saxon, middle-class families. As Heather Mayer has noted, mainstream respectability for middle-class women and men meant home ownership, financial stability, and living in a family with a married mother and father.⁶³ Although the CP supported the nuclear family, communist women endorsed another standard of respectability: support for socialist values and a future socialist government, and standing in solidarity with working-class people. CP women valorized not physical beauty but, rather, support for the CP's program of good homes for all, higher wages for workers, and a stronger welfare state. Respectability, for the CP, related to ideology, not to physical beauty or to middle-class standards about the family. Familial and personal relationships reinforced political and ideological ties in a wide variety of political movements, from the far right to the left, and the CP was no exception.⁶⁴

61. *The B.C. Lumber Worker*, 12 July 1943.

62. Mona Morgan, personal interview by Brian Thorn, 7 June 2000, Vancouver, B.C.

63. Mayer, "Beyond the Rebel Girl," 83, 96–97.

64. See Rush, *We Have a Glowing Dream*, 4–7, 42; Thorn, *From Left to Right*, 27–28.

Communist-run beauty pageants differed from their mainstream counterparts in other ways. For example, CP and union members voted on the candidates of their choice for the pageant rather than having judges give scores, as in a mainstream contest.⁶⁵ Perhaps more importantly, the ultimate goal of these pageants was to raise money for the CP, which, in turn, could be used to set up party rallies and to support CP candidates who wished to run for public office. The party did not give individual prizes to winners.⁶⁶ One particular CP pageant, the LPP Bazaar and Carnival held on 15–17 March 1945 at the Boilermakers' Hall in downtown Vancouver, reveals much about the CP's gendered ideology. The *Pacific Advocate* noted that the "girls pictured on this page will wheedle votes for their respective constituencies. You pays (sic) your dime or dollar and you take your choice – may the staunchest committee win." The advertisement for the pageant noted that "reports of ticket sales on the \$800 prizes offered on the admission ticket to the March 17 dances being held all over the province indicates that with very little effort these tickets can be sold by the thousands!"⁶⁷ The party weekly referred to "constituencies," meaning the lumber workers' or miners' union, or to the different CP clubs in Vancouver.

Women's unpaid work on behalf of the party served as an important aspect of female leftist activism. Married women like Mona Morgan took on significant roles within the CP – as event and protest organizers, behind-the-scenes planners, and, in some cases, as "pin-up girls" who offered their bodies to help fundraise for the party. Yet, as Andrée Lévesque has argued, while the CP platform and leadership promised equality for women, and even endorsed maternity leaves and day nurseries, Canadian Communists did not deliver on these promises. In fact, 1920s-era CP organizations such as the Women's Labor Leagues supported birth control and abortion, only to have the CP back away from these issues during the 1930s.⁶⁸ The CP leadership always saw women's struggles as subordinate to the class struggle, and to the overall goal of creating a Communist Canada. We might contrast CP activist Jeanne Corbin's life with that of Mona Morgan. Corbin never married, and she devoted much of her time to fighting for CP-led campaigns.⁶⁹ Although Morgan also fought for higher wages and better workplace conditions, she was married and had children. We can only marvel at the amount of work and effort that women like Morgan put into Communist causes, given that the party put little effort into

65. Riverol, *Live from Atlantic City*, 6.

66. *The B.C. Lumber Worker*, 6 August 1943.

67. *Pacific Advocate*, 10 March 1945.

68. Joan Sangster, "Looking Backwards: Re-Assessing Women on the Canadian Left," in Joan Sangster, *Through Feminist Eyes*, 89.

