ENGENDERING THE PAGEANT:
RHETORICAL CONSTRUCTIONS OF IDENTITY AND CITIZENSHIP
THROUGH DRAMA AND CONTEST, 1900-PRESENT

A Dissertation in
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by

Mia E. Briceño

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The dissertation of Mia E. Briceño was reviewed and approved* by the following:

Rosa A. Eberly  
Associate Professor of Communication Arts and Sciences and English  
Dissertation Advisor  
Chair of Committee

Thomas W. Benson  
Professor of Communication Arts and Sciences and Edwin Erle Sparks Professor of Rhetoric

Stephen H. Browne  
Professor of Communication Arts and Sciences

Susan M. Squier  
Julia Gregg Brill Professor of Women’s Studies, English, and STS (Science, Technology, and Society)

Kirtley H. Wilson  
Associate Professor of Communication Arts and Sciences  
Graduate Officer for the Department of Communication Arts and Sciences

*Signatures are on file in the Graduate School
ABSTRACT

This study explores the tradition of pageantry in the United States, focusing on the pageant as an explicitly gendered cultural practice and the rhetorical relationships between that practice and U.S. citizenship. In spite of its reputation as a feminized, low culture artifact, the pageant is a consistently maintained rhetorical practice that continues to be performed in and among diverse publics. Pageantry is thus implicated in political discourses of model democratic citizenship. I explore pageantry’s symbolic influence in U.S. culture and politics in five case studies. These cases are arranged somewhat chronologically, reflecting a kind of rhetorical history of the pageant in the United States. I begin with Progressive Era historical pageantry, and next move on to better babies contests held at state fairs in the early twentieth century. From there, I transition to analyses of competitive child and female pageantry in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. Finally, I close with an examination of contemporary female impersonation pageants, or drag pageants. The guiding question in this project is: What can be said of the rhetoric of pageantry, and what implications does that rhetoric have for feminist – but not necessarily female – subjectivity and citizenship in contemporary U.S. culture? I argue that discourses of pageantry and pageant performances themselves exhibit transgressive potential, yet they simultaneously continue to shape and to be shaped by hegemonic notions of nationalism and homogenous ideals of U.S. citizenship.
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Chapter One

Introduction

Oh, the Pageantry!

Since Barack Obama was inaugurated as President of the United States in January 2009, and the U.S. economy continued to deteriorate, elected officials at the state and federal levels have increasingly taken aim at eliminating or stalling policies and programs that enfranchise historically marginalized citizens. At a time when the financial future is uncertain for a large percentage of the U.S. population, it has become a standard strategy to champion the cutting of “entitlement programs” and to argue for the continued limitation of rights and freedoms for certain populations. Arguments for policy change have thus relied heavily on the premise that reducing “big government” will ameliorate economic hardships for all. The scapegoats in this fight for legislative action have been federal and state funding of Planned Parenthood\(^1\) – fueled by the perpetuation of the falsehood that the organization uses federal funds to perform abortions\(^2\) – Social Security, Medicaid, Medicare,\(^3\) and National Public Radio.\(^4\) In addition, social conservatives have pushed back against federal and state attempts to legalize same-sex marriage. President Obama’s strategic reticence on the matter has only strengthened the argument that gay marriage provides too strong a challenge to collectively held views on citizenship and civil rights.\(^5\)
In the midst of these conservatising economic and social trends, questions surrounding the universality of citizenship and legitimacy of personhood must be reinvigorated. Although political leaders often frame their conservative arguments as a challenge to the encroachment of socialism or communism on the distinctly capitalist, American way of life, the battles to defund this and block that rely on a premise that all persons are not deserving of equal civil rights under U.S. law. The relationship between basic civil rights and social welfare programs is certainly untidy, but the recent trend to disestablish programs that enable greater access to healthcare or to continue to restrict rights for marginalized groups demonstrates that only particular persons are desirable citizens worthy of fair treatment and guaranteed civil rights in the eyes of federal, state, and local governments in the United States. It continues to be the case that those particular persons created and maintained via official rhetorics of politics are male, heterosexual, white, able-bodied, and middle-to-upper-middle class.

Pageants are the cultural practice around which this study is focused. How could the pageant possibly be related to serious debates over policy change and the restriction of civil liberties? Pageants may dramatic, didactic, or competitive, but in the United States, pageants of all stripes have nearly always been primarily concerned with publicly performing local and national identities in the service of promoting nationalism. As such, pageants are inherently tied with collectively constituted narratives of citizenship, not only for pageant participants, but also for pageant bystanders. Thus, in addition to its broader nationalist objectives, pageantry has also been a significant site for the construction and reinforcement of particular notions of individual U.S. citizenship. In other words, pageantry affects and is affected by collective meanings of the term
“citizen;” and further, through drama and contest, the pageant demonstrates what it is to enact and embody U.S. citizenship relative to gender, race, and class. In spite of its present reputation as an anachronistic, largely irrelevant spectacle of low culture, changes in pageantry over time and the development of the form across practicing publics indicate much about prevailing and potentially transgressive rhetorics of U.S. citizenship. A rhetorical inquiry into the history and practices of pageantry is thus relevant to understanding how individual and collective citizenship is discursively constructed in the United States, and, for example, why the rights of some citizens may be denied or retracted while others are legitimated and protected. I explore those connections and their implications in the study of rhetoric, pageantry, identity, and citizenship that follows.

I aim to contribute to a body of scholarly literature on and about pageantry that includes analyses and interrogations from a number of different disciplinary perspectives, including history, cultural studies, art history, feminist theory and women’s studies, and drama and theater studies. The foci of these established studies are as diverse as their disciplinary perspectives—some hone in on the historical pageant craze of the early twentieth century, others explore the persistence and historical impact of the distinctly American “beauty pageant.” In rhetorical studies, in particular, scholars have demonstrated that pageantry is closely related to some of the most persistently salient topoi in the field, including identity formation, the relationship between form and rhetorical influence, and the role of audience in the constitution of the rhetorical moment. One early exposition of pageantry in the Quarterly Journal of Speech dictated the most rhetorically significant elements of the pageant form, including direction, concise speech,
movement and color, and collective effort. Twelve years later, at the 1932 conference of the National Association of Teachers of Speech, Clara E. Weir called the pageant “the messenger,” and espoused “the efficacy of the pageant as a vehicle for the expression of a message.” At the arguable height of the competitive female beauty contest in 1959, speech teacher Jack W. Murphy shared the tale of his experience coaching Miss Missouri, Margie Critten, to the national Miss America pageant in *Today’s Speech.* Murphy demonstrated an inherent relationship between competitive pageantry and the growing field of speech communication:

[T]his seemed to be the job for a charm school or a modeling school rather than a university. However, investigation revealed that the girls are judged on poise, appearance, personality, projection and talent as well as on beauty. All of these elements save beauty are basic to speech training.

In the late twentieth century, Richard N. Armstrong and Gerald S. Argetsinger analyzed the suasory potential of the Hill Cumorah Pageant, an annual religious pageant performed by the Church of Latter Day Saints (the Mormons) near Palmyra, New York. S. Michael Halloran has argued that the spectacular lived experience of the historical pageant demonstrates the blurring of the traditionally discrete roles of rhetor and audience. Bonnie J. Dow and Mari Boor Tonn have demonstrated the significant rhetorical role of the Miss America pageant in media discourses of gendered personhood, liberal feminism, and individual agency and autonomy.

In this study, it is my goal to contribute to scholarly conversations about pageantry in rhetorical studies by engaging the notion of the pageant as rhetorical phenomenon, focusing on particular cases and contexts of pageantry from the early
twentieth century to the present, and drawing on these and other established rhetorical studies of pageantry. I focus especially on the role of public discourses about (U.S.) American\textsuperscript{16} pageants as well as performances of pageantry during this time period. The questions that guide this inquiry into pageants are as follows:

- What is the rhetorical legacy of the American tradition of pageants, and what is the relationship between this legacy and collective narratives of U.S. citizenship?
- What roles do gender, race, sexuality, class, and age play in pageantry, and how do they contribute to collective understandings of citizenship, in turn?
- What implications does a rhetoric of pageantry have for feminist rhetorical theory and criticism, and what does it indicate about pageantry’s scope of rhetorical influence in U.S. culture broadly?

I explore these questions by focusing on key components of pageantry at several historical moments and in different cultural contexts. My analysis necessitates a kind of confrontation between pageantry as a cultural practice and feminist personhood as a position from which citizenship and civic engagement may be performed that is as yet underexplored in popular and scholarly discourses of pageantry.

Several \textit{topoi} – among them “identity,” “subjectivity,” and “citizenship” – are crucial to this project and reappear across the case studies. I undertake a brief discussion of each of these \textit{topoi} here, in order to clarify the terms of my guiding questions and contextualize my use of them in the pages to come. I begin with “identity.” Referring to Aristotle’s \textit{Rhetoric}, Kenneth Burke stated that in the “simplest case of persuasion,” “You persuade a man [sic] only insofar as you can talk his language by speech, gesture, tonality, order, image, attitude, idea, \textit{identifying} your ways with his.”\textsuperscript{17} In one sense, then,
as I interrogate pageantry’s sphere of influence in the United States, I follow this tradition of exploring the rhetorical functions of identification, and by extension, differentiation, as they occur between rhetor and audience. 

“Identification” and “identity,” however, are not necessarily interchangeable terms, and as Maurice Charland has argued, identification in the Burkean sense traps any “attempts to elucidate ideological or identity-forming discourses as persuasive” in contradiction. From this perspective, “persuasive discourse requires a subject-as-audience who is already constituted with an identity and within an ideology.” Charland provides an alternative conception of identity as constitutive, wherein identity is constituted in and through discourse, and the notion of stable, unified subjectivity (individual and collective) is challenged. A rhetoric of pageantry entails the process of identification Burke lays out, but the identities of individual subjects and collective bodies are dynamic and constituted through discourses and material experiences of pageantry. I consider the ways in which individual and collective identities are constructed through pageant texts and performances, and through those constructions, how pageant publics and pageant audiences are constituted and legitimized. Further, the discussions of identity herein are complicated by what Patricia Hill Collins calls “the interlocking nature oppression,” a theoretical perspective that acknowledges that individuals inhabit multiple identity categories, and those intersectional identities cross-cut systems of domination and thus affect and are affected differently by hegemonic discourses of power.

The second significant *topos* in this study is “subjectivity,” a term that I have already invoked in the discussion of “identity” above. Individual and collective identities are embodied in “subjects” or “persons,” and the value and legitimacy of one’s
subjectivity is tacitly measured relative to the identity categories that she or he inhabits or is perceived to inhabit. In the broad context of postmodernism, it is not enough to assume that every human being is a subject; rather, as Raymie McKerrow has shown, the notion of a subject must be considered in light of poststructuralist critiques. Subjects, who are “speakers” for the purposes of rhetorical criticism or theory, and texts, are “embedded in a contingent world.” McKerrow goes on, “Texts exist not as unitary and whole objects but as traces or fragments. They exist in a dialectical relationship with the social matrices out of which they spring.” And further, “[S]peeches are not given by subjects acting as originary beings at the center of a universe of discourse. Their words do not move outward from the center in concentric circles.”

McKerrow’s view of subjectivity relative to the project of critical rhetoric is significant because it suggests a revisioning of the rhetorical act and recognizes the incompleteness of the subjects and objects of rhetoric, thus challenging rhetoric’s role in the creation and maintenance of master narratives and enabling critiques of previously undervalued rhetorical performances, like pageantry. Rosi Braidotti’s feminist perspective is also important to this process of revisioning and revaluing. Braidotti names subjectivity as a “process of becoming-subject:”

The subject is a process, made of constant shifts and negotiations between different levels of power and desire, that is to say wilful [sic] choice and unconscious drives. Whatever semblance of unity there may be, is no God-given essence, but rather the fictional choreography of many levels into one socially operational self.
McKerrow and Braidotti inform my view of subject position and subjectivity in this study. I assume that anyone who participates in pageantry is engaged in the process of becoming-subject, but I also recognize that collectively understood conceptions of the subject imply that she or he is a being, or that her or his subjectivity is complete. In other words, our public conversations about “subjects” posit them as fully realized and suggest that not all subjectivities, or subject positions an individual or collective inhabits, are “created equal.” I argue that, in the United States, pageantry has been a significant means through which subject positions have been rhetorically constructed, developed and adapted, and subjected to evaluation.

The third significant topos is “citizenship.” The discursive terrain of “citizenship” is rather rugged. Like “subjectivity,” “citizenship” is processual, both in the ways its definition has adapted with changing U.S. cultural contexts and historical events, and the plurality of ways in which it is enacted by “citizen-subjects” in the United States. “Citizenship’s” incomplete and contingent nature is “good” for a rhetorical analysis of pageantry, as the pageant is not an event that immediately comes to mind when one considers the practices of citizenship. That is not to say that I wish to strike those traditional engagements in civic life, like voting, publicly demonstrating, and exercising the right to free expression, from our collective understanding of citizenship. Rather, I am prompted by the work of Robert Asen to reconsider a traditional view of citizenship. In his essay, “A Discourse Theory of Citizenship,” Asen states: “Rather than asking what counts as citizenship, we should ask: how do people enact citizenship?” Asking the latter question enables a revisioning of citizenship that is arguably better suited to changing historical and cultural contexts. Citizenship may thus be collectively
understood as “a process that may encompass a number of different activities.” I contend that pageantry is one of the “different activities” in which “citizen-subjects” model and enact citizenship. Through the particular cases of pageantry I examine in this study, I demonstrate how pageant publics and pageant audiences alike participate in a “mode of public engagement” via pageantry.

The chapters herein contain narratives and case studies of, arguably, the most significant moments in the rhetorical history of pageantry in the United States. The interrogations included in each chapter demonstrate what forms pageantry has taken at particular moments in U.S. history and how a collective narrative of pageantry has developed and become embedded in U.S. culture. Pageantry, like so many terms that refer to cultural forms and practices, potentially evokes multiple meanings. Elements of pageantry may be found in anything from a Veterans’ Day parade to the dramatic enactment of a Bible story to a commonplace event in our celebrity-saturated culture – the walking of the red carpet. Since becoming a television staple in the mid-twentieth century, however, it is the beauty pageant, or, to be specific, the Miss America pageant, that most readily comes to mind whenever the word “pageant” is spoken. Although the exemplar of contemporary female competitive pageantry has been a “scholarship program” and not technically a bathing beauty contest since the mid-1940s, the beauty pageant image and its relevant associations have been slow to vanish from public memory in the U.S. The historical pageant was the first kind of pageantry to incite “madness” in U.S. audiences, but it is the beauty pageant, or competitive pageant, that is most recognizable today. The powerful but short-lived popularity of the historical pageant in the early 1900s gave way to a collective attraction toward competitive
pageantry from the 1920s to the 1950s. That attraction holds today in the continued practice of competitive pageantry and its strong symbolic affiliations with its beauty pageant past. I argue that this “evolution” of U.S. pageantry is reflective of the tenor of public discourses of citizenship at particular moments in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. In this introduction, I set the stage for this argument with a discussion of rhetoric and rhetorical history and the theoretical contexts that inform the study overall. In addition, I preview each chapter, in order to demonstrate the arc of the argument and how the conceptual and theoretical components inform it.

Rhetoric, Rhetorical History, and the Pageant

It is important to recognize that “feminist rhetorical studies” is a broad category, and there are diverse purposes and objectives attached to the practices that are identified with it. For example, the project of identifying or reclaiming “women’s voices” may be distinctly different from engaging in an act of feminist rhetorical criticism. In this study, I engage mainly in the latter practice. Thus, I do not necessarily examine rhetorical artifacts that are “feminist” in nature, nor do I focus on artifacts of which women are the sole producers and consumers. Rather, I prioritize the role of gender and the workings of power relative to gender in this study of a rhetoric of pageantry and citizenship. That does not mean that there are not areas of overlap in those categorizations, however. Karlyn Kohrs Campbell engaged in both identification and analysis in her essay, “The Rhetoric of Women’s Liberation: An Oxymoron,” by identifying a category of rhetoric outside of traditional categories and providing an
alternative means of analyzing that rhetoric. \(^{32}\) “The central argument of this essay,” Campbell stated, “is that the rhetoric of women’s liberation is a distinctive genre because it evinces unique rhetorical qualities that are a fusion of substantive and stylistic features.” \(^{33}\) For Campbell, although women’s liberation rhetoric could be quite traditional in structure, it would always be “unique” because it “attacks the entire psychosocial reality, the most fundamental values, of the cultural context in which it occurs” by virtue of the rhetor being in violation of the female role and challenging traditional assumptions about the nature of rhetoric and those who produce it. \(^{34}\) I do not argue that discourses of pageantry are akin to those of women’s liberation as Campbell sees them, but from the perspective of a feminist rhetorical critic, I am able to consider pageantry’s rhetorical tensions as an arguably female-centric practice that reinforces oppressive rhetorics \(^ {35}\) – i.e. in the form of the swimsuit competition – but also challenges traditional or classical views of the rhetor – i.e. in the interview segment of the competitive female pageant.

These tensions in pageantry are not “merely” discursive, \(^ {36}\) or constituted solely in the realm of words and other symbols, as pageantry is constituted through a blend of discourses, human actors, and experiences and embedded in “real world” contexts. Because I understand pageantry to be “material” and because I believe that “rhetoric provides a rich set of analytical and explanatory tools for social critique,” \(^ {37}\) I undertake this analysis of pageantry with a consciousness toward Dana L. Cloud’s critique of “the materiality of discourse.” \(^ {38}\) I attempt to “[avoid] relativism and idealism while acknowledging the persuasive force of rhetoric in history.” \(^ {39}\) That is, I do not view pageantry as a purely abstract construct nor as purely contextual practice. Rather, I state
my position as an ideological critic – one with a particular focus on feminism and gender – and attempt to analyze the pageant without “[sacrificing] the notions of practical truth, bodily reality, and material oppression to the tendency to render all of experience discursive, as if no one went hungry or died in war.” The pageant is rhetorical because it is symbolic, and it influences and is influenced by discourses of identity and citizenship. That influence is not only identifiable in the ways we talk about “being” or represent citizenship in visual culture, but also embodied in contestants, producers, and audiences and enacted in the practices of pageantry and other areas of public life. It is my goal to be attentive to those influential relationships.

Relative to acknowledging the materiality of discourse and the resonances of pageantry in public life, feminist criticism in rhetorical and communication studies has been established as a rich area for exploring discourses of individuality, collectivity, identity, and citizenship. Some of that work, like much of this one, focuses on the competitive female pageant’s inextricable relationship with American narratives of autonomy and prosperity. Sarah Banet-Weiser, Bonnie J. Dow, and Mari Boor Tonn have all shown that the pageant is strongly correlated with pervasive liberal feminist attitudes toward achievement, individual agency, and good citizenship. As such, I use their studies as significant points of departure for my feminist critical perspective, and I attempt to add to their critical findings by providing a larger historical view of the pageant and incorporating different identity dimensions, such as race, class, and age.

A certain amount of historical work is necessary in any rhetorical analysis, but extending the scope of our rhetorical vision of pageantry requires a more sustained focus on the history of the pageant in form and practice. As a result, I engage, in part, in the
work of “rhetorical history” in this project. David Zarefsky argue, “There are (at least) four different kinds of inquiry embraced by the term ‘rhetorical history.’” The third sense, “the historical study of rhetorical events,” is the one that best applies to this study. Zarefsky contends there are several ways to proceed in this third sense of rhetorical history: “Rhetorical discourse could be studied as a force in history”; “Rhetorical discourse could be studied as an index or mirror of history”; or “[H]istorical study could be undertaken of key arguments or even terms.” The chapters that follow begin with a focus on historical pageantry, move on to better babies contests in the second chapter, then contemporary child pageantry in the third, adult female competitive pageantry in the fourth, and finally, in the conclusion, male and female impersonator pageantry. In each case, I engage the first and second tenets of the third sense of rhetorical history, considering the ways in which prevailing trends in pageantry at particular historical moments impacted and/or reflected discursive constructions of gendered citizenship. By focusing on a traditionally feminized rhetorical practice, I also take advantage of one of Patricia Bizzell’s “opportunities for feminist research in the history of rhetoric.” In the ongoing process of re-visioning rhetoric from its masculine and male-dominated traditions, I have looked “not for names, but for issues…. that throw into relief the social practices that resulted in … exclusion, thus … highlighting where women are, as well as where they are not.” Women, and other marginalized populations, have always played a large part in pageantry, thus studying the pageant from the perspective of rhetorical history evidences the participation of non-traditional practitioners of rhetoric in the construction of citizenship discourses throughout the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries.
Because this study spans a period of history and the developments in pageantry over the course of that span, I argue that it is also important to consider the rhetorical evolution of the term “pageant.” In Oren M. Levin-Waldman’s essay, “The Rhetorical Evolution of the Minimum Wage,” he employs the phrase “rhetorical evolution” without much explanation, almost in passing. He does, however, use it synonymously with the phrase “rhetorical permutations.” I agree with the sentiment that “permutation” invokes—that rhetorical evolution is recognizable change over time—but further, I contend that there is a sense that a term, practice, or performance can be in flux and/or vary across publics and counterpublics. Evolution, then, is not suggestive of progress or uplift as time moves forward, but rather, it is indicative of adaptation relative to particular contexts and in conjunction with historical moments. As it has been interpreted and practiced in the United States, the pageant is illustrative of this flux, and from the perspective of a rhetorical historian, that flux mirrors changing discourses of gendered citizenship.

An explosion of pageant fervor in Progressive Era-America arguably echoed governmental and popular concerns over improvement, efficiency, and civic and community-mindedness. The historical and/or religious pageant fulfilled the needs for order and patriotic enactments of citizenship that were being challenged by increasing immigration and the heightening voices of social movements and their leaders, including movements for women’s and workers’ rights. The staging of the first Miss America Pageant in 1921 tacitly engaged the ideals of the early twentieth-century historical pageant, but as the performance of pageant as popular cultural form has demonstrated in the proceeding years, the inception of Miss America also contributed to the turning tide
of the meaning and enactment of pageant spectacles. This study hinges on that turning point, but not as a precise moment in time. Rather, I explore the multiple rhetorical means through which the pageant became popularly understood as the “beauty pageant” in the United States, even as historical pageantry’s nationalist objectives remained significant to collective understandings of pageantry. Today, although it fights to retain its relevance in various forms and with various pageant publics and audiences, the pageant is, without doubt, a considerable means through which U.S. citizens are modeled, fashioned, and ultimately formed.

The Rhetorical and Public Nature of Pageantry: Models, Publics, and Audiences

Rhetorical theory provides a helpful lens through which to examine pageantry as a changing and influential cultural practice in the United States. Like rhetoric, the pageant is known for being highly ornamented and arguably shallow, both in its historical and competitive forms. Pageantry may be understood as “a splendid display” or a “gorgeous, colourful, or spectacular show,” but these seemingly complementary definitions are obtained at the cost of what such descriptions suggest about the content of the form – that it is a “show without substance; mere acting or show; empty or specious display.” Rhetoricians have long defended the subject of their studies against the charge that rhetoric is all style and no substance. Terms like “rhetorical figure” and “rhetorical flourish,” as well as the tendency to equate rhetoric with flowery or grandiloquent language, continue to reinforce the popular understanding of rhetoric as ornament, in spite of the continued development rhetorical theory over the course of thousands of
years. Whether or not these characterizations of pageantry and rhetoric are qualified is not what is at stake in a rhetorically driven study of pageantry. Rather, it is how the two interact in cultural processes of meaning making and influence that is most important.

As noted above, at the convention of The National Association of Teachers of Speech in 1932, Clara E. Weir described the pageant as “the messenger.” Weir argued that the pageant was one of the most efficacious vehicles “for the expression of a message” due to the fact that it is an ancient art: “History reveals that pantomime was the first means of communication; and out of pantomime grew pageantry.” Broad as Weir’s origin story may be, and although the form has been stretched, adapted, and reinterpreted, her emphasis on the relationship between pageantry and effective communication speaks to the pageant’s strong disciplinary ties to rhetorical studies, as well as its strength as a cultural form. Weir provides us with good reasons for the study of pageantry in U.S. culture and, nearly eighty years after her declaration, prompts an inquiry into our continued reliance upon pageantry to be an effective messenger.

In the years since Weir articulated the inherent relationship between communication and pageantry, several scholars in the field of rhetorical studies have explored the cultural significance of pageantry in the United States, including the Richard N. Armstrong and Gerald S. Argetsinger on religious pageantry, S. Michael Halloran on the historical pageant, and Bonnie J. Dow and Mari Boor Tonn on the Miss America Pageant. In all of these cases, and as is arguably true of rhetorical studies broadly, the question of identity – U.S. identity, in particular – is a recognizable and potentially driving theme of the analyses. Armstrong, Argetsinger, and Halloran find that the pageant drama is a performance that both encourages identification with the narrative
onstage and among audience members. Dow and Tonn provide a feminist perspective on
the beauty pageant that questions the individual’s desire to identify with the contestants
onstage, as well as the complicated relationship between the changing discourses of the
Miss America pageant’s mission and a liberal feminist narrative against which it has
struggled, but with which it has ultimately partnered. I build on this established body of
work on pageantry in rhetorical studies by continuing to take the pageant seriously as a
cultural form and considering further the implications of pageant practices, past and
present, for feminist subjectivity and citizenship.

Tonn contends that pageants are both “cultural rituals” and “public performances”
that act as “potent sites where social identities take partial form; cultural values,
meanings, and rules of conduct may be collectively and individually interpreted,
embraced, or resisted; and contours of social hierarchy and differentiation become visibly
revealed.” This is true not only of the Miss America Pageant, but also of Easter
pageants, bodybuilding competitions, Civil War reenactments, and gay pride parades – all
arguable iterations of pageantry. Although I cannot cover the entire spectrum of
pageantry in this project, I contend that the scope of our inquiries into pageantry must
include a broader range of pageant types in order to understand more of its rhetorical
history and political and cultural influence. In order to bring historical pageants, better
babies contests, child glitz pageants, female competitive pageants other than Miss
America, and impersonator pageantry into the fold, this study further requires the
theoretical contexts of model and anti-model and publics and counterpublics. I turn now
to a discussion of these theoretical influences, in order to consider not only how messages
of pageantry are communicated among pageant publics and audiences, but also how
rhetorics of pageantry are imbued with the power to accomplish all of the things that Tonn suggests they do.

Pageants are commonly linked with the notion of a model or role model.\textsuperscript{55} Historical pageants set standards for public celebrations, “[T]he early-twentieth-century history pageant … provided a model for commemorating the 150\textsuperscript{th} anniversary of the Lewis and Clark expedition.”\textsuperscript{56} The Miss America organization proudly declares on its website, “Miss America is a role model to young and old alike.”\textsuperscript{57} News stories on changing pageant trends observe, “Gay Pageant in Norway Seeks Global Role Model.”\textsuperscript{58} Miss Black America is touted as providing guidance to black girls, in particular, “We believe that we hold a responsibility to stand as leaders in reaching our young girls early – providing true leadership and serving as role models.”\textsuperscript{59} Because the primary objective of pageantry is to achieve and demonstrate fitness through model acts and subjects – that is, to influence through example – it is valuable to approach this cultural form from a rhetorical perspective. Inherent in the processes and goals of a rhetorical performance like pageantry are influence, representation, and meaning making. Pageantry makes spectacular displays of notable historic events and purportedly exceptional people. Further, pageants are inextricably linked with publics’ and counterpublics’ concerns about what is culturally valued and/or valuable.

Taking these “model” discourses into consideration, one finds a helpful framework for the rhetorical analysis of pageant discourses over time in \textit{The New Rhetoric: A Treatise on Argumentation}. Chaim Perelman and Lucie Olbrechts-Tyteca discuss the significance of argument from model and anti-model as a brief (but significant) component of the overarching question regarding how people reason about
values.⁵⁰ According to the authors, “Argument can be based ... on a model that one will be asked to follow ... If someone serves as a model, he [sic] must therefore possess a certain prestige, and his serving as model is proof that he does ... A model shows what behavior to follow.”⁵¹ This is a clear illustration of the desired outcome toward which pageantry works – in both its historical and competitive iterations. The argument from model thus tends to fit a common sense kind of reasoning that one or all should imitate the behavior of the best subject. However, the commonsensical nature of the model is challenged by further discussion of the form: “A person may be held up as model for his capacity to avoid temptations of imitation.”⁵² Thus, while a model argument is based, in some measure, on the notion that following the model’s behavior is valuable, it can also be considered valuable – although the argument is perplexing – for model behavior to be unique and thus encourage uniqueness in others.

Argument from model is further nuanced by the dualistic nature in which Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca understand it. It is the model’s opposite, the anti-model, that cements one’s understanding of the model. In fact, according to Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca, although the model implicitly inhabits the more powerful position in the binary/hierarchy, the anti-model may actually have a “more powerful influence”⁵³ in terms of argumentation and reasoning. The difference between the anti-model and model arguments is this, “Whereas in the latter (model) there is the intention to pattern oneself, be it even in a clumsy way, on someone, and the conduct to be adopted is relatively well known, in argument by the anti-model one is trying to get others to be different from someone without its being possible always to infer precise positive behavior from the distinction.”⁵⁴
Certainly pageantry is not the only cultural form that utilizes such arguments, nor does it employ arguments from model and anti-model only. However, pageant audiences understand pageantry primarily through the lens of model/anti-model, and model/anti-model also provides a significant frame for the formation of pageant publics. It is arguably through the rationale of model/anti-model that the processes of identification and differentiation take place in and among pageant publics. One public’s model is another’s anti-model, and vice versa, as we have seen in public debates over pageant scandals involving contestants’ forays into nude modeling and drug and alcohol addiction. Because it is an obvious and relatively significant component of this cultural form’s rhetorical influence, the model/anti-model element arises frequently in the chapters included in this project.

There are clearly identifiable models in pageantry – the climactic battle scene in a historical pageant or the newly crowned Miss USA – that demonstrate to pageant participants and audiences what version of history is appropriate or “fashionable,” or “what behavior to follow.” Indeed, this is arguably the central purpose of pageantry: to select out and glorify model objects and subjects. Pageant producers and participants are no strangers to anti-models, however, as public pageant controversies have demonstrated in recent years. Many beauty pageant “scandals” have produced a kind of anti-pageant sentiment from anti-model examples and arguably deepened anti-pageant sentiment among pageant audiences.

Vanessa Williams, the first black Miss America, was de-crowned when nude photos of her ran – without her permission – in Penthouse magazine. In mainstream newspapers and rag mags alike, JonBenet Ramsey’s frequent participation in child
pageants, and thus the sexualization of female children via pageantry, was often implicated as a contributing factor in her murder. Miss South Carolina Teen USA Caitlin Upton’s daft monologue about “U.S.-Americans” provided glorious fodder not only for the mainstream press, but also bloggers, who used the clip to demonstrate the imbecilic nature of pageants as well as their contestants. Miss USA hopeful Carrie Prejean’s onstage declaration against gay marriage kept her in the media spotlight long after the 2009 winner had been declared. These examples, although seemingly standard in terms of beauty pageant models gone wrong, are not unequivocal examples of the pageant anti-model. Vanessa Williams’ career as an entertainment figure flourished in the years following her “scandal,” and Carrie Prejean was named first runner-up to Miss USA 2009 — um, whatshernamé65 — and has enjoyed a period of minor celebrity as the face of young, white, conservative America. It is necessary to avoid taking the arguments from model and anti-model out of context and instead to explore examples such as these as a means to understanding their rhetorical functions and values. We must consider not only what or who makes a model or anti-model – or some derivation thereof – but for whom and in what contexts? Beyond pageant audiences or communities, then, there are pageant publics and counterpublics that are defined, in part, by the virtues of their approved versions of model pageant subject.

In this study, I refer to those who participate in pageant culture as “pageant publics.” Those who do not participate in pageantry directly but act as pageant spectators or interact with pageant culture via mediated representations of pageantry fall into the broader category of “audience.” Conceptualizing pageant culture within a “publics” framework better enables an analysis of pageantry as a significant component of civic
life. “Audience” can be overly simplistic and obscure differences found within them.66 “Community” can be similarly problematic in that it is idealistic and masks power dynamics inherent in human collectives.67 The concept of a “public,” however, accounts for the misinterpreted or lacking components of “audience’s” and “community’s” rhetorical legacies. Michael Warner contends there are three senses in which the public or a public is invoked. The first suggests a “social totality” or a people – in this sense, there is no clear distinction between a public and the public. When public is used in this way, it is similarly problematic to audience and community. Although it “might be organized as the nation, the commonwealth, the city, the state, or some other community,” these categories remain abstract, devoid of difference and power. The second use of “public” stands in for “a concrete audience, a crowd witnessing itself in visible space.”68 The third sense, Warner contends, suggests “the kind of public that comes into being only in relation to texts and their circulation.” While each of these interpretations of may be invoked relative to pageantry – and they inevitably are, as pageant participants are often rhetorically constructed as homogenous collectives, and pageants are public performances that require concrete audiences – it is the third sense that I will rely upon and develop in this study. The notion that there are pageant publics suggests the development of pageant culture in the United States over time, and also allows me to consider the proliferation of diverse pageant forms and practices. Largely gendered female and often marginalized or implicitly categorized as low culture, pageants are not generally viewed as a relevant thread in the fabric of U.S. citizenship. However, when viewed as active publics engaging with, and sometimes challenging, historical and contemporary discourses of U.S. identity and nationalism, the rhetorical
potential of pageantry reveals itself as not only substantial but persistently relevant to collective understandings of U.S. citizenship.

Warner argues that a public “comes into being only in relation to texts and their circulation.” Pageant publics have long been conjured and maintained based on their engagement with distinctly pageant-related texts. From the establishment of the American Pageant Association in the early twentieth century to the use of better babies contests as a means to disseminating public health information to mediated spectacles of beauty-slash-scholarship pageants from the 1950s onward, numerous textual means have been employed to cultivate an understanding – or multiple understandings – of pageantry as a shared cultural form. Certainly pageantry has been actually enacted throughout the twentieth century and to the present, but what Warner cites as crucial to the constitution of a public and what is most significant to a rhetorical analysis of pageantry is this: “[A]ll discourse or performance addressed to a public must characterize the world in which it attempts to circulate, projecting for that world a concrete and livable shape, and attempting to realize that world through address.” The “world” of a particular public can be performed or achieved, in one way or another, but its existence rests on the notion that its addressees retain a kind of “partial nonidentity” or are composed of “indefinite strangers.” The particular cases of pageantry in this study share common threads that demonstrate a “nonidentity” or “stranger” identity that connects pageant publics who are not geographically close or do not maintain direct communication through the circulation of pageant texts like prevailing pageant standards and practices.

When viewed by audiences outside of pageant publics, those pageant texts are often interpreted as anachronistic, “low culture,” or less valuable than other cultural
practices and institutions. Thus, relative to pageant audiences, contemporary pageant publics are arguably akin to Warner’s notion of a counterpublic. Although counterpublics are structurally similar to publics, the quality of counterpublic textual address differs slightly: “[C]ounterpublic discourse also addresses those [indefinite] strangers as being not just anybody. Addressees are socially marked by their participation in this kind of discourse; ordinary people are presumed to not want to be mistaken for the kind of person who would participate in this kind of talk or be present in this kind of scene.”

At the present historical moment, because pageant tends to mean beauty pageant, it carries with it a slew of negative connotations. At least, this is largely true when understood in terms of a prevailing attitudes about equal and humane treatment of all persons – for example, the most recognizable type of pageantry today, the competitive female beauty pageant, is especially offensive to those who see the gender dynamics of pageantry as oppressive. Outside of non-apologetic pageant enthusiasts, it is often understood as embarrassing and even backward to be associated with competitive beauty and/or scholarship pageants in the United States.

