Crowning Glory: A Sociological Study of Gender in the Beauty Pageant System

Lee Taylor

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CROWNING GLORY:
A SOCIOLOGICAL STUDY OF GENDER IN THE BEAUTY PAGEANT SYSTEM

by
Lee Taylor

A thesis submitted to the faculty of The University of Mississippi in partial fulfillment of the requirements of the Sally McDonnell Barksdale Honors College

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Approved by
Advisor: Professor Ross Haenfler
Reader: Professor Charles Reagan Wilson
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For my mother—the most beautiful woman I will ever know.
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I am also sincerely grateful to Dr. Charles Reagan Wilson and Dr. Kirsten Dellinger for their meaningful advice and constant support.

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This thesis provides a sociological examination of the personal experiences of beauty pageant participants in the South. By deconstructing the ideal view of women in beauty pageants, I attempted to answer how pageant contestants view their individual participation in the oppressive framework of the beauty pageant contest. In order to provide an in-depth analysis on the role of gender in beauty pageants, I conducted personal interviews and field study observations. Additionally, I researched current online sources and scholarly publications concerning gender and beauty pageants. The beauty pageant system demands that young women alter their bodies and personalities in order to achieve the ever-elusive feminine ideal. However, beauty pageant participants understand that this temporary transformation of self enables them to "use" the system for their own means. Although beauty pageants may appear to be a frivolous cultural event, this study reveals that the beauty pageant system is a powerful social structure worthy of greater understanding. Additionally, the personal narratives of pageant participants, judges and administrators help to reveal the complexities of the role of gender in the beauty pageant system and society as a whole.
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There she is, Miss America
There she is, your ideal
The dreams of a million girls
Who are more than pretty
May come true in Atlantic City
Oh she may turn out to be
The queen of femininity
There she is, Miss America
There she is, your ideal
With so many beauties
She'll take the town by storm
With her all-American face and form
And there she is
Walking on air she is
Fairest of the fair she is
Miss America
INTRODUCTION: HELLO BEAUTY PAGEANTS!

When I was a child, I loved parading around my house with plastic jewels hung around my neck and clipped on to my ears. As I look back on that time, I like to think I was priming myself to be a beauty queen. Though I was only two years old, I prepared for the various competitions by improving my body, rehearsing my talent, polishing my interpersonal communication skills and practicing my poise.

Several times each day, I would run into my living room with glee at the thought of working out my “bod” on my Sit-N-Spin. It was bright blue, made me dizzy and gave me very impressive arm muscles. I often showed off my figure by strutting around the house in my Hanes Her Way underwear and nothing else. Occasionally I would cover myself with stickers, but only because I did not understand the concept of a spray tan quite yet.

The talent competition was going to be a breeze too, because I watched the top music videos on CMT everyday. As I watched the country singers, I practiced my talent by bouncing up and down in time to the music and warbling what few notes I knew. I also “sang” loud enough in church on Sundays that when the pastor talked about Jesus loving all the little children he avoided looking in my direction.

Although I excelled in all portions of the competition, my forte was interpersonal communication, otherwise known as “interview.” I may not have had people asking me
questions, but I always found someone to quiz. "Wanna know suhmnn?" became my
signature phrase, and I soon realized that no one could understand what "suhmnn" was to
want to know anything about it.

Since my language skills were obviously lacking, I turned to my stuffed animals.
I began to throw more and more tea parties for them, becoming a gracious hostess. I
developed charm, poise and conflict resolution skills (much needed for the fights over the
best plastic Toys-R-Us china). All of these skills are crucial to success in pageant
competitions: charm to win over the judges, poise for the evening gown competition and
conflict resolution skills to calm pageant participants angry at their loss.

As I began to prime myself for beauty pageants, I joined a long line of women
who have also spent their time and energy in pursuit of beauty ideals represented within
pageantry.

A BRIEF HISTORY OF PAGEANTS

The history of pageantry can be traced back to when Esther and hundreds of
beautiful young virgins paraded in front of Biblical King Ahaseurus in order to vie for the
title of queen. Even Cinderella was forced to fit her foot into a glass slipper so she could
be considered the ideal partner for the fairy tale prince. Both of these women, real or
imagined, may provide a hint at the origin of beauty pageants. However, beauty pageants
did not become an American tradition until the early 19th century when town officials or
social group leaders crowned a May Day or Mardi Gras queen in local festivals and
parades (Banet-Weiser 1999). Yet ironically it was the women's suffrage movement that
pushed pageants to the mainstream in the 1910s. Since the activists believed pageants were the best form of propaganda, suffragists would conduct short plays in order to gain publicity and supporters. White sashes, which were covered with phrases such as “Votes for Women,” became the identifying mark of the suffragists’ pageantry. When the 19th amendment awarded women the right to vote in 1920, the suffragists’ pageants ended. However, a new type of pageant was soon to capture the attention of the American people (Hamlin 2004).

The Miss America pageant began when a group of Atlantic City businessmen seized upon the idea of pageants as spectacle and created a bathing beauty contest in order to extend the tourism season. On September 7, 1921, the group of businessmen held the first “Atlantic City’s Inter-City Beauty Contest” in conjunction with a weeklong “Fall Frolic” of games, contests and events. Although the first pageant was of minor importance to the nearly 150,000 observers, over the next few years the pageant would become the defining aspect of the “Fall Frolic” (Hamlin 2004; Watson and Martin 2004).

Organizers divided the pageant into two categories: professional and amateur. The professional women were actresses, dancers and models. Amateur women were girls who were local newspaper winners of photographic beauty contests. Each division winner competed against each other, but an amateur always won the title. By allowing the more “innocent” contestant to win, judges reinforced Victorian ideals of femininity in a nation where gender roles were rapidly changing. This “cookie-cutter version of America’s ideal woman” was praised for her long hair, wholesomeness and dreams of domesticity; therefore, solidly establishing the ideal American woman as the antithesis of “the suffragette and the flapper” (Hamlin 2004: 46; Watson and Martin 2004: 3). Despite
crowning "pure" girls as winners, "'[the pageant] was condemned by civic and religious organizations for not only being indecent, but also because the contest exploited women for pecuniary purposes, while at the same time corrupting them through rivalry and competition'" (Banet-Weiser 1999: 37).

Due to the harsh criticism, bad publicity and the financial stress of the Great Depression, the pageant was suspended in 1928 and did not resume until 1933. In 1933 another wholesome youth was crowned; however, for various reasons the pageant did not take place the following year. In 1935, the Miss America pageant resumed with the goal of restoring legitimacy and respectability to the institution. In order to accomplish such a task, the executive director hired 29-year-old Lenora Slaughter from St. Petersburg, Florida (Banet-Weiser 1999; Watson and Martin 2004). Slaughter, otherwise known as "Mother Superior," installed moral precepts into the pageant system and thoroughly monitored the contestants’ behavior (Banet-Weiser 1999: 39). By banning contestants from entering bars and night clubs as well as disallowing them from speaking to men during the week of competition, Slaughter sufficiently campaigned for Miss America to become the embodiment of feminine respectability.

The need for recognition as a respectable institution prompted the Miss America Organization to create the talent competition in 1938 (McGregory 2004). The talent portion, the highest percentage of points in the judging process, is still seen as a definitive mark of the Miss America system. Also during this year, competition became limited to contestants between the ages of eighteen and twenty-eight who were single, had never been married or had a child. This addition to the contractual agreement of contestants assured the Miss America executives and the public that the winner would be "chaste,"
and therefore pure and wholesome. In order to further establish that contestants would be of good moral character, participants could no longer represent amusement parks or fairs; instead, they were to represent “a state, key city, or geographical location” (Banet-Weiser 1999: 40).

Throughout the changing social and political climate of the 1960s, the Miss America pageant “ranked either as the first or second most popular broadcast eight out of ten years” (Watson and Martin 2004: 8). Yet for many feminists the pageant represented the ideals of a patriarchal society in which racism, sexism and militarism were “packaged into one ‘ideal’ symbol, a woman” (American Experience 2002; Banet-Weiser 1999). Therefore, it was no surprise that the cultural icon of Miss America was targeted for a feminist demonstration.

On September 7, 1968, between 100 and 400 hundred protesters with the Women’s Liberation Movement assembled in front of the convention hall with posters stating “‘No More Beauty Standards’” and “‘Let’s Judge Ourselves As People’” (American Experience 2002; Craig 2002). The main organizer of the event, Robin Morgan, condemned the media’s mixed messages of femininity and “‘the degrading mindless-boob-girlie symbol’” that women had been forced to accept by society (American Experience 2002). At the center of the whirlwind of media attention was the “freedom trash can” wherein radical feminists threw articles of beauty torture, such as girdles, curlers, makeup, high heels and bras (American Experience 2002; Banet-Weiser 1999; Watson and Martin 2004). Considered to be the launch pad of the second wave of liberal feminism, the protest was deemed a success; however, it was not the only protest that took place that day (Banet-Weiser 1999; Craig 2002).
A few blocks over from the all-white Miss America pageant and the mostly white Women's Liberation protest, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) protested in a "positive" way by hosting the first Miss Black America pageant (Craig 2002). The goal of the pageant was to denounce the dominant cultural ideals of white femininity, to proclaim to a larger audience that "black is beautiful" and to expose the racist structure of the Miss America Organization (Banet-Weiser 1999; Kinloch 2004). Three years after the inception of Miss Black America the first black woman participated in the Miss America pageant; however, it was not until 1984 that a black woman was crowned Miss America.

In the 1990s, the Miss America Organization once again encountered public controversy. However this time the concern was over the portrayal of pageant participants as sexual objects, specifically when their bodies were on full display in the swimsuit competition. This section of the competition had been the most controversial since the beginning of the pageant; however, it was the portion that brought in the viewing audience. So in order to give the public a voice and quiet the critics, the Miss America Organization allowed viewers to call in during the 1995 contest and vote whether or not to retain the swimsuit competition. The vote was 80 percent to 20 percent, in favor of maintaining the traditional pageant structure (Watson and Martin 2004).

Two years later, in 1997, pageant participants were allowed to wear two-piece swimsuits for the first time in 50 years. Though often quipped in the media that "sex sells," the CEO of the Miss America Organization repeated over and over that this change was "'not a ploy to boost ratings'" (Watson and Martin 2004: 9). Instead, he insisted that the change was to allow participants the freedom to express their
individuality. In 2001, the swimsuit portion of the competition once again underwent an important change when it was renamed the “Lifestyle and Fitness” category. The process of reframing this portion of the competition placed an emphasis on the active role of the participant in maintaining a healthy lifestyle and removed the negative connotations associated with being an objectified and sexual bathing beauty. However, it “does not eclipse the fact that the swimsuit competition is just that: a competition where women parade in front of a panel of judges in a swimsuit” (Banet-Weiser 1999: 25).