69. Andrée Lévesque, *Red Travellers: Jeanne Corbin and Her Comrades*, trans. Yvonne M. Klein (Montréal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2006), 154–155.

promoting women's issues. Beauty pageants suggest the potential of women's activism in the CP – more women's activism and more focus on women's concerns like higher female wages and birth control would have helped the party to broaden its base – but also the marginalization of CP women.⁷⁰

In connection with another CP-endorsed event, the IWA's Lake Cowichan Women's Auxiliary and carnival committee planned a Miss Cowichan Lake contest for its annual Labour Day picnic. The Auxiliary asked every community and business in the Lake Cowichan area to sponsor a contestant. "We would like our auxiliary to be represented in this Duncan Dominion Day Parade Committee," noted Lil Godfrey. Godfrey went on to state that, on the day of the parade, "we had those girls in their green and gold crepe paper dresses. They had the insignia on their head and a big banner, 'We Support Local 80's Labor Programme, Equal Pay for Equal Work for All. Every Union man's wife in an auxiliary, unity in war and peace.'"⁷¹ Rather than emphasizing female grace or beauty, as in mainstream pageants, contestants promoted the union and the broader communist movement. The statement "every union man's wife in an auxiliary" endorsed women taking on a role outside of the home, although in a way that continued to emphasize a woman's domestic role.

CP beauty pageants suggest a kind of modification, or appropriation, of traditional beauty contests. CP women used the pageant – an aspect of mainstream, capitalist culture that commodified women's bodies to promote an ideal standard of beauty – as a method of fundraising and promotion for the party. Communist modification of beauty pageants reflected a use of the "master's tools" to attempt to "dismantle the master's house," or a version of Prentice's strategic essentialism.⁷² CP women appropriated the beauty pageant in such a way as to present a hybrid version of the contest, one that maintained an emphasis on the female body but with a different sense of beauty. The pageants emphasized socialist ideology and used women to do so.

Thus, using the example that Lil Godfrey outlined above, the pageant emphasized leftist and feminist issues: equal pay for all, and women's increased activity in union auxiliaries. The Communist beauty pageant represented a kind of "workers' theatre," in the manner that Candida Rifkind has described. Instead of using recitations and stage acting, as in 1930s-era leftist theatre,

70. Lévesque briefly mentions that the CP press discussed beauty pageants during the 1930s. See Lévesque, *Red Travellers*, 153. In my own research, I found little evidence of left-wing beauty pageants during the 1930s.

71. Lake Cowichan Women's Auxiliary, interview by Sara Diamond, Summer 1979, SFU Archives, WLHC.

72. Prentice, "Workers, Mothers, Reds," 115-141; the "master's house" phrase is from Audre Lorde, "The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House," in Audre Lorde, *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* (Berkeley: Crossing Press, 2007), 110-114.



Famous photos, such as this one of Veronica Foster, the “Bren Gun Girl,” demonstrate how women were taking on more of a public role.

National Film Board of Canada. Photothèque / Library and Archives Canada / PA-116067.

CP women used their bodies to present an anti-capitalist, pro-socialist message.⁷³ Yet, as Rifkind and Alan Filewod have also suggested, men in 1940s-era society emphasized women's secondary, and stereotypical, roles in political movements. Women often assumed important roles in the cultural activities of leftist movements, though they rarely ascended to important political or leadership roles.⁷⁴ Gender equality was, at best, a secondary issue within the CP. In terms of CP members' familial relationships, traditionalism reigned. CP women often looked after children and did house work, while CP men attended political meetings and eschewed any work in the domestic sphere.⁷⁵ Even in cultural productions, left-wing men asked women to take on roles that did not threaten male domination.

In reality, CP beauty pageants suggested that women were only useful to the movement by virtue of their physical attributes, an extension of mainstream ideas about female beauty. As previously seen, the context of World War II led to left-wing men endorsing mainstream society's fear of women's freedom.⁷⁶ All of this suggests the two-sided nature of CP-led beauty pageants: the party used a conservative view of women to promote radical, socialist ends. Still, the party leadership's overall view of women's roles in the party, and in society, remained largely conservative in practice.