One must revisit Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca to further reason through the categories I have presented here, i.e. pageant publics, counterpublics, and audiences. Pageant publics, counterpublics, and audiences are closely related to the most significant topos presented in The New Rhetoric, audience; in particular, the concepts of particular audience and universal audience. According to Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca, “[A]n audience, for the purposes of rhetoric, [is] the ensemble of those whom the speaker wishes to influence by his [sic] argumentation. Every speaker thinks, more or less consciously, of those who he is seeking to persuade; these people form the audience to whom his
speech is addressed." Thus, publics, counterpublics, and audiences are all audiences in a general sense, but, pageant publics are called into being by pageant texts that presume a “particular” pageant audience. However, pageant publics are not the only audiences to whom those texts are addressed. Thus, when the “universal” audiences of pageantry – which “[consist] of the whole of mankind [sic], or … of all normal, adult persons” and who do not participate in pageant culture directly – engage with pageant public texts, those universal audiences are faced with “arguments that are foreign or even directly opposed to what is acceptable [to them].” The arguable result is a disconnect in perceptions in pageantry:

This explains the relative weakness of arguments that are accepted only by particular audiences and the value attached to opinions that enjoy unanimous approval, particularly approval by persons or groups who agree on very few matters.

Value is strongly connected with discourses of pageant publics and pageant audiences, but in public conversations, the views of pageant audiences – i.e. the “normal,” universal audiences – tend to be valued more highly. For example, the mothers of child pageant contestants, who are active members of pageant publics, are often disparaged in public discourses of pageantry as selfish, opportunistic, and even unfit parents. Those mothers are hard-pressed to “win” a public debate on the value of pageant participation for little girls. In addition, Tonn has also noted “the stark disconnect between the continued popularity of the Miss America beauty pageant, especially among female viewers, and the public revulsion toward beauty pageant culture,” exemplified in collective responses to the JonBenet Ramsey murder case. The resulting public conversations about the
nature of pageantry and its place in U.S. culture are heavily value-laden and
demonstrative of a hierarchy between universal and particular pageant audiences.

Bringing a particular/universal audience pairing into the fold helps us understand the
differences between how pageant publics perceive themselves and their practices and
how pageant audiences perceive the performances and practices of those who participate
in pageant culture directly. It also encourages reflexive examination of public
conversations surrounding pageantry, as pageant audiences are also implicated in the
disapproval they voice toward competitive pageantry, in particular.

I have shown the disciplinary and theoretical exigences for this study of pageantry,
identity, and citizenship in the United States. It is not enough, however, to speak of these
theoretical and conceptual foundations of this study largely in the abstract. In the last
section of this introduction, I provide abstracts of each of the chapters to come, in order
to demonstrate what counts for significant moments or events in pageantry and how those
moments engage with the conceptual foundations outlined above.

**Previewing the Pageant: Chapter Abstracts**

This project is divided into five chapters, including this introduction, and a
conclusion. These chapters are arranged somewhat chronologically, reflecting, as
discussed above, a kind of rhetorical history of the pageant in the United States. Pageants
are not a strictly contemporary ritual. Historians trace it, in one form or another, to at
least the Renaissance. The Renaissance pageant enjoyed revival in late nineteenth
century England and then migrated to the United States, mainly taking two popular
forms, that of the historical pageant and the beauty pageant. In nearly all of its iterations, the pageant has been a medium for communicating hegemonic notions of nationalism and homogenous ideals of U.S. citizenship. I explore these pageant thematics in each of the case studies described below.

Chapter two is titled, “Setting a Symbolic Stage: The Pageant ‘Craze’ of the Early 1900s and Collective U.S. Identity.” The historical pageant of the early twentieth century is a significant moment in the history and development of pageantry in the United States. Pageant publics and audiences were established at the height of the “craze,” during the storied Progressive Era. In the 1910s and 1920s, concerned citizens were eager to (re)establish American identity as a challenge to large influxes of immigrants from points West and East, as well as the migration and integration of the post-slavery black population. The American Pageant Association was among the organizations that attempted to constitute that homogenous version of U.S. identity through drama, or the historical pageant. As the form gained popularity, more diverse publics – i.e. non-white and female publics – utilized the historical pageant to dramatize local and national discourses of collective identity. In this chapter, I explore and analyze the mainstream pageant craze and its relationship with Progressive Era social movements, paying particular attention to black nationalist and woman suffrage pageantry. I also consider the ways in which the historical pageant craze set the stage for future developments in U.S. pageantry and how it is implicated in collective assumptions about citizenship and civic participation.

Chapter three is titled, “Before Toddlers & Tiaras: Better Baby Contests and the Ideal Pageant Subject.” In this chapter, I examine the relationship between pageantry and
eugenic science, focusing on better babies contests – state fair spectacles and vehicles for popular eugenics education in the early twentieth century. Targeted to participate in the contests, mothers and babies were implicated in gendered discourses of democratic participation based on a set of theories and practices intended to promote “better breeding.” Better babies contests were not marketed as pageants, but they capitalized on the popularity of the photographic beauty contest and were successful in propagating eugenically driven ideals of personhood and citizenship in the U.S. among white and black audiences. Although the standards of contemporary competitive pageantry are not explicitly based in eugenic science, better babies contest ideals resonate in competitive female and child pageantry today.

In the fourth chapter, “Pageancy: Pageant Structure, Participant Subjectivity, and Power,” I interrogate the structure of contemporary competitive pageantry, which is largely modeled on the most storied of all beauty contests, the Miss America pageant. As certain kinds of feminist discourses of subjectivity have become more culturally acceptable, Miss America and other pageant organizations have become targets of academic and popular critiques; those critiques are especially focused on the pageant’s potential to exploit its female participants. Questions about the balance between structure and agency in all-female competitive pageantry have long been at the heart of feminist analyses of the ritual, but they have not yet permeated other realms of pageantry in which gender and other identity categories affect the perceived and enacted agency of the contestants. In this chapter, I theorize pageancy, or the rhetorical construction of pageant agency, and extend questions of individual choice to the world of child glitz pageants.
My analysis focuses on popular culture representations of glitz pageant culture, especially as it is depicted in the reality television series *Toddlers & Tiaras*.

The fifth chapter, “The Rise of the Anti-Model: Pageant Scandals and Controversies,” is devoted to exploring the relationship between pageants and political issues. Pageants have long been associated with scandal, but as the competitive pageant has developed over time, the scandal of a bathing beauty contest has been displaced by the controversy of pageant contestants espousing political views. Public responses to two recent pageant interviews communicate the sentiment that pageants are relatively important to how national identity is constructed and understood. The particular cases I focus on in this chapter are Caitlin Upton’s infamous “maps and U.S.-Americans” interview at the 2007 Miss Teen USA pageant, and Carrie Prejean’s question and answer regarding gay marriage during the Miss USA 2009 telecast. The ways in which gender, race, sexuality, and age are invoked in public responses to these pageant controversies is particularly important to an evaluation of the female competitive pageant’s civic influence.

The concluding chapter, “Alterna-Pageants, Anti-Models, and Possibilities for Feminist Citizenship,” accounts for the ways in which historically “unfit” or “abnormal” subjects engage in what I refer to as “alterna-pageants.” Using female and male impersonator pageants as the primary texts for analysis, I explore the historical connection between the pageant-masque and contemporary, competitive, counterpublic pageantry. Insight from this rhetorical history facilitates a critical analysis of the assumption that alterna-pageants are wholly different entities from the normalized, all-female form; it also enables an interrogation of the pageant as transgressive performance.
Even as alterna-pageant contestants challenge the model pageant type and engage with public discourses about sexuality, citizenship, and rights, they also reinforce pageant tradition. After that brief analysis, I conclude by performing a synthesis of the rhetorical inquiries in preceding chapters and discuss the place of pageants in contemporary feminist contexts, the implications for individual and collective identity that pageantry may have for its particular audiences, and broader implications for the performance of U.S. identity and citizenship more generally. It is here that I reconsider the guiding questions of this study and explore the implications for future explorations of the pageant in rhetorical studies.
Notes


2 This argument is inflammatory for at least two reasons: 1) The Hyde Amendment “excludes abortion from the comprehensive health care services provided to low-income people by the federal government through Medicaid. Congress has made some exceptions to the funding ban, which have varied over the years. At present, the federal Medicaid program mandates abortion funding in cases of rape or incest, as well as when a pregnant woman's life is endangered by a physical disorder, illness, or injury,” and 2) The charge that federal funds pay for abortions hyperbolizes the already polarizing Pro-Life/Pro-Choice public debate and continues to demonize and misrepresent the realities of abortion as a medical procedure. See “Public Funding for Abortion,” ACLU, July 21, 2004, http://www.aclu.org/reproductive-freedom/public-funding-abortion (accessed January 12, 2012).


11 *Today’s Speech* is now *Communication Quarterly*.


16 I specify “U.S. American” here to set a standard or to encourage a particular way of reading the terms “America” or “American” in the study as a whole. Although I do not provide the “U.S.” preface throughout, I think it important to make the distinction early for (at least) three reasons: 1) The term “America” elides the fact that America consists of the majority of the countries in the Western hemisphere. Inhabitants of North, Central, and South America (and arguably the territories) are *all* American. The unmodified descriptor “American” implies “citizen of the United States” and thus is infused with the valuation of a kind of civic identity. Further, from those implications a kind of
ownership of American identity and an understood hierarchy of culture and country in the Americas is surmisable; 2) The specific cases that are explored in this study are all situated, geographically and culturally, in the U.S.; 3) I research and write from the perspective of one who was born and grew up in the U.S., an aspect of my identity that informs my relationship with feminisms and how I engage in rhetorical theory and criticism – in other words, this is a U.S. centric study. One final note on the phrasing – as will be fleshed out in the third chapter, her use of the term “US-American” worked against pageant contestant Caitlin Upton during the Miss Teen USA 2007 interview segment. Perhaps Upton did not utilize the wording for the reasons I have specified here, but the public response to the phrase was not to smartly interrogate it, either.


18 Ibid., 19-23.


20 Ibid.


23 Ibid., 62.

25 McKerrow, 58.


28 Ibid.

29 Ibid.


33 Ibid., 75.

34 Ibid.


36 Among its definitions for “discourse,” the *Oxford English Dictionary* includes the following: “a spoken or written treatment of a subject, in which it is handled or discussed


38 Ibid., 141-163.

39 Ibid., 158.

40 Ibid., 159.


43 Ibid., 29.

44 Ibid.


46 Ibid., 54.


48 See Steven Selden, “Transforming Better Babies into Fitter Families: Archival Resources and the History of the American Eugenics Movement, 1908-1930,” Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society, 149.2 (2005), 207. For example, Selden notes the relationship between the rise of better babies contests – an early iteration of the beauty pageant – public mood, and governmental improvement programs: “[Mary] DeGarmo linked [better babies] competitions to the social efficiency movement of his period, placing them into the context of policies for standardized homes, standardized roads, and standardized roads. From the standpoint of the then-popular social efficiency movement … standardization would maintain a smooth-running social machine in which the model baby, living in the model home, would travel on the model road to the model school.”


50 Ibid.

Ibid., 380.


Tonn, 151.

I have chosen not to address the significant connection between contemporary competitive pageantry and contestants’ aspirations to pursue careers in modeling. Child pageants, in particular, often market themselves as “model searches,” or have model search contests alongside their competitive pageants.


Ibid., 363-364.

Ibid., 364.

Ibid., 366.

Ibid., 367.


70 Ibid., 81.

71 Ibid., 58.

72 Ibid., 86.

73 Ibid.

74 Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca, 19-35.

75 Ibid., 19.

76 Ibid., 30.

77 Ibid., 31.

78 Ibid.
Chapter Two

Setting a Symbolic Stage: The Pageant “Craze” of the Early 1900s and Collective U.S. Identity

History is a pageant and not a philosophy.

– Augustine Birrell

The historical pageant quickens the sense of nationalism as well as the art sense of the community. It possesses a power for unification and coordination of larger groups of people that a play does not possess. It is a civilizer…. People who would not dream of participating in a play are readily drawn in to a pageant because group work overcomes all self-consciousness. Pageantry reaches all people a play could never reach. It is an arouser of patriotism, and through arousing patriotism, makes for Americanism.

– Constance D’Arcy MacKay

Pageants Other than Beauty

For contemporary audiences in the United States, the word “pageant” conjures visions of a stage filled with fit, attractive, young women in evening gowns and sashes, competing with one another for a title like Miss America or Miss USA. The term pageant is largely understood in the early twenty-first century as beauty pageant – a competition in which female contestants are judged on aesthetic criteria in order to determine who among them best represents the ideals of that particular pageant. But beauty pageants, however long and storied their history in the United States, did not set the original standard for pageant spectacle. The earliest definitions of pageantry, from the late fourteenth to early fifteenth centuries, characterize pageants as theatrical productions – a means to communicate religious or historical themes through the
dramatic performance of a series of scenes.³ Pageants of this kind in the United States share significant characteristics with those of the beauty variety. One of the most significant of these shared characteristics is the promotion and performance of nationalism, and on regional or local scales, of civic or community-mindedness. These demonstrations take various rhetorical forms, from the presentation of the flag, to the singing of the national anthem, to the prompting of patriotic sentiments in the interview segment of the televised beauty pageant.

It is arguably significant that pageants performed in the United States from the 1800s to the present have, for the most part, taken one of the two aforementioned forms – historical or beauty. On first glance, it seems questionable that pageants so apparently different in kind share such easily identifiable core qualities. This challenge has merit, as there are many ways in which the historical pageant aims at something entirely different than the contemporary beauty pageant. The former is a tableau-type drama that peaked in popularity in the first two decades of the twentieth century. The historical pageant is composed of a series of scenes with synecdochal and enthymematic qualities that reinforce or retell a moment in the nation’s or local community’s history. Audiences for this pageant are not just learning about a historical event for the first time; they are building on their existing historical knowledge, as well as utilizing that knowledge to fill in any gaps in their shared understanding of what constitutes civic identity, pride, and responsibility.

The beauty pageant, by contrast, is primarily a competition – and a competition among women, at that. By generically gendered conventions, if men are acculturated to test and demonstrate their worth in the realm of athletics, women are encouraged to do
the same in the world of competitive pageantry. The beauty pageant often rests on a premise of unification or collective identity, a foundational characteristic evidenced in contest titles like Miss America, Miss USA, and, on smaller state and regional levels, Miss Southern Kentucky Fair, and Fayette County Fair Queen. Female contestants are judged on their physical appearances and intellectual talents, and those discrete categories are synthesized and evaluated as a contestant’s overall ability to embody the ideals expressed in the pageant title. Unlike the historical pageant, there is no clear narrative told in the competitive pageant. However, as the latter echoes the former’s attempts to create and maintain a collective sense of identity, it thus has implications for the ways in which U.S. audiences interpret and enact citizenship. Historian Lois W. Banner alludes to this rhetorical function of the beauty pageant:

Rituals following set procedures, beauty contests have long existed to legitimize the Cinderella mythology for women, to make it seem that beauty is all a woman needs for success and, as a corollary, that beauty ought to be a major pursuit of all women. In addition, beauty contests also illuminate American attitudes toward sensuality and offer a gauge of the influence of Victorianism in American culture. They reveal the nature of community rites designed to further cultural homogeneity and to integrate social classes within the American democratic order. Banner suggests that the beauty pageant is very much like the historical pageant in that it purports to promote cultural pluralism within U.S. culture broadly, but actually functions to homogenize representations of Americanness and citizenship. In addition, although
both the historical and beauty pageant types include performances of gender, the beauty pageant contains the added quality of *explicitly* gendering those representations.

Considering the obvious qualitative differences in these two forms, how can one argue that the historical pageant, popularized at the turn of the twentieth century, and the beauty pageant, which gained popularity during the mid-to-late twentieth century, are indeed variations on the same cultural form? Is there a moment, or are there *moments*, in historical and cultural narratives of pageantry that directly link the historical pageant with its ultimately more recognizable successor, the beauty pageant? Or is their relationship in name only, as pageants in their various forms all retain a sense of theatricality and spectacle? What do the changes in pageant form, across publics and over time, contribute to a rhetoric of pageantry broadly? I condense these questions into the following guiding inquiry in this chapter: did the historical pageant *transform* into the beauty pageant, and to what extent might that potential transformation have contributed to the staying power of the pageant and its significance as a cultural tradition in the U.S.? These questions must be directly addressed in order to consider the rhetorical legacy of pageantry in the United States – especially as the pageant has impacted and been impacted by gendered, racialized, and sexualized discourses of identity and citizenship. In this chapter, I examine three instances of pageantry in the early twentieth century as a means to assessing rhetorical relationships among pageants, as well as cultural meanings of pageantry across historical time periods.
Identity On Stage: Pageant Lineage in the United States

Historical pageantry found its firm footing in U.S. culture in the first decade of the twentieth century, following the revival of medieval and Renaissance pageantry in England in 1905. That year, a small item in *Country Life*, “the journal for all interested in country life and country pursuits,” reported the details of Louis Parker’s Sherborne Pageant, held in “the fine and picturesque old town of Sherborne in Dorsetshire.” 1905 being the town’s 1,200th anniversary, “it will be brought to public notice in a peculiar manner by the performance of a folk-play.” The pageant was held “in the ruins of the ancient castle of Sherborne,” and the plot of the “folk-play” included “some chief events in the history of the town, which was founded … in 705.” The Sherborne Pageant sparked an epidemic of “pageantitis” in England, and in the nine years that followed, a minimum of forty pageants were performed in Britain.

The “pageantitis” that afflicted British audiences soon traveled across the Atlantic, driving U.S. publics “pageant mad.” Like the Sherborne Pageant and the successive English pageants that it spawned, U.S. historical pageantry celebrated places as a means to cultivating local, regional, and sometimes, national, identity. The first “English-style” historical pageant took place in the United States in Philadelphia in 1908, during a weeklong municipal festival that celebrated the 225th anniversary of the city’s founding. The historical pageant procession took place on Friday afternoon of the festival, and the parade included “sixty-eight scenes from Philadelphia’s past mounted on floats and divided into seven ‘periods’ from ‘Exploration and Settlement’ through the ‘Civil War.’” Local historian Ellis Paxson Oberholtzer lobbied for and oversaw the
Philadelphia pageant of 1908, and he called on local Philadelphians to participate in his efforts to produce “a single, comprehensive, illustrated presentation of their city’s history.”\textsuperscript{14} In effect, Oberholtzer’s aspiration to synthesize the city’s history contributed to a homogenized depiction of Philadelphians’ collective identity. Historian David Glassberg contends, “The [Philadelphia] pageant, in fact, displayed a highly exclusive portrait of Philadelphia’s history and population. Oberholtzer invited participating groups to demonstrate solely their identification with ‘the city’ and not their particular occupational, district, or ethnic affiliation.” In addition, Oberholtzer’s criteria for inviting Philadelphians to participate included being members of “long-settled Philadelphia families,” and identifying with the “right ethnic background.”\textsuperscript{15} The exception to this rule of exclusivity was an Underground Railroad scene that included black performers, but “no Irish, Polish, or Italian organizations represented their nationality’s contribution to the city’s history”\textsuperscript{16} in the pageant. Oberholtzer thus mobilized the history of the city in order to depict collective identity and regional pride, but his selectivity effectively silenced the marginalized histories and identities of many Philadelphians during a major historical celebration centered on the cultivation of civic pride.

The Philadelphia pageant set a precedent for structure and representation in American historical pageantry to come. After Philadelphia, other U.S. cities, large and small, hopped on the pageant train. “At the height of the craze,” Glassberg notes, “thousands of Americans in hundreds of towns from Portland, Maine, to San Gabriel, California, joined in civic celebrations by acting out dramatic episodes from their town’s history.”\textsuperscript{17} Oberholtzer’s racial, ethnic, and class structuring of the Philadelphia pageant
and the proceeding widespread national interest in historical pageantry arguably reflects the political and cultural context of the historical moment:

Opinion makers and political leaders in the Progressive Era were deeply concerned about weakening party loyalties and a decline in voting, the rise of an increasingly secularized Protestantism, the mass migration of Europeans, the movement of blacks from the southern to the northern cities and the ever more vigorous entry of women into politics.\textsuperscript{18}

In addition to these concerns, an increase in corporate economic and political power led to fears of widespread corruption. These worries, taken together, led to the following shared public sentiment: “Some leaders … despaired that the disintegrating effects of science, technology, and complex social relations meant that the possibility for independent, virtuous citizens to live by a set of common values had been lost.”\textsuperscript{19}

Questions thus arose, among “presidents, policymakers, journalists, and intellectuals,” about “whether and how to construct a more felt sense of national identity.”\textsuperscript{20} The historical pageant offered a concrete means of quelling Progressive Era fears related to cultivating and maintaining a shared national identity. Oberholtzer’s Philadelphia pageant constructed a homogenous collective identity that previewed the potential outcomes of “the Americanization movement’s turn toward compulsory methods of assimilation.”\textsuperscript{21}

The historical pageant thus established a strong presence in the Progressive Era United States, but it would not endure into the mid-twentieth century – at least not with the same levels of enthusiasm or in the same public venues. Instead, historical pageantry, with its aspirations to depict and cultivate a particular kind of national identity, gave way
to competitive pageantry, the type that remains most recognizable in the United States today. In its “beauty” form, the pageant is also dramatic in many ways, but it is not a drama per se. More accurately, the beauty pageant is collectively understood to be a contest between female contestants who are judged mainly on physical attractiveness. In contemporary, mainstream, competitive pageantry, these standards are determined by largely Western beauty norms that are based on relative whiteness – not only are contestants (implicitly) judged on the lightness of their complexion, but also the extent to which their facial features, physical bodies, and ways of communicating conform to Anglicized standards. There are thus obvious differences between the historical pageant and its beauty pageant successor, but the ideology and purpose on which the latter rests are clear reflections, if not direct facsimiles, of the historical pageant’s aspirations to influence an ideal of shared national identity that was perceived as relatively homogenous. The element of direct competition is a major point of divergence, but I argue, the basic foundations tend to remain the same, over time and across publics.

This quick comparison of pageant types in historical sequence evidences a pageant lineage that is directly tied to the rhetorical functions of U.S. pageantry from the early twentieth century to the present. Although they differ in form and structure, the historical and beauty pageant both shape and are shaped by public discourses of identity and citizenship in the United States. In his in-depth study of historical pageantry, historian David Glassberg describes the significance of the pageant to cultivating public history and collective identity. According to Glassberg, pageantry is a form of “public historical imagery” that “delineates what is public and what is private, who belongs to the public and who does not…. As such, public historical imagery is both a reflection of the
larger culture, and its prevailing ways of looking at the world, and a major element in the shaping of that culture.”

In categorizing the pageant as a type of “public historical imagery,” Glassberg not only provides support for the argument that the pageant is a significant example of visual rhetoric, but also provides support for the position that pageantry provides important insight into the creation and maintenance of public memory in the United States, especially as it exists within the public domain and thus helps constitute a collective understanding of the past. Thus, in spite of its proclaimed irrelevance in recent years, pageantry, when understood as “public historical imagery,” plays a significant role in the ongoing formation and maintenance of a collective U.S. identity.

To date, rhetorical scholarship on public memory has covered a wide range of texts, including museums, memorials, and speeches, and rhetorical scholarship on the Progressive Era has proceeded largely from a social movements perspective. The historical pageant provides an opportunity to consider these areas of rhetorical studies in tandem. Indeed, the historical pageant is a confluence of public memory and social movement topoi, a site in which collective identity is constructed via the public performance of memory, and the performance itself is an extension of Progressive Era reform movements. J. Michael Hogan notes that, in the Progressive Era, the label “progressive,” held generally positive connotations, and was thus embraced by individuals and social movements of all political stripes who were invested in facilitating change. In the remainder of this chapter, I examine historical pageantry as it was produced and performed by three publics who embraced the spirit of change characteristic of progressivism. In spite of their differences, in each case, it is evident
that historical pageantry and its publics were generally shaped by and helped shape the “new common language of political and social analysis that was reform oriented, moralistic, and optimistic about the possibilities for human ‘progress.’”27 Beginning with mainstream historical pageantry, I demonstrate how the historical pageant form was set – key to this form was a progressive tone that pervaded pageantry across publics in that historical moment and that has persisted in pageantry to the present. I then describe and analyze the counterpublic and countermemorial productions of black historical pageantry and woman suffrage pageantry. Set against one another, these multiple historical pageant productions “[engage] the way that memories affect and are effected by various publics”28 and offer some insight into the continued tradition of pageantry in the United States and its ongoing relationship with collective notions of model citizenship and national identity. Although historical pageantry was not, for the most part, the work of prominent historical figures or social movement leaders,29 it is an artifact of Progressive Era public address that is worthy of closer critical examination, especially as it provides insight into the deliberative tone of that historical moment and beyond.

**Constituting Communal Character: Structure and Identity in Mainstream Historical Pageantry**

The historical pageant of the early twentieth century functioned much like the more static representations of past events in local and national histories, like the museum and other “public” monuments to historical triumphs and struggle. However, while the tradition of the museum and the monument endure in twenty-first century American
contexts, the historical pageant does not continue to be a particularly salient shaper of a dominant U.S. worldview – not on first glance, at least. The historical pageant may not retain its Progressive Era vitality, but the tradition of feting nationalism through public performances has enabled pageantry to endure in U.S. culture. Still, it is the female competitive beauty pageant that is most familiar today, while the particular form of pageantry that peaked in Progressive Era America fell out of favor long ago. Glassberg contends, “Though some pageants, especially holiday pageants for children, remain popular, the use of pageantry as the centerpiece of an elaborate civic celebration … was over by World War II.”30 Like other trends that lose their appeal relatively quickly, the historical pageant is arguably no longer in fashion. However, the pageant’s ability to endure – even, and especially, in non-historical forms – indicates that it occupies an important place in the rhetoric of U.S. nationalism and has significant implications for the ways in which model citizenship is rhetorically constructed and enacted. This enduring legacy of pageantry is well known to the average U.S. citizen, but the relatively momentary significance of the historical pageant is not. It is important to consider what the pageant was and how particular publics in the United States caught pageant fever, in order to argue for and evaluate the lasting rhetorical significance of a pageant type that is rarely performed today.

There may be an apparent disconnect in the relationship between pageants past and present, but this questionable lineage only reflects a long-standing debate over the definition of pageantry. William Chauncy Langdon, President of the American Pageant Association and Master of the Pageant, wrote numerous newspaper and journal articles, books, and personal correspondence that demonstrate that the concept of the pageant lay
on disputed rhetorical grounds. Langdon often presented a definitive version of the meaning of the term “pageant” in published writings, but even he could not remember with certainty whether or not the question of definition had been settled among the elite of historical pageantry. In the June 15, 1913 edition of the New York Times, Langdon’s name graced the byline of an article titled, “America, Like England, Has Become Pageant Mad.” The article focused on educating the newspaper’s audience about historical pageantry and advocating for its cause. In that article, Langdon presented a certain view of the historical pageant’s meaning as well as its primary objectives. He wrote, “The ordinary bystander might say, ‘It is a craze!’ And so it is.” Langdon evokes an understanding of and compassion for the pageant that might spread to his readers, thus making the pageant more than just a passing craze. In a section of the article entitled, “What Pageants Mean,” Langdon argues that the pageant is an artistic form created and performed by the citizenry of a given community. Further, the subject of the pageant is one that recalls and recounts the past, but also reflects on the present sociocultural conditions of the community in question. A lengthy but illustrative excerpt gives a clearer definition of pageantry as Langdon sees it:

In America, the central type of pageant is the historical, as in England, the pageant that presents, in a series of dramatic episodes, the past life of a town – with … a tendency to continue the pageant-drama down to the present. The modern pageant is drama in which the place is the hero and the development of the community the plot…. The first thing to determine is what the character of the town is, as a community, and next how, through the years of the centuries, it has become what it is, and whither it is bound, and what its possibilities are.
This explanation of the pageant is rhetorically constructed in a way that collapses the ideograph and the image, a process that also occurs in the performance of the historical pageant. They may not be explicitly stated, but by focusing on the hero, relatively ambiguous but decidedly local community narratives, and the “development” of a community over time, Langdon plays to some of the most sacred U.S.-centric ideographs. Michael Calvin McGee described the ideograph as “a high-order abstraction representing collective commitment to a particular but equivocal and ill-defined normative goal.”

McGee theorized the ideograph as a way of understanding the relationship between rhetoric and ideology. As such, ideographs are terms that are power-laden, tend to “guide behavior” and are “culture-bound.” In Langdon’s discussion of the pageant, time, heroism, community, and character act in concert to evoke liberty, equality, and democracy – those ideological concepts that so strongly support Americans’ rights “to fight over the legacy of their national Revolution and to protest their exclusion from that Revolution’s fruits.” The pageant was not necessarily an incitement to protest, but, in character with Progressive Era rhetoric of change and strengthening the voice of the people, one of the primary concerns of the historical pageant movement was to increase and strengthen nationalist sentiment at local levels. The ideograph provides a clearer way of understanding how the rhetoric of pageantry functioned in early twentieth century discourses of citizenship, as well as the significance of pageant structure in those discourses. The ideographs that construct the vision and objectives of the pageant are full of ambiguous, yet positively valenced building blocks that link together to define the form. The specific ideographs that are most prominent – community and character
among them – are part and parcel of the implicit call to nationalism that occurs across pageant types.

Thus, what makes the pageant a particularly significant example of “public historical imagery” is also what makes it a significant shaper of culture, history, and memory – then and now. In the 1910s, a typical historical pageant was composed of numerous theatrical elements: large-scale staging – either on a raised stage platform or in a stage-like open-air site, like the stairs of a capitol building or an open field – a series of dramatic scenes or episodes, rather than a smooth and sequential narrative, depicting the pageant narrative and freely interpreted as pageant producers and directors saw fit, period costumes, a musical score performed by an orchestra, and a live audience. Certainly this was not the first time in U.S. history that public celebrations relied upon the visual and its attendant sensory strategies to influence local audiences. From the holiday parade to the traditional Fourth of July oration, the visual spectacle has had a lengthy and involved partnership with rhetorics of community celebration and nationalism. The traditional speech situation, the parade, and the pageant may all have something of the spectacle in them – that is, not in the more contemporary, postmodern, Debordian sense, but rather, in the sense that S. Michael Halloran interprets the experiential nature of rhetorical acts: “Traditional arts of rhetoric have focused exclusively on the preparation and delivery of texts, yet speeches are typically delivered in a context of spectacle that merits critical scrutiny. The spectacle itself is a rhetorical experience quite apart from the speech text because it involves symbolic action that engages the mind, the passions, and the senses, symbolic action that bonds its participants and constitutes them as the ‘we’ so often invoked in speech texts.” There is thus some spectacular quality to all rhetorical acts –
a quality that engages traditional rhetorical appeals – *ethos*, *pathos*, and *logos* – in concert and that acts with all other characteristics of the act to constitute audience and experience. Following Halloran’s argument, the spectacle’s ultimate effect is to call an audience’s identity into being or to reinforce a pre-existing identity belief. The spirit of the Progressive Era, codified in political and social reform efforts, as well as attempts to build post-Civil War unity through collective identity, was thus a moment primed for the spectacle of the rhetorical act. The historical pageant demonstrated that the spectacle might be more than the context for the significant rhetorical moment – i.e. the speech – indeed, it could be the rhetorical moment itself.

In the specific case of the historical pageant in the early 1900s, the form exerted a particularly impressive symbolic influence due to its synthesis of live performance and highly visual dramatic elements, which culminated in a sensual, experiential appeal. The 1919 *Encyclopedia Americana* described the historical pageant in this way: “Episodical and dramatic construction, historical in content, educational and social as well as aesthetic in its aim, the writers, composers, designers and all other artists implicated, have nowadays a scope for creative energy that was quite beyond the compass of the old regime.” The spectacular pageant was thus appealing to experts and lay audiences alike. Both a novel and flexible form of artistic expression, the historical pageant provided an attractive platform for the telling of historical narratives that encouraged a particular kind of public remembering of a place and its people. The form’s popular appeal made it rhetorically significant across diverse publics; in mainstream and marginal communities, the pageant provided sufficient means to disperse model histories that
could be enacted in the service of improving the present, and eventually, projecting long, proud futures – for the form, as well as the publics different pageants called into being.

Like other modes of memorializing, it was the particular job of the historical pageant to mold local and national cultures into a somewhat uniform medium that encouraged reverence for the past, and thus, care and consideration for the present and future. Pageant structure and kairos were the raw materials necessary for the job to be fully completed – that is, for the pageant “craze” to result in immediate and enduring widespread cultural appeal. According to Glassberg, the turn of the twentieth century represents a moment in U.S. history when citizens were primed for the cultivation of nationalism via a predominantly visual form such as pageantry: “Historical pageantry entered a landscape at the turn of the century that was dense with historical imagery. Many of the themes it expressed were like those in other media – museums, monuments, murals – that also put forth versions of the public history. But the historical pageant, as a dramatic public ritual chronicling local community development, also had unique features that accounted for its sudden growth and decline in the period.” Like the museum or monument, the pageant emphasized the primacy of place, as pageants about a town or community were performed in that town or community, thus retaining the museum’s objective of shaping public memory in order to constitute a present and future collective identity, but including the added spectacular benefits of dramatic, live re-enactments of history, an accompanying musical score, and sets and costumes. Further, residents of the local community were often recruited to participate in the production of the pageant drama. As participants, citizens took on the dual role of audience member and living link with the collective past. The historical pageant thus not only capitalized
on this particular moment in the history of U.S. visual culture, but also from the long-standing American tradition of “the politics of celebration.”\textsuperscript{49} Like the ritual of the parade, the historical pageant of the Progressive Era was one of “a set of practices that empowered Americans to fight over the legacy of their national Revolution and to protest their exclusion from that Revolution’s fruits.”\textsuperscript{50} Whereas the museum, the monument, and the mural relegated citizens largely to the role of spectator, the pageant provided the means to participate in public memory and thus actively contribute to the creation of a communal identity.

Civic and community identity were central to early twentieth century iterations of pageantry as imagined by Langdon and the American Pageant Association. Langdon contends in the \textit{New York Times} piece regarding the pageant “craze,” “Artistic guidance is good, of course, but in this pageant movement there is a strong and right instinct that citizenship is most important.”\textsuperscript{51} At the dawn of the twentieth century, in the postbellum United States, a landscape “flooded” with a large and diverse wave of immigration across all of its borders, “the people” felt the charge of restructuring its collective identity was a particularly important one. For pageant folk, these historically based, but present-conscious, scenic dramas were the best chance that citizens had at recognizing and (re)claiming their communal identities. Pageants were simultaneously an enactment of communal identity and an idyllic projection of that identity via carefully selected historical moments. While the spirit of the local community was often invoked as a driving force behind their production, pageants were often spearheaded by a pageant master, like Langdon, or other pageant experts – for example, those who sat on the board of the American Pageant Association like Clark and Brown. Most pageant masters came
from the Northeast and Midwest and were “professional dramatists and recreation workers hired by towns to distill local history into a dozen or so dramatic episodes, then organize and oversee their production by hundreds, sometimes thousands, of local residents.” In *The Technique of Pageantry*, a “how-to” guide on crafting and producing a pageant, Linwood Taft noted the specific duties of a pageant master relative to pageant content: The pageant master is usually one who acts as author or editor in civic pageants. There is a distinct advantage in this when he has the ability to use sincere dignified English.”

Because the pageants themselves could become unwieldy – due to several factors, including the number of participants and the relatively large scale of the production – a pageant master or production manager/director was perhaps the most efficient way to see the pageant through to its actual performance. Glassberg notes, “The collaboration of new national groups with local civic officials not only influenced the form of public historical presentations, but also subtly influenced historical themes.”