Despite the numerous changes that Miss America made to its structure in order to remain relevant to the current societal norms and ideals, the ratings for the televised competition began a downward trajectory in 1994. Ten years later, after the crowning of Miss America 2004 Ericka Dunlap, ABC announced that the Miss America competition would be dropped from the network lineup (Ramirez 2004). The following year, the pageant was permanently relocated from Atlantic City to Las Vegas when the Country Music Network (CMT) picked up Miss America.

In an attempt to garner more viewers CMT created a reality show in 2007 titled “Finding Miss America,” which aired episodes leading up to the final night of competition (CBC Arts 2006). In 2008, Miss America was relocated to The Learning Channel and the reality show was re-titled “Miss America: Countdown to the Crown.” Although the reinvention was necessary to keep the Miss America pageant afloat, many pageant supporters believe that the new gimmick of a reality show further supports the stereotypical identity of the Miss America pageant and its participants.

In order to combat the stereotypes of beauty pageants, the Miss America Organization refers to and markets itself as a “scholarship competition.” Though
originally intended to attract “a higher class of girls” to the pageant, society often regards the pageant scholarships as the only relevant part of the competition. Today the pageant annually awards over $45 million in cash and scholarship assistance, helping to identify the pageant “as an institution of education” (Banet-Weiser 1999: 110).

It is the scholarship money that often attracts girls to participate in beauty pageants. However, there is a strict pageant hierarchy consisting of local and state competitions that a pageant participant must win in order to take part in the Miss America competition. Each standard Miss America local and state preliminary includes an offstage interview, an on-stage question, and a swimsuit, talent and eveningwear competition. Yet each preliminary differs radically as it reflects the societal norms, ideals and values of the local community or the state as a whole.

Local pageants are held throughout the state between October and February, known to participants as “pageant season.” Participants enter the preliminaries representing only themselves; however, if they win they become the representative for a city, county or geographical region. Local organizations, such as the Jaycees, the Chamber of Commerce, or women’s leagues, host pageant preliminaries in school gymnasiums or civic center auditoriums. At the end of the pageant competition, the winner of the local preliminary is announced and thus she begins her reign as Miss ________. Her duties include being present at special community activities, ribbon cuttings, Rotary Club meetings and holiday parades, in order to add a bit of “glitz” to the events. However, the most important job of the local queen is to rigorously train herself in order to represent her local community in a positive light at the state pageant competition. Local pageant organizations financially support a pageant queen’s state
preparation by providing an allowance for pageant attire, a membership at a gym or sessions with a “pageant coach.”

The state competition, which is held in the summer months, is preceded by seven to ten days of pre-production. During this time, contestants usually attend community events, such as autograph signings, galas, mall openings and fashion shows. In addition, the contestants participate in preliminary judging competitions in order to narrow the finalists down to the Top 16 on the last night of judging. The final night of competition is often held at a civic center auditorium, convention hall or theatre. As soon as the state winner is crowned, she is expected to withdraw from school in order to promote the pageant organization’s agenda through speaking engagements and personal appearances. To fully invest in her training for Miss America, a pageant winner may choose or be required to move into the state director’s home so her progress can be monitored.

Both the local and state competitions reflect not only the values of the local communities, but also the values of the Miss America Organization. One of the key foundations of the America pageant system is its judging process of Olympic style scoring, which judges girls “only against themselves.” However it is still a system that assigns numbers to women, evaluating them much like products in Consumer Reports (Watson and Martin 2004). Numerical values between one and ten are ascribed to each individual participant’s performance in the following local preliminary competitions: talent portion (35%), private interview (25%), evening wear (20%), lifestyle and fitness in swimsuit (15%) and onstage question (5%) (Miss America). The Top 5 finalists are announced from the preliminary scoring, and then the scores are discarded placing each finalist as “equals.” The judges then rank the contestants in the order he or she believes
the contestant should place in the competition. Therefore, the judging process is
“simultaneously an arbitrary and a clearly calculated process” (Banet-Weiser 1999: 54).

The state and national competition varies from the aforementioned process, only
by its addition of the final competition scoring. On the final night of these competitions,
the Top 16 contestants are judged according to these percentages: composite score from
the preliminary competition (30%) and lifestyle and fitness in swimsuit (20%). The girls
are then narrowed down to the Top 10 and judged by their previous scores and the
following: evening wear (20%). In the Top 8, the previous scores are once again tallied
along with talent (30%). The onstage question portion of the competition is not
weighted; however, it is used to aid the judges as they make their final decision. Due to
the peculiar judging process it is often said, “‘with a different group of judges, a different
girl would win every time’” (Banet-Weiser 1999: 55).

**PROJECT OUTLINE**

In this study I analyze the personal experiences of beauty pageant participants.
Each of the participants has competed within the Alabama, Mississippi or Tennessee
America and/or USA pageant system. Their individual experiences constitute a narrative
not often recognized in the world of academia. Therefore, throughout this study I aim to
give each individual a voice in which to claim his or her space within the pageant world,
as well as the academic world.

Each of the stories contains common threads, which I have woven into a larger
more organized analysis. In the first section of my study, I focus on pageant participants’
construction of personal pageant identity. Under this heading I study common
stereotypes within the system, and the ways participants aim to construct an identity that is the antithesis of the stereotypical pageant girl. I also analyze the notion of beauty as power, and how young women within the system use pageants as a stepping-stone. This analysis uncovers the core motivation for most women within the system, which is scholarships and potential fame.

In the second section of my study, I explore the role pageants play in reinforcing performances of femininity. I analyze the importance of a specific body type of a pageant participant and the lengths young women will go to achieve this ideal. I also look behind the curtain of beauty pageants to explore the backstage rituals of participants and the façade behind which they often hide their insecurity. By studying the contracts of pageant winners, I reveal how participants are cast as models of moral propriety and the role of restraint within the pageant system. To further understand the pageant system, I discuss the “proper” personality pageant participants display in competition.

In conclusion, I find that the pageant system strictly reinforces society’s current conservative feminine ideal by rewarding women who fit within a specific beauty mold and who follow certain rules of decorum. Each of the pageant participants acknowledges specific guidelines, following them only to achieve their goal. Therefore, until beauty pageant participants actively resist the current standards within beauty pageants there will be no change in this cultural institution.
METHODS

Born and raised in the rural South in the small-town of Grenada, Mississippi, I was surrounded by subscribers of Southern femininity who love to gossip about who is pretty and “bless her little heart” who is not. And since the inhabitants of my hometown consider beauty queens local celebrities, I came to see teased hair, bright lipstick, glittery dresses, rhinestone jewelry and a sweet persona as the epitome of pretty. Therefore it was no surprise that I was thrilled when my mother took me to visit Miss Grenada County at Union Planter Bank on a Saturday afternoon a few weeks before Christmas. I was seven years old, and although I was also supposed to be telling Santa my Christmas list, all I really wanted was a signed headshot from a beauty queen—to Lee with Love. Even at my elementary school, Kirk Academy, I was reminded of how pretty beauty queens are. Each time I entered the school office, I was face to face with a framed 18 x 24 photograph of Miss Teen USA 1987 Kristi Addis, who was attending KA when she won her title. In fact, it was in the hallowed halls of my hometown alma mater that I entered my first beauty pageant.

In the moment Ms. Deloach handed out the forms for the Junior-High Beauty Review in seventh grade homeroom, I knew that I had found my calling. Not only would I have the chance to become the beauty queens I idolized, but also I would be able to enjoy the spotlight. Since the age of three, I have always had a yearning to perform. Though my stage was merely my garage and my mother the lone audience member, I sung my little heart out day after day. Upon entering the sixth grade, I became involved
in show choir and I competed in school talent shows, but my desire for the spotlight could not be soothed. With pageants I had finally found another excuse to be on stage.

My love affair with pageants continued for eight years, during which I competed in sixteen pageants. Seven were based solely on beauty and the ever-elusive poise, three involved beauty, poise, talent and interview, and six were judged on beauty, poise and interview. I won two pageant titles—Miss Grenada County Hospitality and Miss Mid-South Fair, and I was chosen for the Top 10 in Miss Mississippi Hospitality and 1st Alternate for Miss Mid-South Fair Youth Personality. Each of these pageants enabled me to improve my speaking skills, my posture and quite comically my ability to tease hair.

Due to my involvement in pageants and my recent title as Miss Mid-South Fair, my pageant coach and pageant friends began encouraging me to compete in Miss Mississippi. Their reason and rhetoric was the same: my interview skills and singing ability would allow me to win Miss Mississippi; however, I would have to go on a rigorous diet and exercise plan. Because I had always maintained a healthy weight, those last few words stung me beyond belief.

Consequently, I began to question the narrow beauty mold that pageant participants often force themselves into in order to excel in competitions. I was appalled at the performance of participants to speak, act and look a certain way. As I began to study the stereotypical model of femininity, I found myself far from the beauty ideal. Whereas "Pageant Patty" was tan, toned, blonde or brunette and had a B to C cup size, I was fair-skinned, freckled, flabby, redheaded and my cup size was a mere AA. Needless to say, if I really wanted to win the title of Miss Mississippi I would need a major physical transformation.
After much critical thought and consideration, I realized that sacrificing my body in order to achieve the feminine ideal was surely not worth my time. So I disregarded external pressures to continue in my pageant career and I announced my retirement from the beauty pageant world. However, my affaire de Coeur has continued on in my academic pursuits.

Throughout the past year, my sociological interest in pageants led me to conduct research on the personal experiences of beauty pageant participants in the South. By deconstructing the ideal view of women in beauty pageants, I studied the structure in which they operate and the part these young women play in perpetuating a stereotypical view of femininity. In addition, I analyzed the role of social class in pageants and studied deviance from and resistance to pageant norms.

I have conducted in-depth interviews with seven women and two men between the ages of 19 and 54 who are involved with the Miss USA and Miss America pageant system. I gave each participant the opportunity to remain anonymous throughout the study; however, only one participant decided to retain anonymity. I first interviewed friends and acquaintances and then proceeded to ask for referrals for following interviews. I conducted interviews in person, each lasting from 20 minutes to an hour. Interviewees answered a few follow-up questions via phone interviews and e-mail. In order to gain diverse individual perspectives, I selected pageant judges, directors, coaches and participants with various levels of experience in the pageant system. I conducted interviews in Oxford, Mississippi, Birmingham, Alabama, Nashville and Memphis, Tennessee, which allowed me to assemble a broad sample of data.
In addition to my interviews, I conducted field study observations by attending two Miss Mississippi preliminaries, the Miss America Judges’ Workshop and the Miss Mississippi Trunk Show. At the first preliminary I attended, Miss Madison, I observed the rehearsal as well as the preliminary competition. On the Friday night rehearsal, I spoke briefly with the co-directors of the pageant as well as the mother of a pageant participant. On Saturday night, I observed the front stage and back stage dynamics of the local pageant preliminary by alternating between the dressing room, the side stage and the gym floor where the audience was seated. I observed the rituals performed by pageant participants and I also gained individual perspectives of the contestants by asking them a few short questions and listening to their conversations. At the second preliminary, Miss University, I observed the preliminary competition only.