Looking Back on the Past: CP Women's Reflections on World War II-Era Beauty Pageants

LOOKING BACK AT THEIR DAYS as beauty pageant contestants, CP women veterans did not see their experiences as degrading or sexist. Indeed, female party stalwarts viewed the pageants as one method in which they attempted to help their party raise money and publicity. Prominent CP member June Olson, of the Lake Cowichan Women's Auxiliary, stated: "I won the Lumber Queen competition," sponsored by the IWA in 1946, "down in Duncan. We didn't win it for beauty, we had a lot of sponsors, we sold tickets. We made money."⁷⁷ Olson's statement reflects a commonly-held view among CP women: the pageants did not primarily relate to physical beauty. Rather, as Mona Morgan remarked, the party held contests to gain proceeds from ticket sales.⁷⁸ Betty Greenwell, also a beauty pageant winner, remarked that there "was no beauty

73. Rifkind, *Comrades and Critics*, 132–139.

74. Alan Filewod, *Committing Theatre: Theatre Radicalism and Political Intervention in Canada* (Toronto: Between the Lines, 2011), 146–147; Rifkind, *Comrades and Critics*, 145, 159.

75. Sangster, *Dreams of Equality*, 191–192 and *passim*.

76. Filewod, *Committing Theatre*, 147–148.

77. Lake Cowichan Women's Auxiliary, interview by Sara Diamond, Summer 1979, SFU Archives, WLHC.

78. Mona Morgan, interview by Brian Thorn, 7 June 2000.

about it.”⁷⁹ Like Morgan, Greenwell suggested that the contests related to who could raise the most money for the party. CP veterans Vi Dewhurst and Betty Griffin corroborated these statements. Griffin mentioned that these popular girl competitions were “not beauty pageants.” She argued, looking back on her involvement in the CP, that she and her female comrades “didn’t think twice” about the pageants. Certainly, Griffin did not see the beauty contests as negative for women.⁸⁰ Most CP veterans were not especially interested in talking about the beauty pageants. Both Mona Morgan and Elspeth Gardner did not initially remember that the events had even taken place. When asked why the CP might have staged these contests, Gardner remarked, “I guess why they would reflect the times, in that they weren’t thinking so much about the feminist movement.”⁸¹

CP women’s statements show some of the pitfalls of writing a feminist history. Looking back on these pageants from the vantage point of the early 21st-century, with the influence of second-wave feminism and its reaction against negative aspects of beauty culture on women,⁸² these pageants seem harmful to women’s empowerment. From the perspective of CP veterans, however, the pageants told a different story. The party, hardly a rich organization, needed the funds that these pageants could provide. As we have seen, the CP’s pageants also were substantially different from mainstream beauty contests. Participating in these kinds of events offered women, who were already strong supporters of the CP, a way that they could benefit their party in publicity and fundraising. Indeed, when talking with CP veterans, we can see beauty contests as events that demonstrated leftist women’s agency. They performed what society saw as conventional gender roles to reach a higher goal: supporting their class and party.⁸³

79. Betty Greenwell, personal interview by Brian Thorn, 29 May 2000, Vancouver, B.C.

80. Vi Dewhurst, personal interview by Brian Thorn, 23 May 2000, West Vancouver, B.C.; Betty Griffin, personal interview by Brian Thorn, 18 May 2000, Vancouver, B.C.

81. Mona Morgan, interview by Brian Thorn, 7 June 2000; Elspeth Gardner, personal interview by Brian Thorn, 29 June 2000, Burnaby, B.C.

82. On second-wave feminism, a branch of women’s liberation that promoted many different aspects of women’s empowerment in social, civil, and workplace rights – as distinct from the first-wave feminist period of 1870–1930 that emphasized women’s legal rights such as the right to vote and hold public office, see Dorothy Sue Cobble, *The Other Woman’s Movement: Workplace Justice and Social Rights in Modern America* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004); Dennis A. Deslippe, *Rights Not Roses: Unions and the Rise of Working-Class Feminism, 1945–80* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2000); Alice Echols, *Daring to be Bad: Radical Feminism in America, 1967–1975* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989).