The details of Taft’s instruction on the pageant-master’s expertise in the English language and Glassberg’s historical account of the pageant master’s role as efficiency expert demonstrate that the pageant master was no less responsible for the creation of a pageant’s identity narratives and appeals to homogeneity than the members of the immediate community. The incorporation of community outsiders as advisors to the pageant process, as well as the ties with national pageant organizations, evidences that local and national pageant objectives became woven together to create a dominant discourse of pageantry in the United States. Although this was not the first time that pageantry and nationalism acted as ideological partners in the development of local and national American identities, they became bonded more tightly by the “craze-like” nature
of the pageant phenomenon. The force of these mainstream views on pageantry was strong, and it is clear that the American Pageant Association had measurable influence over the practices of pageantry across the country. In spite of the American Pageant Association’s and others’ desires toward uniformity, however, the pageant form was adopted by several different publics in order to facilitate challenges to the homogenous message of the mainstream historical pageant.

That appeal to subscribe to a homogenous, collective identity clearly underscored mainstream historical pageantry in the Progressive Era. The definition of pageantry, however, had not yet been settled among those who inhabited official roles within pageant publics. In November of 1916, three years after William Chauncy Langdon’s declaration of America’s pageant madness, he corresponded with Lotta A. Clark, executive committee member of The Shakespeare Festival Guild and board member of the American Pageant Association. The exact substance of Langdon’s and Clark’s exchange dealt with the definition of the term pageant as decided upon by the American Pageant Association. The sequence of the correspondence demonstrates that Clark is the one to raise concern for once-and-for-all defining the term pageant and thus the mission of the American Pageant Association:

According to my recollection the American Pageant Association never adopted a definition of a pageant. It agreed to devote its attention for the present to pageants with a definite community interest, but that was all if I remember correctly. I have six definitions at your disposal. You remember your own, don’t you…. The other five are as follows,-

“A festival of thanksgiving to Almighty God for the blessings of the past,
the opportunities of the present, and the hopes of the future.” Louis N. Parker
“A medium of expression between artists and a great listening public.”

Farwell.
“The youngest of the arts, - and the art of all arts.” – J.W. Alexander
“A free dramatic form which teaches though not abstractly by stimulating local pride for that in the past which makes the best incentive to future civic endeavors and accomplishments.” – Baker
“A drama ‘of the people, for the people, by the people’.” – L.C.56

Shortly after Clark voiced her concerns to Langdon, in December of 1916, Frank Chouteau Brown – another board member for the American Pageant Association – probed the definition question further in a letter to Langdon. “Dear Langdon,” Brown wrote, “Your two post cards have caused a considerable flurry which so far has not resulted in disclosing any ‘official definition’ of the term pageant.”57 Langdon provided a detailed response that was directed to Clark specifically, but that addressed both Clark’s and Brown’s concerns about what the term pageant means:

The definition I have been after was something like this: Drama of the history of the developement [sic] of a community.’ The five that you sent me make an interesting collection of points of view. Yours is by far the best and the nearest to being a definition, i.e. somthing [sic] by which one can recognize a pageant if one met one coming down the street. These five are all fine eulogies. Parker’s describes the spirit but does not define the form; Farwell’s applies equally well to all the arts, is definitive for all as well as for all forms of drama; Mr. Alexander’s
latter part, ‘the art of all arts’ might be definitive, but I doubt if he meant it so, or
if any artist of other kind would allow the precedence; Baker’s is instinctively
non-committal, and a definition is committal; your [sic] is fine, the nearest to
being a definition, but would apply perfectly to the Irish plays for instance, which
are not pageants.$^58$

How the American Pageant Association would describe pageantry, to what definition
they would commit, and subsequently, how they might promote the pageant of the early
twentieth century were troubling questions to those charged with setting the tone for
pageantry and its potentially beneficial outcomes for the U.S. citizenry broadly. At the
very least, it made members of the board of directors uncomfortable to think that they had
not made their stance on pageantry clear. Although Langdon’s definition remains
somewhat ambiguous – “drama of the history of the development [sic] of a community” –
it is complete in its appeal to culturally valuable goods, i.e. communal identity and
historical reverence. As pageant practices grew, however, more probing and critical
inquiries asked “whose communities?” and “whose histories?”

**Revisionist Historical Pageantry**

Intentionally or not, a milky white, mainstream, and semi-religious version of
civic pageantry is what national organizations like the American Pageant Association
sought to achieve. However, pageant fervor in the Progressive Era also included political
demonstrations by a variety of underrepresented and overtly discriminated-against
groups. Glassberg argues that pageants incorporated and addressed diverse perspectives
within the local community that they alleged to represent,\textsuperscript{59} suggesting that they led to a kind of plurality in the ways in which pageant performers and pageant-goers engaged with the medium and its content. The 1919 *Encyclopedia Americana* explicitly notes the inclusive and even democratic nature of the pageant: “The pageant spirit primarily seeks to encourage people of all classes and ages belonging to the institution or locality promoting the occasion to involve themselves in democratic and festal fashion in the preparations and performances.”\textsuperscript{60} Sarah J. Moore notes that the social reform efforts that permeated the Progressive Era were often linked with the production of historical pageants, but pageants would often forego *specific* agendas and instead generally “[attempt] to draw together diverse communities in cooperative efforts.”\textsuperscript{61} Such evidence suggests that the pageant might not only be a prime platform to communicate social issues of the day, but that it might also be a great equalizer among increasingly diverse local populations. However, it does not seem to be the case that a dominant national discourse of pageantry was challenged and/or interrupted within those locally diverse pageant contexts. In fact, Glassberg calls attention to the groups strategically excluded from the pageant craze, “Pageantry grew with civic officials' efforts to create a coherent ‘public’ out of a hodgepodge of classes, interests, and immigrant groups – though blacks and organized labor usually remained outside the boundaries of the ‘public’ that pageants delineated.”\textsuperscript{62} Moreover, pageants not overseen by a pageant master or those that were produced solely by marginalized community groups were not likely to receive the same type of media coverage – in character or quantity – as that of pageants of the sponsored kind. This history indicates that, even though the historical pageant was marketed as a unifying community activity, the collectivity that it sought to achieve was marked in
racialized, classed, and gendered ways and excluded or continued to marginalize less powerful groups within a community.

In the early 1900s, at least two marginalized community groups produced pageants that, for various reasons, did not fit the perceived norm in mainstream historical pageantry. In numerous ways, however, their productions still satisfied typical pageant qualities and characteristics. The 1919 *Encyclopedia Americana* placed pageant content in two categories: social and historical. The former “[concerns] itself with some didactic phase,” while the latter “[envisages] the development of a given community.”

Although one might be mistaken to consider these categories mutually exclusive, they are helpful in that they provide some distinction between mainstream historical pageantry and those performed by marginalized pageant publics. Pageants representing black histories and nationalism, as well as those performed in the service of white woman suffrage, were arguably successful and historically memorable iterations of the form that did not conform strictly to pageant type. Rather, they fused together social and historical pageant content to create a kind of alternative to the mainstream—whereas mainstream pageants depended primarily upon homogeneity, historical maintenance, celebration, and community pride, these alternative pageants utilized the form to re-remember historical figures and narratives, increase community pride, reach audiences composed of community outsiders as well as insiders, and to effect social change rather than maintain dominant ideologies regarding their communities. What’s more, because African Americans and white women were the primary producers of their communities’ public pageant performances, the historical imagery of black and woman suffrage pageants challenged the visual representation of collective U.S. identity most often found on the
mainstream historical pageant stage.

The Black Pageant is the Thing

_The Star of Ethiopia_ pageant was first performed in New York in 1913 and was the brainchild of W.E.B. Du Bois. This pageant was certainly not the only one in a broad category of black pageantry, but it is arguably the most memorable and influential. Reminiscent of the dominant themes of communal identity and civic pride that pervaded “mainstream” pageant forms, Du Bois conceived of _The Star of Ethiopia_ as “a useful means of encouraging black solidarity.” Indeed, Du Bois observed the rhetorical power of the pageant and distilled it into this oft-quoted line: “The pageant is the thing.” However, whereas mainstream (read: white) pageantry worked in the service of nationalism by inspiring regional collective identity and pride, _The Star of Ethiopia_ pageant challenged sweeping visions of collectivity that dismissed black historical narratives. That is not to accuse mainstream historical pageantry of deliberately misinterpreting U.S. history, nor to claim that black pageantry presented “true” interpretations of the past. Rather, black pageantry confronted notions of collective identity on regional and national levels by dramatizing what it considered to be a Negro worldview. Glassberg notes that, in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, black residents and other marginalized community members were often absent from local public celebrations – not only pageants – especially as they figured, or did not figure, in the narrative of the centerpiece of the celebration, the historical oration:

Local blacks…. for example, were rarely sufficiently organized to display views
counter to the prevailing interpretation on public holidays – though they sometimes did so on days not designated as part of the official ceremonial calendar. Even if civic officials invited such groups to participate in the public celebration, the officials remained in control of the contexts in which the groups' contributions appeared, such as the order of march. Moreover, groups on the margins of local politics often desired to identify themselves with the core community and to appear as endorsing the historical orators' representation of the public and its history even if they held alternative views privately.67

If the pageant was indeed the preferred form of historical celebration in the early twentieth century, as well as a primary means through which communal identity was formed and/or reinforced, this passage demonstrates that several competing factors may have affected the potential for members of marginalized factions of a community to participate in public celebrations. The restrictions on participation decreed by civic officials coupled with hesitance to challenge the “core community” identity portrayed in the drama to suppress the expression of “alternative views” in the pageant celebration. Additionally, Du Bois held that the repository of public historical imagery regarding black communities at the time added up to a propaganda campaign that labeled African Americans – black men, especially – as intellectually underdeveloped and inherently violent.68 Black women and men were portrayed stereotypically in the growing industries of popular culture in the nineteenth and early twentieth century U.S.69 Minstrel shows were common and featured mainly the comic black figure, usually in blackface, and most often embodied in the dandy Zip Coon or the backward Jim Crow.70 Advertisers in the late 1800s illustrated black children and adults as “grotesque caricatures,” exaggerating
features to appear animal-like and employing text that belittled the characters’ intelligence. At about the same time, popular music producers capitalized on the appeal of the comic black figures of the vaudeville stage, using them as characters in the soon-to-be-popular genre of “coon songs” and “coon shouts.” J. Stanley Lemons argues, “All these stereotypes…. were so familiar that few people had any notion that they degraded black Americans.” It is perhaps not surprising, then, that in the related worlds of music and theater, both black and white artists produced and participated in the proliferation of derogatory song lyrics, narratives, and images of black women and men. The propaganda that was a catalyst for Du Bois’ pageant undertakings contributed to a pervasive attitude about African Americans that black as well as white audiences embraced at the turn of the twentieth century. The historical pageant came equipped with stimulating multimedia characteristics – from the theatricality of its scenic narratives to familiar and sometimes original musical scores to visually stimulating costumes and sets – making it a rhetorical medium well-poised for combating the insidious anti-black propaganda campaigns of existing and developing culture industries. Thus, the performance of a historical pageant itself was the centerpiece of community gatherings around pageantry, offering a challenge to dominant forms of public celebration and a space for marginalized publics to (re)constitute public memory.

Because the damage of mainstream structures that suppressed black history affected black and white Americans alike, it was Du Bois’ contention that black historical pageantry should attempt to address white, as well as black audiences. The goals of The Star of Ethiopia pageant would be three-fold (at least): “‘to get people interested in the development of Negro drama’; to teach ‘the colored people themselves the meaning of
their history and their rich emotional life through a new theatre’; and ‘to reveal the negro to the white world as a human, feeling thing.’ In order to achieve these goals, black pageantry differentiated itself from white historical pageantry in several ways. The mainstream pageant drama was relatively inward looking, focused on influencing the attitudes of the local community via homogenous depictions of historical and contemporary local culture and consciously seeking few audiences beyond that immediate community. Du Bois’ vision of black pageantry would challenge this standard, set first by Oberholtzer’s Philadelphia pageant and maintained by the productions of the American Pageant Association, by attempting to address black as well as white audiences. Further, the “community” represented in the dramatic narrative of *The Star of Ethiopia* was not limited to the story of the residents of the immediate region in which it was performed. Rather, “Du Bois sought a cultural representation of the black diaspora, a collective consciousness among black people centered upon a common history and ancestry.” Mainstream pageantry often sought to forge connections between local community pride and nationalist fervor, either eschewing difference or espousing the harmony of the American melting pot. The impulse toward collective identification in *The Star of Ethiopia*, however, was to be driven by the deliberate focus on race, especially as that focus emphasized the lack of diversity represented in mainstream pageantry and other popular culture texts.

As noted above, Du Bois was certainly a significant influence on how black pageantry was conceptualized and performed, but he was not the only contributor to the genre. In 1930, about fifteen years after *The Star of Ethiopia* was last performed, a collection of works by black playwrights was published under the title, *Plays and*
Pageants from the Life of the Negro. The inclusion of pageants in the anthology reinforced Du Bois stance on the pageant as counterpropaganda to negative dominant cultural narratives about African Americans and evidenced the existence of a genre of texts that called black publics into being. The collection frames the black pageant movement as not only concerned with the lack of black public historical imagery and narratives, but also with emphasizing particular kinds of black identities. Christine R. Gray notes that Willis Richardson, the editor of the original publication of Plays and Pageants, purposely omitted from the collection plays written in dialect. Richardson argued that “the use of dialect kept alive the image of blacks as uneducated,” but he also “defended its use in material written by African Americans.” This editorial decision is telling, as it suggests a kinship with the kind of uniformity and homogeneity found in the mainstream pageant community, as well as a tendency to err on the side of caution when addressing audiences that might be racially mixed. Perhaps paradoxically, in order to challenge mainstream historical imagery and narratives, black pageants were required to adopt white ideals of the English language, written as well as spoken.

There was also much to be gained by retaining significant structural elements of mainstream historical pageantry. Although black pageants represented marginalized historical perspectives not depicted in mainstream pageants and largely contained no “central white characters,” they did not break form with early twentieth century pageantry generally. Du Bois was taken with the spectacular nature of pageantry, and so he and other black pageant masters formed their dramas with “epic scale” in mind. Also like mainstream pageantry, black pageant narratives were episodic, rather than linear and climactic, included important aesthetic elements like costume and score, and
celebrated “events or figures important to the community.” Although black pageantry challenged the historical narratives told in mainstream pageantry, it largely appropriated mainstream pageant form. That is not to say that black pageantry was but a mock-up of “real” pageantry, but rather, it was part and parcel of the pageant “craze” that William Chauncy Langdon touted – using a familiar, popular form to disseminate untold and underappreciated narratives to black and white audiences.

It is significant that plays and pageants were housed in the same collection in terms of targeted audience and what might be considered intended effect. Gray contends, “In addition to being united by a common history and by the exuberance of the pageant itself, the audience was, no doubt, brought together through a shared mood, morale was raised, spirits were lifted, and identification with the race’s history was increased.” By contrast, “[m]ore than likely, the plays did not have this same effect.” Although, arguably, different mediums affect messages differently, it is not entirely clear why the pageant form would have effected more measurable interactions with and reactions from audiences than the play. There are at least two identifiable factors that potentially contribute to Gray’s view: 1) the pageant form tended to be more abbreviated than the play – a patchwork of inspirational scenes that audiences understood enthymematically, rather than a continuous narrative containing new characters and unfamiliar storylines, and 2) not only were the intended audiences of black pageants racially diverse, but they also spanned the demographic category of age. Children’s interactions with and reactions to pageants would not necessarily be more visceral or shallow. On the contrary, pageants written with children in mind demonstrated great investment and belief in black youth to effect positive change in “black identity” and to embody the vision of the “New Negro.”
Similar to mainstream historical pageantry, black pageantry reminded and/or informed black audience members of “the culture’s history,” in order to effect feelings of social uplift and racial unity – the past was the platform by which a proud present and future could be determined.

Mainstream and black pageantry appealed to senses of nationalism through some similar strategies. The particular practices of pageantry across communities indicate that it was necessary to maintain a certain amount of uniformity in order to identify the diverse productions as pageants and to inspire a sense of community-mindedness and civic identity. However, there were elements of the production that demonstrated diverging pageant pathways. Katharine Capshaw Smith argues, “Although black writers drew on mainstream white pageant conventions, black pageantry has its roots in a satirical African American tradition.”

Black pageants achieved the seemingly disparate goals of mimesis and subversion by enacting a particular kind of black nationalism – what Wilson Jeremiah Moses terms Du Bois’ “traditional black nationalism” which, during Du Bois’ lifetime, was “the emerging ideal of a black nationalism that blended African and cosmopolitan values.”

Black pageantry as a whole should not be understood as a project authored solely by Du Bois, nor should one make the mistake of presuming Du Bois was a static individual with unchanging political beliefs throughout his adult lifetime. However, an examination of black pageantry in the early twentieth and its consistent themes, considered alongside the large-scale spectactularity of *The Star of Ethiopia* suggests that the type of black nationalism that Moses attributes to Du Bois is identifiable across black pageant narratives and practices.

Central to this claim about pageantry and black nationalism is the Du Boisian
notion of double-consciousness. Although double-consciousness may be interrogated apart from a nationalist philosophy – Du Boisian or otherwise – it is significant to the cultivation of a rhetoric of pageantry to consider the concept in such a context, as it raises questions about the performances of nationalisms across pageant genres. According to Moses, double-consciousness is an inescapable component of Du Bois’ black nationalism. Moses notes, “Du Bois’s position with respect to black nationalism has been described as ambivalent, reflecting his admitted double-consciousness as both a black man and an American,” but Du Bois does not have the monopoly on the double-consciousness/nationalism relationship. Moses argues that while Du Bois’ provides the most famous quotations on the matter, “double-consciousness manifested in the thought of many Afro-Americans, and indeed, many Western intellectuals who have attempted to be at once culturally nationalist, and yet loyal to a more broadly conceived ‘western Civilization.’” For the black nationalism of pageantry in particular, these coexistent loyalties are most often made manifest in the narrative structure of “Ethiopianism.” Moses defines Ethiopianism as “the effort of the English-speaking black or African person to view [her or] his past enslavement and present cultural dependency in terms of the broader history of civilization.” Key to the tradition of Ethiopianism are the corresponding beliefs that Africa will rise, and the West will decline – that is, after hundreds of years of imperialism, the West, or Western European dominance, will follow the pattern of all empires and fall. Africans, who have been endowed with “moral superiority” during these years of oppression will fulfill the Biblical prophecy: “Princes shall come out of Egypt; Ethiopia shall soon stretch out her hands unto God.” Certainly, the title alone suggests that The Star of Ethiopia is tied to the tradition of
Ethiopianism, and the pageant narrative itself demonstrates a strong reliance upon the declining West/rising Africa dichotomy.

The notion of double-consciousness suggests internal conflict, yet the partnership of pageantry and Ethiopianism demonstrate a kind of syncretism rather than disconnect in black historical pageantry. Further, while the content of black pageant narratives often follow African American rhetorical traditions, the spectacle of pageantry and the structure of the pageant performance align closely with mainstream early twentieth century pageantry. Conscious or not, a kind of strategic appropriation is illustrated in the composite structure of black pageantry – the Du Boisian model of black nationalism, while sometimes appealing to a more radical worldview – that is, one in which blacks are powerful – ultimately resembles a paradigmatically “Western” ideal. Structured in this way, black pageantry illustrates the function of double-consciousness as Stephen H. Browne characterizes it – not only “a condition of being,” but also, “a means to imagine, structure, and express a certain view of the world.” Racial superiority, masculine heroism, and progress narratives routinely inhabited the landscape of black pageant dramas, demonstrating that particular educational and cultural traditions potentially influenced those authoring, producing, performing, and frequenting black pageants.

The case of black historical pageantry provides an opportunity to add another rhetorical dimension to the notion of double-consciousness. Pageants may have been authored by individuals, but they were touted as community productions – large-scale theatrical affairs that required the collective efforts of an invested public. There is something of Patricia Hill Collins’ notion of the “outsider within” in this interpretation of black pageantry. Du Bois’ double-consciousness describes an individual’s view of his
own complex identity, but Collins’ theorizing of the “outsider within” demonstrates the systemic nature of achieving and inhabiting a standpoint. According to Collins, “[O]utsider within status has provided a special standpoint on self, family, and society for Afro-American women,” as they have been historically obligated to function in European American spheres (e.g. as domestic workers in white homes) and marginally accepted as members of those spheres, or outsiders within. There are three key elements that compose this status: 1) Black women’s self-definition and self-valuation, 2) the interlocking nature of oppression, and 3) the importance of Afro-American women’s culture. Because Collins develops her argument for the “outsider within” in the context of black feminist thought, the concept may seem ill-fitting to the overtly masculinist structure of black nationalism. However, the added value of recognizing outsider within status as part and parcel of feminist standpoint theory is that standpoints are achievable by members of all identity groupings, if not standard or uniform. Although standpoint theory developed mainly in feminist philosophical contexts, the elements that comprise Collins’ “outsider within” demonstrate that the interweaving elements of black pageantry – Du Boisian black nationalism, satirical African American narrative tradition, and mainstream historical pageantry form and genre – potentially represent a standpoint that is particular to black pageant publics in the early twentieth century. Further, the tradition of black pageantry is by no means without gender, and through the lens provided by Collins, we may question assumptions about the roles that women and men played in producing pageants. As it simultaneously integrated and challenged the standards of the mainstream, black historical pageantry expanded Du Bois’ notion of double consciousness to a kind of representative standpoint, thus offering a practice of
countermemory and model citizenship that called publics in the black diaspora into being while attempting to address black and white audiences.

**Pageant the Vote**

Black pageantry was not the only alternative to the Progressive Era mainstream historical pageant. Just as racial identity and the acknowledgement of racial identity as a crucial component of human subjectivity played a primary role in black pageantry, gender identity occupied a similar position in suffrage pageants. According to Kimberly A. Hamlin, suffrage pageants were not “merely” alternatives to the historical pageant, they were the most successful pageants of the Progressive Era. She contends, “In the 1910s, the most popular and well-known female pageants were the elaborate, theatrical events created, produced, and performed by the woman’s suffragists.”

Like mainstream and black pageantry, suffrage pageants were a significant part of the whole understood as a Progressive Era pageant craze. Of all pageants of the historical moment, Hamlin argues, “[N]o one produced more effective [pageants] than the suffragists.” If effectiveness is measured by “social change,” and if “social change” leads to legislative change, suffrage pageantry may be understood as the most effective of the craze – their spectacular influence arguably contributed to the passage of the Nineteenth Amendment in 1920.

Women had a strong presence in the mainstream pageant scene at the beginning of the twentieth century, but Hamlin’s view of all-female pageantry speaks to the need – then and now – for a more complete depiction of gender in pageantry. Women featured
prominently in the establishment of the American Pageant Association, conceived of and
wrote the narratives of many a pageant, and played directing and production roles in local
pageant performances. Middle-class clubwomen dedicated to the “amateur arts”
embraced the form, and created all-women’s pageants that propagandized for non-
controversial ends endorsed by women’s groups, such as the study of Shakespeare or love
of country.” However, in spite of inhabiting seemingly powerful (read: male-defined)
roles behind the pageant scenes, women were consistently depicted in historical pageants
in “traditional” roles, and “women’s work” was portrayed as “stereotypically
domestic.” Glassberg notes, “In the pageant version of history, women appeared as the
heart and soul of the community throughout its history, in scenes reenacting the
upholding of the town’s timeless traditions, not those depicting its response to changing
circumstances.” These depictions communicated the message that, as women’s roles
remained stable over time, so did the character and spirit of the community. The
narratives told in historical pageants often focused on change – from the diversification
of the local population to a particular turning point in the community leadership or
politics – but the objective of civic-mindedness and continuity underlying each narrative
required the demonstration of a stable community character. It was, in part, through the
performance of the feminine through “relatively timeless” women’s activities – like
knitting or sewing, dancing, attending church, or getting married – that such stability was
achieved.

This consistent portrayal of white women in mainstream historical pageantry
followed from and maintained the nineteenth century ideal of the cult of True
Womanhood. Barbara Welter describes True Womanhood as consisting of “four
cardinal virtues:” piety, purity, submissiveness, and domesticity. The Progressive Era proved to be a trying time for the maintenance of feminine virtue, however, and at the same moment that True Womanhood endured in mainstream historical pageantry, the concept was tested by the New Woman who was becoming prominent in “all-woman” pageantry. Early “all-woman pageants” were performed at women’s colleges, and although these were generally “safe … nostalgic frolics” in which the classics’ curriculum was enacted or honored on stage, they were crucial to setting a stage for all-woman political pageantry. However, even as the standard of the “True Woman” evolved into that of the “New Woman” in pageants that broadened their foci from celebrating classical education to promoting patriotism and pacifism in World War I to paying tribute to women’s contributions to U.S. history, the virtues of the former were not wholly lost. In her analysis of the first national woman suffrage pageant, held on March 3, 1913, Sarah J. Moore contends that the different ways in which suffrage activists viewed “the role of women in contemporary society” became a “defining, if unarticulated feature of the national suffrage pageant itself.” This “feature” infused the pageant with simultaneous and contentious messages of militancy, acquiescence, feminism, and the feminine ideal.

The public conversation around the white, female, middle-class suffrage activist at that historical moment further supports the blurring of the boundaries between the “True Woman” and the “New Woman.” Moore notes that categorizing women (and, at times, men) who sought the vote in different ways also meant they would be differently categorized. A suffrage activist might alternately be described as a suffragist, a suffragette, or a feminist. “Suffragist” is a historically specific moniker, referring to
women and men who supported woman suffrage prior to the turn of the century. Relative to the status quo, woman suffragists embraced a radical agenda, but the term “suffragist” retained a relatively neutral meaning when employed in public discourses of suffrage. By contrast, the term “suffragette,” which became popular after 1910, deployed the image of a militant, female suffrage activist. Although their opponents initially meant it as a term of derision, female suffrage activists embraced “suffragette” as a way of specifying their adoption of an ideology more militant or progressive than the late nineteenth and early twentieth century suffragists. The last of the three monikers, “feminist,” was a term that was used sparingly, as it implied the most radical of all perspectives on woman suffrage – feminists fought not only the vote, but also for “the transformation of woman’s role in society.” Moore explains that activists for woman suffrage would avoid the word altogether to promote a more moderate stance and to avoid impeding the progress of the movement.\textsuperscript{116}

Suffrage discourses produced by female activists also indicates that the True and New woman could be merged together to make the notion of suffrage more widespread in its appeal. Suffragists provided counterpropaganda against at least two prevailing views that worked to demean their efforts. According to Moore, suffragist writings “often attempted to dispel the popular misconception that women who sought the vote were mannish in attire, strident, lacking in domestic accomplishments, and distinguished by particularly unattractive personalities.”\textsuperscript{117} Additionally, “they argued that women would use the ballot to preserve the sanctity and health of the home.”\textsuperscript{118} Overtly masculine, mean, and indifferent to domestic sphere responsibilities – it is the case that even in contemporary contexts, these characteristics are understood as decidedly unwomanly and
thus damaging to individuals and groups of women who enact them or are perceived as enacting them. In order to achieve social movement goals, suffrage activism often appealed to followers of the cult of True Womanhood – a group to which many suffrage activists themselves belonged – by presenting themselves as classically feminine, attractive, kind, and deeply invested in domesticity. The message was this: if given the right to vote, women would make use of it in gender-mandated ways – the True Woman and the New Woman were separate entities only by virtue of the former’s inability to rock the vote. Taken together, the traditional depiction of women in mainstream historical pageantry, the classification of woman suffrage activists by (stereo)type, and suffragist discourses promoting True Womanhood suggest the following: regardless of diverse purposes, in order to be rhetorically effective among diverse audiences, pageantry broadly required a moderate representation of women and the feminine.

Woman suffrage pageantry stood to benefit from at least one element of mainstream historical pageantry gleaned from a repository of explicitly gendered images in public historical imagery. From late nineteenth century to the moment of the Progressive Era pageant, woman as symbol of liberty developed into a recognizable visual trope. In October 1886, the Statue of Liberty was unveiled in New York Harbor. A gift from France to the United States, the statue is an “allegory of the republic … keeping with moderate rather than radical politics” and “guaranteed not to offend.” As were the majority of visual representations of woman in the late nineteenth to early twentieth century, Lady Liberty’s appearance was “staid and matronly,” and eventually, she “acquired the character of a mother.” Perhaps the ultimate hybrid of ideograph and image, the Statue of Liberty symbolized a virtuous republic, and, lest she
be accused of being a public woman, fulfilled the requirements of the Cult of True Womanhood. As historical accounts and images from the national woman suffrage pageant in 1913 demonstrate, a significant component of the pageant allegory was the inclusion of characters Justice, Charity, Liberty, Peace, and Hope. The prominence of these coordinating characters echoed the advice of Linwood Taft in The Technique of Pageantry and fashioned the suffrage pageant in the image of the mainstream historical type. The careful structure and design of the pageant by author Hazel MacKaye arguably influenced the view on the national suffrage pageant as unusual, a disturbance, even, but not radically revolutionary. Karen J. Blair contends, “The spectacle heralded a future of responsible, non-threatening woman citizens, not harpies who threatened to dislodge civilization as it was known.” The similarities in kind between historical and woman suffrage pageantry did not save the latter wholly from mockery or ridicule. Indeed, “Women were jeered, tripped, grabbed, shoved, and many heard ‘indecent epithets’ and ‘barnyard conversation.’” However, the use of woman as symbol of liberty in the suffrage pageant demonstrates that the spectacle of female publicness was not entirely removed from collective assumptions about female embodiment of virtuous, republican ideology, and indeed, the parade and pageant proved themselves impactful alongside it.

Further cushioning the blow of women demonstrating in public, and also in order to gain and maintain support for the woman suffrage movement, black women were excluded from woman suffrage pageantry. This exclusionary tactic was not new to early feminist movements in the United States. Although black women were prominent fixtures in woman suffrage circles, their presence could be detrimental when appealing to national audiences about federal legislative change. Dorothy Sterling notes the ebb and
flow of black women’s inclusion in nineteenth and early twentieth century women’s movement: Although no black women were present at Seneca Falls in 1848, they participated in similar women’s rights meetings thereafter, until the turn of the century when the need of southern support for a woman suffrage amendment made them unwelcome.”126 The national woman suffrage pageant of 1913 appears to be one of these moments in which black women’s support was privately encouraged and accepted, but publicly unwelcome.

The suffrage pageant of May 1913 in Washington, D.C. consisted of two parts, “the procession along Pennsylvania Avenue and the allegorical tableaux staged on the steps of the Treasury Building.”127 In the Progressive Era, parades were not only part and parcel of holiday celebrations, but they were becoming tradition relative to suffrage activism. Thus, the suffrage parade the early twentieth century historical pageant were structurally a bit different, but they were unquestionably similar in at least two respects: 1) both were performed entirely by women, and 2) both were influential due to and significantly influenced by the publicness of their performances. Jennifer Borda’s study of woman suffrage parades as rhetorical form further articulates the complex interplay of belief, purpose, and representation as regarded the public performances of suffragists.128 It is due in part to gender and publicity that Borda contends the simultaneously transgressive and limiting outcomes of the suffrage parades:

The suffrage pageants were conceived of as an opportunity to control the [woman suffrage] movement’s image by inviting spectators to view the women as they wanted to be seen. The unprecedented presence of women in civic processions, however, invited the gaze of the mostly male crowd, many of whom regarded the
women as sexual objects, thus nullifying any sense of suffragists’ agency. The parade form aestheticized both the women and the movement by reinforcing the notion that women’s value was contingent upon her feminine appeal. Ultimately, by treading a fine line between persuasion and seduction, the suffrage parades risked subordinating the seriousness of women’s cause to the spectacular sight of beautiful women on parade.\textsuperscript{129}

Borda’s analysis may not evoke the image one would most like to associate with the feminist activism of women historically, but it is rightly indicative (although not entirely descriptive) of a kind of double bind in which activist members of marginalized publics may become entrapped. The question is this: what is the use of activism if hegemonic cultural perspectives will always dominate, deligitimize, or appropriate the ideology of the marginalized? The relative agencies of the female suffrage activist and the male spectator, or the black pageant performer and the white audience member, cannot simply exercise power over one another – or have a “nullifying” effect, as Borda’s language suggests. Rather, there is a way in which competing perspectives retain their respective weightiness in particular contexts. As was the case with black pageantry, an all-female suffrage pageant espoused an inherently radical worldview – one in which white women are empowered through the vote – and thus employed tempering strategies to openly communicate an agenda while ultimately challenging dominant audience worldviews. Suffragists argued hard – in word and deed – for audiences to view them as traditionally attractive and feminine, yet conforming to norms of womanhood also made them subject to sexualized objectification and the blanket dismissal of their political agenda – in live public performances of suffrage activism in particular. However moderate, though, the
activist performers were at the mercy of the perception of the spectators’ interpretations and perceptions. Neither black nor woman suffrage pageantry was unsuccessful in achieving its objectives, but the work of fashioning the pageant form was clearly an ongoing process to which pageant producers and spectators contributed.

The strategic tempering of suffrage pageant rhetoric is implicated in a longer view of pageantry – one that suggests that suffrage pageants and beauty pageants are linked by a kind of pageant evolution. Kimberly A. Hamlin writes, “[T]he Miss America Pageant would not have been possible without the earlier success of the suffrage pageants, which introduced the public to all-female pageantry, popularized pageantry in general, and … challenged prevailing views of acceptable gender roles.” Hamlin uses the image of the woman-produced and performed suffrage pageants as a point of contrast to the familiar all-female beauty pageant, a form of pageantry that was gaining popularity in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Hamlin argues that the beauty pageant, which was often male-produced and performed by women, is significant evidence of a kind of “backlash” against the increasingly more “public” woman of the Progressive Era. Arguably, it was not a moderate discourse that audiences desired from suffragists, but none at all. In the beauty pageant, one can find resonances of the early twentieth century form, but it is devoid of perhaps the most significant rhetorical element early U.S. pageantry had to offer – whereas historical pageantry was community-minded and provided a platform from which empowered agents might speak, beauty pageants would be marked by a reliance on competition between individual women and relegate its participants to prescribed silence.
Historical Resonances and Pageantry’s Rhetorical Scope

This exploration of the pageant craze of the Progressive Era United States demonstrates the rich history of pageantry as a rhetorical phenomenon and its real influence relative to the construction of public memory and collective identity, past and present. The pageant carries with it varied cultural significance among the diverse publics that it calls into being. The particular cases of mainstream historical pageantry, black pageantry, and suffrage pageantry evidence the wide-ranging functions and objectives of the form and simultaneously illustrate general adherence across publics to the form exemplary of the “craze” in the historical moment. In the instances of black pageantry and the suffrage pageant of 1913, the simultaneous existence of more and less “powerful” discourses of pageantry, identity, and politics arguably resulted in the relative moderation of these alternative pageant narratives. Circumstances may have called for the tempering of their pageant rhetoric, but considering the ultimate goal of mainstream historical pageantry – “Americanization through drama”131 – both black and woman suffrage pageants offered relatively radical challenges to public memory sanctioned in the whiter, more masculine depictions of history offered by the proprietors of hegemonic pageant discourses, e.g. the American Pageant Association. These particular cases of pageantry also provide some insight into the resonance of the rhetoric of the historical pageant beyond the historical moment. Alternatives to mainstream pageantry demonstrate that the form was never actually static, but rather, always dynamic and always open to being appropriated by communities wishing to challenge its primary goals of nationalism and blended civic pride.
Although the historical pageant has largely fallen out of fashion, some practitioners remain. The “holiday pageant,” or the religious pageant, is a relatively similar incarnation of the historical pageant form. Glassberg suggests there is a relationship between the historical pageant and the religious pageant as performances that shape cultural viewpoints, and especially as they might both act as a vehicle for spreading U.S. nationalism. A particularly illustrative example of the ways in which nationalism is performed in religious pageants is seen in the Mormon Church’s annual performance of the Hill Cumorah pageant. In their essay on the Hill Cumorah pageant as “suasive form,” Richard N. Armstrong and Gerald S. Argetsinger describe the performance’s patriotic flair, “Since the bicentennial year of 1976, the Mormon pageant at Cumorah has been preceded by the enthusiastic unfurling of a giant 50x80 American flag . . . as the National Anthem, sung by the Mormon Tabernacle choir, pours forth from powerful speakers encircling the audience. Thus, the non-Mormon patriotic American may identify with the Mormon Church as patriotic.”\footnote{As Glassberg suggests, and Argetsinger and Armstrong demonstrate, religious pageants as they are carried out in contemporary contexts are related in spirit, if not wholly in kind, to the historical pageant of the Progressive Era. A kind of pageant lineage may be drawn from the early 1900s to the present in these particular cases, but it is not yet clear that the same might be said of early U.S. pageants and contemporary beauty pageants.}

In the chapters that follow, I trace a development of pageantry through the twentieth century in order to demonstrate that, while the practices of pageantry may have changed over time, the ideological foundations and aspirations to shape collective identity and public memory remain a consistent component of a rhetoric of pageantry.
In its heyday, historical pageantry was a diverse, yet clearly identifiable rhetorical form, and in the early twentieth century, that particular form was the fashion. Although the historical pageant is produced and performed much less frequently in the early twenty-first century, it is difficult to deny the claim that the successors of historical pageantry have pervaded a shared cultural consciousness in the United States. The Progressive Era pageant “craze” has adapted and evolved into sustainable pageant publics, and even pageant industries. Once characterized as a passing trend, pageantry has matured into an old stand-by, still capable of rousing its participants – sometimes tacitly – to feel a part of a collective, national identity and thus a part of the U.S. citizenry.
Notes


3 *Oxford English Dictionary*, n. “pageant,”

4 “Miss Southern Kentucky Fair,” *Southern Kentucky Fair Pageants*,
sokypageants.webs.com (accessed December 4, 2011).