At the Miss America Judges’ Workshop, I received “an official judges guide for a Miss America local or state preliminary competition” handout, listened to a speech delivered by the out-going Miss Mississippi executive director and watched a video distributed by the Miss America Organization. Each of the aforementioned items officially certified over 200 attendees and I to become Miss America Organization judges on the local or state level. The Miss Mississippi Trunk Show, which immediately followed the workshop, outlined the travel plans for the reigning Miss Mississippi’s trip to Las Vegas for the Miss America competition and her corresponding attire. During the show “the queen” showcased over 33 outfits for her audience, while emcee Jennifer Adcock offered anecdotes from her former reign as Miss Mississippi. At each pageant event I made short notes, which I further expanded and analyzed at a later date.
To further understand the backstage portion of the pageant competition, I reviewed a video from an interviewee’s participation in the Miss Tennessee Scholarship Pageant. In the video, a panel of six judges interviewed the pageant participant Miss Lexington 2007 Grace Gore. The ten-minute interview revealed the power dynamics between the judges and the pageant participants. As the second most weighted portion of the preliminary competition, the interview consisted mostly of typical and superficial questions that focused on core issues of morality and respectability. I took notes on each judge’s question and on Gore’s subsequent answers, later coding and analyzing them in addition to my other observations.

In order to research the national context within which the local and state pageant structure operates, I watched the “Miss America: Countdown to the Crown” television series and the Miss America 2009 competition on The Learning Channel (TLC). These televised programs provide individuals with enough basic information to formulate a critique of beauty pageants. Therefore, I desired to become a part of the general household viewing audience in order to understand the message that the Miss America Organization constructs and conveys to the public at large. While watching the programs, I specifically analyzed the stereotypical presentation of beauty pageant participation as portrayed in each state representative’s mannerisms and speeches, as well as taking notice of the emcees’ and judges’ commentaries. I took notes on the two television programs in order to compare them with my personal interviews and observations.

In order to examine patterns in the data, I transcribed each interview and coded my field notes. By comparing the data from the transcriptions with the coded
information, I was able to identify specific topics of interest. Recurrent themes were expanded as I continued to analytically study and organize the data.
CHAPTER 1: CONSTRUCTING PERSONAL PAGEANT IDENTITY

An essentialist view of gender inexplicably links masculine and feminine attitudes to the biological and anatomical differences between men and women. In other words, subscribers to an essentialist theory believe "things are the way they are by virtue of the fact that men are men and women are women—a division perceived to be natural and rooted in biology, producing in turn profound psychological, behavioral, and social consequences" (West and Zimmerman 1987). However, reducing gender to merely "essential" natures overlooks the social formulation of gender. In the social constructionist gender theory, masculinity and femininity are constructed through societal interaction. Thus masculinity and femininity are not "natural," essential, unalterable characteristics tied to biological maleness or femaleness; what it means to be a woman or man changes from time to time, place to place, and even interaction to interaction. Therefore, individuals learn "acceptable" gender traits, practices and patterns through interactions with parents, teachers, peers and society. Before babies have even left their mother's womb, they begin to learn what it means to be "masculine" or "feminine." The paint color of the nursery, the name and play toys the parents choose for their new baby all reflect the urge to qualify children into specific gender roles at the earliest age possible. As children accrue gender lessons, they begin to situate their social conduct in relation to masculine and feminine traits. And by preschool little boys have begun to
orient themselves around “efficaciousness,” while little girls have begun to organize their social conduct around “appearance” (West and Zimmerman 1987; Freedman 1986).

Outside of personal interaction with peers, girls learn to associate femininity with beauty by reading fairy tales, playing with toy makeup kits and watching television. Rita Freedman notes in *Beauty Bound*, that gender “is culturally conditioned through the direct experience of hearing Cinderella tales, dressing Barbie dolls, watching Miss America, Miss Teen, Miss Hemisphere” (Freedman: 121). In these cultural lessons, girls learn that beauty belongs to females and feminine beauty brings rewards—Cinderella wins the prince, Barbie marries Ken and the pageant winner receives a crown.

In this chapter, I analyze pageant participants’ understanding of their personal role within the pageant system. To first understand how pageant participants define their individual participation, I study the stereotypical imagery of the pageant girl, often called a “Pageant Patty” by participants. I also discuss the battle individual participants wage against the imaginary construct of the stereotypical pageant girl, and how pageant girls both deny and accept the myth. Examining the individual participants’ fear of “losing” themselves in the system, I discuss the importance they place on maintaining a healthy personal perspective during pageant competition. I also acknowledge the connection of the pageant participant’s definition of self to feminist rhetoric.

I continue the chapter analyzing the connections between beauty, power, competition, and fame, studying the ways in which participants perceive pageant competitions as institutions of empowerment. I analyze the concept of “acceptable” feminine competition and the linguistic framing of a pageant win as sheer “luck.” I also study the recognition and success that pageant participants seek through their pageant
competition. By analyzing the scholarship aspect of beauty contests, I consider the social implications of rewarding monetary assistance to pageant winners.

"I'M NOT A PAGEANT PATTY": THE STEREOTYPE AND ME

_We do not want the critics to say that all we talk about is world peace._  
-Miss America 1989 Gretchen Carlson

Stereotypes are widely held, oversimplified, fixed images or ideas that allow individuals to quickly assess others. Although these binary concepts are inevitable and convenient, they discourage outsiders from searching beneath the superficial label of stereotype (Freedman 1986). Since stereotypical images are usually a conglomerate of personal perspectives and individual ideas, the viewer is left with a false representation of the "labeled person."

The stereotypical imagery of a pageant girl has been perpetuated through the media’s portrayal of beauty pageants and its participants. In the 2000 Hollywood blockbuster film _Miss Congeniality_, the lead character Gracie Hart is an undercover F.B.I. agent who poses as Miss New Jersey in the Miss United States pageant. When asked in her onstage interview what is the "one most important thing our society needs," Hart replies "harsher punishment for parole violators." However, it is not until she adds "and world peace" that the crowd cheers ecstatically. Pageant participants are well aware of such stereotypes, and they often desire to separate themselves from the stigma associated with the "pageant girl."
Jane Simmons\(^{1}\), a nineteen-year old dance major who has dedicated her last three summers to training for Miss Alabama, named the film when describing the stereotypical pageant girl. “If you have seen Miss Congeniality, you know, a girl that wants world peace, but really wouldn’t know how to solve it.” She also stated that stereotypical pageant girls are “dumb divas” who are only concerned with their outer appearance. At the beginning of her interview, Jane seemed wary of discussing “pageant types” stating that it was unreasonable to believe that pageant girls were all the same. However, she frequently referred to typical pageant contestants as “Pageant Patty” while establishing herself as the antithesis of this delineation.

Patty is typified as being a Barbie doll like figure that is either incredibly stupid or an evil conniving wench. Most often described as a “fake” girl who is dull and never takes off her high heels and makeup, Patty enters pageant competitions purely for the recognition that comes with being a title-holder. By seeking self-validation in her pageant “wins,” Patty often “loses” herself in the pageant system. She is apt to brag, and her personality differs dramatically between the front and back stage.

Many pageant participants would be hard pressed to find a young woman who embodied all of these characteristics, yet one particular contestant in the Miss Madison pageant brought the “Pageant Patty” figure to life. When I first met Lisa\(^{2}\) at the Friday night pageant rehearsal, she was wearing five-inch high heels, false eyelashes, bright pink lipstick and rhinestone jeans. She was unusually tan for January and her dyed-blonde hair fell in ringlets past her shoulders. Her mother Janice\(^{3}\) told me that the Miss Madison

\(^{1}\) Name has been changed to protect the identity of the pageant contestant.
\(^{2}\) Name has been changed to protect the identity of the pageant contestant.
\(^{3}\) Name has been changed to protect the identity of the pageant contestant’s mother.
competition was Lisa’s third preliminary for the current pageant season, and that she planned to compete until she had won a title that would send her to Miss Mississippi.

Backstage at the Saturday night competition, Lisa brought a friend to help her prepare even though there was a sign strictly stating “only the contestants and our staff will be allowed backstage.” As her friend helped her to get ready for the competition she stated: “Everybody calls me the biology nerd and Lisa the beauty queen.” A few hours later after the emcee announced Lisa as a runner-up, she quickly gathered her clothing from backstage and left without speaking to the pageant officials. Although Janice told me that Lisa “never focuses on winning, but more on experience and fun,” Lisa’s demeanor after the pageant contest revealed a young woman who defined a large portion of her self-worth on winning pageant competitions.

The battle against the pageant girl stereotype is a prime concern for many pageant participants. Grace Gore, 24, a Vanderbilt graduate student that constantly refused to wear her crown during her reign as Miss Tennessee said:

A lot of the girls that I’ve met, I believe do try to make that a priority, to kind of disprove the stereotype. Just because historically pageants have gained that stereotype of being kind of like the ditzy girl that gets all dressed up and parades around. You know, like the movie Miss Congeniality, [laughter] great example of the stereotype, you know to an extreme of pageant girls, and nobody wants to be that. And even the girls that kind of are that don’t want to admit that they are. So, I mean, yeah, I think to some extent maybe we all do try to disprove that stereotype.

When participants deny the existence of pageant stereotypes and assert that they are not a “Pageant Patty,” they only further proliferate the myth of the stereotypical pageant girl. Yet they also establish an “out” for themselves, which is to be viewed as the exception to the rule. Therefore, it is in the description of Patty that they define themselves as pageant participants.
In sharp contrast to Patty, participants discussed “real” girls, like themselves, who choose to compete in pageants. They define real girls as intelligent, expressive, “normal everyday people” who only wear makeup when appropriate. Genuine girls are always honest and humble, and they enter pageants primarily for the scholarship money. Always keeping a solid “perspective” on the importance of pageants, real girls never become “sucked” into the system. Leah Laviano, a twenty year-old student who became first alternate at Miss USA 2008 despite her short stature of 5’4”, described her idea of a “real” girl: “Someone that’s really natural, down-to-earth...who doesn’t have to have like heels everyday, or, you know, someone who can just be herself and not try to be somebody that she’s not or somebody who, or somebody that she thinks she should be.”

Despite the vivid distinction the pageant participant aims to make between herself and the stereotypical pageant girl, many contestants are overwhelmingly afraid of becoming “Pageant Patty” and they often rely on their parents to help them remain grounded throughout pageant competitions. Leah, the student, credits her mother’s attitude toward pageants as being the key to maintaining a “positive” outlook on beauty pageant competition.

She really made me really humble. Like I said she told me if you cry about it we won’t do it again. Because she told me the girl that wins won for a reason. Everything happens for a reason. If you don’t win it doesn’t mean you’re not pretty, it doesn’t mean that they’re prettier than you. It just means that they did better or the judges liked them better. She just always made sure that I was grounded that I never got a big head... I don’t feel that I’m somebody special more than somebody else...And so, it was just the fact of her just keeping me humble my whole life and I really really appreciate that. Because there are a lot of girls in the pageant, you know, that cry if they don’t win or get a really big head if they do win. And it’s just something that I really really pride myself on.