83. There is a whole series of texts that discuss fashion and beauty as aiding women’s pursuit of economic empowerment. See especially Banet-Weiser, *Most Beautiful Girl*, 10, 210; Kathy Davis, “Remaking the She-Devil: A Critical Look at Feminist Approaches to Beauty,” *Hypatia* 6, 2 (1991): 29; Nan Enstad, *Ladies of Labor, Girls of Adventure: Working Women, Popular Culture, and Labor Politics at the Turn of the Twentieth Century* (New York: Columbia University Press,

In this way, we can see that different perspectives on working-class and radical female beauty existed during World War II. CP men largely endorsed a traditional standard of female beauty. As far as we can tell, Communist men simply saw the pageants as a means of using female bodies to promote the party, and to raise funds for it. This attitude is reflected in the official party newspapers and the language used in the party press. CP women's perceptions of the pageants at the time when the pageants took place is more complicated. The evidence seems to indicate that women took on these roles without complaint and as a means of using culture to support socialist policies. CP beauty pageants accepted different kinds of women – those who were older, married and with children, and from various ethnic groups – than one would find in mainstream pageants. CP women used a conservative method – putting female bodies on display, even if in a hybrid manner – in order to reach a radical end: the promotion of leftist values. As Rifkind has noted, visual culture created products that would support the leftist values of the Communist political formation, even if the cultural products also endorsed strict gender roles.⁸⁴

It would, therefore, be a mistake to see CP-led beauty pageants as being completely a product of the patriarchal culture of the CP's male leadership. Scholars such as Janice Radway, Candace Savage, and Susan Banet-Weiser argue that participation in beauty pageants and other aspects of "women's culture" offer women an avenue into a world of adventure, wealth, and prestige.⁸⁵ Similarly, Anne Toews suggests that the CP press used stories about different kinds of bodies – working-class, male, and female – as evidence of how capitalism brutally exploited and ravaged the working-class body in factories and workplaces. The CP used these images to suggest the corruption of the capitalist system.⁸⁶ In beauty pageants, leftist women performed a vision of 1940s-era feminine beauty – or at least a vision that CP men of the time saw as beautiful – while presenting a socialist message. The Communist beauty pageant modified the mainstream contest to critique capitalism and to broaden the definition of female beauty. For their part, the participants,

1999); Rita Felski, "Because it is Beautiful: New Feminist Perspectives on Beauty," *Feminist Theory* 7, 2 (2006): 280; Kathy Peiss, *Hope in a Jar: The Making of America's Beauty Culture* (New York: Metropolitan, 1998).

84. Rifkind, *Comrades and Critics*, 142–143.

85. Banet-Weiser, *Most Beautiful Girl*, 12; Kathy Davis, *Reshaping the Female Body: The Dilemma Of Cosmetic Surgery* (New York: Routledge, 1995); Ellen McCracken, *Decoding Women's Magazines: from Mademoiselle to Ms.* (London: MacMillan, 1993); Janice Radway, *Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy, and Popular Literature* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1984); Savage, *Beauty Queens*, 118.

86. Anne Frances Toews, "Flesh, Blood, and Bone: Working-Class Bodies and the Canadian Communist Press, 1922–1956," in Gentile and Nicholas, eds., *Contesting Bodies and Nation in Canadian History*, 328–346.

without exception, expressed pride in their leftist activism and in their status as women in a predominantly male movement.⁸⁷

In fact, CP and union-supporting women saw their work and activism before, during, and after the war as positive. Alice Person, an IWA shop steward and a worker at the Hammond Cedar Lumber company during World War II, remarked that “it was still a hard thing to convince a lot of women to go out and work. There was a real campaign that women were needed on the job.” She added that “the whole idea was that you’ll be able to go back to your domestic work afterwards or go back to your housework.” Still, Person agreed that women’s war work “gave the women independence. It opened the door for women to get the idea ‘well, why should I go back and do housework. If I stay home I won’t get anything.’”⁸⁸ While sexist attitudes toward women certainly existed, the overall impression that women gave in later interviews reflected a positive sense of their earlier experiences, both in wartime workplaces and in the Communist Party. Jonnie Rankin suggested that, at the end of the war, even in industries that had left-wing union locals, “the women would go first” if there were layoffs, to make room for returning servicemen.⁸⁹ Rankin’s statement suggests the two-sided nature of women’s experiences in unions and the CP. Clearly, many women found their experiences empowering: they could play a role outside of the home, and they could support socialist ideas in the workplace and in society. Yet in the short term, women were in subordinate positions, both in wartime employment and in the context of leftist unions and political movements. Of course, Person and Rankin’s statements concern leftist women’s wartime work in factories, not in beauty pageants. But the broader point remains: leftist women profited from their experience in work and in the party during World War II, even if many CP men did not support these women or women’s concerns in general.