5 “2011 Scheduling Information,” *Fayette County Fair*,


7 *Country Life* 27, no. 436 (1905): 652. As a point of clarification, the *Country Life* cited here is a British periodical that remains in publication today. In the United States, a magazine entitled *Country Life in America* covered similar topics on this side of the pond. That magazine ceased production in 1942.

8 Ibid.

9 Sherborne is alternately spelled Sherbourne in historical pageant literature. I am adhering to the former spelling here.


13 Glassberg, 47.

14 Ibid., 46-48.

15 Ibid., 48-49.

16 Ibid., 50.

17 Ibid., 1.


19 Ibid.


21 Ibid., 65.

22 Glassberg, 1-2.

23 Since the late 1960s, the most visible public arguments about the irrelevance of beauty pageants have been feminist in nature and concerned with the oppressive, patriarchal
nature of the institution. Perhaps due in part to the proliferation of critical analyses of beauty pageants, in the late twentieth century, audiences for the most renowned pageant telecast, Miss America, declined significantly, which contributed to the pageant’s dismissal from network television in 2005. Between 2005 and 2010, Miss America was broadcast instead on cable networks CMT and TLC. However, Miss America returned to ABC in 2011, suggesting that it has regained appeal in the eyes of the major television networks, as well a possible resurgence in television audiences’ pageant interests. I explore the cultural relevance of female competitive pageantry in greater depth in the fourth chapter. See Christine Lagorio, “Will Trump Save Miss America? The Donald is Wooing Down-On-Its-Luck Miss America Pageant,” CBS News http://www.cbsnews.com/stories/2005/03/11/entertainment/main679739.shtml (accessed August 20, 2011); and “Organization Info: Key Facts and Figures,” Miss America, http://www.missamerica.org/organization-info/key-facts-and-figures.aspx (accessed August 20, 2011).


27 Ibid., x.


29 The clear exception here is W.E.B. Dubois, whose *Star of Ethiopia* pageant is examined in this chapter.

30 Glassberg, 1.

31 Langdon did not become the president of the American Pageant Association until 1922 (a year after the first Miss America pageant), but his interest in the pageant “craze,” his role as Master of the Pageant in various communities around the country, and his support for an organization that would enable research on and the production of pageants is traceable to at least 1910. He remains a significant historical figure, especially as regards Progressive Era pageantry, if only because a collection of documents concerning pageantry exists in his name at the John Hay Library at Brown University and chronicles the evolution of historical pageantry from the perspectives provided by the papers in the collection.

32 The spelling of Langdon’s middle name appears differently in different contexts. Most of the published works that bear his name, as well as the personal correspondence held in the William Chauncey Langdon Collection of Pageants at the John Hay Library at Brown University utilize the spelling “Chauncy,” yet it does appear as “Chauncey” in numerous
contexts (notably, even in the title of the collection at Brown). I will utilize the former spelling, since Langdon’s personal correspondence indicates that that is the one that he himself would have used, unless I am directly citing from a publication that used the “e”-inclusive spelling.


34 Ibid.

35 Ibid.


37 McGee theorized ideographs as language, but much scholarship in the field of rhetorical studies has since challenged the notion that words are the only symbols that evoke ideographic qualities (see, for example, Janis L. Edwards and Carol K. Winkler, “Representative Form and the Visual Ideograph: The Iwo Jima Image in Editorial Cartoons,” Quarterly Journal of Speech 83 (1997): 289-310). I agree with these expansions on McGee’s work, but I retain the original vision of ideograph here to discuss the particular terms that are consistently central to Langdon’s and others’ views of pageantry in the moment of the early twentieth century.

38 McGee, 15.

The clearest examples of pageant as protest were the national Woman Suffrage Pageant and the Paterson Strike Pageant, both of which occurred in 1913. I discuss the former later in this chapter. For more on the latter, see Linda Nochlin, “The Paterson Strike Pageant of 1913,” *Art in America* 62 (1974): 64-68.


Glassberg, 1.

See Greg Dickinson, Carole Blair, and Brian L. Ott, “Introduction: Rhetoric/Memory/Place,” in *Places of Public Memory: The Rhetoric of Museums and*

49 Waldstreicher, 3.

50 Ibid.

51 Langdon, “America, Like England, Has Become Pageant Mad.”

52 Glassberg, American Historical Pageantry, 132.

53 Glassberg, “History and the Public,” 965.


55 Glassberg, “History and the Public,” 965.


Ibid.


See Krasner, 81-94.


Ibid., 102.

Ibid., 104-105.

Ibid., 107-108.

Ibid., 102.


Krasner, 82.


79 Ibid.

80 Ibid., xxx.

81 Ibid., xxvii.

82 Ibid.

83 Ibid., xxix-xxx.

84 Ibid., xxx.

85 Smith, 40.


88 Ibid., 145.

89 Ibid., 156.

90 Ibid.

91 Ibid., 160.

92 Ibid., 157.


I employ masculine terms here for two reasons, 1) these are the terms on which the historically prominent figures of black nationalism – all males – framed their philosophies in their own words, and 2) to emphasize the male-centeredness of not just Du Bois’ nationalism but black nationalism generally.

Collins, S14.

Ibid.

Dorothy Smith’s 1974 essay, “Women’s Perspective as a Radical Critique of Sociology,” is cited as the origin of feminist standpoint theory. Following Smith, significant developments in standpoint theorizing are numerous, but some of the more recognizable work is found in Nancy Hartsock’s “The Feminist Standpoint: Developing the Ground for a Specifically Feminist Historical Materialism,” Collins’ “Learning from the Outsider Within: The Sociological Significance of Black Feminist Thought,” Sandra Harding’s “Rethinking Standpoint Epistemology: What is ‘Strong Objectivity’?,” and Susan He-man’s “Truth and Method: Feminist Standpoint Theory Revisited.” See *The Feminist Standpoint Theory Reader: Intellectual & Political Controversies*, edited by Sandra Harding (New York: Routledge, 2004), in which these significant moments in the standpoint theory conversation and numerous others are anthologized.

100 Ibid., 27-28.

101 Ibid., 28.

102 Glassberg, American Historical Pageantry, 135.


104 Glassberg, 135.

105 Ibid., 136.

106 Ibid.


108 Ibid., 152.

109 Blair, 130-135.

110 Ibid.


112 Blair, 130-135.

114 Ibid.

115 Ibid.

116 Ibid., 90-91.

117 Ibid., 92.

118 Ibid.


121 Warner, 10.


123 Blair, 138.

124 Harvey, “Marching for the Vote.”


127 Moore, 92.

129 Borda, 46.

130 Hamlin, 29.

131 MacKaye, v.

Chapter Three

Before Toddlers & Tiaras: Better Babies Contests and the Ideal Pageant Subject

The work of [The Better Babies] Bureau is to encourage the holding of Better Babies contests as an aid to preventive medicine and a method of helping parents to start children, physically and mentally, toward individual health and efficient citizenship. The Better Babies contest is a simple but scientific examination of babies by reputable physicians who score them for physical and mental points; and prizes are awarded not for beauty but for physical and mental development.

– Anna Steese Richardson

Partners in Pageantry

In much the same way that historical pageantry and contemporary competitive pageantry do not appear to descend from the same family tree, pageantry and eugenic science are two respective sets of concepts and practices that do not evidence any kind of close relationship. For U.S. audiences, the pageant exists in the realm of entertainment culture and signifies femininity and frivolity, whereas eugenics occupies a significant moment in the development of biological sciences and reeks of sinister connotations. One is a performance, the other a set of scientific beliefs and practices, but in spite of their differences, pageantry and eugenics are related historically and philosophically. The popularity of both the historical pageant and eugenic science peaked in the first three decades of the twentieth century and fell out of favor shortly thereafter. Both were conducive to that historical moment, in which a prevailing sense of national identity was challenged by postbellum conditions and demographic population changes prompted by
an influx of European immigration on the East Coast and Asian immigration on the West Coast. In both pageantry and eugenics, one could find satisfying answers to the persistent questions that belie the desire for a national identity and culture – not only the generic “who are we?” but also “what kind of people are we?” A heavy reliance on the visual was one of the overlapping means through which pageants and eugenics influenced prevailing views on subjectivity and citizenship. Indeed, there are plenty of evocative, even iconic memories of their heydays that persist in public memory, from the spirit of Liberty in human form – white, female, and draped in a white robe – to the haunting images of concentration camp victims in Nazi Germany – malnourished, the specter of impending death hovering over the black and white image. Although they are different entities with apparently dissimilar rhetorical structures – one is a dramatic performance or contest, the other a body of scientific discourse and attendant practices – pageantry and eugenic science provide similar discursive and material evidence for what constituted normalized subjectivity in the United States in the early twentieth century. And their influence did not end there. As they have developed into characteristic elements of U.S. culture, contemporary competitive pageantry and the innovative field of genetic science continue to shape and to be shaped by discourses of fitness and ideal citizenship. Considering their overlapping ideologies and objectives, discourses of pageantry and eugenics would pair nicely in early twentieth century efforts to improve infant health and healthcare. This chapter interrogates the relationship between pageantry and eugenics as they converged in the form of better babies contests in the first three decades of the twentieth century.
As the popularity of the historical pageant declined, the increasing popularity of photography and photographic beauty contests primed audiences for the competitive beauty pageant to take its place. About a decade before the public bathing beauty contest originated on the Atlantic City boardwalk, however, state fair spectacles known as better babies contests were drawing large crowds in the South and Midwest. The better babies contest occupied physical space on the fairgrounds – it was an attraction, a place where visitors could go to see and judge the potential effects of eugenics-inspired “better breeding” campaigns. Somewhat akin to the civic-minded pageant craze of the early twentieth century, better babies contests were developed alongside public health campaigns that reasoned the implementation of selective breeding strategies used in bettering livestock could likewise improve human stock. At their height, the contests were among state fairs’ biggest draws, both in terms of the number of participants and spectators. They prospered until the late 1920s, gaining popularity as they developed in urban as well as rural settings. Better babies contests did not ultimately endure as long as their fair counterparts – i.e. livestock and agriculture contests – but their tradition has arguably held steady to the present day in the form of competitive female and child pageantry. In both the development of a rhetoric of U.S. pageantry and an overarching rhetorical history of pageantry, better babies contests provide strong evidence for the pageant as a persistently salient site for the cultivation of U.S. nationalism and model citizenship.

My goal, in this chapter, is to contribute to the body of work on “better breeding,” as well as to expand a rhetorical perspective of pageantry and pageant practices in the United States by focusing on the phenomenon of better babies contests as a significant
influence on the development of the form. I pay special attention to the structure of the contests and emphasize the roles of race and gender relative to pageant contestants and pageant parents. I argue that the particular site of pageantry, beginning with baby photographic beauty contests and followed by better babies contests, evidences the implementation of eugenic theories and practices that ultimately remain resonant, although adapted, in contemporary competitive pageantry’s overlapping investments in fitness and ideal citizenship.

**Contemporary Views on Pageantry and Eugenics**

In recent years, popular and scholarly criticisms of both the U.S. tradition of pageantry and the legacy of eugenic practices have proliferated. These criticisms often question the compatibility of these institutions with foundational beliefs in and well-maintained narratives about the liberal, autonomous U.S. citizen. Pageants are relics of a time when popular culture was lacking, if not entirely devoid of, feminist influences, and eugenics is a pseudoscience that mistakenly (and often violently) embraced the dogma that breeding genetically superior human beings would better U.S. society. In spite of their coming-of-age at similar moments, however, pageantry and eugenics do not, on their faces, share common objectives or even ring familiar for the same audiences. The former has never been taken too seriously or understood as having substantial influence on American ways of living, whereas the latter has been alternately embraced and rejected as a potentially powerful means of intervening on U.S. society and culture.
In short, pageants, as virtually harmless, outwardly feminized, visually stimulating theatrical spectacles, and eugenics, as a potentially harmful scientific intervention on human reproduction, may not appear to cross paths on the beaten trails of U.S. culture and collective identity. However, as noted above, to consider them entirely separate entities in the creation and maintenance of public discourses of identity and subjectivity would be a mistake. Both pageants and eugenics are representative of the civic education and community-bettering spirit of the Progressive Era United States. Further, they are persistent and adaptive icons of what it is to be model U.S. subject and citizen, in spite of the fact that they are often maligned in discursive exchanges outside of their respective publics.

Because eugenics is an emotionally triggering subject, due to the ways in which it has been used to practice violence against marginalized peoples – e.g. European Jews, African-American women and men, intellectually disabled and “socially deviant” communities in the United States – it seems pertinent to provide a kind of disclaimer regarding its potential relationship with the contemporary U.S. institution of competitive pageantry. This is not to say that pageants are devoid of controversy in and of themselves. However, there is indisputable evidence that eugenic theory and practices resulted in directly harmful effects on particular human populations in the United States and elsewhere in the world; substandard quality of life and humiliation, death, and disease are among the deplorable outcomes of projects carried out in the name of eugenics, racial uplift, or “better breeding.” By no means is the term “eugenics” neutral. After the mid-twentieth century, a time in which eugenic science provided credible support for developments in biological sciences, the term “eugenics” began to drop out of
scientific discourses. Marouf A. Hasian notes, “In earlier years [before the eugenics program of Nazi Germany] the ambiguity and capaciousness of the word ‘eugenics’ had allowed both hard-liners and reformers to employ the term, but now the word was associated with fascism, and researchers scrambled to find ways of erasing any ideological links between their agendas and that of the Nazis.”

Due to its violent past, eugenics has been prohibited entry to the future of scientific discourse and practice, in both popular and expert realms. However, as a predecessor to the field of genetics, eugenic science could not then and cannot now be completely erased from scientific inquiry or public memory.

The contemporary field of genetics may rest on foundations laid by eugenics, and scientific and lay audiences may, to some extent, be conscious of the connection, but it is in the interest of the advancement of genetic science to ignore or suppress its relationship to its “pseudoscientific” predecessor. One means of rhetorically constructing developments in genetics as positive or objective is to remove “eugenics” from scientific and lay vocabularies of human biological research. “Eugenics” resonates in a profoundly negative way, especially among the populations that were once on the receiving end of its most violent and oppressive programs. “Genetics,” however, is collectively understood as an area of scientific research that is progressive and benefits all humans, regardless of race, gender, sexuality, or intelligence. Hasian notes this tendency in current scientific discourses to describe genetic science as value-neutral in his analysis of the Human Genome Project:

[T]he use of reductionist genetic metaphors entices us into believing that the human body is simply a composite set of ‘genetic instructions’…. Genetic
research thus appears to be at the vanguard of social change, and complex human conditions are presented as simply matters of reading the genes and not necessarily as issues of power or allocation of resources. Just as better babies contests were a popular tool for encouraging support for eugenic theory and practice, so the cautionary turn taken in scientific discourses attempts to underscore the objectivity of mapping the human genome, as it is ultimately a project undertaken for the betterment of all humankind. Yet, the connection between eugenic history and genetic present remains, and one of the realms in which it resonates is contemporary competitive pageantry. This connection is critical to an inquiry into rhetorical constructions of citizenship and subjectivity in the United States, and the connection is particularly salient in the case of better baby contests, a discursive and material site in which lasting assumptions about gender, race, and fitness were forged.

Pageants are not the only place one finds present-day reincarnations of eugenic theory and practice. Nor should they be mistakenly touted as a kind of spin-off of eugenic science, as the primary stage on which the notions of racial betterment are embodied and showcased. It is hardly the case that civic, community, religious, or beauty pageants place genetic breeding requirements on their participants in any explicit way. However, it is important to consider early twentieth-century pageants especially as rhetorically significant phenomena in light of the resonances that eugenic discourses have left on our cultural understanding of human fitness and subjectivity. As she researched the Eugenics Survey of Vermont seventy years after its implementation, Nancy L. Gallagher found herself in a deep “inquiry into the penetration and persistence of eugenic ideas and controversies in twentieth-century discourse on family life, health care, and
social welfare problems." The clearest examples of eugenics’ persistent scientific resonances and public concerns that race betterment campaigns are still alive and well are found in the realm of reproductive sciences. The late twentieth-century case of Norplant and Depo-Provera arguably typifies such concern. Norplant and Depo-Provera are hormonal contraceptives that were targeted toward “marginalized women in the United States and abroad” – including developmentally delayed women, drug-addicted women, incarcerated women, HIV-positive women, Native American, Latina, and African American women – in spite of having known, dangerous side effects and lacking FDA approval. The case study “parallels that of surgical sterilization,” demonstrating that even after the term “eugenics had” been erased from official scientific theory and practice, some elements of the scientific community continued to pursue eugenically driven objectives. Further, the logic of eugenic discourses percolates into dominant, stereotypical narratives about marginalized populations and influences support for implicit and explicit disciplinary measures to be taken against those populations – take, for example, the myth of the “welfare queen,” an image that is evocative of a low-income, African American woman who exploits the federal aid system by refusing to work and continuing to have children outside of heterosexual marriage. One must take care not to read any and every cultural belief or practice as influenced by eugenics; however, these examples evidence the persistence of particularly resonant discourses over time and across rhetorical practices. The rhetoric of eugenics illustrates how discourses do not necessarily disappear as they become antiquated or fall out of fashion.

It is critical to note that eugenic discourses are not simply maintained as is. Rather, they are subject to a kind of evolutionary process. According to Beverly
Horsburgh, “Today’s eugenic thinking is not merely a rival of outdated pre-World War II attitudes, but is rather a part of a historical continuum. Scientific disciplines have always tended to reflect and mediate our response to race, class, and gender, as well as the degree to which we value human beings for their own sake.” Through the enactment of normalizing narratives in drama and contest, pageants update, reframe, and perhaps even rename eugenic ideals that influence contemporary understandings of what it is to be a fit subject and citizen in the United States.

**Eugenics’ Histories**

“Eugenics” is hard-pressed to escape its dark discursive and material pasts. The term hearkens to the building of a purported master race in Nazi Germany and systematic and forced sterilizations in the United States. Privileging these aspects in public memory of eugenics suggests that it is often understood in terms of extremes. Either eugenics is framed as the ultimate tool in biological terrorism, or it is too easily dismissed as mere pseudoscience. In the past fifteen years, however, some scholarship on eugenic history in the U.S. has taken a slightly different approach. Hasian argues that “eugenics was popularized in part because of its very ambiguity,” and due to this ambiguity, it has been transferred onto a spectrum of better breeding efforts – from ethnic cleansing to the study of heredity. Rather than consider eugenic history and development from one of these extreme positions, the focus must shift to the plurality of meanings and performances of eugenics in U.S. historical and contemporary contexts. Pageantry is one of these alternative sites for rhetorical excavation in the scholarly history of eugenics.
The move to reconsider or re-vision the meaning of eugenics is fitting, especially as the history of eugenics reveals that it is difficult to force eugenics into any one definitional or theoretical box. Historian Daniel J. Kevles describes eugenics as a forerunner to contemporary genetic science: “Human genetics as a program of research originated with the eugenic idea that the physical, mental, and behavioral qualities of the human race could be improved by suitable management and manipulation of its hereditary essence.” There is some vagueness in this description that eschews the more concise writings of Francis Galton himself, who Kevles calls the “Founder of the Faith.” Galton was rather matter-of-fact in early ponderings on the not-yet-named science of eugenics. Drawing on his observations of selective breeding processes performed on plant and animal species, Galton wrote, “Could not the race of men be similarly improved? Could not the undesirables be got rid of and the desirables multiplied?”

Considering Kevles’ and Galton’s eugenic views in tandem, there is evidence of the basic, shared value of improving human life. The means through which such improvement might be achieved and what that improvement might actually look like are not made explicit. Although public memory of eugenics tends toward a clearly defined vision, because eugenics ultimately hinges on the vague notion of improving human life, the interpretive and practical possibilities are numerous.

Examining eugenics through a rhetorical lens allows us to consider the potential and implications of eugenics’ “ambiguity.” Hasian contends that we must be cautious not to “[treat] eugenics as the product of exclusively tyrannical governments,” nor should we treat it as mere “pseudoscience.” Instead, he argues for an ideographic approach to the study of the rhetoric of eugenics in order to interrogate power relations among the term’s
various definitions, as well as the potential material effects of the enactments of those symbolic interpretations. There are at least eight culturally-situated, ideographic understandings of eugenics – Hasian describes them as “categorical meanings” into which the term eugenics may fall, and they range from improving the physical and mental health of human beings generally, to perpetuating the white race, to engaging in a kind of “scientific philanthropy” that benefits the “fit” over the “unfit.”18 In this laundry list of interpretations, Hasian demonstrates that all eugenic beliefs and applications are not created equal. “In sum,” he writes, “‘eugenics’ was an evocative term that could be employed in a myriad of ways.”19 These myriad interpretations did not exist simultaneously, nor did they hold equal weight among diverse publics – scientific and otherwise. Rather, during different historical time periods and in different contexts, particular interpretations of eugenics held sway. In the early twentieth century – a time when postbellum structural changes and an immigrant influx prompted mainstream historical pageants to reinforce a homogenous brand of civic identity – the definitional plurality of eugenics served the movement well. The “scope and complexity” of the Progressive Era prompted “the progressives [to respond] with a yearning for the world that used to exist before degeneration became a reality.”20 Hasian contends that the eugenics movement could satisfy this “yearning,” as it “had mass appeal” and “its goals could be construed in many ways.”21 So, for example, although it was considered a science, eugenics was used to explain and thus applied to social “problems.”22 As such, many social projects, and even everyday conversation,23 in the early twentieth century could be understood as having eugenic undertones. Considering the craze-like nature of the historical pageant in this same historical moment, as well as the undercurrent of social
uplift that pervaded diverse publics different iterations of the pageant form, the pageant was one of the many “social projects” primed for popular eugenics education. In many ways, the historical pageant acted as a prelude to the “social project” pageants that would proliferate under the mantle of eugenics – particularly, the better baby contests, which became wildly popular state fair spectacles.24

As historian Alexandra Minna Stern demonstrates in Eugenic Nation: Faults and Frontiers of Better Breeding in Modern America, scholarship about and public memory of eugenics is largely East coast-centric.25 This bias was due, in large part, to the wealth of “archival repositories” of official eugenics documents and records on the “Atlantic seaboard.”26 Stern states, “With New York, Washington, D.C., and Boston as epicenters, most students of eugenics developed a narrative that tacitly enshrined the East Coast as the geographical reference point.”27 Those studies of eugenics were then “projected … across the rest of the country.”28 In order to challenge and supplement that focus, Stern presents a revisionist history of eugenics in the United States. She states her objective as “explor[ing] continuities, permutations, and ramifications of better breeding in the United States that have been obscured; in so doing, [Eugenic Nation] proposes a revised chronology, deceters the vantage point from which the story is often told, and excavates a set of topics that have rarely received more than a passing nod.”29 Among the “obscured” examples that Stern brings into focus are the concerted efforts to implement eugenically driven medical programs on the West coast. Shifting the regional focus of eugenics narratives, she also demonstrates that the racialized bodies of Mexicans at the U.S.-Mexico border were subject to public health initiatives that demonstrate the altogether different treatment of Mexican immigrants from European immigrants at Ellis
Island, for example. Stern’s critical approach to eugenic history, in tandem with Hasian’s multiple categorical interpretations of the term eugenics, provides strong evidence that partial knowledges of eugenics must be explored discretely and alongside one another in order to provide a fuller (admittedly, however, never complete) understanding of its role as a significant component of public memory and continued cultural practices in the United States.

Kevles, Hasian, and Stern all note the inevitability of equating eugenics with Nazi Germany. The latter two suggest that this automatic connection in the dominant narrative of eugenics, while valid, obscures the nuances of the theoretical and practical developments of eugenics in the early twentieth century, and in The Rhetoric of Eugenics in Anglo American Thought and Eugenic Nation, Hasian and Stern, respectively, significantly re-focus the vision of eugenic history and discourses. Along with Hasian and Stern, Nikolas Rose reminds the contemporary consumer of eugenics histories that at the pique of its popularity, “Eugenics was not disreputable or marginal: it defined one dimension of mainstream thinking about the responsibilities of politicians, professionals, scientists, and individuals in the modern world.” Eugenic theory and practice was thus simultaneously novel and banal. Although specifically eugenically driven practices proliferated in the early to mid-twentieth century, it did not then and does not now represent an all-encompassing worldview in the United States. Still, the multiplicity of ideographic meanings and the plurality of eugenic practices provide significant evidence that eugenics discourses have not been tossed out altogether, but rather, remain in the U.S. cultural consciousness – sometimes implicitly and sometimes explicitly. The way in which we understand eugenics has changed over time and varies within the contexts of
particular publics, and as these discourses have changed and disseminated, so the term “eugenics” itself has been subject to change. That is to say, eugenic science is not necessarily alive and well in the everyday lives of U.S. citizens and non-citizens, but the premises on which the rationality of eugenic science rests – genetic manipulation, bodily control, and ultimately, (human) race betterment – are part and parcel of rhetorical performances of subjectivity and the power dynamics that influence such performances.

**Pageants’ Histories**

In the early twentieth century, the historical pageant dominated the pageant stage, so to speak. Historical pageant productions enabled increasingly diverse communities to standardize their collective identities and reinforce or retell narratives of strength, heroism, and civic religiosity – in some cases, in explicitly racialized or gendered terms. However, in addition to the diversification of historical pageantry, the category “pageant” came to include multiple, differently structured forms. Most notably, before, during, and after the American Pageant Association’s William Chauncy Langdon declared in the *New York Times* that America had become “pageant mad,” the modern American beauty pageant had begun an incubation period that would eventually develop into a kind of craze of its own. The notion of the pageant as competition was itself competing with the notion of pageant as civic celebration, and as with eugenics, it was becoming more appropriate to conceive of pageantry as a diverse category of cultural performances. A rough pageant lineage must be traced in order to establish some limits on what constitutes
pageantry and how, if at all, these seemingly incongruous rhetorical forms share more than the moniker “pageant.”

Contemporary pageants can be traced from multiple origin points – there are several paths by which the practice of pageantry became a common one in the United States. Differences in lineage result from differences in structure, but arguably, there are basic foundational purposes that tie diverse pageant forms together. David Glassberg notes the significant influence of the revival of the Renaissance pageant, first in England in the late nineteenth century and then, by extension, in America in the early twentieth century. It is from the Renaissance example that U.S. pageantry inherited the notion of the pageant as civic celebration. Modeled on English Renaissance revival pageants and in defiance of the vulgar and carnivalesque public celebrations of the late nineteenth century, the early twentieth century U.S. pageant was realized by “genteel intellectuals” invested in maintaining cultural homogeneity. This type of pageant lent itself beautifully to the era’s progressive politics of reform and was tied to initiatives like the playground movement and civic education. In spite of the historical pageant’s popularity, however, Langdon, eventual president of the American Pageant Association and staunch proponent of the historical pageant type, noted in 1913 – with some apparent disdain – that in America “the word ‘pageant’ covers a wide and as yet unlimited field of new dramatic and semi-dramatic forms.” Even as Langdon and the American Pageant Association worked determinedly to solidify a particular collective definition of pageantry in the United States, pageant publics proliferated.

Perhaps the most significant development in pageantry, as it is the pageant type that retains the most salience across publics in the United States today, is the beauty
pageant. In *American Beauty*, Lois W. Banner charts the development of the beauty contest in America between the years 1800 and 1921, citing the “beauty contest” as a “major institution” of fashion culture in the United States. Major cultural institution though it may be, Banner challenges the *Oxford English Dictionary*’s claim that the term beauty contest is found “originally and chiefly [in the] U.S.” The contemporary beauty pageant may have eventually found firm footing in the New World, but competitive pageant beginnings are traceable to medieval Europe. “European festivals of venerable lineage often included a competition to choose the most beautiful woman participant” – this presumably familiar model is emulated, in some way, in the vast majority of beauty pageant examples from the twentieth century forward. The European festival that had the most significant impact on early American beauty contests was the May Day celebration, and particular to that festival, the crowning of a May Day Queen. In the nineteenth-century United States, the title of May Day Queen was, according to Banner, “a ritual of childhood.” More appropriately, the explicitly gendered practice was a ritual of girlhood that demonstrated power dynamics in girls’ relationships with one another, and particularly, linked queenship and education, as girls accorded a favorite school friend the title of Queen of the May. In these earlier, more private performances of the pageant, rhetorical connections between monarchical government, democracy, and gendered and racialized fitness began to form. For these relationships to become more complexly integrated into a fabric of U.S. nationalism, they would need to be subjected to greater publicity and legitimimized via the addition of explicitly patriarchal influences.

The selection of Queen of the May between girls was a protopublic event – it would have likely occurred in the presence of a relatively small and homogenous
environment, that is, an audience of white girls in a gender-segregated educational setting. Thus, changes in the gendered dynamics of these types of events were due, in part, to the relative publicness of the crowning. The particulars of the May Day celebration adapted, morphed, and mapped onto American holiday observances including Christmas, the Fourth of July, and George Washington’s Birthday, as well as special events like the Marquis de Lafayette’s tour of the U.S. in 1826. Although the notion of queendom lay beneath the surface of May Day and holiday proclamations, a crowning did not always take place. Often, in these contexts in which women welcomed or flanked male war heroes, they were clear visual symbols of fertility and female fitness – young, white, and dressed in white, their physical proximity to masculine strength and virility implied the potential for establishing American royalty through better breeding. There was an ever-present understanding that participation in rituals of this sort symbolized elevation to a higher sort of feminine status. For example, while the male victors of jousting tournaments – modeled on the medieval kind – earned the right to select their queens, the delegation of women who welcomed Lafayette to Washington, D.C. “[gained] great esteem through their association with the national hero,” and “for the remainder of their lives were known as ‘Lafayette girls.’” The immediate, physical presence of an audience validated the “girls’” acquaintance with masculine power and helped to ensure that the eventual centerpiece of the contemporary pageant – the crowning of the queen – became a vehicle for emphasizing dominant narratives of chivalry and heteronormativity in U.S. culture and society.

Old World traditions were the inspiration for the pageant, but established and new media channels played a significant role in the development of the pageant form in the
United States. Although pageantry is always already rooted in and reliant upon the sensory realm of the visual, the rise of photography made the pageant visually accessible to participants and audiences beyond those present at local festivals and community holiday celebrations. Photography thus made the pageant less spectacular in some ways, and arguably less moralistic, as women and children were put on display via a new and potentially exploitative medium, and the only condition necessary for a beauty contest to take place was an advertisement, published in the local newspaper, calling for photographic submissions.

Photography was the technological development that was most influential to the development of pageantry in the United States. In their respective histories of American beauty culture and the Miss America pageant, Lois W. Banner and Sarah Banet-Weiser trace the origins of the photographic beauty contest to the working relationship between P.T. Barnum and Matthew Brady. Following a staging of “what might be called the first modern beauty contest, involving women’s display of face and figure before judges,” the showman Barnum partnered with photographer friend Brady to initiate a call for a photographic beauty contest. The daguerrotype entries were to be painted as portraits, exhibited in Barnum’s own museum, and voted on by gallery visitors. Each participant would receive a prize, but the ten women voted most beautiful would represent the superior beauty of American women in a world book of beauty to be issued by a French publisher. In spite of initiating the call and receiving some submissions, this particular contest did not come to fruition, but its advertisement helped set a stage for the proliferation of photographic beauty contests in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.
Despite concerns over the relative morality of putting women on public display in photographic beauty contests – as well as the questionable morality of the female participants – the form gained popularity across socioeconomic classes, and thus, ethnic populations. Whereas the crowning of queens at May Day festivals reinforced the belief that “middle-class white women were…. the moral guardians of the American spirit,”\textsuperscript{52} the photographic beauty contest allowed for diversity in participation, in theory, at least, if not in practice. Further, as the beauty contest became “an accepted feature of American life,”\textsuperscript{53} the form displayed some variability in terms of participant gender and age. Via photography, the beauty contest could be fairly easily adapted into competitions to find the world’s most perfectly formed man and woman\textsuperscript{54} or the search for the most cherubic-looking baby.\textsuperscript{55} Photos afforded wider audiences an opportunity to engage in “the gaze” – either as the viewers or the viewed – and provided a mainstream outlet for advertising gendered, racialized, and implicitly sexualized fitness. The advent of photography thus aided in establishing strong links between pageantry and a cultural drive toward social uplift and “better breeding.” This climate cultivated a type of pageant that sought not only to single out feminine beauty but also to establish categorical standards of fitness that would come to be understood – albeit implicitly – as quintessentially American.

**Better Babies Contests: The Nexus of Pageantry and Eugenics**

Infant beauty pageants, like variations of the May Day festival and the novel photographic beauty contest, were popular in the late nineteenth century among upper
class families. Before they became a valued marker of family life, however, they were popular culture novelties. P.T. Barnum not only had a hand in the development of the female beauty contest, but he also initiated some of the earliest baby beauty contests. Barnum scholar Bluford Adams calls the first baby show, held in 1855, “the most poorly understood of Barnum’s major productions.”

Barnum’s baby shows set many of the standards the bourgeois baby beauty contests that would proliferate in years to come. The physical attractiveness of the baby was the primary criterion on which she or he was judged, evidenced by categories such as “finest twin,” “finest triplet,” and “finest baby.” Additionally, like baby beauty pageants and better babies contests to come, the primary audience targeted by the baby shows was female. Women comprised most of the shows’ spectators, judges, and contestant parents and were also employed as caretakers in Barnum’s nursery department and as souvenir vendors.

A class element would intervene on the shows’ continued successes, however. The visual spectacle geared toward women and children raised concerns about morality and propriety. “[Barnum’s] baby shows violated most of the middle class’s deepest beliefs about maternity….