The ability to define her identity outside of pageant competition is not only a source of pride for Leah, but also for many other pageant participants. Meg Pace, 23, a local news
reporter who deeply aspires to be Miss America but has yet to win a local title, offered her definition of pageant participation: “I was going in there Meg Pace and win or lose I was coming out the same person.”

The acknowledgement of self-worth as defined by the individual pageant participant recognizes the young women’s resistance to patriarchal values as defined by the beauty pageant system. Though they could align their viewpoint with a feminist’s notion of beauty liberation, most of the pageant participants I interviewed were unaware of feminist rhetoric. This confusion over the goals of the feminist movement was obvious in my conversation with Jane, the dance major from Alabama, when she said: “I would say that we are not anti-feminist, because feminist is when you don’t like pageants right?”

My participants’ conservative Southern upbringing offered little or no alternative discourses on beauty and womanhood, with feminists being defined as anti-beauty lesbians. Because these young women were disallowed an education of the feminist consciousness, they were largely unaware of how to subvert the power beauty held over their lives. Therefore, they sought “equality” in the inequities of a patriarchal system by choosing to compete in beauty pageants. Although competing in beauty pageants may not be seen as resistance to hegemonic ideals, participation in pageants allows these young women to “resist” by harnessing the power of beauty for their own economic means.
BEAUTY AS POWER: COMPETITION, RECOGNITION AND FAME

I don't think there is anything wrong with using your, you know femininity, sexuality, whatever when necessary and appropriate to help you out. It's what we've been given. Why not use it?

-Abbe Gatlin

Historically women have been excluded from positions of power and prestige in the public and occupational sphere. In order to make up for this exclusion, women began to use exaggerated femininity as a way in which to compete for men rather than against them (Freedman 1986; Kimmel 2000). Advised to play by the "rules," women succumb to hegemonic notions of power as they attempt to gain visibility they lack both locally and globally (Kimmel 2000; McGregor 2004). In a patriarchal system, women often lack sources of power, such as "physical strength, education, and money"; therefore, they approach the acquisition of power indirectly by utilizing "charm, dependency, or love withdrawal" (Freedman 1986: 74). Consequently, women begin to believe that they can only achieve equal power with men by using their feminine wiles.

With beauty labeled as the weapon in the competition for power, women begin to see each other as enemies. Naomi Wolf states: "Our faces and bodies become instruments for punishing other women, often used out of our control and against our will. At present, 'beauty' is an economy in which women find the 'value' of their faces and bodies impinging, in spite of themselves, on that of other women's" (Wolf 1992: 284). The competition felt in the "beauty economy" of the pageant contest can be compared to the rivalry and excitement of a football game. Abbe Gatlin, 21, an aspiring Broadway actress, undergraduate at Birmingham-Southern College and one-time participant in the local Alabama preliminary Miss Mallard Pointe, found it hard to
contain her laughter as she described her disbelief at the competitive atmosphere of the Miss Alabama pageant:

There's all these women you know being so, speaking quietly, and...we start, the lights go dark and all those clappers come out and all that like, just for real, hooting and hollering, like you would at a football game, but at a beauty pageant in this beautiful theater. And all sense of professional poise is out the window and we are at a football game cheering for those girls, you know, on stage.

Fathers of pageant participants claim that they enjoy the competitive nature of beauty contests, and they are usually the most vocal supporters of their daughter's pageant participation. Jane's father, a former college basketball star, took an interest in her pageant participation as a substitute for the competitiveness of her brother's baseball games. Although their daughters are not overtly tackling the enemy team as they would at a football game, individual pageant participants do use subtle tactics to demonstrate their "power" on the playing field.

Refining their "tactics" through hours of training, beauty pageant participants credit their success in competitions to their constant dedication and practice of their pageant role. Leah, the student, believes that "every pageant's practice." Jennifer Adcock, 28, a dedicated law school student who is considered a "crossover" success story for placing in the Top 10 at Miss America and Miss USA, constantly harped on the need for self-discipline in beauty pageant competition. She describes the rigidity of her training as Miss Mississippi preparing for Miss America: "At one point in time they handed me a sheet of paper that said this is what time you get up, you watch the news and read the newspaper from this time to this time and then you go to the gym and then you go practice...it was a very structured environment."
Despite the immense hours individuals commit to preparing for pageant competition, it is rare that any participant will publicly acknowledge that she deserves to win. By denying a pageant win, young women are able to distance themselves from the masculine traits associated with achievement (Freedman 1986). Though this may seem unnecessary when the competition is in a socially acceptable feminine forum, pageant winners still fear being labeled with presumably masculine traits such as arrogance and smugness. Therefore in order to appear feminine, pageant winners often modestly attribute their success in the pageant system to sheer "luck." Linguistically framing a win as luck allows women to place themselves into "the girl-next-door ideal." This ideal participant is rewarded in the pageant system for being self-effacing and humble; however, these characteristics "gloss over the modicum of ambition" needed to compete in beauty pageants (Yano 2006: 4).

Although it is riddled with inconsistencies, the girl-next-door ideal has helped pageant queens become a paragon of femininity in the eyes of young girls. Generally speaking, every pageant participant had spent her childhood watching the Miss America pageant and idolizing the contestants. Grace, the reluctant beauty queen, said,

I remember my sister and I... even up into an age when we were probably way too old, or should have been way too old maturity wise ...watching these pageants and making out our own score sheets and, you know, really getting into it. And we, I just remember watching these girls and thinking that they had it all together...They’re beautiful; they’re talented; they’re articulate. And like, look how graceful they are. And I just, it was something that when I played dress up, it’s like who I pretended to be, you know, because they just seemed so awesome.

Many young women also stated that participating in beauty pageants was seen as a feminine ritual in their small hometowns, and that beauty pageants were always considered a natural part of community life. Meg, the news reporter, went on to explain
this phenomenon: “Miss Mississippi is a local celebrity, like everyone knows who she is, everyone watches the pageant.”

Replacing the upper class Southern tradition of debutante balls, entry into pageants allows girls from middle class families to be formally introduced into the community (Stoeltje 1996). This introduction follows a specific pattern: first, the master of ceremonies states the names of the young woman’s parents establishing her place in the town social order; secondly, the emcee lists the participant’s community service, athletic and honor society involvement identifying her as a productive and worthy citizen (Lavenda 1996). However, the beauty pageant goes beyond the debutante presentation by choosing one of the participants as a winner, and therefore as the most outstanding, respectable representative of young women in the community.

The lure of community and possibly state recognition often leads an aspiring pageant participant, and especially her parents, to believe that winning a title will secure her “a fine job” in “a big city” or move them up on the Southern social ladder (Wilson 2006). Rick Caccamisi, 54, former executive with the Miss USA system and a hair salon owner who prides himself on his truthfulness, explained the participants’ quest for celebrity-like status: “It doesn’t matter how rich or how poor you are, Mom and Dad will do anything to see that that child succeeds in whatever. And I’ve seen more people that are in the lower economic class trying to succeed, to get, to get that title in order for them to think they’re in the upper class of society.”

Winning a beauty pageant title may bring recognition, but it does not guarantee success. Tara Boosey, a thirty-three year old business executive who voluntarily serves as business manager for Miss Tennessee, said, “I hate to tell those girls, but it’s not going
to get you anywhere [laughter]. Only you, yourself, is gonna get you where you want to be. So don’t rely on a title to get you there.” Despite her belief that pageant titles do not secure future prosperity, Tara did credit her success in the job market to the skills she learned in beauty pageants. By preparing for and participating in the interview competition, she learned to confidently state her opinion and to think on her feet when faced with obscure and difficult questions. In addition to interview skills, many participants cite the discipline and work ethic they obtained by working towards the goal of winning a title. Jennifer, the law school student, said her maturity was greater than the typical undergrad because she had to sacrifice attending social activities to prepare for the Miss Mississippi pageant. Mai Matthews, 41, the only black man on the Miss Tennessee board of directors and a teacher who has a collection of over 500 autographed photographs of beauty queens, added another quality he believes contestants learn from pageantry: “I call it stick-to-it-tiveness, someone who never gives up.” He said the ability to persevere despite difficult circumstances helps girls remain in the pageant system after several losses and it also helps them to endure the job search after college.

A widely held belief among pageant participants and volunteers is that young women find few opportunities to develop these “real-life” skills outside of pageant participation. By publicizing the lessons learned through beauty pageant participation, contestants both justify their reason for competing and affirm the relevance of beauty pageants in a modern society. Jennifer, the law school student, attributes her public speaking skills to her participation in pageants:

I really was incredibly, incredibly shy and very soft-spoken, terrified and petrified to speak to adults. ...But I can remember, when I was in high school we had to have a public speaking, like a speech course that we had to take, it was required.
And I was petrified, thought I was going to be sick at my stomach every time I had to do it. It was the scariest thing in the world...And after I won Mississippi’s Junior Miss one of the first things I had to do was address the State Senate and House of Representatives....And you know I had to go to schools and speak to elementary schools. ...And so I wanted to do it to the best of my ability, because I felt that responsibility. And I just kind of took it and ran with it and grew from it. And then I ended up majoring in speech communication in college, which never would have happened had it not been for Junior Miss.

Although Jennifer’s experience in the beauty pageant system noticeably affected her future career, young women could just as well develop public speaking skills through their local Toastmasters organization or use the hours spent in beauty pageant training to develop their business skills in a part-time job.

Yet for young women who desire to work in mass communications or break into the entertainment industry, pageant titles can and often do open doors. Robin Mead of CNN and Gretchen Carlson of Fox News are former title-holders, along with Hollywood actresses Delta Burke, Mary Ann Mobley, Vanessa Williams and Halle Berry. Their time as pageant queens helped them to develop their professional lives in front of the camera, while establishing contacts in their respective fields of interest. However, the power of the spotlight is sometimes too much for queens to handle. Rick, the former executive who worked directly under Donald Trump, said “ninety percent of them ended up with DUIs, in bed with the wrong person, getting caught at parties that they shouldn’t have been...the list goes on forever.” He was the one who was responsible for getting them out of trouble, but he said they could not be blamed for making mistakes that “normal human beings” commit.

Although the fame and power of a pageant title can become detrimental to its recipient, the scholarship funds made available in the organization only work for good in the lives of the contestants. As the leading scholarship provider for young women in the
United States, the Miss America Organization awards over 45 million dollars in cash and scholarship assistance at the local, state and national level. Each year the Miss America Organization awards the following monies at the national level: the winner receives a fifty thousand dollar scholarship, the first runner-up receives a twenty-five thousand dollar scholarship, the second runner-up receives a twenty thousand dollar scholarship, the third runner-up receives a fifteen thousand dollar scholarship and the fourth runner-up receives ten thousand (Miss America).