Conclusion: Gender, Beauty Pageants, and the Communist Party of Canada

WHAT DO BEAUTY PAGEANTS tell contemporary readers about Communist ideology in Canada? This article has argued that the CP approach to beauty pageants symbolized the party’s wider approach to women’s and gender issues. The CP’s view of gender and the woman question was two-sided and complex. On the one hand, we might see these pageants as positive, or at least benign. They helped to raise money for the party and allowed some leftist women an avenue into supporting their party. The women who participated in these

87. Betty Griffin and Susan Lockhart, *Their Own History: Women’s Contribution to the Labour Movement of British Columbia* (New Westminster, BC: United Fishermen & Allied Workers’ Union/CAW Seniors Club, 2002), 139–150.

88. Alice Person, interview by Sara Diamond, Summer 1979, SFU Archives, WLHC.

89. Jonnie Rankin, interview by Sara Diamond, Summer 1979, SFU Archives, WLHC.

pageants were mothers, wives, and daughters, often of male CP members, and active supporters of the CP. Unlike mainstream pageants, these women came from a variety of ethnic backgrounds. These pageants were part of the broader leftist culture in Canada, and not simply, or solely, an aspect of sexist and patriarchal culture. On the other hand, these pageants suggest that left movements could not completely separate their views from the wider society's perception of gender roles. While women in the pageants called for labour rights and promoted the CP's program, the party put on pageants and used language that emphasized women as physical objects and as items for men to admire. In this sense, Communist beauty pageants reflected dominant bourgeois culture.

Similarly, this article suggests that male and female CP members had different ideas of what these pageants meant. CP men seemingly saw the pageants as a way of promoting and fundraising for the party. As we have seen, the pageants demonstrate how leftist men held to conservative, or at least mainstream, ideas surrounding a woman's role in society. Conversely, CP women, at the time when these pageants took place, modified the pageants so that they took on a different meaning from mainstream beauty contests. At the pageants, Communist women expressed support for socialist views and promoted leftist values. The views expressed at CP pageants would not have been acceptable at a Miss America pageant. In this regard, CP beauty contests represented a hybrid event that seemed mainstream on the surface but also endorsed a leftist ideology. For CP women reflecting on their experiences in the party many decades later, all of them saw the pageants as unimportant. Some could not even remember that the pageants had occurred. All emphatically stated that there was "no beauty" involved in these popular girl contests. CP women saw the pageants simply as one way in which they assisted their political movement. Participation in beauty pageants was part of women's political work, although CP women did not see it as significant political work.

What are we to make of women's participation in CP beauty pageants? The pageants were, after all, a minor part of a relatively small, if significant, political movement. CP beauty pageants suggest something important about the trajectory of women's experiences in Canadian society during and after World War II. World War II saw women of all classes and political backgrounds come out of the home and into public life, many for the first time.⁹⁰ Outside of the domestic sphere, women increasingly became members of political groups from all ideological perspectives. Undoubtedly, these movements began to slowly carve out space for women's activity.⁹¹ Contemporary left movements might think about how to appropriate a mainstream, bourgeois convention or event in order to present a more radical perspective. It would, of course, be

90. Pierson, "They're Still Women After All," *passim*.

91. See, for instance, on the post-World War II period, Joan Sangster, *Transforming Labour: Women and Work in Postwar Canada* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2010), 76–107, 233–268.

inappropriate in our current context to use a beauty pageant for this purpose. Yet a more imaginative and creative approach to protest and activism might serve modern left movements well. At the very least, the strategic use of a conservative-seeming cultural production could draw attention to the contradictions and fault lines of capitalism and neoliberalism. Perhaps in the future, progressive movements will use mainstream events for their own purposes. This can only be a positive development in these days of austerity.

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