Barnum was attacked as a desecrator of ‘the sanctities of home and of life.’ Critics accused him of leading an enormous, motley mob of amusement seekers into the heart of the women’s sphere.” Because children and women were generally believed to have a strong relational bond – which was primarily due to women’s culturally defined role as mother, but also because women were considered to be members of the nurturing gender and keepers of the private or domestic sphere – Barnum’s very public baby show experiment earned a reputation as an affront to the gentler sex. White women and children were to be shielded from such gross improprieties, but Barnum and others were
not to be dissuaded from adapting and evolving the growing American tradition of child pageantry.

Middle class motherhood and childhood gained meaning and value via numerous rhetorical channels, but in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, it is visual texts that have perhaps contributed most significantly to the construction of dominant narratives of all American-ness and fitness. The pageant or beauty contest is one of those visual texts, and the history of the baby photo contest and its successors in particular evidences a desire to construct those narratives of inbred and cultivated good stock via aesthetic categories. Both mother and child were directly implicated in these proliferating discourses of fitness, and thus, they were the audiences to whom aesthetic and the scientific messages of fitness were targeted. Evidence of such targeting is especially visible in the adaptation of the baby beauty contest into better babies contests.

Among the standards to which contestants were held in the popular “beauty shows” of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century were “comeliness and corpulence.” Of central importance was the physical attractiveness of the child, which was often determined via baby photographs – that new medium of growing cultural significance. Josephine Gear contends that the complementary and pervasive ideologies of “baby worship” and “adulation of the mother” were illustrated visually in high art and pop culture contexts, from painting and portraiture to print advertising. As the realm of popular culture became increasingly visual, the baby photo served several functions, including the “valorization of infancy” and the legitimization of motherhood. The infant traditionally appeared in the photo alone, but the trip to the photographer’s studio and the resulting display of the baby picture in the home provided a “double social
initiation” that straddled domestic and public spheres. A woman’s participation in the
take picture-taking event and the subsequent framing and displaying the image in the home
were means by which women might graduate “from the role of wife to that of mother” –
the baby photograph provided a kind of publicity that helped middle class white women
claim their places as “shapers of the community’s social life.” The performance of the
baby photo and the beauty contests that it inspired thus contributed to a climate in which
the objectives of better breeding could disseminate via familiar cultural practices.

Rising concern over infant mortality rates in the United States in the early 1900s
inspired the development of eugenic programs specifically targeted to improve early
infant health. These programs were an opportunity to not only save more children’s
lives, but also to improve the genetic stock of white Americans in the process. Better
babies contests developed as an extension of public health policy and popular eugenic
education programs, merging the gospel of eugenics with spectacle in a way that
demonstrated both the need for eugenically driven health practices and the positive
effects of those practices. In June 1913, Woman’s Home Companion reported “Better
Babies” to be “the most popular movement of the day,” and described the movement as
“sweeping the country like wildfire.” The phenomenon was touted as “the outgrowth of
a scientific and honest health contest for babies which has replaced the old-fashioned
beauty show at state fairs and similar gatherings.” Thus, in this moment, the phrase
“baby is king” came to be enacted not only by and through pageant-like competitions,
but also via public policy measures. Further, the general feeling of “adulation” for the
mother-infant relationship aided in popularizing better baby contests and contributed to
lasting perceptions of and attitudes toward the contemporary beauty pageant.
Iowa is well documented as the state in which the first official better babies contest occurred, but the initial attempt at a better babies contest took place at the Louisiana State Fair in 1908 and was officially titled the first “Scientific Baby Contest.”

By the end of 1913, a total of “117 county and local baby health contests had been conducted in all states, except West Virginia and New Hampshire.” Better babies contests were different from photographic beauty contests and baby beauty shows in that they judged their participants – generally ranging in age from infants of about six months to toddlers of about four years – on allegedly non-aesthetic characteristics. The criteria noted on contestants’ scorecards included qualities attributed to perceived biological makeup. At the first contest in Louisiana, “Measurements were taken of height and weight, circumference of head, chest, and abdomen, as well as length of arms and legs…. Using modifications of tables for physical development by age, individual contestants' measurements were carefully tabulated … the contestants' mental acuity was also evaluated.” The process of standardizing scorecards was a difficult one, and uniformity on a national scale was never actually realized. Although experts could not reach consensus on all judging criteria, there were generally several recurring categories across better babies contests, including the generic-sounding “physical,” “mental and development,” and “measurements.” In spite of the scientific emphasis, however, standards of physical attractiveness continued to be strongly correlated with biological fitness. Better babies contest scorecards appeared to challenge the “idealized cherub” standard of baby beauty shows past, but narratives of attractiveness were adapted to support scientific scores. Laura Gardin, a sculptor commissioned by Woman’s Home Companion to design a Better Babies award medal, described her vision of the better
baby: “No harsh lines…. Better Babies have soft, vague lines. Their dimples come and go. Their curves are changeable, elusive, and whether they be blond or brunette, they have what I call a blond softness which is expressed in the single word innocence.” It is difficult to interpret Gardin’s vision as counter to that of the cherub, especially as her idealized better baby calls to mind the plumpness and whiteness of the standard artistic representation of angelic infants. The lack of consensus across scorecards and the continued correlation with external beauty indicates that it was difficult to conclude a model of perfection of infant health and that better babies contests were not as superior to the shallow baby beauty show as their proponents suggested. A contest reliant on scientific standards would not suffice to simply select the blondest, bluest-eyed, most cherubic-looking, white child to be one of the faces of popular eugenics, so doctors were relied upon to judge contestants based on observations of the contestants’ physicality and outward disposition. Further, the heightened visual nature of the events – the presence of spectators at the contest site, the possibility that advertisers would sponsor the event, the likelihood that a contest would obtain local and national media coverage, and the subsequent publication of the photos of contest winners in regional and national periodicals – indicates that representation and audiences’ engagement with the contests could have real effects on the larger children’s health movement, of which the contests were an important part. Although better babies contests were arguably more complex than their beauty contest predecessors, they were required to keep up appearances, so to speak, in order to continue to thrive.

Perhaps due to the fact that no one could definitively articulate what constituted a “better baby,” movement organizers decided instead to name those relatively better
babies within each event’s context the champions. The structure for judging was thus based on an anti-model rationale in which generally standardized categories like those noted above enabled the detection of “imperfections and defects,” which, when observed, were grounds for the deduction of points. Stern details the process of deducting points in the Indiana contests:

From a starting score of 1000, deductions were calculated for a wide host of physical defects including unevenness of the head, scaly skin, ill deportment, delayed teething, abnormal ear size or shape, and enlarged glands. Slow reactions to the mental tests or perceived lack of muscular coordination lowered a child’s score, as did deviations from the national standards for height and weight (based on age) and weight-to-height ratio. Tabulated results from the contests indicate that Schweitzer instructed her team to subtract the most infinitesimal of figures for each defect—most likely to maintain high results for every baby, thus diluting the rivalrous nature of the contests. Effectively, then, contestants were judged on their anti-model status, with the baby considered the least defective becoming the champion of the contest.

In the state of Indiana, better babies contests began in 1920, and, like others of its kind, were only one component of a larger movement to improve Hoosier health and citizenship. The contests were not merely tangential to the movement, however, but according to Stern, were “the centerpiece of [Dr. Ada] Schweitzer’s quest to groom Indiana into an enlightened guardian of Hoosier children.” In the agriculture heavy state, there was a readiness among those in the farming culture to warm to the notion of “breeding superior children,” as it was “just a step away from producing heartier corn,
pigs, and cattle." A quote that frequently appears in better babies scholarship reflects this somewhat sensible yet also frightening reasoning behind the contests, “You are raising better cattle, better horses, and better hogs, why don’t you raise better babies?”

Francis Galton’s sentiment about improving breeding fit rather nicely into the structure of health reform movements of the early 1900s. Eugenics seemed to provide the means through which such ends could be achieved, and so the relationship between infant healthcare reform and eugenic science was clearly communicated across competitions. In Indiana in particular, Schweitzer talked of better babies contests specifically as “a school of education in eugenics.” As such, “scientific” criteria used to improve breeding among Americans were based in cultural narratives about race. In the Indiana contests in particular, African American children were prohibited from entering, which ensured – undeniably, alongside prevailing beliefs about racial hierarchies and segregation laws – that the champions of the competitions would always be white. Better babies organizers and supporters proudly promoted their contests as distinct from the baby photo contest because the participants were judged on scientific, rather than purely aesthetic criteria. Physicality could not be completely discounted, however. In the historical moment in which better babies contests thrived, contest producers and doctor judges effectively reconstituted notions of fitness by marrying aesthetic and scientific standards in their overall evaluations of contestants. Eugenic science certainly took precedence, but it appeared that better babies contests were not as distinct from baby beauty contests as they were touted to be. Stern considers the emphasis on the scientific as a kind of response to changes in visual culture and the privileging of outward physical attractiveness over developments in biological and reproductive sciences:
From the perspective of paediatric science and measurement, being beautiful no longer mattered and, in fact, could camouflage a baby’s unnoticed or latent ailments. Thus, just as modernity’s optic universe of advertising, film, and fashion was exploding in the 1910s and 1920s, placing more emphasis than ever on vision and appearance, better baby contests began to challenge and redraw the lines between visibility and invisibility, normality and abnormality.85

Observations of the internal and external body were taken together to demonstrate overall fitness, and race was the first criterion factored in, as only phenotypically white children could enter most better babies competitions. Better babies contest thus may not have been “merely” beauty contests, but they relied on standards of beauty and eugenic beliefs rooted primarily in the belief that lighter skin and whiter features are not only preferable but genetically superior. Better babies contests did rely on “objective,” scientific measures of fitness in a way that beauty contests of the era did not, but they did not deny the significance of appearance in judging fitness. Race certainly was chief among the visual characteristics of fitness, but other indicators, “such as large ears or being tall for [one’s] age”86 were noted among potential defects that suggested a correlation between internal and external health.

As is often the case with cultural artifacts of a “bygone” era, the existing conversation on better babies contests takes the role of race for granted, perhaps inadvertently. Eugenic science is remembered as a means to creating a “master race,” and that “master race” is understood to be white. Thus follows a certain kind of reasoning regarding different types of eugenic practices. For example, in the case of positive eugenics, or the efforts to improve breeding among those deemed fit, one may
assume that white women and men were deemed good breeders.87 In the case of negative eugenics, or systematic efforts to prevent the proliferation of the unfit, the assumption that “reasonably” follows is that women and men of color were targeted. It is not enough to rely on these assumptions about eugenics and race, however – it is important to take race into account explicitly as a primary component of the events, and for the express purposes of this project, especially as the contests’ legacies figure prominently in pageant contexts in the contemporary United States.

**Better Black Babies**

Histories of eugenics suggest that black Americans would have been left out of better breeding initiatives, but, in fact, there were numerous efforts within African American communities to “subvert racism within eugenic thought through the guise of uplift” and “to promote greater numbers of robust babies.”88 Several scholarly inquiries into better babies contests suggest there is incomplete archival evidence on “colored” or “Negro” better babies contests. In her extensive study of better babies contests, Annette K. Vance Dorey notes, in passing, that a “Free-For-All Colored Babies” category existed in an Indianapolis contest in 1915.89 Stern insists there is little evidence that the colored babies classification satisfied the requirements of a “true” better babies contest. In her research, she found that while Dr. Ada Schweitzer, the person most responsible for the infant health movement in Indiana, may have had some hand in weighing or measuring the contestants in the “colored” category, there are no details that describe the contest in detail or demonstrate that a better “colored” or “Negro” baby winner was selected. In the
larger narrative told through better baby scholarship, babies of color appear to be missing entirely from the contests themselves, as well as the broader initiative to improve infant health and healthcare. However, in her history of African American reproductive philosophies, movements, and practices, Michele Mitchell details the cooption and adaptation of eugenic discourses to serve the objectives of “race progress” in black communities. Infant mortality rates were generally high in the early twentieth-century United States, but it was higher for black children than any other ethnic group at that time. Interested black and white audiences alike considered it a real possibility that “Afro-Americans might die out as a distinct ‘race.’”

Black women were chief agitators and activists in the realm of infant welfare, and thus, eugenically driven efforts toward race progress. Beginning with “mothers meetings” in the 1890s, groups of “aspiring, middle class, and fairly elite” clubwomen mobilized around the cause of children’s health and welfare. One of the means by which their appeals to racial betterment reached “a broad cross-section of the Afro-American populace” was through the implementation of popular better babies contests at “segregated black state fairs in the rural south.” Mitchell’s research demonstrates that the judging standards were similar to those of all-white and integrated baby contests. Photos from treatises on better breeding in African American communities and of black better babies contest winners demonstrate that children with lighter complexions, light eye color, and straighter hair were considered the fittest subjects. In addition to emphasizing racialized external characteristics of black better babies, photographs alluded to the connection between better breeding and prosperity via “clothing, toys, furniture, and backdrops” included in the images. The significance of the role of black
mothers was also implied in photographs and related literature on children’s health and healthcare. Considered in the context of “adulation” for the mother-infant relationship, it is telling that children of color and their mothers are missing from dominant narratives of the better babies movement, in spite of black better babies contests having actually taken place and sharing the overall objective of racial betterment with white contests.

**Better Girls vs. Better Boys**

Better babies contests are significant for their potential influence on contemporary pageants and racialized subjectivity. They are also sites in which the gendering of competitive pageantry seems to have developed in particular ways. Gender always plays a significant role in cultural traditions, but the development of infant and child pageants is perhaps the first moment in pageantry that challenges assumptions that the “beauty” in beauty contest is gendered female or feminine. The photographic contest of the late nineteenth century privileged the male infant, and especially the male infant in relation to his biological mother. Unlike photographic baby beauty contests, the better babies model “encouraged the medicalization of notions of physical perfection and detached them from earlier categories of beauty.”94 There was little shift in the gendered dynamics of pageantry, however. Baby remained “king,” rather than shifting toward or sharing the stage with a “queen.” There were often separate categories for girls and boys based on the assumption of innate biological differences, and although there were overall evaluation criteria, there was evident gender bias in judging and the awarding of prizes.95 Annette K. Vance Dorey details these differences in *Better Baby Contests: The Scientific...*
*Quest for Perfect Childhood Health in the Early Twentieth Century*. Dorey notes the essential external and internal assumptions that prevailed in most better babies contests: “Female toddlers were praised for their adorable appearance,” “Boy babies were given outright preference,” and reports claimed that “the physical superiority of boys over girls was … brought out by the contest.” The value placed on these gendered criteria became evident in prize disparities in some contests. According to Dorey, for example, in the 1913 Latah County Fair in Moscow, Ohio, “A special prize of $5 in gold was awarded to the ‘best baby girl’ by the University of Idaho law Department. A bank donated a $10 special prize for the ‘best baby boy.’” Placing a higher economic value on contestants correlated with larger cultural values about the subordination of female external beauty to an infantilized yet masculine energy based on male contestants’ physical strength.

“A Profession Which Requires Training”: Republican Motherhood and Female Citizenship

Children were certainly the stars of better babies contests, but they were by no means the only important participants. Across race, class, and regional differences, women played the key roles in establishing and popularizing better babies contests, were often at the helm of child health improvement programs, and acted as vocal advocates for eugenically-minded betterment programs in particular. Stern’s study of Dr. Ada Schweitzer is only one glimpse into the history of women who were prominent better baby advocates and program developers. Dr. Sara Josephine Baker became the first director of the New York City Bureau of Child Hygiene in 1908. In that same year, the
first Scientific Baby Contest took place at the Louisiana State Fair – that contest was the brainchild of former schoolteacher Mary DeGarmo.\textsuperscript{100} The National Congress of Mothers’ efforts to improve infant health were significant to forging relationships, strengthening, and creating some semblance of uniformity among grassroots better breeding campaigns.\textsuperscript{101} Dr. Rebecca Crumpler was a pioneer in black communities’ efforts to improve infant health and well being.\textsuperscript{102} White, female pediatricians were relatively numerous among the judging doctors at the contests.

Perhaps the most famous – and historically controversial – of leading women in the popularization of eugenics broadly was Margaret Sanger. Although she labored most intensely on issues of birth control and racial betterment rather than improving the health and fitness of babies, Sanger’s birth control advocacy was arguably the first step to achieving better babies \textit{and} better mothers. She reasoned in \textit{The Birth Control Review} in 1919, “Birth control…. not only opens the way to the eugenist [sic], but it preserves his work. Furthermore, it not only prepares the ground in a natural fashion for better motherhood and of family life, but enables the child to be better born, better cared for in infancy and better educated.”\textsuperscript{103} Sanger was hip to the power of the politically public woman, and she emphasized the critical role of the mother to the cause of better breeding in particular, “Eugenics without Birth Control seems to us a house builded [sic] upon the sands. It is at the mercy of the rising stream of the unfit…. Only upon a free, self-determining motherhood can rest any unshakable structure of racial betterment.”\textsuperscript{104} As the latter half of this quotation suggests, Sanger’s version of “self-determining motherhood” was limited based on criteria including race, class, and mental and physical ability. The women who filled these criteria and were already mothers were targeted by
better babies publicity to build the “unshakable structure” of which Sanger wrote.

Sanger’s words provide some perspective on the immense contributions of women in the dissemination and practice of eugenic science, and through this discussion of better breeding, she especially points to the significance of the role of mothers in the history and evolution of pageantry in the United States.

Women were prominent leaders of what Mary Ziegler has termed “eugenic feminism” and its programs, but they were also called upon to be active eugenics supporters in their everyday lives, especially in their role as mothers. As mothers, women – white, “well-born” women in particular – carried great potential for disseminating and popularizing the theory and practices of eugenics. Because pageantry generally and eugenic programs particularly are tied to improving individual citizens and thus a national population, better babies contests were particularly ripe sites in and through which the concept of “Republican Motherhood” was enacted. With infant and child health and race betterment as the premises belying better babies contests – and later, fitter family contests – it is clear that at least one of the general objectives of the spectacles was to build a stronger nation, a stronger group of citizens achieved through the nurturance of patriotic mothers. What Linda Kerber has argued of the image of the public woman in nineteenth century America continued to hold true in the Progressive Era; women in the United States were an undeniable component of political life, but their role in politics was largely tempered. Kerber writes, “The model republican woman was to be self-reliant (within limits); literate, untempted by the frivolities of fashion. She had a responsibility to the political scene, though not to act on it…. The model republican woman was a mother.” As they organized better babies contests, entered children as
contestants in the competitions, and composed the majority of the contests’ audiences, mothers and potential mothers enacted civic responsibilities, especially a duty to strengthen citizens by supporting eugenics. Although a better babies participant or spectator may have initially entered the contests out of concern for her own child’s health (or having been enticed by the prizes), she was eventually implicated in the performance of republican motherhood enabled by these competitions. The popular acceptance of eugenics required the concern, advocacy, and activism of white women, and the cause of infant and child well being cleared a successful route to public female action. In enacting republican motherhood, women also fulfilled one of the chief characteristics required by the cult of true womanhood – they were thus able to participate in shaping public policy and serve the nation while maintaining a firm hold in private, domestic female life.

The extent to which female citizens, “republican mothers” in particular, were direct agents for a eugenically-driven, government-sponsored child health campaign is arguable. There is evidence, however, that these women had a hand in some noticeable effects resulting from better babies contests. In Indiana, Stern asserts that the better babies contests implemented and run by Dr. Ada Schweitzer likely “played a part in effectively reducing infant mortality rates and prompting mothers to safeguard against bacterial infection of milk and food. The contests also provided a platform for the commercialization of public health as well as the incorporation of the ‘better baby’ into advertising – a newborn icon that figured regularly in the 1920s, selling products such as condensed milk and infant formula.”

Better babies contests demonstrate a eugenically driven attempt to fashion the citizenry of the United States. As the numbers above evidence, measurable effects of the
better babies movement charted differences in infant health and healthcare in the twenty-odd years that they were in fashion. In addition to its effects on children’s health and healthcare in the early twentieth century, better babies contests have exerted symbolic influence on contemporary competitive pageants, which are alleged to be more than mere beauty contests. Just as better babies were judged on a compilation of internal and external characteristics, so is the pageant child or adult female today. In addition to the traditional beauty pageant categories, children and adults must demonstrate that they are adept in the more ambiguous categories of “poise” and “character,” as well as able-bodied in the “bathing suit” and “talent” components. Judges in contemporary child pageants may not examine contestants’ tonsils or measure exact ear size, but it is common knowledge within pageant publics and even among outsiders that simply looking the part will not earn one a pageant victory. The structure of better babies contests, including evaluation criteria and racialized and gendered regulations and divisions, as well as their role in the overall narrative of eugenics in the United States, has demonstrably impacted the structure and performance of child and adult competitive pageantry today.

**Better Babies, Better Pageants, Better Citizens**

Since the early twentieth century, developments in genetic science and advances in civil liberties have challenged, and perhaps changed, the way we talk about human betterment and fitness. In spite of those developments, however, the impact of early eugenic theory and experimentation on discourses of human health and well-being cannot
be ignored. The practice of pageantry, past and present, provides particularly compelling evidence that cultural assumptions about the relationship between fitness and citizenship have been and continue to be strongly influenced by a eugenically driven, better babies contest rationale. The Miss America pageant offers the most notable examples of this rationale. In the 1930s, the Miss America organization implemented “contract rule number seven,” which stated that its contestants “must be in good health and of the white race.”10 Several years later, in 1945, pageant director Lenora Slaughter changed the identity of the Miss America pageant from “bathing beauty contest” to “scholarship program.”11 These structural changes directly echoed some of the goals of better babies contests discussed here, like equating an individual’s physical and intellectual fitness with her racial identity and purportedly evaluating contestants on more than purely aesthetic criteria.112

A better babies contest rationale is not only built into official codes and other structural components of competitive female pageantry. Contestants who compete at the highest levels of Miss America and Miss USA embody an implicitly understood set of judging criteria that favor, as better babies contests did, light(er) complexions, fit (read: thin) and able-bodied frames, “good” hair, gender conformity, and psychological dexterity. The standards of physical and intellectual fitness to which child and female pageant participants are held are not explicitly “eugenic” or directly descended from better breeding initiatives of the early twentieth century. However, while standards of attractiveness have always been interpreted through lenses of gender and race relative to their particular cultural contexts, the eugenic requirements of early twentieth century better babies contests comprised a novel set of criteria that insisted on linking internal
health and external beauty, and those criteria continue to pervade the structure of the contemporary competitive pageant. Whereas the earliest bathing beauty competitions were provocative displays of partial public nudity, today’s swimsuit competitions are sold as nationally televised demonstrations of model female health and vitality. The Miss America organization even changed the title of its swimsuit category to “Lifestyle and Fitness” in recent years. Additionally, public controversy over an “obesity epidemic” in the United States in the past two decades has contributed to scholarly and popular debates over the mediated representation of fat identities and whether or not it is responsible to “promote obesity” on television and film. Arguably, competitive pageantry thus relies on a modified rhetoric of the internal fitness/external beauty paradigm that fueled better babies contests’ popularity. In most competitive pageant contexts, the young, slim, toned, light-skinned, straight haired, heterosexual, relatively intelligent contestant is presented as the embodiment of model female citizenship. It is not as though those who do not fit this description are subject to negative eugenic programs, but they are symbolically marginalized – as pageant victors are elevated to model status, non-ideal subjects are judged less capable of enacting (gendered) citizenship.

At the convention of The National Association of Teachers of Speech in 1932, Clara E. Weir described the pageant as “the messenger.” Weir argued that the pageant was one of the most efficacious vehicles “for the expression of a message” due to the fact that it is an ancient art: “History reveals that pantomime was the first means of communication; and out of pantomime grew pageantry.” Broad as Weir’s origin story may be, and although the form has been stretched, adapted, and reinterpreted, Weir’s
emphasis on the relationship between pageantry and effective communication speaks to the pageant’s strength as a cultural form and thus, our continued reliance upon it to be an effective messenger. The histories of eugenics and pageantry demonstrate that they would make splendid partners in furthering the message of better breeding. As a significant component of a rhetorical history of U.S. pageantry and a memorable messenger of racial betterment, better babies contests were perhaps the most efficacious of all attempts at popular eugenics education. The form and its message retain that effectiveness, even today, across competitive pageant publics.
Notes

1 Anna Steese Richardson, “The Better Babies Bureau and What it is Doing for American Babies,” *Woman’s Home Companion* 40, no. 9 (1913): 22.

2 Annette K. Vance Dorey explains that the 1911 Iowa State Fair is often credited as the site of the first “baby health contest” in the United States. However, historical accounts out of Louisiana claim that the 1908 State Fair in Shreveport was the home of the first “scientific baby show.” See Annette K. Vance Dorey, Better Baby Contests: The Scientific Quest for Perfect Childhood Health in the Early Twentieth Century (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, 1999), 25-39.

2011, accessed August 26, 2011,


4 See chapter one for more on Progressive Era pageantry.

5 Alexandra Minna Stern notes the polysemous nature of the term eugenics (which literally translates as “well born”), as well as the synonyms that different interpretations of eugenics suggest. Marouf A. Hasian also notes the variety of ways in which “eugenics” translates based on context – historical and otherwise. I invoke the term in most of this chapter to mean “better breeding,” due to the fact that better baby contests were marketed as platforms for increasing infant and child health in the early twentieth century. See Alexandra Minna Stern, Eugenic Nation: Faults & Frontiers of Better Breeding in Modern America (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 11; and Marouf A. Hasian, The Rhetoric of Eugenics in Anglo-American Thought, (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1996), 28-29.

6 Hasian 140.

7 Ibid., 148-149.


10 Ibid., 180.


Hasian, 23.

Ibid., 22.


Ibid., 3.

Hasian, 23.

Ibid., 28-29.

Ibid., 29.


Hasian, 30.


Hasian argues that, in the early twentieth century, “‘eugenics was a term that Anglo-Americans heard about from the time of their infancy.’” The term was pervasive and
generally used to describe human health and fitness, thanks in part to its plurality of meanings. Today, one might take offense to casual use of the term at all, but near the turn of the twentieth century, the offense would have existed in the perceived misuse of the word. “Hard-line eugenicists” wondered at the proliferation of the term and its permutations. Hasian quotes Karl Pearson’s disdain for casual invocation and misuse of eugenics in a letter to Francis Galton in 1907: “I hear most respectable middle-class matrons saying if children are weakly, ‘Ah, that was not a eugenical marriage!’” Whether employed appropriately or not, Hasian demonstrates the significance of the familiarity of the term in the first three decades of the 1900s. For more on “Eugenics in 1920s Popular Culture,” see also Steven Selden, “Transforming Better Babies into Fitter Families: Archival Resources and the History of the American Eugenics Movement, 1908-1930,” *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society* 149, no. 2 (2005): 199-225.


26 Ibid.

27 Ibid.

28 Ibid.

29 Ibid., 2-3.

30 This is not to downplay the physical, emotional, and psychological strain that was placed on European immigrants at Ellis Island, however, Stern’s focus on Mexican immigrants at the particular site of the U.S.-Mexico border demonstrates the significance of differently racialized immigration relative to eugenic practices. The implications are significant considering comparative racialized discourses of different immigrant populations in the United States and how those discourses variably impact immigrants’ subjectivity and citizenship.


An increase in urbanization, as well as the school-to-work ratio for children, were the two predominant exigencies for the playground movement – it was correlated with general concerns about public health in the early twentieth century and employed the language of “better breeding” evidenced in popular eugenics programs. Arguably a forerunner to campaigns like *Let’s Move*, headed by First Lady Michelle Obama, the call to organized and educational play was promoted as a means to improving Americans’ physiological and mental well being. See Henry Stoddard Curtis, Ph.D., *The Play Movement and Its Significance* (New York: The MacMillan Company, 1917).

Langdon, “America, Like England, Has Become Pageant Mad.”


Banner, 250.

Ibid., 250-254.

Ibid., 250. Significant to the connection between pageantry and education, Banner also notes that May Day rituals, in traditional and adapted forms, became staples of all-female institutions of higher learning including Vassar, Wellesley, and Bryn Mawr.

45 Banner, 250-251.

46 Ibid., 251.

47 Ibid., 255-256.


49 Banner, 255.

50 Ibid., 256.

51 Banner concluded from her research that a fire that destroyed Barnum’s museum in the 1860s also claimed the photographs that were submitted for the contest. Barnum tried again in 1889 to drum up business for a beauty contest connected to his famous circus, but he could not ultimately finance it. The tales of these two beauty contest failures are missing from Barnum’s memoirs. See Banner, 256-257 and 339.

52 Banet-Weiser, 34.

53 Banner, 260.

54 Ibid.


57 In *E Pluribus Barnum*, Adams notes that the “babies” who participated in the 1855 show “were actually children ranging in age from a few months to five years.” See Adams, 100.

58 Adams, 100.

59 Ibid., 101-102.

60 Ibid., 103.


63 Ibid., 420.

64 Ibid., 421.

65 Selden, 206.


67 Ibid., 3.

68 See Gear, 420-421.

“Better Babies Contests,” *Image Archive on the American Eugenics Movement*, http://www.eugenicsarchive.org/eugenics/topics_fs.pl?theme=43&search=&matches= (accessed August 26, 2011). Annette K. Vance Dorey is careful to note that although Louisiana “claimed” the first “scientific baby show,” there is some debate as to where and how better babies contests originated (and even that they were inspired by French and British programs to improve infant health). The Louisiana contest is a significant origin point, however, as it was held five days after and in contrast to the fair’s more traditional “baby beauty show.” See Dorey, 25-39.

Dorey, 36.

Selden, 208.

Dorey, 44-45.

Ibid., 46-47.

Richardson, 22.

Ibid.

Dorey, 44.


Ibid., 742-752.

Ibid., 748.

Ibid., 743.


Ibid., 748.
Ibid. Rules restricting participants of color did not end with better baby contests.

Beginning in the 1930s, the Miss America pageant made official the infamous “rule number seven,” which stated that “contestants must be of good health and of the white race.” Contestants of Asian, Native American, and Jewish ancestry competed for the Miss America title in spite of the rule in the mid-twentieth century, but black contestants were barred into the 1960s. In response, J. Morris Anderson established the Miss Black America pageant in 1967. See “People & Events,” American Experience: Miss America, http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/missamerica/ peopleevents/ e_inclusion.html (accessed March 16, 2011); and “Our History,” Miss Black America, http://www.missblackamerica.com/IntroToMBAPpg1.htm (accessed March 16, 2011).


Dorey, 63.

Certainly other factors come into play in the histories of negative and positive eugenic practices (class, mental health, physical ability, etc.), but I am foregoing an intersectional analysis here in order to focus on the primacy of race and the ways in which it resonates across time and pageant types.


Dorey, 49.

Mitchell, 81.
91 Ibid.

92 Ibid., 80-97.

93 Ibid., 89, 99.


95 Dorey, 103.

96 Ibid.

97 Ibid.

98 Richardson, 1.


101 Dorey, 21.

102 Mitchell, 96.


104 Sanger, 12.


109 Stern, 750.


112 As alluded to in n. 81, beginning in 1941, several contestants challenged “contract rule number seven,” including Native American contestant Mifauny Shunatona, who was Miss Oklahoma 1941, the first Jewish Miss America Bess Myerson in 1945, and in 1948, Puerto Rican contestant Irma Nydia Vasquez and Asian American Miss Hawaii Yun Tau Zane. See “People & Events: Breaking the Color Line at the Pageant,” *American Experience: Miss America*, http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/missamerica/peopleevents/e_inclusion.html (accessed January 21, 2012).


Ibid., 380.
Chapter Four

Pageancy: Pageant Structure, Agency, and Citizenship

“This page was created simply to show how many of us out there think that this concept of pimping out your 6 year old for a trophy is an absolute shame! This is what corrodes our country from within!!!”

– Citizens Against “Toddlers and Tiaras” Facebook Info

Pageant Structure, Rhetoric, and Subjectivity

For the first two decades of the 1900s, the historical pageant was the most popular iteration of the pageant form. However, as the cultural landscape in the United States changed, so did the pageant, and the “craze,” as William Chauncy Langdon categorized it, fulfilled its destiny. As one who believed in the civic-minded purpose of the historical pageant, Langdon lauded the fervor around pageantry and thought it the steam that would fuel the American Pageant Association’s engine. In true craze fashion, however, the historical pageant incited “a capricious and usually temporary enthusiasm,” and so it is not surprising that the “irrational” excitement surrounding the historical pageant could not be sustained beyond the early 1930s. Although the mania faded, the historical pageant did not disappear entirely in the mid-twentieth century. Rather, several factors contributed to changes in the pageant form over the next several decades including World Wars I and II, immigration spikes and the resultant diversification of local communities, the proliferation of eugenic theories about human fitness, and the development of visual technologies like photography, television, and eventually, the
Internet. With these and other contextual factors affecting the cultural landscape of the United States, the pageant – now a genre of cultural performance consisting of multiple forms⁵ – was appropriated by different communities and for increasingly diverse purposes. The objectives, values, and meanings of the pageant were thus evolving, and it would not take very long before words like “profit” and “exploitation” would displace “community spirit” and “civic-mindedness” in discourses of U.S. pageantry. For better and arguably worse purposes, from empowering women to find public voices to selling eugenics to the general population, identifiable pageant publics were developing.⁶

As pageant publics have developed and diversified, the pageant form has also developed and diversified. In spite of the pageant’s adaptive nature, there remains one common thread woven through the majority of pageant performances in the twentieth century and afterward, and that thread is competition. The competitive pageant is by no means a mid-to-late-twentieth-century phenomenon. May Queen competitions, baby beauty contests, newspaper mail-in photo contests, and better babies and fitter families contests are all predecessors premised on competitiveness.⁷ As pageantry has developed in the United States, and as cultural narratives of the liberal, autonomous subject remain the primary narratives of model citizenship, competition has arguably become the chief characteristic of pageantry. Competitive pageantry relies mainly on the assumption that it must crown a victor who will, quite literally, be the model of nationalism and/or civic pride as it is articulated via pageant ideology. In one sense, historical pageants were in abstract competition with prevailing community moods and narratives of regional history. Since the mid-twentieth century, however, pageants have predominantly consisted of direct contests among individual competitors. The trend has been well maintained since
live performances of the female beauty contest became poised to surpass early types of competitive pageantry. The Miss America pageant, originally a component of the “Second Annual Pageant” in Atlantic City in 1921, would become the most storied and lasting competitive pageant in the United States. The historical moments in which the Miss America pageant initially took shape are significant, in part, because they are symbolic of the beginning of a shift in public discourses of pageantry.

When the historical pageant was the thing, pageant promoters marketed its great potential to build community and to strengthen individual and collective senses of identity. As a live-action, arguably grassroots dramatic production, the historical pageant did not evoke the sense of competition that thrived in photographic beauty contests, better babies contests, and the female beauty pageant. Although there were problematic elements of historical pageantry – including the disciplining of race and gender to conform to a homogenous conception of national identity – an overt sense of competition was lacking. The world outside of the historical pageant, or even the immediate community outside of the pageant production, was rife with competing discourses of American citizenship and identity, fed by an increasingly diverse immigrant population and continued backlash against post-Civil War African American migration – circumstances that “created a basis as well as a need for a more comprehensive national and ethnic identification.” The historical pageant thus became a site in which those competing discourses of American identity were mollified or even ignored. Generally, each historical pageant public produced its own vision of U.S. identity and model citizenship. Mainstream historical pageants presented idyllic, traditional notions of citizenship, embodied in white figures of masculine heroism and feminine virtue, while
black historical pageantry and woman suffrage pageants offered their own narratives of U.S. citizenship that acknowledged the contributions of African Americans and white women, respectively, to the development and maintenance of American heritage. Within the pageant genre, the structure of historical pageantry may have tacitly implied competition among more or less dominant conceptions of U.S. citizenship. Steeped in the spirit of community and collectivity, however, the historical pageant form was inclined toward promoting particular versions of citizenship, rather than pitting competing versions against one another.