Providing scholarship money for educational purposes has always served as the means by which the Miss America Organization chose to aggrandize its social relevancy and contribution to modern society. However specific and deeply ingrained hegemonic ideals continue to constrict gender equality when women’s intellectual prowess must be supported by a performance of beauty. The lessons accrued from this reward system imply that beauty is the economic currency that women must use to get ahead in the work force. “Like any economy, it is determined by politics, and in the modern age in the West it is the last, best belief system that keeps male dominance intact” (Wolf 1991: 12). Therefore women are encouraged to achieve only if they can keep up their physical appearance, or worse women are expected to achieve through the use of their body.

Another example of this mentality can also be seen in the toy section of any department store. On the “doll” aisle, Barbie boxes are in a row displaying her in the role of astronaut, lawyer, teacher and veterinarian. However, each Barbie is unnaturally slender with good hair, perfect makeup and feet shaped to fit into the accompanying high heels provided with the “career-minded” Barbie doll.
It is the implications of the “superwoman” mentality that binds women into believing that they must be thin, successful, intelligent, self-disciplined and beautiful in order to be recognized by society (Steinem 1995). Nevertheless, some pageant participants revel in the contradictions and relish the pressure to attain the ideal contrived by society and perpetuated in the beauty pageant system. Meg, the news reporter, offered her thoughts on the reward system in this “beauty economy”:

They give scholarships and really encourage you just to be really good at what you’re doing so I just think it, the ones that I competed in, and are part of I think they don’t belittle women they kind of empower them. They make you own it, own the fact that you’re, you’re a beautiful girl and you have something to say and you have a talent you want to show. You know, don’t hide it. We want to see it. We want to see you shine. And that’s what I liked about it.

In this section, it is clear that the individual’s construction of self within the beauty pageant system is fraught with complexities. It may be seen that the stereotypical imagery of “Pageant Patty” is too one-sided to ever truly represent the unique ideas each participant holds of her involvement in the pageant system. Because each young woman was aware of the critical viewpoint held by outsiders to the pageant system, she desired to separate herself from a system in which patriarchal ideas and hegemonic practices are rarely questioned. Yet each of them continues to participate in the pageant system, because the ability to engage in pageant contests allows young women to subvert the power beauty holds over their lives.

The search for empowerment through beauty pageants is dissected to reveal a quest that lies within the “beauty economy,” a place where women are rewarded for compliance to patriarchal ideals. The competition evoked in pageant contests reveals the rivalry of the “game” and the enjoyment pageant participants feel when training for contests. As a ritualized aspect of community life, participants are rarely offered the
opportunity to question their involvement or the foundation upon which the pageant system rests. Recognition and fame, which comes from pageant participation, is not a guarantee; however, many predominately middle-class women are lured to trade their beauty as currency as they seek to obtain pageant scholarships. From a critical viewpoint, this trade-off can be seen as detrimental to the psychological health of pageant participants; however, it is a sacrifice that these young women have recognized and are willing to make.
CHAPTER 2: REINFORCING PERFORMANCES OF FEMININITY

In a society that connects gendered actions to sex categorization, virtually every activity is attributed to being a “man” or a “woman.” However, the construction of individual gender identity does not rely on “natural” and “instinctive” actions, but rather on the continual reproduction of “appropriate” gender “acts” within a situated context. Furthermore, “societal members orient to the fact that their activities are subject to comment [and] actions are designed with an eye to their accountability” (West and Zimmerman 1987: 136). In other words, gender is a performative role reinforced through social interaction. Judith Butler further theorizes the idea of gender as a social construction: “‘There is neither an essence that gender expresses or externalizes nor an objective ideal to which gender aspires, and because gender is not a fact, the various acts of gender create the idea of gender, and without these acts, there would be no gender at all’” (Banet-Weiser 1999: 11).

Sociologists West and Zimmerman define gender as simply “the product of social doings” (West and Zimmerman 1987: 129). Thus social situations, such as the beauty pageant contest, appropriate gender “both as an outcome of and rationale for various social arrangements and as a means of legitimating one of the most fundamental divisions of society” (Ibid: 126). When beauty pageant contests judge women on their beauty, they validate the societal idea that “being a woman” requires careful self-monitoring and that
"being a man" does not entail such rigid discipline of the external self. Not only does the beauty pageant system create a separate sphere for women, but also it rewards young women who conduct themselves in a gender-specific manner.

In this chapter, I analyze how young women "do" gender in the beauty pageant system. By studying how pageant participants regulate their bodies, I am able to uncover the way these young women carefully construct a specific "feminine" ideal. Using Susan Bordo's interpretation of the slender body, I identify and reveal the pageant participants' association of the containment and control of the outer self as a reflection of the internal processes of the mind. I also describe the pageant system's attempt to restrain the individual participant's physical desires through the use of pageant contracts and the unspoken expectations of pageantry.

Next, I establish the strict performance aspect of the interview and talent competition as an avenue wherein pageant participants "act" out an "appropriate" version of self in relation to others. Revealing the intention of the pageant judges' selection of a winner, I explore the need for a pageant participant to demonstrate "niceness" in order to be recognized as a "sellable" product. I also study the talent portion of the Miss America contest as a way the pageant system proves participants' social distinction and middle-class superiority.
Little girls that don’t have a good figure...little girls that aren’t pretty shouldn’t be in beauty pageants, because that is what they are all about. Little girls that are overweight, little girls that are ugly...are never going to win.

-Rick Caccamisi

"The body—what we eat, how we dress, the daily rituals through which we attend to the body—is a medium of culture" (Bordo 1993: 165). However, the intelligible body also functions as an explanation of cultural values and practices. Pierre Bourdieu and Michel Foucault argue that culture is “made body” through the subjugation of the docile body. For women, the body is disciplined through “diet, makeup, and dress” in an attempt to achieve the “ever-changing, homogenizing, elusive ideal of femininity” (Ibid: 166). In Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture, and the Body, Susan Bordo argues that the obsession with controlling the appearance of the feminine body is the most effective means of social control. The preoccupation with appearance in the beauty pageant system reasserts traditional gender power relations through the fragmentation of the body and the containment of desire.

Beauty pageant participants view self-discipline as an integral and serious aspect of pageant competition. Accordingly the pageant participant dedicates numerous hours to the regulation and restraint of the body, often employing coaches and trainers to instruct them in the elements of “proper” pageant behavior. During pageant training, coaches instruct young women to push their shoulders back, tuck their bottom under and pull their tummy in (Banet-Weiser 1999). Another important lesson coaches share with young women is to slightly bend their arms at the elbows and hold their wrists near the hipbone as they “glide” across stage in a “natural” position. Also, coaches teach participants to
pretend their chin is on a shelf as they gaze into the audience. Stressing the importance of 
“natural” motion breaks down the female form into specific elements resulting in the 
fragmentation and objectification of the pageant participant. However, both coaches and 
participants legitimize the construction of this elaborate act as “another step toward a 
more perfect femininity” (Banet-Weiser 1999: 64). Specifically in the non-speaking 
portions of the pageant competition, this “perfect” femininity is cast as isolated sexuality. 
As young women are denied the ability to speak for themselves in the swimsuit and 
evening wear competition, the old adage that “women should be seen and not heard” is 
blatantly manifested on the pageant stage (Ibid).

The juxtaposition of the observer and the observed violently reinforces the 
fragmentation of pageant participants. During the entire pageant competition spotlights 
illuminate the beauty pageant participants, while “the judges sit in the dark [as] faceless 
surveyors” (Ibid: 68). Since these young women cannot return the gaze of the judges nor 
the audience members, pageant critics often equate the beauty pageant stage to a 
pornographic magazine where women are “visually ‘had’” (Freedman 1986: 41). However when critics render pageant participants as pornographic models, they fail to 
call attention to participants’ decision to control their individual bodies throughout 
pageant competition (Banet-Weiser 1999: 68). Furthermore, though the non-speaking 
portions of competition may seem to only make use of the intelligible body, the docile 
body is also being represented through the shape, form and regulation of the external self.

The desire for self-discipline and self-castigation is emphasized in the Olympic 
scoring of pageant participants, where judges rate contestants according to individual 
ability rather than against other participants. Jane, the dancer from Alabama, emphasized
the importance of judging oneself when she said: “I guess the important thing is just, you
know, to see yourself progress. And to compare, to compare you with you.”

When pageant participants battle with themselves, the body is always the victim.
Meg, the news reporter, believes the emphasis placed on attaining the perfect female
form begins long before entry into pageants:

Girls are so bombarded at such a young age with body image. I was actually
reading something the other day that said like 60 percent of like 8 to 11 year olds
throughout America either have tried dieting or thought about it. And that’s a
really young age to already be worrying about your body. And you know they say
it never goes away. Women continue to worry about it, you know, through old
age when you’re naturally supposed to be aging. And now the norm is to try to
stop it with any kind of medicine or injection that can do it.

Although pageant participants were often bothered by pageantry’s demands for a specific
body type, they stated that beauty pageants could not be blamed for merely depicting
society’s standards. Jennifer, the law school student, said: “We have a society that very
much views people on the way they look outwardly and that’s just kind of the cold truth
of life as we know it.”

The societal obsession with body image may stem from the culturally acceptable
notion of judging an individual’s internal state of being on the outer self. “The firm,
developed body has become a symbol of correct attitude; it means that one “cares” about
oneself and how one appears to others, suggesting willpower, energy, control over
infantile impulse, the ability to shape your life…” (Bordo 1993: 195). Following this ideological framework, fat is
seen as indicative of unwanted moral qualities such as laziness, overindulgence and
resistance to a status quo mentality. Therefore, a pageant participant’s ability to suppress
“internal processes out of control—uncontained desire, unrestrained hunger, uncontrolled
impulse” is made manifest in her “tight and contained flesh” (Ibid: 189; Banet-Weiser 1999: 68).

Awarding young women on their ability to produce such a “successful enactment of femininity” is most obvious in the swimsuit portion of the competition, where participants are primarily judged on the “tone” of their body (Banet-Weiser 1999: 68). Mai Matthews, the autograph collector, explains the way he judges pageant participants in “swimsuit”:

Now see we have guidelines that we judge by. A graceful walk with that toneness, but ultimately, ultimately when I put my score down who has the best physically fit body that I can see. I can tell when they’re holding in their stomach. You can see all that. Like I said, I just look for the toneness...I can look at your legs and tell if you work out. I can look at your arms and tell if you’re doing something. I can look at your waistline. A lot of girls can have six-packs and they are really working out. So if a girl comes out and she has a stomach muscles and toned that’s almost a nine right there. Just because I know she works out.

For Mai, pageant contestants’ bodies demonstrate if they are “doing something.” Therefore, the participant with the “six-pack” should be rewarded for exhibiting the “most” effort. “Working out” means the “correct attitude” and pageant participants dedicate hours to the creation of a “firm” pageant-ready body. At the Miss Madison competition, one contestant had woken up at five o’clock in the morning for five days a week for four months in order to train for pageant competition. Grace, the reluctant beauty queen, said: “I was working with two trainers...So much of my life had to revolve around being in tip-top shape in order to compete and look as fit as I did.”

The search for “the elusive yet ruthlessly normalizing goal, the ‘perfect’ body” often leads pageant participants to consider plastic surgery (Bordo 1993: 248). Rick, the former pageant executive, reveals that about fifty percent of national pageant participants have had some form of plastic surgery. He states: “They did it because they knew that
they needed to have it done in order to compete. First thing is nose job. Second thing is boobs. Third thing is liposuction.” Leah, the student, shared her thoughts on plastic surgery: “Like it’s not weird for a girl to at least have a breast augmentation, you know, because that just makes your dresses look better.” She went on to say that the quest for the perfect female form is reinforced in society’s depiction of women: “That’s pretty much what the media wants you to look like is Barbie. You know, nice set of boobs, you know, a good little booty and a little waist.”

Trivialization of plastic surgery in the beauty pageant system is a striking account of the lengths pageant participants will go to in order to alter their bodies. And although only half of participants artificially construct their bodies in such an extreme manner, every pageant participant engages in the temporary and minor transformations provided by backstage beauty rituals.

Beauty rituals are seen as “the things ‘all’ women do ‘to be more attractive’” (Bordo 1993: 253). Therefore the reason why these rituals exist is never questioned; instead, participants focus on the question of how these rituals can be used as external regulation of the body (Banet-Weiser 1999). Participants must engage in these acts in the private domain, so that the “‘finished product’” will be considered “natural” and “authentic” (Banet-Weiser 1999: 71).

Pageant participants’ most common beauty rituals include the use of Stick-Um spray, cleavage enhancer pads, duct tape, Vaseline and “shaded” abs. Most commonly known as athletic grip enhancer, Stick-Um spray is used by pageant participants in the swimsuit competition to “hold down” the suit bottom to their buttocks. Cleavage enhancer pads and duct tape are used to enhance the bust of individual participants, as
well as creating a “seamless silhouette” (Ibid). Participants place Vaseline on their teeth to help them “smile,” and they use makeup to “shade in” abs.

The care pageant participants take in correctly fabricating such a “perfected” display of femininity strengthens the beauty pageant system belief that the outer self is a reflection of the inner self. Jane, the dancer from Alabama, reluctantly acknowledged her “failure” to produce this ideal when she whispered: “I always get critiqued by my parents that I don’t have on enough makeup on stage, but it’s just not my thing I guess.” Like many other beauty pageant participants, Jane fears the consequences of being unable to “master” the “creation” of the “finished product” (Ibid; Freedman 1986). Grace, the reluctant beauty queen, discusses the vulnerability felt by fellow Miss America participants over the assembly of the pageant display:

LT: When you said a lot of the girls were insecure. What do you think they were the most insecure about?

Grace: Probably their bodies. I mean as confident as girls may look walking out on stage in a swimsuit. You know when you’re backstage and you see all those girls like painting on abs and doing last minute push-ups and, you know, taking diuretics, like trying to get out all the, all the water, all the bloating in their bodies. And you know looking in the mirror and posing in different ways. And you know, you see all that backstage and then they walk out on stage and they look so confident. You know? ...All these girls in the mirror frantically putting on their make-up and posing in front of the mirror and trying to make sure their swimsuit is just right. You know, there is a lot of a lack of confidence displayed in that room.

Mirroring Grace’s national pageant experience, it was the swimsuit portion of the Miss Madison competition that significantly revealed the participants’ shared feelings of self-doubt. While each young woman waited for the competition to begin, she practiced “posing” in front of a mirror frequently pausing to grasp the skin on her side in order to compare the amount of “fat” with her fellow contestants. During the “fat” comparison it
appeared as though the participant who could “trash talk” her slender body the most would be made the winner of this grotesquely comic, yet hauntingly intimate contest.

The conversation between the Miss Madison contestants reveals the anxiety and torment young women feel over “bodies habituated to self-monitoring and self-normalization” (Bordo 1993: 203). In the endless pursuit of the feminine ideal, pageant participants continually feel that they will never be good enough. Nonetheless young women continually fight to regulate and restrain their “internal processes” in order to offer up a precise portrait of a body under control (Banet-Weiser 1999; Bordo 1993).

The belief in self-discipline as a necessary feminine praxis is constituted in the historical representations of womanhood. Bordo (1993: 205-206) explains the historical interpretation of the feminine body:

Throughout dominant Western religious and philosophical traditions, the capacity for self-management is decisively coded as male. By contrast, all those bodily spontaneities—hunger, sexuality, the emotions—seen as needful of containment and control have been culturally constructed and coded as female. The management of specifically female desire, therefore, is in phallocentric cultures a doubly freighted problem. Women’s desires are by their very nature excessive, irrational, threatening to erupt and challenge the patriarchal order.

Therefore, patriarchal societies encourage “containment” of the body as a way of managing desire. Following this paradigm, the beauty pageant contest represses pageant participants’ individual desires in order to reinforce “proper” femininity as defined by modesty, chastity, and submissiveness (McGregory 2004).

In the beauty pageant system individual participants are rewarded for the suppression of their physical appetites, which includes the denial of hunger pains and sexual urges. Self-denial is a widely acknowledged component of pageant participation, and competitors often brag about their self-deprivation. The most striking portraits of the
pageant participant’s relationship with food may be expressed both in the public forum of the Miss Mississippi Trunk Show where Jennifer, the law school student, served as emcee and in the personal conversation held between a school girl and Grace, the reluctant queen.

At the trunk show, Jennifer announced Miss Mississippi’s itinerary at the Miss America pageant and offered stories from her experience at the national pageant. Throughout the four-hour presentation, Jennifer made between five to ten “jokes” about food. The “joking” began when Jennifer boldly exclaimed that there would be no pancakes for the current queen at the scheduled pancake breakfast. Jennifer then said: “There is always all this food around and you just can’t eat it...It’s always kind of torturous.” The insistence on not eating was made once again when Jennifer announced a dinner event at an Italian restaurant, and continued as she and the current queen spoke onstage about carbohydrates being terrible for the “swimsuit” physique.

During the exchange the audience laughed generously reassuring her and other audience members that hunger is not only a “joke,” but also an acceptable feminine praxis. Additionally, the significant amount of eating references made by Jennifer reflects the power food holds over the lives of pageant participants. “For dieters, who live in a state of constant denial, food is a perpetually beckoning presence, its power growing ever greater as the sanctions against gratification become more stringent” (Bordo 1993: 103).

Grace, the reluctant beauty queen, was the only participant who questioned hunger suppression as a standardized custom of womanhood. She said that the inordinate amounts of time she spent analyzing her diet was “not healthy,” and she often worried
about young girls who desire to attain the slender physique of beauty queens. Her story about one particular occurrence represents her desire to expel the myth of the “perfect” feminine form:

I remember I had one little twelve year-old girl that came up to me at a school. And she looked exactly I did when I was twelve, you know. I hadn’t hit my growth spurt up yet. But you know, not, I would never call her overweight, but she wasn’t really thin you know. And she came up to me and she just said, “I just want to know how you do it, because I’m just really trying to get this ten pounds off.” She was twelve years old. And it’s like, I, I just looked at her and I said “Look if you could see pictures of me at twelve years old you have so much growing up to do.” And I said “You know what? The way that you see me right now and the way that you look at celebrities in the magazines, it’s not real. Like you can’t have a real life and look like that.”

Both of the aforementioned conversations, between Jennifer and Miss Mississippi and Grace and the young girl, demonstrate the power at play in the relationship between females and food. The two pageant participants exhibited behavior of young women who were haunted by the denial of appetite, yet found hunger a necessary practice of femininity; whereas, the solitary participant recognized and dispelled the power food held over her by recognizing the false representation of the feminine ideal. Lastly, the young student serves as an example of the early age at which girls begin seeking containment and control of the body.

Many feminist scholars link the suppression of hunger to the suppression of sexual desire. Naomi Wolf asserts, “to ask women to become unnaturally thin is to ask them to relinquish their sexuality” (Wolf 1991: 192-193). Bordo goes further in stating that in patriarchal societies “women’s sexual appetites...threaten to deplete and consume the body and soul of the male” (Bordo 1993: 117).

Beauty pageant organizations aim to hamper the “threat” of female sexuality by including “chaste” clauses in legally binding pageant contracts. The “eligibility” section
of the Miss America pageant contract outlines the “presumed morality” of pageant participants.

- I have never been married, or had marriage annulled; I have never cohabited with a male in lieu of a marriage contract, and am not nor never have been pregnant
- I am of good moral character
- I have never been involved in any act of moral turpitude
- Nor have I ever done any act or engaged in any activity which is or could be characterized as dishonest, immoral, immodest, indecent, or in bad taste

Each of these clauses implies the chastity of the pageant participant; and therefore, the denial of sexual urges. However, the transparent nature of the eligibility stipulations leaves much room open for interpretation. Rick, the former pageant executive, discusses the “correct” definition of “moral turpitude”:

Moral turpitude. I really, I really don’t know how that’s defined. I mean everyone’s morals are different. It’s just according to how deep you want to go. Is, is having casual kissing in the front seat of a car someone’s version of morality? Or is having full-blown sex in the middle of the street someone else’s version of morality? Until that’s defined by the Miss America Organization I don’t know how to answer that one.

According to the Miss America Organization’s judges’ guide, pageant winners are to be a “role model” who is “a leader by virtue of her experiences.” When combined with the legal stipulations of the pageant contract, these qualifications depict a pageant winner who “must not bear evidence of having had sex” (Banet-Weiser 1999: 51).

Furthermore, the equation of sexuality with the words “immoral” and “indecent” implies that recognition of sexual desire is “bad,” while wholesomeness is regarded as “good.” In other words, a woman is destined to be either a “madonna” or “tart” when in actuality “she is neither one” (Banet-Weiser 1999: 142).

Vanessa Williams’ “fall” best exemplifies the repercussions of crossing the strict boundary lines of female sexuality as defined by the beauty pageant system. However,
since Williams’ story is grounded in both gender and racial politics it is necessary to first understand the history of racism in the Miss America system. In 1923 the first black people participated in the Miss America contest as “slaves” in a musical number, but due to the eligibility clause that stated “contestants must be...of the white race” black participants continued to be banned entry until 1967 (Banet-Weiser 1999; Kinloch 2004: 96). The crowning of Vanessa Williams as the first black Miss America in 1984 represented a major shift in the racial politics of the Miss America pageant (Banet-Weiser 1999).

Miss America 1984, Vanessa Williams, insisted in her public speeches that racial equality had finally been achieved within the pageant system; yet, race was not a factor when she was chosen as queen. “This dual strategy of focusing on difference, only to insist that ‘difference’ doesn’t make a difference, served to reassure the Miss America pageant and most of America that selecting a woman of color was not going to disrupt dominant notions of (white) womanhood but would give the definition of womanhood a new twist, spice it up, and make it more accessible to all young American women” (Banet-Weiser 1999: 134-135). Nevertheless, no one expected the “spice” that Williams brought as Miss America.