The historical pageant form did not disappear entirely from the genre, but as the craze surrounding it died down in the 1920s and 30s, pageants as we know them today began to take shape. Increasingly popular photo beauty contests, beautiful baby competitions, and better babies contests commenced chipping away at the sense of collectivity that was a driving force behind historical pageantry. Live and photographic competitive pageants were well under way by the late nineteenth century, but 1921 is the year most often marked as the clear beginning of a new era in pageantry. In 1921, a bathing beauty contest was added to Atlantic City’s Fall Frolic festival, in order to stimulate the boardwalk’s post-Labor Day tourist slump. Apart from that loose tie to the economy of the local community, however, Miss America was mainly a beauty contest with the added draw of half-naked female competitors. Although the Miss America pageant was adapted over time and, arguably, in step with changing cultural contexts, it was that first pageant in 1921 that set standards for Miss America pageants to come, as well as all competitive female pageantry in the United States. The predominant pageant form thus changed from collective community effort to corporate-run individual
competition, reflecting changing discourses of individual agency in pageantry, as well as public life.

In this chapter, I explore the rhetorical significance of the female competitive pageant form as the hegemonic structure of pageantry in the United States. In addition, I consider the ways in which that form is reflected in child pageantry and analyze constructions of contestant agency in mediated representations of children’s glitz pageantry. Established feminist criticism of pageantry has largely utilized the paragon of mid-late twentieth century pageantry, Miss America, as a vehicle for interrogating the female competitive pageant’s feminist potential. The competitive female beauty pageant continues to have a stronghold on collective understanding of the form, and it has been sufficient, to this point, to explore the agency of adult contestants and the implications for women’s liberation. In recent years, however, as adult female pageantry has struggled to maintain cultural relevance, the child pageant has become an increasingly familiar topos in popular culture representations of pageantry, as well as scholarly critiques of the role of pageantry in U.S. culture broadly. As the pageant continues to be adapted in diverse publics, it is important to consider how structure and agency are constructed relative to different pageant contexts. Adult female competitive pageantry has long been the focus of inquiries into the liberatory potential of the pageant, or lack thereof, but what of pageant subjects who are below the age of consent? How do we talk about their agency, especially in the structural context of the contemporary competitive pageant? In order to understand more fully the rhetorical significance of the pageant and to challenge the tacit but prevailing assumption that women are the only people who affect and are affected by
pageantry – as participants and audience members – I turn to the child pageant in order to explore further these questions of pageant agency, or *pageancy*.

**What’s Form Got to Do With It?**

After Miss America and its predecessors, there is clear structural homogeneity across pageant performances. It is difficult to establish a direct line of descent from the heyday of historical pageantry to competitive pageants, as they are, in terms of basic makeup, quite different. However, both historical and competitive pageants demonstrate the significance of form and genre within their respective contexts as popular cultural forms. The Progressive Era historical pageant was primarily a narrative medium – it told a story via scenic representations of storied figures or past events. Pageant participants were largely part of a community effort to encourage solidarity and civic-mindedness via an authorized representation of that community’s past. Diverse communities produced their own versions, but historical pageants retained a recognizable structure across publics: collective community efforts resulted in the production of tableau-like, dramatic retellings of historical narratives.

Conversely, while contemporary pageants *can* arguably tell a story – especially as each pageant performance invokes the legacies of pageants and victors who have come before and thus functions to constitute public memory of pageantry – they are, at their cores, direct competitions among individual contestants. Whereas an emphasis on community efforts took center stage in the civic education objectives of historical pageantry, the liberal, autonomous subject is undoubtedly the star of the contemporary
competitive pageant. In their performances of pageantry, pageant publics demonstrate ideological adherence to competitive pageant form via structural adherence. However, in all of its forms, from historical to competitive, the pageant as an enduring cultural performance stirs up questions of power and agency. As discussed in the previous chapter, in the case of the historical pageant, black and woman suffrage pageant publics were among those who challenged the hegemonic objective of mainstream pageantry, which tended toward establishing a homogenous national identity. As the competitive pageant has become the standard-bearer of pageantry in the United States, those questions of power and agency have become focused on the oppression and exploitation of the women who compete in pageants like Miss America and Miss USA. Female competitive pageantry is steeped in patriarchal capitalism – descended from bathing beauty contests, the contemporary pageant is dependent upon a cocktail of “the gaze” and corporate sponsorship. In spite of its relationship with patriarchal capitalism, and in many ways, because of it, competitive female pageantry has also become entwined with feminist movements of the late twentieth and early twenty-first century. The pageant has been alternately condemned as a tool of oppression and touted as a symbol of a woman’s right to determine her own path to empowerment. Although there are multiple perspectives on the value of this persistent cultural performance, it is generally true that, as contemporary pageants have largely evolved into competitions, there is even greater emphasis on the role of the individual in and across pageant publics. This emphasis on individual sovereignty masks the complexity of pageant systems and suggests that contestants make decisions about pageant participation in a vacuum. However, while contestants are the most publicly celebrated participants, all pageant participants – i.e.
producers, judges, stylists and coaches, parents, and corporate sponsors – are significant agents in the pageant process, acting on and contributing to the discursive and material makeup of the ritual. It is not enough to conclude that the pageant acts on the contestants or that individual contestants freely choose pageantry. Rather, concerns about power and agency in pageantry must take into account pageantry’s complex structure and acknowledge differences, as well as the similarities, between pageant publics.

The extant scholarly conversation on pageantry rightly demonstrates that agency plays a significant role in the rhetorical nature of pageantry. Bonnie J. Dow contends that mediated representations of pageantry have become inextricably linked with public discourses of feminism. She demonstrates that, in order to update the antiquated female beauty pageant form – Miss America, in particular – a “key rhetorical strategy” has gained traction “in mediated public discourse about contemporary feminism: the construction of female agency as an implicit repudiation of the feminist critique of patriarchy.” The strategy is seemingly contradictory, but Dow argues that the proliferation of a certain kind of liberal feminism in mediated discourses of female agency, power, and politics has enabled the strategy to thrive. An extended quote from Dow is warranted here:

If the second-wave feminist mantra was the “personal is political,” implying that women’s individual problems were the outgrowth of their political status as an oppressed class, then the corresponding media mantra was precisely the reverse: the “political is personal,” implying that the validity of feminist objections to a patriarchal system was easily discredited by the articulation of individual women’s disavowal of that oppression. The implicit argument that sexism must
not exist if even one woman denies that it does is hardly original; it has been used against feminist claims since the beginnings of the first wave in the nineteenth century. However, the discourse surrounding the Miss America pageant is a compelling example of the reemergence of this strategy in the late twentieth century, and it illustrates the continuing difficulty presented by dominant media’s personalization of claims by and about feminism and its implications.¹⁹

Dow argues that the notion that women are autonomous subjects who have the power to choose their roles as pageant contestants is what undergirds pervasive discourses of female empowerment through pageantry. In such discourses, there is a clear line of demarcation between agent and structure and thus an assumption that one does not necessarily affect another. In effect, a liberal feminist rhetoric of pageantry might suggest that the contestant or potential contestant is truly free to choose whether or not she will participate in pageantry. Taken to its extreme conclusion, this view of pageant structure and contestant agency supports the belief that patriarchy is no longer a hegemonic power structure in the United States.²⁰ Instead, feminist ideology, broadly construed and adapted to mainstream views of female citizenship, provides women with the freedom to choose pageantry (or not), along with the triumvirate of traditionally feminized life objectives – heterosexual marriage, children, and career. It is this strategic, public discussion of choice that suggests the achievement of gender equality, elevating the pageant to liberatory status and negating the complicated power relations that exist in and among pageant publics.

I aim to rethink discourses of agency in pageantry in this chapter, using Dow’s work as a point of departure. The adult, female beauty pageant is easily the most
(in)famous pageant type in the United States and the type that is most often the subject of public discourses of pageantry. However, pageant culture is constituted by more than Miss America alone, and for audiences as well as pageant publics, diverse types of pageants are rhetorically significant to the formation and function of collective senses of identity. Here, I extend the analysis of public discourses of agency in the Miss America pageant to a particularly complex form of pageantry – the child pageant. Although the competitive female pageant has become the most widely recognized form, children (mainly, but not only, female) and their parents are gaining popularity and sparking public controversy. Perhaps the most significant mass-mediated moment in child pageant history in the United States involved the 1996 murder of child pageant queen JonBenet Ramsey. Since then, audiences have been exposed to child pageant culture through film, television, and the Internet, most notably, the 2001 HBO documentary *Living Dolls: The Making of a Child Beauty Queen;*21 the 2006 film *Little Miss Sunshine;*22 and the cable television reality series *Toddlers and Tiaras;*23 which currently airs on the TLC network. In the child pageant, concerns about power and agency are colored not only by gender dynamics, but also by the fact that, in spite of their minor status, contestants are part of a pageant structure that largely mimics that of adult female competitive pageantry. Arguably, because children are inherently more vulnerable to exploitation and oppression at the hands of pageant systems, pageant publics and pageant audiences alike are invested in weighing in on the potential consequences of child pageantry for the contestants. The fires of these public debates are stoked by the mediated representations of a particular kind of child pageants, glitz pageants. A closer look at child pageants depicted on the aforementioned series *Toddlers & Tiaras* will help broaden our rhetorical conversations
about pageantry and also enable a fuller understanding of the empowering potential of pageant agency, or *pageancy*.

An analysis of child pageantry cannot proceed, however, without some reflection on the storied Miss America pageant. Due to its amazing staying power (especially when compared with the short life spans of its historical pageant and better babies contest predecessors) and adherence to normalized gender performances, the pageant that is most often the focus of scholarly and popular conversations on pageantry is Miss America. The history of Miss America has been told from the perspectives of pageant judges and media historians, and critical analyses of the pageant have emanated from history, communication studies, and cultural studies. The Miss America pageant is decidedly the model for performances of pageantry across pageant publics; it thus makes sense to use it as point of comparison and contrast in an analysis that extends pageant criticism into more diverse pageant performances.

Concerns over power and autonomy are key to the established Miss America literature and feminist analyses of the pageant in particular. The structure of much pageant scholarship tends to mirror that of the competitive female pageant, with Miss America held up as the model and agentic power positioned squarely in the figures of individual pageant contestants. Pageant and contestant thus fall into those traps of dualistic thinking that contrast and differentiate one from the other, ignoring their interdependence. Dow clearly explicates the transference of this kind of dualistic thinking onto agency:

> [T]he role of agency within feminist theory is complicated. On the one hand, if patriarchy were as powerful as is sometimes implied, women’s agency (and, by
extension, feminism) could not exist. On the other hand, if women’s agency were as powerful as is sometimes implied, there would be no need for feminism. The truth lies somewhere between the two: patriarchy is powerful, but not so much so that resistance is impossible, and women do exercise agency, but often within a limited field (limited not just by patriarchy, but by race, class, and sexuality as well). 

Because their form follows the competitive pageant model, bringing child pageants into the fold enriches a reconsideration of pageancy, which, to this point, has been critiqued in adult female pageants only. The integration of children into beauty pageant practices reinvigorates a conversation about pageant contestants’ subjectivity and autonomy relative to the pageant structure. Prevailing discourses of liberal feminism are often invoked to legitimize the adult female contestants’ ability to choose to participate, but female empowerment arguments do not directly translate to child pageantry. In order to build on existing conversations about pageant participants and pageancy, I use the following questions as guides: What do prevailing discourses of child pageants in the United States reveal about collective notions of model citizenship, and how are contemporary discourses of pageancy challenged by bringing child pageant publics into the fold?

**Miss America: Structure and Contestant Subjectivity**

The immense presence of Miss America in narratives of model femininity and democratic practice makes it an exemplary pageant form across diverse publics. The
communicative “reach”\textsuperscript{31} of Miss America and the pageant culture that it has spawned that makes it a rich text for an analysis of pageantry’s rhetorical force writ large. As pageant scholarship across disciplines demonstrates, the Miss America pageant is considered to be the foundation and stronghold of pageantry in the United States. As such, scholarly and popular discourses of pageantry reflect a Miss America-centric view of pageantry. It is from the model of Miss America and other pageants cut from the same cloth that a dominant understanding of pageant culture is derived, among pageant publics and audiences alike. As the standard-bearer of the competitive pageant, Miss America provides an important point of departure for (re)considering participant agency across pageant publics. The ideological structure and normatively gendered roles – what I call elsewhere, “ideal subjects”\textsuperscript{32} – within the pageant form are strong indicators of how publics might practice pageantry.

It is important to begin with a detailing of some historical elements that set the structural standards for Miss America. The first Miss America pageant – held on the Atlantic City Boardwalk in 1921 and only one component of the larger promotional festival alternately called “The Atlantic City Pageant,” the “Super Carnival,” or the “Second Annual Pageant”\textsuperscript{33} – is the event most widely cited as the defining moment in pageant history in the United States. That first official competition consisted of only nine contestants\textsuperscript{34}, each of whom were the victors of their local newspapers’ promotional “popularity contests” – a regional marketing tie-in to the Atlantic City Fall Frolic.\textsuperscript{35} The final contestants, who represented the eastern U.S. cities of Washington, D.C., Philadelphia, Camden, Ocean City, Pittsburgh, and Harrisburg, received an all-expenses paid trip to Atlantic City to participate in the Inter-City Beauty Contest.\textsuperscript{36} In 1921, the
“pageant” included multiple events that spanned the course of two days, from the parade of Father Neptune’s seashell barge to the Frolique costume ball to the multi-divisional Bathers Revue. Alongside Father Neptune, the original master of ceremonies, the Inter-City Beauty contestants were the pageant’s focus. However, events like the Bathers Revue, which invited organizations, children, men, and women who were not Inter-City Beauties to participate, called for a demonstrated symbolic investment in Atlantic City by local and tourist communities.

Taken together, the details of “The Atlantic City Pageant” provide evidence of considerable overlap between the historical pageant of the Progressive Era and the burgeoning beauty pageant. The pageant held Atlantic City’s civic identity at its focus, featured traditional elements of community and civic celebrations like the parade, and relied heavily on community members’ participation – notably, the winner of the first Miss America pageant was decided on fifty percent audience applause and fifty percent judges’ decision. In spite of the recognizable overlap of pageant past and pageant future, it appeared that the civic-mindedness of the historical pageant had been discarded for a different type of community involvement. As of September 1921, the once respectable and proud pageant form had been forever tainted by this risqué marketing campaign intended to promote Atlantic City tourism and extend the summer vacation season on the backs – or, perhaps more appropriately, the legs – of the female contestants. Thus the first Miss America pageant must not only be considered a significant cultural performance, but also the beginning of pageantry as a significant symbol of U.S. commerce and capital. In his history of the Miss America pageant and telecast, A.R. Riverol states, “[T]he pageant’s original aim was not to promote pageantry,
beauty, scholarship, or any other such lofty ideal. Its creation was to make money, a point that many pageant aficionados still feel uncomfortable admitting.” The competitive female pageant thus was (and continues to be) marked by a set of complex interrelationships among several cultural institutions, chief among them patriarchy, nationalism, and the capitalistic enterprises of the entertainment and beauty industries, and participation in the pageant places commodified, young, white, female bodies at the intersection of these cultural institutions. The historical moment in which the first Miss America pageant took place was rife with changing perspectives on public women, and the pageant’s male producers arguably understood the appeal of a provocative public exhibition that toed the line of decency yet also aligned itself, however loosely, with the noble, nationalist themes of historical pageantry. Feminine beauty, capitalism, and patriotism thus converged not only in the pageant contestants but also in the structure of the competition.

Perhaps because the standards of public female decency were in flux, an element of spectacle was necessarily incorporated into the structure, as well. This spectacular flavor is evident in the presentation of the first Miss America contestants on the Atlantic City Boardwalk. The Inter-City Beauty contestants arrived at the pageant as mermaids – the most scantily clad of mythical half-human sea creatures – on Neptune’s barge, proudly bearing the names of their hometowns. Thelma Matthew was presented as Miss Pittsburgh, Catherine Gearon as Miss Camden, etc. The parade constituted a borderline lewd public spectacle, but the mix of skin and citizenship had become more palatable to audiences who were increasingly fixing their gazes upon the New Woman in different public fora. Kimberly A. Hamlin argues, “[T]he Miss America Pageant would not have
been possible without the earlier success of the suffrage pageants, which introduced the public to all-female pageantry, popularized pageantry in general, and ... challenged prevailing views of acceptable gender roles. Increasing opportunities for women in public helped open a space in which women could be on display or choose to display themselves outside of private or domestic spheres. Thus the public display of female bodies became an increasingly acceptable element of public culture. In this climate of public womanhood, the Miss America pageant symbolized the backlash against the kind of public woman who had gained attention in the Progressive Era. On the Atlantic City Boardwalk, women were presented to audiences as bathing beauties rather than presenting themselves publicly as suffragists or gender benders – it was a kairic moment in which growing acceptance of the white female body on display, spectacle, and commodity capitalism cemented their already strong bonds to one another. Consciously or not, the first Miss America pageant was able to co-opt the political and cultural moment and also create a marketable pageant type by implicitly calling upon the most patriotic elements of historical pageantry.

While competitive pageantry challenged some standards of decency relative to gender, it did not break with normative assumptions about gender roles and responsibilities generally; rather, it reproduced and reinforced them. The division of pageant roles based on gender was clear from the start: businessmen funded the bathing beauty contest venture, and women were recruited to sell it. These divisions were significant to developing the structure of female competitive pageantry, and in spite of numerous changes to the pageant form over the years, those divisions largely remain in
place today. The roles and relationships among hosts, contestants, and judges are evidence of this.

From its inception, Miss America has relied on a host to focus and anchor the pageant. Father Neptune set a standard for male masters of ceremonies to preside over Miss America in years to come. Long-time host Bert Parks was not the first to MC the pageant, nor was he the first male host, but his twenty-five year association with the telecast is probably the most notable. Following Parks’ model of the paternalistic host – and perhaps in response to increasing critical challenges to traditional cultural institutions like the beauty pageant – the Miss America pageant tacked back and forth between the solo host and co-host formats for most of the latter twentieth century. In both hosting scenarios, however, a male MC has always been present – women act as hosts to the Miss America telecast only in the company of a male co-host. The Miss America producers relied on the co-host format mainly in the 1990s, the same time the pageant found itself in a certain amount of controversy over the swimsuit component of the competition in particular. Among the string of mixed gender co-hosts were talk show hosts Kathie Lee Gifford and Regis Philbin, actors and then-married couple Eva LaRue Callahan and John Callahan, former NFL quarterback Boomer Esiason and television host Meredith Vieira, and brother-sister singing team Donnie and Marie Osmond. Each of these mixed gender pairings were either tied to one another via culturally sanctioned relationships – “man”/wife, brother/sister – or safely representative of ideals of masculinity and femininity in the United States – the epitome of the male athlete (the professional quarterback), television hosts of both genders (but in the case of Regis and Kathie Lee, Philbin embodied the in-charge, rational half of the pairing, while Gifford often assumed
the role of the dumb and sometimes hysterical sidekick). The mixed-gender co-host trend suggests that the Miss America organization wished to quell arguments about its blatant paternalism, but at no time did the telecast go all the way and employ a solo, female host.

In the first decade of the twenty-first century, the telecast returned to the solo, male host format, enlisting the likes of actors Tony Danza, Wayne Brady, and Mario Lopez, and television hosts Tom Bergeron and Chris Harrison. Alongside the fight to save the swimsuit component of the competition in the late 1990s, the return to male hosts evidenced a conservative, perhaps nostalgic, trend in Miss America pageant structure. The most recent telecast, in January 2011, however, featured another mixed-gender co-hosting pair, television host Brooke Burke and previous solo host Chris Harrison. Notably, the host format switch occurred the same year that the pageant’s telecast returned to a major network – ABC – which is also home to reality competition shows *The Bachelor* and *The Bachelorette*, which are hosted by Harrison, and *Dancing with the Stars*, hosted by Burke. This history of hosts evidences a sustained emphasis on paternalism and the significance of male authority figure in this, the most recognizable of contemporary pageants, as well as continued attempts to adapt to changing televisual standards, especially those implemented in the contemporary era of reality television. Although this structure may not raise many concerns in the gender conforming world of female beauty pageants, the near-requirement of employing male masters of ceremonies across pageant publics carries with it a host of normatively gendered and sexualized implications that, I will show, also carry over into the realm of child pageantry and affect collective notions of gendered citizenship.
Only a few elements of Miss America have been highlighted here, but those included are indicative of common structural elements in nearly every contemporary pageant performance that help reinforce and maintain dominant pageant form. This relative consistency of pageant structure across pageant publics has also helped establish and maintain the pageant’s ideographic nature – not only do we share a collective understanding of what a pageant looks like but also what it symbolizes.\textsuperscript{49} The contemporary pageant relies on the overlap of visual symbols and abstract ideology in order to communicate hegemonic perspectives on gender and women’s and men’s public roles. One of the rhetorical functions of a collective, ideographic understanding of pageantry is to maintain traditional gender norms while inflecting those norms with liberal feminist discourses of power and choice. Dow explains how these hegemonic and moderately subversive discourses coexist in pageantry, “To retain its dominance, the hegemonic system must change, and these changes produce ‘leaks’ or contradictions.”\textsuperscript{50} Although some changes have been made within the Miss America organization over time, the structure is relatively stable in its reinforcement of a generic nationalist narrative in which anyone can achieve the American Dream. It is significant to the maintenance of this narrative that the Miss America organization does not consider the regional or national contests in its system to be beauty pageants. Through the careful work of pageant producers in the mid-twentieth century, most notably longtime pageant director Lenora P. Slaughter,\textsuperscript{51} the Miss America pageant was restructured as a legitimate scholarship program for women. The popular perspective on Miss America, however, continues to frame the pageant as a mere beauty contest. The prevailing scholarly view of Miss America suggests that it is only a scholarship pageant in that its victor wins
money that must be used to further her education. Dow argues of television’s hegemonic character, “The medium adjusts to social change in a manner that simultaneously contradicts or undercuts a progressive premise.”\textsuperscript{52} The competing perspectives on structure and agency in popular and scholarly discourses of pageantry generally demonstrate that this is also true of the rhetoric of competitive female pageantry in particular. Thus, the implications for child pageantry are arguably troubling, as the child pageant is, in many ways, a miniaturized version of the competitive female pageant, and further, much of our collective knowledge of child pageants is gained via televisual representations of their publics. Exploring the discourses of those pageant publics that closely mimic Miss America enables the questioning of either/or, beauty pageant/scholarship pageant, empowering/dis-empowering categorizations of pageantry and arguably facilitates a fuller understanding of the pageant’s role in the rhetorical construction of collective identity and gendered citizenship in the United States.

\textbf{Pageancy: Age, Gender, and Other Elements of Pageant Agency}

The structure of the Miss America pageant is detectable, at least in part, in nearly all forms of contemporary competitive pageantry.\textsuperscript{53} Children’s pageants in particular reflect this structural similarity. Like the traditional female beauty pageant, children’s pageant organizations, the contestants who participate in them, and the structure and practices that they endorse are often considered tacky, abnormal, or even exploitive to audiences who observe but do not participate in pageantry.\textsuperscript{54} Relative to adult, female pageants, however, there has been precious little analysis of competitive child pageants as
significant rhetorical performances. In this chapter, I have chosen to analyze child pageants as rhetorically significant sites of agency because they are structurally similar to the traditional female pageant, yet they feature contestants or participant groups who challenge – intentionally and unintentionally – existing power analyses of pageantry. In the case of child pageants broadly, participants are not, strictly speaking, legally able to give consent to participate in what is often viewed as an adult medium. Further, while child pageants reflect adult competitive beauty pageants in that they mainly encourage the participation of female participants, they also provide significant opportunities for boys to participate in pageantry. Further, they tend to require at least a minimum amount of parental participation, making parents and legal guardians a significant component of a power analysis of the child pageant. As the parent factor suggests, for those who identify with child pageant publics and for those who do not, age and gender significantly complicate the value of broader implications of contemporary pageantry on U.S. culture. A rhetorical analysis of child pageants may yield a great deal relative to broader questions of subjectivity and citizenship in democratic contexts.

Unless one has participated in a pageant or is closely related to someone who has, it is difficult to obtain a detailed picture of form and practices that are not displayed on the pageant stage. It is most often through the lens of the media that pageant outsiders get a glimpse of the particulars of pageant culture. Child pageants have long been a staple of U.S. culture – from the photographic beauty contests of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries to the focus on better babies in popular eugenics education – but they have only recently become a mainstream curiosity popularized via the channels of documentary film and reality television. In order to consider the rhetorical forces and
functions of pageancy in child pageants, I have chosen to focus on their most visible representations in U.S. public culture. Here, I examine mediated portrayals of child pageants via television, particularly TLC’s popular reality series Toddlers & Tiaras.

In the mid-late twentieth century, feminist and cultural critics began to question the balance of power dynamics in pageantry, specifically in its increasingly popular competitive form. The increasing publicness of feminist challenges to the status quo in the 1960s and 70s prompted this inquiry, which questioned the value of male-produced/female-performed beauty contest for women. It was, and continues to be, difficult to extricate the contemporary pageant from patriarchal power relations, especially as the structure of most pageants reflects an emphasis on feminine beauty and a performative quality that facilitates the male gaze in both live and televised contexts. In spite of the pageant’s familiarity across U.S. audiences, if not for televised depictions of pageantry, many audiences would have little or no access to pageant performances. As the subject of the televisual gaze, pageants are largely reflective of hegemonic discourses of gender, sexuality, race, and able-bodiedness.

Child pageants do not stray too far from this established model of competitive pageantry, and as such, they have been subject to similar feminist and cultural critiques. Although contestants are far below an age of consent, they are held to similar idealized, adult female standards of physical beauty and expression. Chief among its scandalous characteristics is the reliance on the visual spectacle of child contestants styled to look and behave like their adult counterparts. Also like adult female competitive pageants, an adult male host often oversees child pageants, and a mixed-gender panel of judges evaluates contestants. Further, child pageants are as inextricably tied to patriarchal
capitalism as adult female pageants. “Pageants are a lucrative business,” Henry Giroux argues, “Promoters market pleasure and rake in big dividends, with some making as much as $100,000 on each event.” Beauty industries in the United States also stand to profit – financially and ideologically – in their relationships with child pageant publics. Both the principle of supply and demand and the narrative of beauty based on norms of whiteness are perpetuated by this close relative of competitive adult pageantry. Child pageants, like Miss America and its kin, are symbolic of significant rhetorical relationships among culture industries and U.S. citizenship.

History demonstrates that this is not an entirely new phenomenon – baby beauty shows and contests have been a part of U.S. culture for at least a century – but contemporary child pageants have become increasingly familiar to pageant audiences since the death of JonBenet Ramsey in 1996. The story of Ramsey’s murder sparked a debate over the sexualization of girls in mass media and raised concerns about the ways in which child pageants mimic adult pageants. In the years following, however, child pageants have not raised as much concern as they have ratings. At least two reality television shows that chronicle the lives of child pageant contestants have been produced in recent years and reinvigorated public conversations about child pageantry. These shows, as well as other popular culture representations of children in pageant publics, focus on the extreme practices of “glitz pageants” in particular, the children who participate, and the parents who are not shy about their enthusiasm for the glitz.

Currently, one of the most recognizable mediated representations of child pageantry is the television series Toddlers & Tiaras, which began airing on the cable network TLC in 2009. Toddlers & Tiaras offers a glimpse into the “reality” of
everyday life for child pageant participants and their families and communities. The show’s website does not present itself as the arbiter of judgment regarding its subjects, implying only that they are providing an opportunity for audiences to observe something different from their own lives and the lives of their children. *Toddlers & Tiaras* arguably provides an opportunity for audiences to become educated about a culture unfamiliar to them, a world in which “little girls and boys parade around wearing makeup, false eyelashes, spray tans and fake hair,” and are “judged on their beauty, personality and costumes.” *Toddlers & Tiaras* follows most reality TV formulas, interspersing presumably impartial interviews featuring children and parents with sequences in which the same children and parents are preparing for or participating in a pageant. In a sense, this glimpse into the world of child pageantry follows in the tradition of the televised Miss America pageant. Moving the Miss America pageant from the boardwalk to the TV screen is a significant reason that the competitive female pageant overwhelmed other pageant forms in the television age. There are distinct difference, however, between the televised annual Miss America pageant and *Toddlers & Tiaras*, a show in the midst of the golden age of reality television, a genre that “pretends to tell us, not only what our lives are like as turn-of-the-century Americans, but who we supposedly are, writ large.” *Toddlers & Tiaras* may thus leave audiences a bit conflicted – the world of child pageantry is presented as simultaneously foreign *and* a significant part of contemporary U.S. culture, implicating audiences in the production of child pageant publics.

So, what does the “reality” of child pageantry look like on *Toddlers & Tiaras*? The majority of pageant participants featured on *Toddlers & Tiaras* are white, female children and adults (contestants and pageant moms, respectively), but the series also
features girls of color and their parents, as well as boy pageant contestants and a spectrum of mildly annoyed to extremely enthusiastic pageant fathers and step-fathers. The show is a significant popular culture phenomenon for multiple reasons, but relative to my concerns here, *Toddlers & Tiaras* is important for this reason in particular: it presents the stories of children and parents who participate in “glitz pageants” only, reinforcing a dominant narrative of child pageantry that began with mass media’s telling of JonBenet Ramsey’s murder in 1996, and it opens a space, however small, for a discussion of male participation in and heteronormative representations of child pageantry by representing boy contestants and fathers as active members of pageant publics. I turn now to the mass media focus on the “glitz pageant” and controversies over children’s agency.

**The Construction of Childhood in Western Culture**

JonBenet Ramsey participated in the type of pageant featured on *Toddlers & Tiaras*. These pageants are known as “glitz pageants,” and they are the kind most familiar to audiences with little or no knowledge of pageant culture. When the story of Ramsey’s death was disseminated and retold via mass media outlets in the late 1990s, the images that accompanied the six-year-old’s tragic story depicted JonBenet’s pageant persona. In nearly all of the images projected on local and national news broadcasts, her hair was styled, her face was fully made up, and the child sported a knowingly restrained and seemingly mature smile. The sight of this angelic, white girl-child fashioned to resemble an overly made-up adult woman inspired concern and much public blaming. The application of make-up, false eyelashes, generous amounts of hairspray, and
revealing clothing were the actions that warranted blame – some implicit and some explicit arguments suggested that Ramsey’s involvement in glitz pageants perhaps set the stage for her brutal murder. TIME magazine noted in 1997, “JonBenet Ramsey and her besequinned fellow beauty-pageant contestants are not in fact fully developed adults. They are pint-size little women often done up like trick ponies.” The suggestion here is that the sexualization of girls via pageantry – not to mention the zoomorphism – makes them subject to violent consequences. JonBenet’s parents were considered ultimately responsible for her death in a court of public opinion because they forced her to participate in glitz pageants. Some blame was placed on a culture that is complicit with the sexualization of girls, and less often, boys, and stands to make a profit from it, but for years after Ramsey’s death, her parents remained subject to media scrutiny. Public discourse prompted by JonBenet’s death examined pageant publics but largely blamed pageant parents, falling short of analyzing the culture that arguably maintains the conditions that support competitive pageants.

Most perspectives provided by popular and academic studies of pageantry tend to highlight contestants’ on-stage performances and the judges’ criteria for evaluation, as well as the corporate interests tied to pageants on local and national scales. As a result, pageants may be read as explicitly gendered entities that act on their contestants. Such a reading is well qualified, as Sarah Banet-Weiser demonstrates in The Most Beautiful Girl in the World: Beauty Pageants and National Identity. Banet-Weiser draws on Michel Foucault’s concept of biopower to demonstrate how beauty pageants produce their models. “Women are produced as feminine subjects through disciplinary practices. Disciplinary practices such as dieting and other beauty practices are assumed by most
women as femininity; the practice *is* the production.”

This view of pageantry and its participants is further complicated by the lucrative industry of child pageants in which contestants are years removed from adulthood and legal ages of consent. A decade and a half ago, JonBenet Ramsey’s suspicious death facilitated a blitz of media scrutiny of child pageants and their role in the sexualization of girls. Presently, reality television shows that follow glitz pageant families complicate existing concerns for pageant girls’ relative innocence by engaging in carnivalesque marketing of the world of child pageants. Whereas the question used to be something like, “What are pageant industries doing to pageant children?” it is now something like, “Won’t you show us more of these bratty pageant children and their overbearing, unstable pageant parents?” Considering all of the potential dangers of child pageants, the question of agency in child pageantry appears to have a rather simple answer: children, we assume, have limited capacity for understanding regarding personal choice and thus do not choose but are placed in pageants by their parents or guardians. For infants especially, it would seem that this assumption holds much weight. However, the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF)\(^1\) contends that children do possess autonomy as well as an ability to be part of collectives:

> Children are neither the property of their parents nor are they helpless objects of charity. They are human beings and are the subject of their own rights. The Convention [on the Rights of the Child] offers a vision of the child as an individual *and* as a member of a family and community, with rights and responsibilities appropriate to his or her age and stage of development.\(^2\)
UNICEF defines children as possessing more agency than conversations surrounding child pageantry suggest. Further, some of the mediated depictions of child pageant contestants and their parents prompt audiences to question who the boss is when it comes to child pageant publics. It is necessary to revisit and revise popular culture narratives of child pageantry, in order to re-vision its rhetorical potential.

The media spectacle surrounding the Ramseys and their association with child pageant culture thus fits with questions of structure, agency, and pageantry. In his critique of child pageantry, Giroux contends, “Collapsing the (hardly clear-cut) boundaries between the protective paternal gaze and the more objectified adult gaze, JonBenet’s parents appear to have stripped their daughter of any sense of agency in order to remake her in the image of their own desires and pleasures.”

Belying this comment are questions that exist outside the realm of rhetorical theory and criticism: Of what is a child’s sense of agency comprised? What are agentic possibilities for children? Questions of appearance and representation, however, are not. Relative to this exploration of pageancy, I am interested in what is meant by children’s agency and how a child’s agency functions relative to pageants and is then interpreted through public discourses of child pageants.

Cultural assumptions about childhood must be taken into account in this analysis. Childhood is a “particularly Western” construction, and Diana Gittins argues that it is constructed via adult memories of childhood and images that represent or embody the feelings associated with those memories. Although being a child is a material state of human development and being, “childhood” is a rhetorically constructed notion, as “every baby is born into a social world, a linguistic world, a gendered world, an adult
world full of discourse…. The helpless and totally dependent human infant, without
control or language, is given meaning by adults from the first minute its parent(s) start to
interact with it in the context of a wider culture.”

In the broader cultural context of the West, which includes the United States, childhood “has strong connotations of innocence, purity, and naivety.” A feminist analysis requires further refining of the term
“childhood,” however. I am concerned with both girls’ and boys’ roles in child
pageantry, but, because pageants are strongly correlated with women’s and girl’s culture,
and the majority of participants are female, it is necessary to consider established
literature on girlhood and girls’ agency in particular.