Shortly into her reign, Penthouse released photographs of Williams and a white woman engaged in homoerotic acts (Banet-Weiser 1999; Kinloch 2004). The ensuing scandal, otherwise known as the “fall” of Vanessa Williams, reinforced stereotypical notions of black sexuality by casting her as “the oversexed black Jezebel” (Banet-Weiser 1999: 143). Yet, it was the lesbianism of the photographs that seemed to cast the darkest shadow on the Miss America Organization. The public image of a beauty queen who
understood and took advantage of her own innate sexual desire fully denigrated the “moral” symbolism of Miss America (Banet-Weiser 1999).

Williams’ tale can best be summed up in the phrase “damned if you do, damned if you don’t.” Even as Williams attempted to “deny” her skin color, she could not deny her sexuality. Furthermore in the recognition of her sexuality, Williams’ race once again became a factor. This “double exclusion” of black women demonstrates the pageant system’s foundation of patriarchy where ideal femininity is defined by both outer and inner designations of “whiteness.” (Banet-Weiser 1999).

As illustrated in the four case studies on desire, it is clear that the beauty pageant system encourages the cautious monitoring of pageant participant’s hunger pangs and sexual urges. However, the pageant participant advances self-regulation far past the maintenance of the physical body and “instinctual” urges moving into the perpetuation of a personality “performance” in the talent and interview portions of competition.

**PRODUCING AND PERPETUATING AN “APPROPRIATE” PERSONALITY**

*They are trying to portray Miss America as being so perfect, and she’s not. Nobody is. And even Miss America knows that. The girl that wins knows that she’s not perfect. And I think there is so much pressure to be that way, to be Miss America.*

-Leah Laviano

A successful performance of femininity requires regulation of the outer self both in the containment of the body and the performance of a specific “personality” type. In the beauty pageant system, this “type” is typified by a “girl-next-door” attitude. Therefore, participants carefully monitor their “individuality” in order to enact a “pageant-appropriate” version of womanhood.
The interview portion of the pageant competition aims “to capture the construction of liberal characteristics of agency and choice-making abilities” of the pageant participant (Banet-Weiser 1999: 91). Exhibiting qualities of liberal feminine selfhood requires participants to demonstrate a strong sense of self within a situated gender performance. Framed by the pageant motto “Be the best you can be,” pageant participant identity is founded on the notion of choosing which version of “self” to perform. Perfecting this “YOU” requires participants to practice performances of self in interview training where contestants are taught “‘good pageant answers’” and instructed to deliver them with a “spontaneous air” (Ibid: 92). Pageant participants often view the “rehearsed spontaneity” of the interview segment as a form of “acting.” Meg, the news reporter, said: “They are real girls, but...you know, someone has told them how to act and look on a stage that you just don’t pick up.” Jane, the dancer from Alabama, believed “acting” was a necessary part of pageant competition: “I think it would just be weird if you acted the same way on stage as you did...in actual life, in a non-pageant setting.”

Beauty pageant contestants “act out” a version of “female liberal selfhood within a patriarchal culture—which means that the contestants realize an identity that relies upon a construction of the female self in relation to others—specifically, in relation to men and children” (Banet-Weiser 1999: 93). Central to this identity is the concept of “the nice girl” or the “girl-next-door” (Yano 2006). Anthropologist Christine Yano (234) defines “niceness” within the beauty pageant system:

The stage projection of being nice, defined here as amiable, pleasing, pleasant, tactful, congenial...What is important about niceness is that anyone can have it, do it, and be it. Niceness is the democratic, every-person ideal of humility and decency. Not everyone can be beautiful, smart, or rich, but everyone can be or act...
nice. Furthermore, everyone can remain nice no matter what the conditions of one’s existence.

The universal appeal of “niceness” contributes to the notion of beauty pageant queens as appropriate community representatives. “Niceness” embodies the well-bred, middle-class ideal of femininity that helps pageant participants to identify with the elementary student, the mayor and the businessperson. In other words “niceness” sells, and in the beauty pageant system judges are instructed to choose women with “sellability.”

During the Miss Mississippi judges’ workshop, the executive director stated: “We are looking for a girl that can get on the road and sell the program and sell herself.” When a pageant queen “sells the program” she raises sponsorship and scholarship money for the pageant system and when she “sells herself” she is raising money for her personal gain. Therefore, the pageant queen must have “sellability” in order for her reign to be successful. Rick, the former pageant executive, defines “sellability” as “flat out beauty with the ability to speak.” And according to the executive director, the recognition of a pageant participant’s “’sellability’ begins in interview.”

The initial “sell” takes place in a closed environment wherein the judges ask pageant participants “conversational” type questions. Questions usually involve the contestants discussing information on their “fact sheet” (hobbies or future goals), and cultural literacy questions (current events). Overall the questions never become too personal or too political, rather they are neutral questions that serve to reveal the participant’s “’personality,’ the very locus of niceness” (Ibid: 237).

Reinforcing hegemonic ideals, the “personality” of the pageant contestant “rests in the emotional configuration and practices of the hostess: friendly, congenial, outgoing, hospitable” (Ibid). In Grace’s Miss Tennessee interview, it is clear that the judges’
questions along with the participants’ answers are situated around performing the specific
gendered ideal of the “girl-next-door” with “personality.” This enactment begins as soon
as Grace enters the interview room:

Grace: Good morning! How are y’all today?
Judges: Fine. How are you?
Grace: Doing great! Just ready to get here. It’s the waiting around that’s the hard
part. [laughter from the judges]

After the informal conversation, Grace chooses to stand beside the podium for the formal
interview questioning. A few of the judges’ questions include: “What would the other
contestants say about you?”; “Are you an organized person?”; and “Can you have fun and
focus?”

The exchange between Grace and the judges reveals the importance of “acting
out” a version of “self” consistent with patriarchal ideals. When Grace makes “small
talk” with the judges she is being “friendly.” Her placement at the side of the podium
indicates her “outgoing” demeanor. And lastly, may it be suggested that the questions are
formulated to reveal Grace’s potential to be not only a “good” hostess, but also a “good”
wife and mother.

Although pageant participants are neither wives nor mothers, the questions asked
in the beauty pageant interview reveal how the pageant participant situates herself
according to others; therefore, making known the participant’s potential to be a “good”
future “hostess” of the home. By promoting their “platforms” and serving as “role
models,” pageant contestants further demonstrate their “maternal” nature.

Pageant participants are required to promote an issue-specific “platform” during
their reign; however, “highly politicized issues such as Amnesty International or abortion
rights rarely emerge” (McGregory 2004: 131). Instead, participants champion causes
dedicated to "safe" social causes such as diabetes prevention or breast cancer awareness. In the Miss University pageant, each of the platforms were dedicated to youth: "Helping Others Through Personal Encouragement; STAR: Steps To Awesome Reading; You Booze, You Lose; and Mentoring America’s Youth.” The Miss America Organization’s national platform of the Children’s Miracle Network also emphasizes the pageant participants’ “care” for children. Since “mothering” is seen as a “natural” attribute of women, the choice of pageant participants to place importance on “family, community, and domesticity” reveals the highly gendered nature of the beauty pageant contest (Ibid). Furthermore by establishing a mandatory, youth-focused platform for all Miss America contestants, the beauty pageant system signals to the general public that pageant contestants are “miracle-making (future) mothers.”

In addition to promoting charitable work in the local community, pageant participants dedicate a large portion of their reign to school appearances and speaking engagements. These situations cast beauty pageant participants as “maternal” young women who truly “care” about the education system and the youth of tomorrow, solidifying the notion of pageant winners as “role models.” For many pageant participants, the acceptance of this “role” implies modifying personal behavior. Grace, the reluctant beauty queen, discussed the sacrifices she made in order to serve as “an example to be imitated”:

Part of the contract of Miss Tennessee is that you are not allowed into a bar or, and you are not allowed to be seen with a glass of wine. So much of social atmosphere in your mid-twenties which is where I am, in grad school, you go out for drinks with your friends, you go to dinner, everybody has wine. And you know and I couldn’t do those things. And so I mean, I definitely think that was a sacrifice, but it was something that I took seriously. Because when you do put yourself in that position, because how many beauty queens have we seen on TV, that people take unflattering photos and post them everywhere. Things can be
taken out of context, so I had to be really really careful. And I still do, honestly, because after I spent a year going around to high schools and telling kids ways to be healthy, I don’t need to have a picture taken of me and put on Facebook where hundreds of those kids are still my friends on Facebook. You know, showing them that that was just a temporary thing in my life. You know, that everything in moderation is okay, but I, you know I still take that seriously. But those are all sacrifices that I had to make. I mean it was a, you know, twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week job. Like I was, it was, you always had to be on, you know.

Serving as a role model binds pageant participants with a certain “moral duty” that may or may not be accepted with ease. Yet no matter how they view their “bounden” duty, pageant participants recognize that they are given no choice but to embody the qualities of “niceness” when they make their appearances. Mai, the autograph collector, shared his expectations for pageant queens:

How they are serving as a role model of femininity? Well I think that as far as femininity is concerned, I think just the way she carries herself. She hopefully is acting like a young lady. You know, so a lot of girls have been trained. They try to make sure they are always sitting properly, just acting like a nice, well groomed, well-mannered, you know young lady. And what I think that that shows the young people is that I can be like that to. If she can do it, I can do it.

Acting “like a young lady” is another “nice girl role” that young women in the beauty pageant system must learn to play in order to “act” out an “appropriate” version of femininity. The typical young woman in the pageant system is expected to be a “nice” girl with a “sellable” personality. In other words, she is to be charming, agreeable, sociable, nurturing, maternal and manageable; and in the Miss America competition she is also expected to be “talented.”

Talent implies social distinction and the acquisition of culture, or “what Bourdieu calls ‘cultural capital’” (Banet-Weiser 1999: 108). This term was coined in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries when the burgeoning middle class irrevocably defined “culture” as a “property” one attained through education and training. “In this
view, culture was a process, a matter of individual progress, perfectly in keeping with
democratic values and principles concerning liberal education and equal opportunity”

In the beauty pageant contest, the acquisition of culture is best illustrated in the
talent portion of competition. During talent, participants demonstrate their “social
refinement” singing a Broadway tune, playing Mozart on the piano or ballet dancing to
Swan Lake. The choice of the pageant participant’s talent showcases “cultural
competence,” the ability to personally identify “distinctive cultural signs” as “good” or
“bad” (Ibid: 111). For example, individuals who sing an operatic aria are likely to score
higher than a participant who sings a country western tune, because judges believe an aria
is “more cultured.” In other words, pageant participants must be able to demonstrate a
“learned” “middle-class” arts appreciation in their choice of talent material. However
since acquiring an arts education often requires lessons, equipment and entry fees, certain
socioeconomic classes are placed at an unfair disadvantage in the talent portion of the
pageant competition.