Presumably, girlhood is experienced by all girls, and it is understood broadly to
be “a stage to be passed through on the way to something else – mostly to ‘being a
woman.’” Like “childhood,” however, girlhood is discursively constructed and
contextually understood. Girlhood has meant different things at different historical
moments, but in the late twentieth to early twenty-first centuries, according to Catherine
Driscoll, the concept has been discursively constructed as a kind of “feminine
adolescence.” In “late modernity,” girls are arguably strongly represented in Western
visual culture, and a collective understanding of girlhood, or feminine adolescence, is
constructed through the realms of advertising, television, film, literature, and other
culture and consumer industries. Yasmin Jiwani, Candis Steenbergen, and Claudia
Mitchell note the particular tone of these symbolic representations of girlhood: “Often
framed in terms of declining moral standards, rising hemlines/plunging necklines,
increased aggression, and the demise of feminism, popular attention about or directed at
girls has been considerably – and consistently – bleak.” This view of girlhood aligns
with popular and scholarly conversations about child pageants, but I argue, along with Jiwani, Steenbergen, and Mitchell, that “a more holistic approach towards girls and girlhoods” must be embraced in order to develop a fuller picture of girlhood at this particular cultural moment. Relative to child pageants, in particular, I utilize reality television as a means to exploring the “power, agency, and complicity of girls in resisting and negotiating oppression and inequality within the matrices of structural forces that constrain, impose limits on and contribute to their vulnerabilities.” I turn now to a closer analysis of the framing of pageant childhood, and thus child pageancy, on Toddlers & Tiaras.

The “Reality” of Child Pageants and Implications for Pageancy

Discourses of childhood imply discourses of parenthood. Whereas parents or legal guardians may be an implicit component in to the structure of adult pageants, they do not often factor into public discourses of contestant agency. In the world of child pageants, however, it is difficult to dismiss the parent factor in the child contestant’s agency in light of legal restrictions and cultural conventions on childhood. As a result, public discourses of child pageants, from op/ed pieces to reality show depictions, often frame parents as opportunistic, domineering, and living vicariously through their little princesses and princes. The pageant mom or dad enthusiastically performing her or his child’s talent routine in the audience while her or his child is simultaneously performing onstage is a familiar scene on Toddlers & Tiaras, one that is, at times, uncomfortable to watch. Because this performance is presented in public discourses of child pageantry as
recurring across glitz pageant publics, it is arguably a representative image that embodies
the “pageant mom/dad” – one whose investment in pageants is selfishly motivated and
inevitably tied to her or his belief that the child’s success is her or his success. In the case
of enthusiastic pageant dads in particular, embedded in this image are prompts to
speculate on the father’s sexuality – the suggestion being that only effeminate, gay males
could be so invested in the hyper-feminized world of the glitz pageant. Pageant parents
play a prominent role in public discourses of child pageantry, thus one must include the
arguably exploitative parent-child relationship as a potentially significant element of
child pageancy.

Arguably, enthusiastic or aggressive parenting is necessary in child pageant
publics – glitz pageants in particular – due to the financial cost and the intensely
competitive nature of child pageant industries. In the second season of Toddlers &
Tiaras, “Mckenzie’s Mom” is one pageant parent who frankly discusses the necessities
of participating in pageants. “First of all, you gotta decide, are you gonna play this
game? And if you are, then you gotta be willing to do the things that needs [sic] to be
done.” Purchasing flippers and spray tanning Mckenzie before each pageant are two of
those things featured in their segment. Kim – a.k.a. Mckenzie’s Mom – and her daughter
and husband live in Greenville, Mississippi. Their home appears to be modest, and the
salon where Mckenzie gets her spray tan is a modular building with one hair styling
station and a partition between the tanning room and the salon. Kim and Mckenzie are
presented as working-to-middle class in this segment – as though they are participating in
glitz pageants in spite of their socioeconomic position but also as a component of their
white, Southern heritage, evidenced by their regional accents and even Kim’s description
of McKenzie as “trailer park.” In another episode in season two, “Lindsay’s mom” talks at greater and more detailed length about the cost of pageants. “I don’t particularly add up how much I spend because if I knew, I don’t think I’d ever do pageants.” Melissa – a.k.a. Lindsay’s mom – does have some idea about the cost, however, as revealed in the details of an upcoming trip to Hawaii for the America’s Fabulous Faces pageant. “For a dress, it’s about eight hundred to fifteen hundred [dollars]. A nice glitz photo, probably about a hundred fifty [dollars] to be retouched. Hair and makeup’s probably a few hundred dollars. Just entry fees alone? A thousand bucks. The swimwear I’m bringing – four or five bathing suits – that’s a couple grand right there. Just for her and I [sic] to fly there is fourteen hundred dollars; the hotel for five days is gonna be almost eight hundred dollars.” Melissa describes seven-year-old Lindsay as an “up and coming, fierce competitor,” which perhaps warrants the allegedly untabulated financial cost of pageant participation. Beyond Lindsay’s pageant abilities, though, it appears that Lindsay and her mother (along with her father/Melissa’s husband, who does not appear in the segment) are able to incur the costs of glitz pageants somewhat comfortably. They live in Lake Havasu, Arizona, in a cookie-cutter home on the cul-de-sac with two SUVs in the driveway. Melissa and Lindsay showcase Lindsay’s elaborate pageant costumes – including the “showgirl” outfit that Lindsay will not have an opportunity to wear in the Fabulous Faces pageant – and Lindsay gets her spray tan at a salon that specializes in tanning. Melissa implies that the family does not need to keep specific track of their pageant spending, and she advocates financial ignorance for fathers in pageant families. She contends, “The less the husbands know, the better.”
The role of the pageant parent and public portrayals of the pageant parent – the pageant mom, in particular – relative to the child’s agency are better understood via an intersectional analysis. Class, race, and heteronormativity all factor in significantly to questions of agency, demonstrating similarities, differences, and disconnect across pageant publics. If child pageant participants do indeed desire to participate in these competitions, their ability to do so is severely limited by the fact that they are dependent upon their parents to finance their participation and transport them to pageant sites. In the world of glitz pageants especially, the cost can be so great that prospective participants may be deterred from entering based on their socioeconomic status. Valerie Walkerdine’s research on working class British girls and popular culture is particularly relevant to an evaluation of girls’ agency in the world of glitz pageants as we have come to know them via Toddlers & Tiaras. Walkerdine does not dismiss girls’ desires to be “on the stage,” but her focus on working class girls complicates her theorizing about those desires when they are related to glitz pageants in the United States. Walkerdine contends, “Being looked at presents still one of the only ways in which working-class girls can escape from the routines of domestic drudgery or poorly paid work into the dubious glamour industries, so despised by feminists.” Working-class girls understand that options for “succeeding” are limited, and so the decision to perform simultaneously satisfies the pragmatic necessities of making a living, as well as a complicated desire to be looked by transgressing the (potentially) disempowering journey of girlhood by presenting oneself as attractive and confident. Walkerdine continues, “Subjectivity is not constituted only as the object of the gaze, but subjects are formed in a large number of different practices with different opportunities and possibilities to open to them.”
How, then, are Walkerdine’s arguments potentially challenged by glitz pageants? Pageants provide similar opportunities to be looked at and succeed, but they are not always accessible to the working-class. Glitz pageants are quite costly, and as indicated by mediated representations of child pageants, accessible to middle and upper class girls, boys, and their families. Although they sometimes testify to enjoying being on the stage, the children featured on Toddlers & Tiaras do not appear to need or want to utilize pageantry as a “way out” of a financially strained or culturally restrictive home or community setting. Walkerdine validates this hypothesis: “Middle class girls, as our research shows so clearly, do not need to fantasize being somebody, they are told clearly at every turn that they already are: it is simply not a battle to be entered into.” Still, while the cost of pageant preparation and participation is often discussed on Toddlers & Tiaras, the ways in which that cost impacts a family’s income usually is not. As a result, viewers may make assumptions about the family’s wealth, but it is presumptuous to argue that the child participants are members of the “middle” or “upper middle” class and thus engaging in pageantry for leisure purposes only. Further, taking into account Hilary Levey’s view of child beauty pageants as work, the class standing of any of the families featured on Toddlers & Tiaras is significant to this analysis insofar as it is an indicator of the participant’s relative need, rather than her or his desire, to participate. Levey argues that organized children’s activities, from sports to beauty pageants, are in fact a kind of work. “In many ways,” Levey contends, “the pageant girls who practice their model turns for hours each week on makeshift stages in garages … are not so different from the children who used to work on the family farm.” Levey’s argument is certainly provocative, but it is not entirely out of sync with the longstanding ideological objectives
of pageantry in the United States, namely, promoting nationalism and modeling good citizenship. Ascending class ranks via hard work and individual determination are part and parcel of achieving those objectives. Thus, the families featured on Toddlers & Tiaras may be read as engaging in patriotic, capitalist traditions, (although audiences may not feel comfortable – justifiably – siding with such an interpretation).

Whether one categorizes pageant participation as work or leisure, or marks it as a point on a work/leisure spectrum, parsing out the relative desire of child pageant contestants to engage in the practice remains a difficult task. This question of desire is further complicated by the fact that mediated depictions of child pageants, like those on Toddlers & Tiaras, are arguably edited to prompt audiences to view child contestants’ ability to choose in a particular way. Consider, for example, how glitz pageant participants are often characterized as wielding more power than their parents relative to their participation in pageants. “Tootie’s Mom” frames the power dynamics between herself and her daughter in this way: “I wouldn’t call myself a stage mom, but I am Tootie’s assistant.” Stacy – a.k.a. Tootie’s Mom – continues, “I have to dress her, put her socks and shoes on, um, fetch, and look for, and do whatever she needs to have her ready to go out there as perfect as she can get.”

Beyond acting as Tootie’s personal assistant, Stacy learned to administer spray tans so that she might defray the costs of glitz pageant participation by providing her services to other pageant contestants. Tootie admits that she does not like that her mother has taken on this role, but she understands that Stacy does it because “it makes her money for me.” Stacy frames her side job a bit differently: “I started spray tanning … to try to make some money to fund my habit.” Stacy states further that she will be tanning contestants at Tootie’s upcoming pageant to pay for “my
hotel and part of my hair and makeup.” Tootie’s and Stacy’s testimonies partner with images in the sequence in which Tootie is “in control” to create a somewhat confusing picture of who wields or yields power and when – both Tootie and Stacy reap the benefits of pageant labor. These power dynamics also bring us back to the work/leisure question. Levey shows that pageant parents – mostly mothers – often take on the simultaneous roles of coach, stylist, makeup artist, and even seamstress for their children. The work done by pageant parents is displayed on or by their children, making those children “walking advertisements,” and potentially recruiting other pageant contestants to solicit the parents’ services. Who is doing the work then and under what structures of power, institutional or otherwise? Tootie may be overtly objectified as a billboard for Stacy’s spray tanning business, but she is also ultimately depicted as being actively agentic, even wielding power over her mother in the broader context of her role as pageant participant. Tootie and Stacy’s relationship demonstrates that it is the contestants, not the pageant parents, who ultimately make children’s glitz pageants into a spectacular draw for pageant participants and audiences alike.

Such depictions of the child pageant participant as possessing and demonstrating more power than the parent are significant, in part, because they challenge collectively held assumptions about childhood innocence. Valerie Walkerdine and Henry Giroux both take up the role of innocence as it relates to children’s culture in the West, submitting the notion of innocence to two different criticisms. Whereas Walkerdine rejects what she describes as “simplistic and ahistorical” narratives of the eroticization of little girls, narratives in which “little girls who sing and dance and are erotically coded are being made to lose their childhood,”94 Giroux troubles the notion of childhood
innocence as it relates to dominant cultural acceptance of pageants in the United States. Writing in the wake of JonBenet Ramsey’s death and the round-the-clock media coverage that followed, Giroux explores “child beauty pageants” as a site in which assumptions about innocence are taken for granted.

If innocence is to become a useful category for social analysis, the term must be treated as an ideological practice that can only be understood politically and ethically through the ways in which it is represented and used within everyday life as it is shaped in the intersection of language, representations, and the technologies of power. Central to such a task is the need to address why, how, and under what conditions the marketing of children's bodies increasingly permeates diverse elements of society.

It is not “children’s bodies” in general, however, but girls’ bodies that are most directly tied to the troubling of innocence and the marketing of culture industries. Giroux’s focus on childhood innocence eschews the gendering of childhood and tacitly accepts dominant narratives of girlhood in which girls are subject to vulnerabilities that boys are not. Walkerdine’s perspective is thus critical to further developing an understanding of pageancy in child pageants, for even when parents and contestants identify as biological males, they are coded as effeminate or homosexual. How do gender and sexuality thus complicate pageancy, especially if the most deep-seeded collective concerns about maintaining childhood innocence are connected to girls and not boys – even the effeminate ones?

In his repeated references to JonBenet Ramsey and the stories of other girls who participate in pageants, it is clear that Giroux is primarily concerned with cultural
interpretations of the innocence of girls, not girls and boys. The American Psychological Association (APA) established the Task Force on the Sexualization of Girls in 2005, echoing the Giroux’s and others’ concerns about “the sexualization of girls via media and other cultural messages.” These concerns are by no means unfounded, because, as the APA’s report notes, the sexualization of girls is “set apart from healthy sexuality” and is widespread, perpetuated via marketing and advertising and in the culture industries of fashion and entertainment. While the concern over the sexualization of girls in particular is important, the gendered focus of these concerns tends to invoke the rhetoric of masculinist protection, a rhetoric that belies many cultural criticisms of pageantry. Iris Marion Young contends that the logic of masculinist protection employs a “benign image of masculinity” that is associated with chivalry. Arguably, child pageants are subject to such a rhetoric, in part, because they are strongly correlated with the realm of the feminine and because most participants are indeed female. Talk about children’s activities traditionally associated with boys, sports in particular, does not tend to revolve around a crisis of innocence lost, but rather, building camaraderie and learning to engage in healthy competition and appropriate physical contact. Talk about boys participating in “girls’ activities,” like pageantry, betrays an air of concern, although it is not usually about the sexual objectification of boys or a loss of their innocence via pageantry. Most public conversations about boys in child pageants revolve around the question of their (homo)sexuality, often implying either a sense of camp humor or outright concern that the boys will not grow into traditional performances of masculinity. Whereas sexual objectification is the consequence of pageant girls’ lost innocence, the worry over gender confusion is at the heart of public “debates” over boy pageant participants. After he was
featured on *Toddlers & Tiaras*, boy contestant Zander and his mother Tracy Miller were interviewed on the *Joy Behar Show* and *Good Morning America*. Good Morning America provided Zander’s pageant participation as evidence of a growing trend in which boys participate in activities traditionally associated with girls, including cheerleading, gymnastics, and fashion. In spite of Good Morning America’s contention that this alleged trend has sparked “gender debates,” there is no explicit explanation of the basis for such a debate. Instead, the cause for concern is demonstrated in clips from an interview with Zander and scenes from his stint on *Toddlers & Tiaras*. In these clips, Zander discusses the satisfaction he gets from winning “trophy and crowns.” He is also shown having a manicure in a salon and talking about the need to wear makeup in pageants. The title at the bottom of the screen suggests something is off, but it is also vaguely encouraging: “Pageant Boys: Sons Embrace Sensitive Side.” Overall, this segment implies that participating in pageants not only makes boys effeminate, but also encourages them to be homosexual. This is the cause of the so-called “gender debates.” There is no allusion to pageant boys’ innocence in the report, and it at least makes visible and avoids explicitly judging non-conformist gender performance among boys. Tracy Miller even compares Zander’s pageant participation to signing a child up for a sports team. She says, “It’s just like, you know, you put your child in baseball, soccer, or swimming – they enjoy doing it, so this is what Zander enjoys.” The overall tenor of the report is somewhat objective, but it clearly evidences the gendered nuances between pageant girls’ and boys’ *pageancy* – whereas girls are acted upon by pageantry and stripped of their innocence, boys are effectively stripped of their masculinity.
These gendered conversations about child pageant participants indicate that, while there are overarching concerns about the ethics of child pageants, those concerns fall along clear and clearly differentiated, lines of gender and sexuality (and sometimes, class). Giroux’s work reflects the ways in which popular and scholarly discourses of competitive pageantry mask or completely overlook the significance of these differences. As long as the pageant continues to have widespread cultural resonance, critiques of pageantry must consciously note the primacy of gender and sexuality in pageant histories and practices. I turn now to a discussion of pageant structure and gendered agency and their potential implications for democratic practice.

**The Right to Bare Arms: Pageancy and Democracy**

What, in light of this discussion of pageant form and participant agency in child pageant publics, is the power of *pageancy*? Further, how does it reflect and/or correlate with narratives of democracy and active citizenship? This is a question that prompts more complicated answers as pageantry becomes more diverse. Dow considers popular retorts to such questions in light of the partnering of liberal feminist discourses and the beauty pageant, “By the mid-1970s, media discourse exhibits an increasing emphasis on the personal agency of beauty contestants, an emphasis that works to refute feminist objections by implying that if women claim that they freely choose to participate in the pageant and refuse to claim that they are being exploited, we should believe them.” It is not as easy as drawing the same conclusion about child pageant participants, even as they work alongside messages of increasing opportunities for girls to practice “girl
power” and raising contestants’ individual confidence levels. Further, child pageants are weak to defend against the charge that, at their cores, their central objectives include crowning a victor who is attractive, able-bodied, normatively sexualized, and in most cases, white. The perceived hyper-feminization and sexualization of children via beauty pageant practices adds mightily to the charge that beauty and glitz pageants not only restrict children’s agency, but explicitly oppress and exploit them. Still, child pageant contestants testify to desiring and enjoying the glitz pageant experience – what is the rhetorical significance of such testimony?

The depiction of girlhood and boyhood in Toddlers & Tiaras can be read through Chaim Perelman and Lucie Olbrechts-Tyteca’s “appearance-reality” pair. In The New Rhetoric: A Treatise on Argumentation, Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca describe “appearance” as ambiguous in character and meaning, a manifestation of the real.105 “Reality,” on the other hand, can only be understood “by comparison with [appearance].”106 A process of dissociation reveals the value and hierarchical character associated with the terms, or more accurately, the symbols associated with the terms. “[Reality] provides a criterion, a norm which allows us to distinguish those aspects of [appearance] which are of value from those which are not…. In relation to [appearance], [reality] is normative and explanatory.”107 This discussion demonstrates that reality is the standard-bearer, and appearance is always already assumed to be a fragment or false representation of reality, forever held to but falling short of the standard. Arguably, the depictions of child glitz pageantry on Toddlers & Tiaras and the ways in which children act and are acted upon constitute “appearance,” and our collectively held assumptions about childhood in the United States, and more particularly, the gendered notions of
girlhood and boyhood, construct “reality.” Popular and scholarly cautionary discourses about the sexualization of girls and the homosexualization of boys in child pageant publics illustrate the values and hierarchy generally associated with that appearance-reality pair. However, a good amount of frustration comes with this rhetorical pairing and the value-laden assumptions that it invokes, as there is a strong counterpoint to the notion that an appearance-reality pair even exists, the argument that “the sole reality is that of appearances.”

The appearance-reality pair thus helps to explain the relationship among discourses of child pageants and the participants’ relative agency, especially as it demonstrates what is positively and negatively valued in the discursive construction of American childhood. U.S. culture values innocence and asexuality in childhood, and in girlhood in particular, and child pageants strip children of their innocence and turn them into sexual beings prematurely. Still, although it may feel frustrating or downright icky, it is important to keep in mind that some children choose and like pageantry, some are forced into participating in pageants, and there are numerous potential outcomes for the child who grows up as a pageant contestant. Indeed, the rhetoric of pageantry constituted by Toddlers & Tiaras and other popular discourses of child glitz pageants demonstrates that pageant publics are complex entities with varying degrees of autonomy and collectivity among their members. “Reality” cannot simply assume its moral superiority over the “appearance” of child pageants as illustrated in shows like Toddlers & Tiaras.

One of the larger questions that prompts this study regards the relationship between pageants and democratic practice. In spite of the myriad concerns U.S. audiences have with child pageants, civic education and pride and unadulterated patriotism have always been strong foundations for the practice of pageantry – while
those qualities are often difficult to decipher in mediated discourses of child pageants, they are not entirely lost. I believe I would be mistaken to argue that child pageants, and glitz pageants at that, are clear manifestations of democratic practice in the United States. However, changes in types of civic involvement in the twentieth and early twenty-first century cannot be disregarded, and following Robert Asen, I argue that pageantry, tied as it is to nationalism and civic pride, should be considered one response to the question, “How do people enact citizenship?” Asen’s discourse theory of citizenship “conceives of citizenship as a mode of public engagement.” The theory considers citizenship to be a process, rather than the completion of some quantity of sanctioned civic acts, and it “recognizes the fluid, multimodal, and quotidian enactments of citizenship in a multiple public sphere.” Child pageants are provocative and sometimes troubling, but they provide a medium for public engagement for citizens who identify with non-universal subjectivity categories, including – but not limited to – children (girls and boys under the age of eighteen), feminine adult women, and feminine adult men. Through pageantry, participants who might otherwise be excluded from traditional citizenship activities can become public subjects and engage in a process of aspiring to model citizenship that is based, however loosely, on collective notions of physical, mental, and civic fitness (and notably, which vary based on assumptions about gender, sexuality, age, and race). This is not to say that all pageant participants consciously engage in pageantry as an act of citizenship, but the practices of pageant publics can be read in this way, thus allowing for the development of pageancy as a challenge to oppressive structural expositions on the form, as well as co-opted and forgiving liberal feminist interpretations of it.
Notes


4 Ibid.


6 See chapter one for a detailed explanation of publics.

7 It is worth noting that the historical pageant – the center of the pageant craze of the early 1900s and the type that first keyed Americans into the spectacular and influential nature of pageantry – did not rely on direct competition among its participants. Instead, the historical pageant was intended as a catalyst for community involvement and shared civic pride, and these objectives required a collaborative rather than competitive spirit.


10 I follow Bonnie J. Dow’s explanation of “hegemony” here: “Generally, hegemony, or hegemonic processes refer to the various means through which those who support the dominant ideology in a culture are able continually to reproduce that ideology in cultural institutions and products while gaining the tacit approval of those whom the ideology oppresses.” See Bonnie J. Dow, “Hegemony, Feminist Criticism and the *Mary Tyler Moore Show,*” *Critical Studies in Mass Communication* 7 (1990): 262.

11 I have covered historical pageant publics and better babies/eugenical pageant publics to this point. In this chapter and the next, contemporary competitive pageant publics are the focus, and I explore “alterna-pageant” publics, or pageant counterparts, in the conclusion.


13 I am using “liberalism” as both a broad theoretical backdrop and in order to refer to a type of feminism that “assumes that the relevant political problem is to show that women possess the capacities men possess and can do what men can do.” Of particular importance to the proposed notion of *pageancy* is liberalism’s emphasis on the individual/individualism and how the liberal individual is defined or assumed to be relevant to gender, sexuality, age, and class. See Carole Pateman, *The Disorder of Women: Democracy, Feminism, and Political Theory* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1989), 44.


Ibid., 128.

Ibid., 128-129.

See n7.


Sarah Banet-Weiser, *The Most Beautiful Girl in the World: Beauty Pageants and National Identity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999); Bonnie J. Dow,


29 Dow, 144-145.

30 See Dow, “Feminism, Miss America, and Media Mythology” and Tonn, “Miss America Contesters and Contestants: Discourse About Social ‘Also-Rans’.”


32 See Chapter Three, “Before Toddlers & Tiaras: Better Babies Contests and the Ideal Pageant Subject.”

33 See Riverol, 13. The first “Fall Frolic” took place in 1920, but it did not include a female beauty pageant on its itinerary.

34 There were officially nine contestants, but Miss Atlantic City, Ethel Charles, bowed out of the pageant due to her contention that she had an unfair home field advantage over the others. See Riverol, 14.

36 See Riverol, 13, and “Miss America History: 1920’s – Decade in Review,”

37 Riverol, 12-21.

38 According to Riverol, the role of King Neptune was inhabited by eighty-year-old
Hudson Maxim, the “‘famed inventor’ of smokeless gunpowder.” His celebrity status set
a standard for the male master of ceremonies in subsequent Miss America pageants. See
Riverol, 13.

39 Riverol, 12-21.

40 See Riverol, 14 and “Miss America History: 1920’s – Decade in Review,”

41 Riverol, 24.

42 Ibid., 13.

43 Kimberly A. Hamlin, “Bathing Suits and Backlash: The First Miss America Pageants,
1921-1927,” in “There She Is, Miss America:” The Politics of Sex, Beauty, and Race in
America’s Most Famous Pageant, edited by Elwood Watson and Darcy Martin (New

44 The concepts of presentation and representation are significant to publics theory. I
follow Rosa A. Eberly’s adherence to Richard Sennett’s view of presentation and
representation in The Fall of Public Man. She states, “[I]nstead of reading public
discourses as the representations of individual and ‘authentic’ psyches, I read these
discourses as inherently presentational and thus public.” This issue is at the heart of my questions about pageancy, as there must be some way to consider the actions of pageant publics “as divorced from the authenticity of the subject.” However, it is difficult to adhere to this understanding of “public presentation” when the subjects in question are members of historically marginalized groups. See Rosa A. Eberly, *Citizen Critics: Literary Public Spheres* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2000), 28-29; Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, “Can the Subaltern Speak?” In *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, edited by Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1988), 271-313; and Richard Sennett, *The Fall of Public Man* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1976).

45 The first Miss America telecast occurred in 1954 and was hosted by Bob Russell. Parks did not take over as master of ceremonies until the following year. See Riverol, 49-56.


50 Dow, “Hegemony, Feminist Criticism and the Mary Tyler Moore Show,” 263.

51 Lenora P. Slaughter served as the Miss America pageant director from 1941-1967 and worked tirelessly to ensure that the risqué pageant underwent an image makeover. Slaughter was successful in her endeavors to attract “a certain class of girl” to the extent that a college scholarship was awarded to the newly crowned Miss America beginning in 1945, and in subsequent years, even the competition’s finalists received scholarship monies. See “Miss America History: 1940’s – Decade in Review,” *Miss America*, http://www.missamerica.org/our-miss-americas/1940/review.aspx (accessed March 10, 2011); and Sarah Banet-Weiser, *The Most Beautiful Girl in the World: Beauty Pageants and National Identity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 37-42.

52 Ibid.

53 Photographic beauty pageants, like those that gained popularity in the early twentieth century, are still in existence and are arguably more prevalent and popular due to web accessibility and digital photography. Photographic pageants are most often hosted online and do not require all the trimmings of stage pageants. The Internet has provided an affordable medium for pageant producers to advertise their contests and devote
websites to their organizations. Online pageants are also attractive to participants due to low registration and participation costs – an added bonus is that travel is unnecessary, maximizing the time one has to potentially participate in multiple contests and garner a larger amount of victories. However, the photographic pageant may cost the contestants sitting and print fees with professional photographers, as well as the expense of dressing and styling themselves for the photos. Notably, the photo beauty contest continues to recruit baby contestants heavily, although they often include categories across child and adult age groups. A large repository of online pageants can be found at Mailinpageants.com (http://www.mailinpageants.com/).

Pageant audiences are observers who have a connection to pageant culture through their spectatorship, but a lack of participatory experience tends to limit them from card-carrying pageant public status. See Chapter One of this project for further explication of the audience and public categories as I use them in this study.

I am not a past, present, or future pageant participant. I am studying pageantry via historical artifacts, public discourses, and mediated representations, thus I am a member of the pageant audiences, not the pageant publics, discussed herein.

See chapter two for a detailed analysis of better baby contests in the United States.

Mulvey, 6-18.

See, for example, the popular and scholarly work of sociologist Hilary Levey Friedman, as well as the flurry of responses to JonBenet Ramsey’s death (also popular and scholarly), like Henry Giroux, “Nymphet Fantasies: Child Beauty Pageants and the Politics of Innocence,” Social Text 57 (1998): 31-53.
The two most popular reality television shows that document child pageantry are WE’s *Little Miss Perfect* and TLC’s *Toddlers & Tiaras*. According to the Internet Movie Database (IMDB) *Little Miss Perfect* ran for two seasons in 2009 and 2010, but it is no longer in production. *Toddlers & Tiaras*, on the other hand, began in 2009 and continues to be one of the networks most popular shows. It is currently airing its fifth season.


The TLC network has become known for its “innovative nonfiction programming,” and has had ratings successes with shows like *Jon & Kate Plus 8, What Not to Wear, Sister Wives*, and *Toddlers & Tiaras*. In a recent press release, the TLC network described the *Toddlers & Tiaras* series as a “pop culture phenomenon,” and the show is frequently the subject of blogger and journalist criticism. See “Toddlers & Tiaras: Season 4,” *Discovery Press Web: United States*, http://press.discovery.com/us/tlc/programs/toddlers-


67 See Riverol, 49-56.

68 Pozner, 24.


70 Banet-Weiser, 64.


Giroux, 37.


Ibid.

Jiwani, Steenbergen, and Mitchell, x.


Ibid., 3.

Ibid. Driscoll posits “feminine adolescence” as a category of girlhood specific to late modernity, which she defines as spanning the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

Jiwani, Steenbergen, and Mitchell, ix.

Ibid., x.

Ibid.

It is interesting to note that, on the episodes that air on television and on the *Toddlers & Tiaras* website, featured pageant parents are primarily identified via their children – i.e. “The Sprinkle Sisters’ Mom” or “Jayla’s Dad.” Parents are the primary interviewees, but
their names are lesser contributors to the construction of their personae than their children’s names.


88 Ibid., 142-143.

89 Ibid., 143.

90 Ibid., 154.


92 Ibid., 211.


94 Walkerdine, 144.

95 See Walkerdine; also Giroux, 31-53.

96 Giroux, 47.

98 It is important to note that the APA’s report cites child pageants as an example of “the sexualization of girls and girlhood in U.S. culture.” Ibid.

99 Especially considering that “women and girls are more likely than men and boys to be objectified and sexualized in a variety of media outlets … in advertising, and in … products that are marketed to children.” Ibid.


101 Young, 4.


104 Dow, 129.


106 Ibid.

107 Ibid.

108 Ibid., 418.


110 Ibid.

111 Ibid.
Chapter Five

Loving to Hate the Anti-Model: Pageant Scandals and Controversies

The world might think of the pageant as just a beauty contest, but the pageant folks, perhaps enveloped in myopic delusion, thought of themselves as everything else but.

– A.R. Riverol

No matter how many times it happens, the press finds itself surprised every time a beauty pageant winner is something other than a classic dumb blonde.

– Frank Deford

The Scandalous Nature of Pageantry

There is generally little serious public conversation about competitive pageantry. However, although pageant outsiders may not be aware of it, pageantry is a serious, year-round business to those who participate in and profit from it. The wheels in pageant machines are always in motion – when one pageant cycle ends, another inevitably begins – but the pageant’s mere presence is often not enough to sustain more than the passing derisive comment from pageant outsiders. Pageants are most often invoked in political commentaries and mass mediated messages as metaphors for shallow or inconsequential competitions. There are, however, relatively frequent moments when something unusual happens in mainstream pageant publics and catches the attention of national audiences. The “something” often draws that attention at the expense of a pageant’s reputation or the pageant industry’s reputation as a whole, and that “something” is commonly known as the “pageant scandal.” “Scandal” has been synonymous with “pageant” from the first
staging of the Inter-City Beauty Contest on the Atlantic City Boardwalk in 1921.4 However, while the beauty pageant initially earned its scandalous reputation for putting young women on public display in flesh-baring bathing outfits, more recently, the element of scandal is related to the apparent disconnect between the model standards of pageant culture – exemplified by the Miss America organization’s conversion to “scholarship program” – and the anti-model actions of individual pageant contestants.5 Perhaps the most famous of all pageant scandals in the United States involved the publication of nude photos of the first black Miss America, Vanessa Williams, in Penthouse in 1984 (Williams subsequently resigned). Since then, the nude photo scandals, and variations thereof, have become widespread in female competitive pageantry. In the 2000s alone, several Miss USA contestants have faced public scrutiny for posing for nude, semi-nude, and in otherwise compromising photos,6 as well as participating in pole dancing contests7 and appearing at porn conventions.8 In the world of child pageants, the most scandalous element is the sexualization of children, a common characteristic of glitz pageants featured on reality television shows like Toddlers & Tiaras and debated by pageant insiders and outsiders alike. In the context of this study, public concern about the effect of pageant participation on children peaked with the 1996 murder of glitz pageant queen JonBenet Ramsey. Ramsey’s mysterious death shocked audiences across the United States, as national media outlets linked the tragedy with the toddler’s role as pageant participant.

In the eyes of pageant outsiders, the pageant immediately morphs from frivolous contest to influential cultural ritual when scandals such as these arise. It is arguably a boon for the pageant industry that the competitive female pageant is ready-made for
controversy, especially as the beauty pageant’s cultural relevance has waned in the latter twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. Competitive pageantry is able to rely on its scandalous reputation to maintain a certain amount of visibility outside of pageant publics. Presumably, the competitive pageant’s well-known sexist and racist past, combined with the mass media focus on the most extreme practices of pageantry – from the over-the-top costuming of child glitz pageants to the debate over allowing contestants who have undergone plastic surgery to participate in so-called “scholarship programs” – would be damaging to pageantry’s reputation and make it difficult to sustain the competitive pageant’s popularity. However, this does not seem to be the case. While it is true that ratings for national pageant telecasts fell in the latter part of the twentieth century, and the Miss America pageant, in particular, was bounced from network television to cable and back to ABC, the competitive pageant retained, and still retains, its iconic status in U.S. popular culture. Indeed, the competitive pageant form has maintained the interest of viewing audiences, journalists, bloggers pageantry, and that interest depends, in large part, on the omnipresence of scandal.

Arguably, because pageantry connotes scandal, it is difficult for producers and sponsors of mainstream competitive female pageants to maintain the narrative that their contestants exude traditionally feminine virtues like poise, elegance, and intelligence. Their attempts to save face are further complicated by the fact that it has become a regular occurrence for competitors to admit to past careers in nude modeling, addictions to drugs and alcohol, and the occasional “girls gone wild” pole dancing moment. The frequency with which such small-scale scandals occur has increased along with the ability to leak photos and amateur film on the Internet, a medium that reaches large,
interactive audiences who engage with these artifacts in diverse ways, from ogling the nude images that emanate from their computer screens to enthusiastically commenting on the morality and overall character of a contestant or the pageant organization with which she is affiliated. Scandal is thus a primary means through which lay audiences relate to pageant culture. When scandal emerges from behind the tight and tanned façade of the competitive female pageant, even those who do not identify as “pageant folks” present themselves as fully equipped to evaluate the place of pageantry in U.S. culture, especially as model and anti-model pageant arguments relate to dominant discourses of American identity. Pageant ne’er-do-well is a familiar character in collective U.S. consciousness that not only satisfies a collective desire to denigrate pageantry, but also serves to reinforce narratives of disciplined femininity, even as audiences pleasurably consume the scandal and its artifacts.

While scandal remains key to maintaining pageant outsiders’ connections with pageant culture, the prevalence of scandal “in this media-saturated age,” in both entertainment and political contexts makes scandal somewhat “hard to define, or even notice.” From oral sex in the Oval Office to the use of performance-enhancing drugs in professional sports to Hollywood starlets reenacting the Basic Instinct leg crossing scene as they step out of their cars, scandals, and in particular, scandals facilitated by media exposure, have become so pervasive, even normal, that they arguably have begun to lose their titillating and tawdry character. As a result, there is a detectable amount of desensitization in both pageant audiences’ and pageant officials’ reactions to the latest pageant scandals. In 2007, incriminating photos of Miss New Jersey, Amy Polumbo, were leaked to pageant officials. In the photos, Polumbo is fully clothed but behaving
“not in a ladylike manner,” e.g. drinking alcohol in nightclubs, allowing a boyfriend to 
“bite her breast through her shirt,” and posing in a limousine “with her legs spread in the 
air.”

Although the leaked photos did not show Polombo nude, they were scandalous 

enough to prompt a review by pageant officials. In the end, however, Polombo was 

allowed to keep her title, on the grounds that she did not violate the morals clause 

included in the contract she signed to participate in the Miss America pageant system, 

and the pageant officials’ contention that these were just photos of “kids having a good 
time at a party.”