Despite the obvious parameters of talent, the Miss America pageant still espouses
the “the egalitarian premise of ‘anyone can do it if you try.’” Nevertheless, this
democratic notion of equality keeps talent in the pageant competition mediocre at best
(Banet-Weiser 1999: 110). Meg, the news reporter, discussed her view of the talent
competition:

I saw a lot of girls, if they were going to win Miss Mississippi or Miss America
and they were playing an instrument, they were phenomenal, phenomenal at it.
But if they were singing, they were just mediocre. I was like, well I can, I can be a
mediocre singer. So I just kind of did it as a strategy thing, because that’s more
just again, like just engaging people and having fun and commanding the stage
more so than hitting perfect high notes. So it can’t be awful, it just has to be on key and I could do that.

For Meg, the important part of the talent competition was demonstrating that she “had” talent, not that she was “talented.” Following this paradigm, the beauty pageant system employs the talent competition as a societal mark of distinction and not as an identifier of “true” talent. Talent further outlines the criterion for proper femininity within the beauty pageant system, which is a middle-class woman with an education in cultural refinement.

Throughout each portion of the beauty pageant competition, pageant participants reinforce dominant ideals of femininity in a patriarchal society. Pageantry’s belief in judging the internal state of being on the outer self encourages pageant participants to monitor their external selves by either “working out,” undergoing plastic surgery or engaging in backstage beauty rituals. Participant’s deep desire to achieve the “perfect” female form through self-fragmentation and sexual isolation reveals participants’ individual vulnerability and lack of self-confidence.

The beauty pageant system continues to restrain individual pageant participants by encouraging the repression of hunger and sexual urges. Both pageant contracts and the unspoken expectations of pageantry establish personal regulation as a necessary praxis of womanhood; nonetheless, examples of deviance to these dominant ideals do exist in the pageant system. Overall, the regulation and restraint of the body insinuates that the feminine ideal may only be achieved by reflecting both outer and inner designations of whiteness.

In the pageant participant’s exhibition of inner qualities, individual participants must perform a version of “self” that is situated in relation to others. The crux of this
“self” is reliant on the concept of the “nice girl,” which requires modification of personal behavior and suppression of participant’s individuality. Homogeneity of pageant participants is further reinforced in the talent portion of the competition, where participants are rewarded for exhibiting middle-class cultural refinement.
CONCLUSION

*Pageant contestants are both representations and self-represented, they are both sexual and serious, and they are both smart and feminine.*

-Sarah Banet-Weiser

Journalist and author Frank Deford clearly stated my feelings toward beauty pageants when he said: “The Miss America pageant is ‘maligned by one segment of America, adored by another, [and] misunderstood by about all of it’” (Banet-Weiser 1999: 3). As a former beauty pageant contestant and now a cultural scholar of the beauty pageant system, I have felt all of those emotions—contempt, adoration and complete misunderstanding—either at separate times or, as I write my thesis, all at once. As a beauty pageant participant, my disillusionment began with the realization that beauty pageants clearly reinforce the elusive ideal of a perfect female form. Soon after this newfound insight it was no surprise that I decided to cease my pageant participation; yet, years later I often found myself longing to parade across the pageant stage once again. I could not understand the reason I held contrary views towards the pageant system. How could I entertain both a critical critique and fervent love for pageantry? As I attempted to answer that question I was led to yet another query. How do other pageant participants view their individual participation in the beauty pageant system?

With those questions in mind, I set out to record the personal experiences of pageant participants in the Miss America and Miss USA system. As I listened to nine
diverse individuals sharing stories about beauty pageant participation one thing was clear: the beauty pageant system “does not mean one thing to one audience. It is not merely about pageantry, or kitschy culture, or the objectification of women, or overt racism...It is about all these things and more” (Ibid).

Although it is clear that the beauty pageant system is fraught with complexity, scholars most often regard beauty pageant contests as minor cultural events that have no deeper meaning or symbolism beyond what meets the eye. However, “[c]ultural critics argue that in treating popular culture as trivial, we risk obscuring the operation of structures of power that are masked by the seemingly frivolous nature of events and images” (Cohen 1996: 7). In *The Most Beautiful Girl In The World*, Sarah Banet-Weiser argues that, “popular culture exists as a space that can be simultaneously conventional and unpredictable, liberatory and reactionary, personal yet anonymous, and grounded in materiality while also being a realm where fantasy is played out” (Banet-Weiser 1999: 5-6). An academic analysis of the beauty pageant system requires not only an understanding of the entertainment aspects, but also of the political and cultural practices that constitute and surround the beauty pageant competition. However, the most important part of this analysis is to examine the undercurrents of power that sustain the beauty pageant system.

Although I employ feminist methodology within my study, most feminist gender theorists offer only a dominant pejorative analysis of beauty pageants. Within a feminist paradigm, beauty pageant contestants are often represented as mere victims of a patriarchal system; however, participants rarely identify themselves as such. Therefore, the inclusion of pageant participants’ personal reflections is necessary in order to
acknowledge the individual agency young women exercise throughout their pageant participation. In recognizing Susan Bordo and Naomi Wolf’s feminist research, along with pageant participants’ personal stories, I am able to fully uncover the tension that exists between the oppressive framework of the beauty pageant system and the individual power retained by the pageant participant.

Beauty pageant participants are well aware of the stereotypes associated with the pageant system, and they deeply desire to separate themselves from the negative imagery of the stereotypical pageant girl. When pageant participants deny the existence of “pageant types” and assert that they are not a “Pageant Patty,” they only contribute to the myth of the stereotypical pageant girl. Furthermore, pageant contestants use Patty as a scapegoat on which to place the harsh criticism of the beauty pageant system. Naomi Wolf asserts: “People most need the mechanism of denial when an intolerable situation has been pointed out to them—but the means for change does not yet exist” (Wolf 1991: 5). In this case, beauty pageant participants are well aware of the oppressive framework of the beauty pageant system; yet contrary to Wolf’s statement, change is available for participants—they do not have to compete. However, for pageant participants, the existence of Patty allows them to define themselves outside of the patriarchal system in which they operate, while simultaneously enjoying the beauty process of pageant competition. “This particular identity...is one of ‘feminine embodiment,’ which is the condition of being caught between existence as just a body and the desire to transcend that body and become a subject who acts upon the world and in and through it” (Banet-Weiser 1999: 24). In other words, when pageant participants recognize that their
individual view of self does not rely on mirroring the feminine ideal, they are able to use beauty pageants as a sight of pleasure and therefore power. Although the “beauty economy” of the pageant system is often seen as oppressive, many pageant participants find pageant competition empowering. More specifically, middle-class women are more likely to seek local recognition, job skills and scholarships from pageant contests than any other socio-economic class. These rewards are used by the pageant system to signify the modernity and social relevancy of the pageant organization. However in rewarding young women for their enactment of the feminine ideal, deeply ingrained hegemonic practices are manifested on the pageant stage. Furthermore, the beauty pageant system sends a message that women may achieve only if they focus on their looks as well, or women may only achieve by using their body.

Western societies’ obsession with appearance is mirrored in the beauty pageant system where women subject themselves to careful self-monitoring in order to achieve the feminine ideal. Anthropologist Christine Yano states: “beauty and the industry that surrounds it, including beauty pageants, are part of a larger regime of social control of women: prescriptions for surface appearance actually mask deeper directives for behavior, comportment, and gendered selves” (Yano 2006: 19). Susan Bordo’s research on the slender body explores the societal belief that “the firm, developed body [is]...a symbol of correct attitude” (Bordo 1993: 195). Therefore, young women believe they must regulate and restrain their bodies in order to demonstrate the “proper” attitude in the beauty pageant contest. Achieving the feminine ideal requires pageant participants to alter their bodies through “working out,” undergoing plastic surgery or participating in backstage beauty rituals. Although young women linguistically frame these activities as
self-discipline of the outer body, the fragmentation of the self cuts beneath these deeper directives to reveal young women tormented by insecurity and self-doubt.

Not only does self-containment of the body include regulation of the external self, but also it requires restraint of internal processes. Thus “correct” management of the body requires pageant participants to suppress their personal desires. In the beauty pageant system, self-denial is an acceptable feminine praxis and self-deprivation is a source of pride for many pageant participants. Both the unspoken rules of pageantry and pageant contracts repress young women’s hunger pains and sexual urges in an attempt to control the pageant participant’s individual behavior. Feminist scholars suggest that societal images of women indulging their appetites—either through food or sex—indicate instant gratification and therefore lack of self-control. In order to contain women’s sexual desires, pageant contracts include “chaste” clauses that characterize sex as “immoral” and “in bad taste.” When the pageant system castigates women for their own innate desires, “[f]emale sexuality is turned inside out...so ‘beauty’ can take its place, keeping women’s eyes lowered to their own bodies, glancing up only to check their reflections in the eyes of men” (Wolf 1991: 155). Resistance to the pageant system’s mandatory sexual repression caused the uproar in the Vanessa Williams’ scandal of 1984; however, her story represents more than just a transgression of sexuality. Williams’ fall reveals the racial politics of the Miss America system where the feminine ideal is defined by both outer and inner designations of whiteness.

The heterogeneity of the pageant contestant is also limited in the “personality” portions of the pageant competition. In beauty pageants, young women are expected to situate their personality in accordance with others—specifically men and children.
Therefore, most pageant participants exhibit "nice" characteristics of the "girl-next-door." This feminine ideal is depicted as nurturing, amiable, personable, cheerful and thoughtful at all times. In other words, pageant participants must carefully monitor their behavior in order to be viewed as a successful representative of the pageant system. Additionally, the pageant system's insistence on finding a girl that "sells" indicates the need for young women to market themselves as a "sellable" product, which means demonstrating the marks of a "good hostess." Women in the pageant system are also expected to be culturally literate; therefore, the talent portion of the pageant competition designates the participants' social class.

The beauty pageant system allows young women to feel powerful in a patriarchal society where women obviously lack power. However the beauty pageant contest also proliferates the idea that women will never be as powerful as men; therefore, they must trade their bodies in exchange for social, economic and political equality. Until pageant contestants begin to resist the dominant ideals of the beauty pageant system there will be no change in the perpetuation of the feminine ideal within pageant contests.

As a former pageant queen, I understand the desire of pageant participants to have someone call them beautiful. However after listening to pageant participants' stories of self-denial and self-monitoring, I find it hard to support the pageant system's perpetuation of the feminine ideal. Yet, I cannot refuse young women's decision to exercise their independent agency within the pageant system. My feelings can best be summed up in the words of Naomi Wolf:

The "beautiful" woman does not win under the myth; neither does anyone else. The woman who is subjected to the continual adulation of strangers does not win, nor does the woman who denies herself attention...You do not win by struggling to the top of a caste
system, you win by refusing to be trapped within one at all. The woman wins who calls herself beautiful and challenges the world to change to truly see her (Ibid: 220).
LIST OF REFERENCES


Yano, Christine R. 2006. Crowning the Nice Girl: Gender, Ethnicity, and Culture in Hawai’i’s Cherry Blossom Festival. Honolulu, HI: University of Hawai’i Press.