A year earlier, in 2006, Miss USA Tara Conner admitted to drug and alcohol 

addictions after she was caught drinking underage and failed drug tests. The Miss 

Universe Organization, which is a “Donald J. Trump and NBC Universal joint venture,”

looked to pageant boss Trump for a final decision on Conner’s fate. Rather than demand 

Conner’s resignation, Trump called for the organization and Miss USA’s public to give 

Conner a second chance. According to the Washington Post:

[Trump] had expected … to terminate Conner's reign when the two met … but 

she impressed him with her sincerity and contriteness and the story of her humble 

origins in Kentucky and the way that New York City had swept her into its vortex 
of wickedness and sin. "She was telling me that she got caught up in the 

whirlwind of New York. It's a story that has happened many times to many 

women and men that came to the Big Apple," Trump intoned. "They wanted their 

slice of the Big Apple and they found out it wasn't so easy.”

The corrupting influences of the big city were thus to blame for Conner’s missteps. Even 

though she had behaved badly while she was the reigning Miss USA, Trump ruled that
Conner would check into a drug and alcohol rehabilitation program rather than lose her crown.

Yet another photo scandal took place in the Miss Universe Organization in 2009. Miss California USA Carrie Prejean was already facing a media blitz following a controversial pageant interview, when nude and partially nude modeling photos of her were released on the website the dirty.com. Donald Trump was called upon yet again to make the final decision regarding Prejean’s fate as Miss California. He gladly reviewed the leaked photos and made the blasé declaration, “The pictures were fine. It was not a big deal.” Prejean ultimately did lose her title, but as a consequence of other contract violations, not topless photos. Between the years of Vanessa Williams’ Penthouse scandal in 1984 and Carrie Prejean’s missteps in 2009, the theme of the model-contestant-gone-bad has become somewhat normalized not only in pageant culture but also in broader cultural contexts. Williams was forced into giving up her crown, while Polumbo, Conner, and Prejean were granted a second chance to rebuild their public images sullied by their “bad girl” antics. The pageant scandal has not run its course, but it appears that the frequency with which scandals occur leave the scandal-as-audience-magnet somewhat wanting.

In the post-Clinton/Lewinsky/Woods/Weiner era, is difficult to identify any actions as uniquely scandalous. However, whereas moral codes have presumably been tossed by the wayside in many shared cultural institutions in the United States, competitive pageant organizations maintain that they are bastions of female propriety and empowerment. Any actions to the contrary thus suggest scandal. The thing is, it is difficult for audiences to buy into the self-proclaimed standards of female competitive
pageantry, as well as the notion that “anti-model” actions of some contestants undermine those standards. For example, the Miss America organization made the switch from bathing beauty contest to scholarship program in its 1945 contest, but collective views of the Miss America pageant did not change in kind. Audiences are in on the joke – Miss America and its spin-off, Miss USA, insist they are competitions of substance, yet they retain their skin-deep evaluation criteria. There is evidence, however, that mainstream competitive female pageantry may be challenging the view that national pageant systems are scholarship contests in name only. It is arguably no longer fruitful to frame critical analyses of pageantry as revealing pageants for “what they really are.” Instead, in order to critically consider the rhetorical role of pageantry in contemporary culture, we must explore how it has adapted in form and function, as well as how it has remained consistent. An appropriate place to begin such an analysis is the commonplace interview segment – the only element of mainstream competitive pageantry that appears appropriately suited to a scholarship program and the richest site of public controversy in the world of early twenty-first century pageantry.

In this chapter, I use the pageant scandal as a point of departure, in order to explore the rhetorical function of the role of public controversy in competitive pageantry. At least two moments in recent pageant history call for an updated, perhaps fuller, inquiry into the substance of pageants and their contestants. The first occurred at the 2007 Miss Teen USA pageant. When it came time for Miss South Carolina Teen USA Caitlin Upton to answer an interview question loosely related to the status of public education in the United States, she flubbed – big time. A deluge of reactions hit print and online media. The tone of the responses ran a gamut from incredulous to angry, but an
implicitly shared commitment to interrogating the influence of pageantry in U.S. culture broadly pervaded all of them. Two years after Upton’s cringe-inducing response, the aforementioned Miss USA hopeful Carrie Prejean sparked a different kind of controversy with her interview performance. When asked about her stance on gay marriage by openly gay pageant judge and gossip blogger Perez Hilton, Prejean revealed her conservative personal political views. Immediately following the pageant telecast, informal public debates over the political nature of pageantry ensued, and Hilton himself vlogged with vehemence his dissatisfaction with Prejean as a potential Miss USA and a young person in a United States that is increasingly honors the rights of citizens who identify with LGBTQ communities. Upton’s and Prejean’s pageant controversies indicate that it has become more titillating to watch pageant contestants wax philosophical on political matters than to see them take their tops off. This arguable shift in pageant perceptions is significant, especially if pageantry continues to maintain a relationship with collective understandings of nationalism and citizenship. In order to determine the implications for that relationship in the early twenty-first century, I look closely at the rhetorical situations surrounding both of these interview controversies, as well as the responses they inspired. At the site of the pageant controversy, I explore the notion that the pageant is a dynamic yet persistent influence on gendered views of citizenship in the United States.
From Bioterrorism to Big Boobs: Scandal and Controversy in Pageantry

As noted above, the history of the competitive pageant is pervaded by scandal – arguably, to the point that scandal seems to constitute the lifeblood of pageantry in the United States. The pageant’s tacit objective of modeling female citizenship is thus inextricably linked with its scandalous nature. In recent years, however, controversy appears to have taken scandal’s place as a necessary characteristic of competitive pageantry – as traditional pageants appear to be increasingly out of step with changing attitudes toward gender, race, and LGBTQ issues, moments of controversy remind audiences of pageantry’s sphere of influence and often prompt public debate about the implications of practicing pageantry in the democratic nation-state. That is not to say that scandal has left the realm of pageantry entirely. Indeed, when it comes to the most (in)famous moments in competitive pageant history, elements of both scandal and controversy are not only ever-present but also closely related. In order to consider their significance and interrelated nature, it is necessary to first define and contextualize the place of scandal and controversy in pageantry.

Once linked with religious misconduct,26 scandal is generally understood today as “a breach in moral conduct and authority.”27 In recent years, the most notorious public scandals have manifested themselves in the realms of politics and religion: the names Jim Bakker, Jimmy Swaggart, Bill Clinton, and more recently, Eliot Spitzer, Ted Haggard, and Anthony Weiner will likely always be associated with sexual misadventures. Due, in part, to the ways in which these scandals represent a tear in the “fabric” of the “public religious dimension” of American life, or “civil religion,”28 it is not surprising that
rhetorical scholars have thus far considered the role of scandal in public life from a primarily political perspective, often exploring the rhetorical functions and impacts of the resultant apologia of the public figure involved in the scandal or the impact on political attitudes.29

Religious and political sex scandals did not originate in the latter twentieth century, but they did gain popular and scholarly visibility in the 1980s and 90s. Since then, media coverage of scandals has become more frequent and also spread to other institutions of U.S. culture. As a result, the predominant, collective understanding of scandal presumes it to be inherently linked with mass media. In order for an act to become scandalous, it must make a necessary transition from private to public, and media outlets are the primary means by which audiences become savvy to “breaches in moral conduct.” James Lull and Stephen Hinerman’s definition of “media scandal” could thus encompass all contemporary scandals:

A media scandal occurs when private acts that disgrace or offend the idealized, dominant morality of a social community are made public and narrativized by the media, producing a range of effects from ideological and cultural retrenchment to disruption and change.30

Throughout the twentieth century and into the early twenty-first, the Miss America and Miss USA organizations have frequently been the subject of media scandals. Like scandals in the arenas of politics, sports, and other entertainment cultures, the respondent “ideological and cultural retrenchment” of pageant scandals can be measured relative to the technological and mediated moments in which they occurred.
The first Miss America pageant in 1921 was publicized by “local press” and witnessed by “thousands of revelers both on the beach and jamming against the Boardwalk and pier rails.” The pageant itself was the scandal. It was, after all, a bathing beauty contest – a public event that relied on the tawdry allure of publicly displayed, scantily clad white women to reinvigorate the late summer season in Atlantic City. Several years later, a former Miss Saint Louis and Miss America hopeful became the subject of international news. While living in France with her family, Charlotte Nixon Nirdlinger (née Nash) killed her husband – a judge in the 1923 Miss America pageant in which she was a contestant – in self-defense. The New York Times and Chicago Daily Tribune followed the story for several years, often identifying Charlotte Nixon Nirdlinger as “Beauty” in headlines. Although she was not crowned Miss America, Nixon Nirdlinger’s connection to the pageant was never missed in the media coverage of the scandal. Beyond these early scandals, as Miss America matured and other beauty pageants developed, small-scale scandals involving contestant eligibility would occasionally arise, sometimes even earning a mention in the newspaper. In some instances, the illicit behavior of an individual contestant called for a pageant organization to initiate stricter rules, thereby demonstrating to audiences that their “girls” were being held to the highest feminine standards. After Bette Cooper, Miss America 1937, “[ran] away with her chauffeur on the evening she was crowned,” the Miss America Organization implemented a rule that “Contestants could not be seen with or talk to any man during pageant week.” In the early years of competitive female pageantry, audiences thus grew quickly from local to global as they gained a stake in female competitive pageantry via the increasingly commonplace pageant scandal. Of course,
questioning and condemning the morality of the bathing beauty component never really lost its appeal, but to say that the public performance of pageant contestants in swimsuits retained its scandalous quality would be an exaggeration. Enter pageant controversy.

Controversy and scandal are not necessarily interchangeable terms, but they are certainly connected. Scandal is the moniker stamped on private acts of moral impropriety gone public. Arguably, scandal is among the basest of mass mediated events, as it is tawdry by nature and often swirling with themes of sexual debauchery, financial scamming, and excessive drug use. By contrast, controversy does not tend to carry with it such obviously negative connotations. Rather, it calls to mind the spirit of public deliberation and the logic of rational argumentation. “A notion of controversy,” Kendall Phillips reminds rhetorical scholars, “underlies much of our thinking about disputation and argument.” The OED defines controversy as “the action of disputing or contending with one another,” and also makes it synonymous with debate. Whereas scandal is indicative of a transgression of the private/public divide, in the field of rhetorical studies, controversy is understood to be inherently “public.” As a topic of public concern, controversy is further pertinent to rhetorical theory and criticism due to its deliberative character, public controversies consist of multiple perspectives and thus tend to exist at several different stases of argumentation – fact or conjecture, definition, quality or value, and policy. Scandal, by definition, and by contrast with controversy, constitutes a moral breach. While moral codes vary relative to culture and context, “morality is constructed by collectivities through their public discourse,” and that public morality is “bounded by an inductive, historical objectivity.” Thus, public morality is crafted by “collectivities” in a processual manner, and tends to reflect a shared moral code. A breach in that shared
code – a scandal – thus offends, well, pretty much everyone. For example, when a mother featured on the reality television series *Toddlers & Tiaras* dressed her child as Julia Roberts’ character in the film *Pretty Woman* – “not the reformed Vivian Ward who goes to Rodeo Drive and buys some nice dresses and lives happily ever after. The streetwalking version complete with black boots, a mini skirt and a blonde wig”\(^{41}\) – the public reactions reflected a general consensus that dressing one’s three-year-old daughter as a “fictional prostitute” is, indeed, wrong. Perhaps due in part to its perceived fixed *stasis*, scandal is hard-pressed to acquire the legitimacy that controversy is afforded through its deliberative character, and in spite of the fact that controversy usually involves debate over provocative, even morally questionable issues. Thus, while they do not constitute a familiar binary, the respective qualities of scandal and controversy do exist in a discursive hierarchy. Thus, the roles of scandal and controversy in pageantry are implicated in the pageant’s construction of model female identity and also indicative of the place of the pageant in U.S. culture.

Although they differ in many respects, scandal and controversy are easily conflated in the realm of competitive pageantry. Whether it is a Miss USA nude photo leak or the coerced hypersexualization of child pageant contestants on *Toddlers & Tiaras*, it is difficult to determine what merits speculation over such acts in public fora. Is it shock at the moral impropriety of the individuals involved, outrage over the questionable character of competitive pageant structure and its influence on girls and young women, or old-fashioned moral panic?\(^{42}\) For the purposes of rhetorical analysis, it is not necessary to answer why the scandal/controversy hybrid found in pageantry is appealing, but, rather, to determine how the phenomenon functions symbolically, for whom, and what the
implications might be. In order to do that work, pageant scandals/controversies and the public conversations that surround them must be understood as an alternative to the “counterfactual yet normative” conception of the public sphere theorized by Jürgen Habermas and critiqued and expanded upon by many scholars since. In short, the pageant and its attendant scandal/controversies provide a site for “explor[ing] the concept of controversy without relying on the norms of the public sphere.” The pageant’s paradoxical status as both a long-standing, traditional performance of nationalism and a low culture, gender-marked spectacle makes it a fitting text for such an exploration. The pageant interview, in particular, is the place in competitive pageantry where scandal and controversy have overlapped of late. Before moving to an analysis of two specific pageant interview controversies, I will first establish the boundaries of pageant scandal and controversy. I turn now to a brief history of provocative pageantry and its rhetorical implications within pageantry and for pageant audiences.

Audiences know a pageant scandal when they see one, and they do not tend to be surprised when such scandals make news. Especially since female competitive pageantry became a nationally televised event in 1954, pageant viewers and participants have had greater access to, and thus more to say about, the world of pageantry and its contestants. Mass media, pageant publics, and pageant audiences have all had a hand in determining moral and ethical boundaries relative to the pageant. When pageant scandals arise, they inevitably gain public attention and – for better or worse – further public discourses of pageantry, often relative to provocative political issues that rule the day. Certainly the 1996 murder of JonBenet Ramsey must be mentioned again here, although there is no conclusive evidence that clearly connects the six-year-old’s death with any particular
component of pageantry or her life as a glitz pageant contestant. However, media
coverage of Ramsey’s death and the mystery surrounding it focused on her ties to child
beauty pageants and the practices that accompany them. Glitz pageants and the parents
who love them make women out of girls by arguably coercing infant and toddler
contestants to perform the role of an adult female – and often, a hypersexualized,
unrealistic imagining of what adult females look like or how they behave. Henry Giroux
argues that this trend to sexualize girls via cultural performances like the glitz pageant
strips children – girls in particular – of their innocence and also of agency, thus making
them subject to violence. Journalists reporting on the Ramsey case did not always make
such a direct connection, but the barrage of images that accompanied Ramsey’s story
depicted her in full pageant mode – the hair was big, the lips painted, the outfits
outrageous. The only thing worth knowing about JonBenet Ramsey was that her parents
made her participate in glitz pageants, a fact that became inextricably linked to her
murder in 1996 and in press coverage in the years following.

As noted above, the most recognizable contestants on the national pageant stage
of late have admitted to problems with drugs and alcohol or been embarrassed by a nude
photo scandal. These contestants may not take the crown, but their names are often more
likely to resonate with audiences beyond the moment of the pageant itself. Scandals have
not only become more frequent but also more extreme, and they put the competitive
component of pageants in focus. In 2007, Ingrid Marie Rivera won Miss Puerto Rico
Universe, but the victory did not come without a competitive dust-up. Rivera claimed
that her evening gown and makeup had been laced with pepper spray during the pageant
competition, and once she dressed and applied her makeup, she suffered a strong allergic
reaction. Initial forensic tests were inconclusive for pepper spray, but Rivera and her team stood by their claim of sabotage, and a second round of tests revealed that indeed Rivera’s personal belongings and clothing had been contaminated. Media reporting on this scandal confirmed what audiences already believed about female competitive pageantry – pageant contestants take the “mean girl” persona to its extremes and are even willing to toe the line of bioterrorism to eliminate the competition.

A rise in plastic surgery in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries has also prompted pageant insiders and audiences to consider, in another light, the integrity of contest rules and regulations. The issue in question is this: should contestants who have undergone plastic surgery be allowed to compete, especially in the most recognizable national and international pageant systems? Beauty pageant contestants have always engaged in body modification in one form or another, but the permanence – and sometimes, obviousness – of plastic surgery challenges audience assumptions about a potential queen’s authenticity, not to mention her intelligence. In spite of being generally acceptable in the world of competitive pageantry, pageant organizations, individual contestants, and title-holders are expectedly reticent regarding the matter of plastic surgery. Reality television and a consistent liberal feminist ideology has enabled a broader acceptance of women going under the knife, but even the acknowledgement that some pageant contestants have reconstructed their deviated septums (for health reasons) and augmented their less-than-buxom breasts (for self-esteem purposes) further underlines the “wink wink, nudge nudge” nature of female competitive pageantry. It may not be socially acceptable, but it is not unusual for the top contestants in national pageants to go under the knife in the pursuit of a more perfect pageant body. If model
performances of femininity are symbolized by national pageant contestants, acknowledging the significant, even necessary, role of plastic surgery in the most famous contests implies that women are judged primarily on appearances on the pageant stage and in public life. That judgment extends to collective views on gendered citizenship. Sarah Banet-Weiser contends:

Beauty pageants construct a specific imagined community, even while a particular vision of community occasions and informs their construction. Pageants create a national field of shared symbols and practices that define both ethnicity and femininity in terms of national identity. As a significant practice of pageantry, plastic surgery literally changes individual contestants' bodies and shapes a broader narrative of the feminized body politic.

Scandal’s inherent connection to the tradition and structure of the form sets up a kind of expectation that some kind of pageant mischief will arise regularly to reinvigorate an otherwise outdated ritual decreasing in cultural relevance and popularity. Scandal thus occupies a significant space in the realm of pageantry and is arguably indispensible to the pageant ritual. However, scandal does not function to legitimize the pageant. It is when pageant scandal pairs with or crosses the line into the realm of controversy that the form is taken most seriously by pageant outsiders. In order to analyze the rhetorical function of pageant controversy relative to scandal, I turn now to an exploration of the scandal/controversy hybrid phenomenon in competitive pageantry.
The Pageantry is Political: Where Scandal and Controversy Meet

Although scandal has taken center stage in the world of pageantry, the pageant has also seen its fair share of controversy. As the foremost competitive female pageant organization, Miss America has been charged on counts of both sexism and racism at various points in its history. Although these charges are sometimes accepted as a given, they are also often at the heart of public pageant controversies. In addition, pageant controversy is regularly attached to scandal, making the pageant scandal/controversy a kind of hybrid.

While individual contestants have taken personal stances against unsavory swimsuit requirements, the most memorable protests, and thus, resultant controversies, involving female competitive pageantry’s sexual objectification of women occurred in 1968 and 1969 and resurfaced in the late 1980s and nineties. Pageant historian Frank Deford characterizes the 1968 demonstration by radical feminists on the Atlantic City Boardwalk and the subsequent smaller 1969 protest as “little hassles” that “produced an incommensurate amount of publicity for Women’s Lib, which succeeded in giving the moment visibility for the first time.” In spite of the publicity that the protests generated for feminist movements in retrospect, “on the day after the pageant, the crowning of the new Miss America was a bigger story for the New York Times than was the protest.” Further, although the sensational myth of the bra-burning Libbers on the Atlantic City Boardwalk remains the most salient in public memory – who was crowned Miss America in 1968, anyway? – the Miss America organization, as well as those made more or less in its image, remain committed to a staid structure of female objectification in general
and the swimsuit competition in particular. When the discourse of objectification was revived in the 1990s, the Miss America Organization decided to put it to a vote – during the telecast of the 1995 pageant, viewers were given the opportunity to phone-in their answer to the question, should Miss America retain the swimsuit portion of the competition? The results demonstrated that after years of internal and external debate, 79 percent of the nearly one million voters remained steadfast in their support for the swimsuit competition.\textsuperscript{58} Two years later, on the heels of this show of public support, the pageant organization modified the rules to allow contestants the option of wearing two-piece swimsuits for the first time since 1947.\textsuperscript{59} These moments in contemporary pageant history evidence a link between a conservative backlash in politics proper and a conservative reification of gender hierarchies and norms in the late 1990s and early 2000s. The proliferation of a “particular version of liberal feminism”\textsuperscript{60} by the news media overlapped with incitements to and conflations of “girl power” and power feminism, making popular arguments like Frank Rich’s, that “Miss America wannabes know what they’re getting into … an … if contestants were all so brilliant or talented, they’d either be earning grants from bona fide academic institutions, if not the Citadel, or starring in a road company of ‘Cats.’”\textsuperscript{61} The baring of female flesh, perhaps the most recognizable element of pageant scandal, thus developed into public controversy as a component of debates about feminism and gender equality outside of the somewhat insular world of pageantry.

Unless it were to undergo radical ideological and structural changes, competitive female pageantry would never be able to fully deny charges of sexism. However, the institution \textit{has} been forced to confront a long-standing – and in the case of Miss America
explicitly-racist agenda. Miss America’s infamous contract rule number seven was formalized in the 1930s under the directorship of Lenora Slaughter – the influential pageant director who fashioned a beauty pageant into a scholarship program – and reflected eugenic-minded, better breeding ideals, stating, “Contestant must be in good health and of the white race.” One could argue to forgive the organization based on historical context, but the institutional racism of pageantry is too significant, too far-reaching to brush off as a marker of the times. In August of 1968, while protests took place outside the Miss America pageant, another kind of pageant protest was underway on the boardwalk. This “positive protest” closely resembled the traditional competitive female pageant in form and content, but one element was distinctly different – all of the contestants were African American. The first Miss Black America pageant was bundled into media coverage of the satirical feminist protest of the Miss America pageant and thus received significantly less mainstream press coverage. Miss Black America was not the first pageant designed specifically for black contestants, but it was significant due to its focus on race, and thus, the ways in which it complicated a seemingly straightforward call to end sexism rampant in pageantry. In spite of the inaugural Miss Black America contest and its implications, the race question in pageantry was a long way from being settled in 1968, and not even the crowning of the first black Miss America fourteen years later would adequately address it.

Vanessa Williams is remembered mainly as the first Miss America to resign following a nude photo scandal, and second, as the first black Miss America. When she won the crown in 1983, Williams and the Miss America pageant were perceived as
breaking long-standing color barriers, but as Valerie Felita Kinloch observes, it was a much more complicated moment in pageant race relations:

The pageant’s acceptance and public construction of Williams as America’s queen reiterated, momentarily, its own discourse of power: to prove, despite a racist history, that the pageant was raceless in its representation of all American women. The black body became a sign of racial harmony by standing side by side with the historically white model of beauty. Such a representation further denigrated the black body and its cultural politics: Black contestants were given limited exposure in the selection of a national representative at the same time that their bodies, minds, and interactions were judged by white standards.66

When she was crowned Miss America, Williams symbolized the complexities of African American women’s beauty culture and the significance of race relative to models of feminine virtue and female citizenship. On one level, Williams embodied the desire to pass, or to fulfill white cultural standards of physical attractiveness. As the first black Miss America, however, and an articulate and outspoken one at that, she was embraced by black audiences and institutions like the NAACP.67 But, when compromising photos surfaced, Williams was swiftly punished and pressured to resign her title. The scandal and public reactions to it demonstrated that the behavioral choices of the first black Miss America only served to reinscribe damaging stereotypes about the hypersexuality and deviant carnal appetites of African American women. Whereas “press coverage of her initial crowning can be read as an elaborate and complex process of ‘uncoloring’ of Williams as Miss America,”68 the photo scandal quickly repositioned her not only as black but as too black to be Miss America. Sarah Banet-Weiser contends, “Just as
[Williams] was granted individual personhood when she won the Miss America crown, she was summarily denied this same category when the photographs were published: she became all black women in U.S. society, and she affirmed mass-mediated representations of this identity. Williams did not consent to the publication of the photos, and she also claimed that they were meant for private use. At the level of the pageant organization and its standards for moral conduct, the publication of the photos merited the title of “scandal.” Relative to the historical and cultural moment, however – post-civil rights, post-second wave feminism, and smack dab in the middle of a conservative political backlash – Williams’ photographic kerfuffle was implicated in a public controversy about the politics of race, gender, and representation in the United States.

From “bra burners” to Miss Black America to Vanessa Williams, it is clear that one of the rhetorical implications of this history of exposed flesh – white and black – is that pageant controversy is almost always expressed in relation to contemporary pageantry’s relatively embarrassing history as mere “cheesecakery.” Charges of sexism and racism carry less weight when levied against the pageant – a cultural institution that has always struggled to be taken seriously anyway. Although pageant insiders may clearly explicate the intellectual differences and perceived hierarchy between Miss America and Miss USA, for example, audiences remain unable or unwilling to distinguish one competitive pageant from another. This relationship legitimizes negative perspectives on pageantry that tend to permeate from public discourses perpetuated by pageant outsiders. It also reduces complex concerns about the traditions of competitive female pageantry to one-dimensional non-issues. When a contestant provides a sub-par answer to a question about political geography in an interview segment, she may be
reviled as an affront to philosophies of citizenship that emphasize rational deliberation, or her answer might be derided as laughable, and the contestant characterized as a “Dumb Blond Débutante Bimbot [sic]” who will “marry well, suppress her gag reflex and live happily ever after.” In spite of what passes for, at worst, a hostile attitude toward pageantry, and at best, an indifferent one, as cultural attitudes and federal legislation have changed, so has “the public” expected competitive female pageantry to change in kind.

Anachronistic and irrelevant though it may seem, pageantry remains a meaningful cultural institution in which history is encapsulated and through which U.S. identities are influenced. A.R. Riverol describes public attitudes toward pageantry in the twentieth century as a swinging pendulum:

Although the early pageants of the nineteen twenties and thirties had been the focus of public protest, the pendulum of public opinion had swung in favor of the pageant in the nineteen forties and fifties. This favorable response was, in part, the result of the efforts of Lenora Slaughter to clean up the image of the pageant by elevating it from a “cheesecake” show to a scholarship pageant. Community support was at its highest during and after the World War Two years. By the late 1960s, however, left-leaning non-pageant publics changed the pendulum’s direction, and “the pageant once again was, if not reflecting the strains and strides of the times, at least existing in spite of it all.” In effect, “the public” expects something from the pageant as a persistent cultural performance, but public discourses of pageantry – from reality TV shows to limited media coverage of the annual Miss America pageant – indicate that the bar is set relatively low.
This brief exploration of pageant controversy demonstrates a connection between collective notions of citizenship and pageantry. Several factors contribute to this reciprocal relationship, including shifting attitudes toward competitive pageantry, as well as staid perceptions of the form as merely a beauty contest and its contestants as vapid beauties. In order to probe the significance of attitude shifts and trouble the persistent view of pageantry as cheesecakery, I turn now to the most recent topic of controversy in pageantry – the pageant interview.

**Pageant Interviews and Controversial Citizenship**

After the official addition of the Miss America interview segment in 1947, competitive female pageantry steadily increased attempts to tie what it is that the pageant queen represents – the embodiment of nationalism – to timely and topical discourses of domestic politics. As Banet-Weiser has noted, however, “the interview competition is by far the most easily and commonly ridiculed element of the spectacle.” In spite of its status as a joke among pageant outsiders, the interview component exists across competitive pageant systems – even child pageants submit their contestants to Q&A. Whether the system markets itself explicitly as a scholarship program – as Miss America does – or remains loyal to a more traditional pageant type – as Miss USA does – the interview remains essential because it is “aimed to capture the construction of liberal characteristics of agency and choice-making abilities.” It is at the site of the pageant interview that a contestant’s intelligence and autonomy are simultaneously tested and mocked, and it is within this context that the most recent and significant pageant
controversies have taken shape. One particularly interesting element of these controversies is that they have sprung from the Miss USA pageant, the younger, hotter – and thus, presumably dumber – sister of the Miss America brand.

The producers of the Miss USA pageant have never touted the contest as a scholarship pageant, but they have taken care to avoid categorizing it as a beauty contest outright. According to its website, the Miss USA pageant is a “contest that has evolved [from a bathing beauty competition] into a powerful, year-round, international organization that advances and supports opportunities for … young women.” There exists a general consensus in pageant scholarship that the Miss Universe organization, of which Miss USA is a part, is “the sexier, and slightly tawdry cousin to the Miss America pageant,” and that it “makes no bones as to what it really is.” Just as the Miss USA folks avoid categorizing their contest as a beauty pageant, so too do careful critics stop just short of calling Miss USA “what it really is.” These messages do not directly praise or blame either pageant, but they do set them against one another and imply that, while Miss USA is less respectable or arguably less “feminist” than the Miss America scholarship system – it is certainly not the thinking woman’s pageant – it is arguably more honest about its commitment to judging contestants based on physical beauty. These differences in organization image arguably contribute to pageant and audiences’ perceptions of and reactions to pageant scandals. Miss USA’s history as an offshoot of Miss America informs perceived and actual differences in terms of the moral turpitude of these respective pageant organizations.

In the 1940s and 50s, the Miss America organization was remaking itself in a more respectable image under the direction of Lenora Slaughter. At the heart of this re-
visioning were concerns about the bathing suit\textsuperscript{80} element of the competition. Miss America began as a bathing beauty contest, after all, and thus had always been the subject of controversy. As white women in particular became more “public,” the bathing beauty contest was simultaneously interpreted as symbolic of a woman’s right to self-presentation and the questionable moral integrity of the contestants and the pageant. The story goes that Jean Bartel’s refusal to pose in a bathing suit in 1943 was notable – considering the bathing beauty contest legacy – but did not ruffle sufficient feathers to result in any drastic changes in pageant standards. However, when Yolanda Betbeze protested in 1951, Catalina Swim Wear, a newly acquired sponsor of the Miss America pageant, would not stand for the winner’s indignant behavior. Betbeze’s “unbending posture” instigated the rift between the pageant and Catalina Swim Wear that caused Catalina to pull their sponsorship and develop their own beauty pageant, which ultimately became the Miss Universe Organization.\textsuperscript{81} Citing this origin story, Sarah Banet-Weiser frames the Miss America/Miss USA relationship as a competition: “[they] remain, as they began, in competition with each another.”\textsuperscript{82} As the two most recognizable national pageant organizations, pageant audiences largely view Miss America and Miss USA as one in the same. They share the core characteristics of all contemporary female beauty pageants – including the standard eveningwear and swimsuit categories – and contestants must be physically attractive (by normative standards of beauty) in order to make it to the national contest stage in each system. But Banet-Weiser notes that pageant insiders would be less likely to place Miss America and Miss USA in the same pageant category:

Despite this competition, it is clear that the Miss America pageant sets itself apart from the Miss USA pageant. The political and economic context or complex
infrastructure of the Miss America pageant that [Lenora] Slaughter helped to create situates the pageant in very different ways from Miss USA. The Miss America pageant’s status as a nonprofit civic ritual, rather than merely another commercial venture in which women’s bodies are on constant display, also distinguishes it from most other popular cultural forms. 83

The material and symbolic construction of the Miss America organization as oppositional or alternative to the Miss Universe organization depends on its image as, essentially, a kind of charitable organization that requires its participants to demonstrate hard work, cultivate intelligence, and to assert independence via their individuality. As long as Miss America maintains this image – and that is likely to be a long time – it may remain “a more plausible and a more convincing site for the production of the liberal, female subject” than Miss USA, “as well as a more complicated and complex popular cultural form.” 84

If Miss America and Miss USA are as different as Banet-Weiser suggests – the former has branded itself as more than a pageant, and thus more respectable, while the latter remains a “boobs and bounce” contest – the infamous pageant interview segment would seem to provide the best evidence for the argument that Miss America and Miss USA are fundamentally different. Interviews give each Miss America hopeful a chance to display, in part, “that her goal is to be an educated woman,” thereby reinforcing the scholarship pageant image, as well as supplementing the requirement that each contestant develop her own social issue platform. However, the interview is by no means exclusive to Miss America, and in fact, Miss USA also requires its contestants to address “thought-
provoking” prompts on a range of topics from evaluating domestic and foreign policies to articulating position on polarizing social issues of the day.

Although interview rounds are structured differently in each telecast, in both cases the question and answer segment is one of the few opportunities during the competition that a contestant has to actually speak. The swimsuit component of the competitive female beauty pageant has received much attention in popular and scholarly analyses – and rightly so – but while this practice is bothersome to some and loathsome to others, it is arguably more intriguing that contemporary pageants that evaluate contestants largely on appearance continue to retain the interview segment. Banet-Weiser contends that the swimsuit competition is set apart from the other evaluative categories, or “fragments of femininity,” of the Miss America pageant. The nonspeaking female contestant is essential to the swimsuit competition in particular, as it is a moment of undeniable objectification. During the 2011 telecast of the Miss America pageant, co-host Chris Harrison introduced the “Lifestyle and Fitness in Swimsuit” component in this way: “Here we celebrate health, fitness, self-confidence, and, okay, can I just say it? Looking amazing in a really tiny swimsuit.” Everyone appears to be in on the joke – no matter how much public relations work is spent selling Miss America as a scholarship program, it is nearly impossible to deny that this is essentially a beauty pageant. The silent “blur of bodies” serves to maintain “tradition” in the contest as a whole while also promoting twenty-first century discourses of female agency. It is important to bear in mind the contrast between swimsuit and interview when assessing the public impact and rhetorical weight of the controversies discussed below and the relative importance of the pageant interview to the rhetorical construction of female citizenship. Banet-Weiser argues, “The
swimsuit competition minimizes the potential threat that contestants pose as intelligent speaking subjects by insisting that they are also bodies, also women.’\textsuperscript{92} Throughout the Miss America and Miss USA pageant telecasts, it is truly only in the instances of direct Q&A that the audience hears the voices of the individual contestants, and even then, only finalists are submitted to the brief interview. Considering the historical and structural context in which the interview component exists, it is arguably an uphill battle to achieve public controversy, but it is by no means an impossibility.

There are two examples of the pageant scandal/controversy hybrid that I will examine here. The first occurred in 2007 and the second in 2009, and they enable the critic to explore the complexity of long-standing questions about the female pageant, public decency, intellectual capacity, and model citizenship, from a different perspective than that of the standard pageant “media scandal.” Both of these pageant controversies took place during the interview segments of competitions in the Miss Universe family – Miss Teen USA and Miss USA. The public conversations that followed each interview, including online responses to the respective interviews’ YouTube videos and journalistic opinion and editorial pieces ruminating on the pageant interview’s place in U.S. culture, demonstrated a significant discursive investment in a popular cultural performance that is more often than not derided as irrelevant. The \textit{topoi} that national and international audiences employed as they engaged with these controversial interviews, including gendered subjectivity, collective identity, and the pageant queen’s responsibility to model good citizenship and unite diverse communities within the U.S. population, reveals much about the role of the mainstream competitive female pageant and its relationship with the
rhetorical construction of citizenship in the United States. For the judges’ consideration, I submit the cases of Caitlin Upton and Carrie Prejean.

In August 2007, eighteen-year-old Lauren Caitlin Upton was representing the state of South Carolina in the Miss Teen USA pageant. Upton fared well throughout the contest and made the cut for the group of five finalists. These five finalists were strong in the beauty and appearance-based categories, but in order to decisively conclude who should win the Miss Teen USA title, the contestants must do as many have done before them and show the audience their brains as well as their cleavage. As the camera spanned the remaining five – all but one, Miss Colorado Teen Hilary Cruz, were white – host Mario Lopez’s voiceover announced that this would be “the round of competition that ultimately determines their fate.” The question and answer round that followed is arguably the most (in)famous in all of competitive female pageant history, due entirely to the question posed to Miss Teen South Carolina Lauren Caitlin Upton and the response she supplied. The clip of this exchange has 53,212,764 views on YouTube to date. The transcript follows:

Judge Aimee Teagarden’s Question: “Recent polls have shown a fifth of Americans can’t locate the U.S. on a world map. Why do you think this is?”

Contestant Lauren Caitlin Upton’s Answer: “I personally believe that U.S.-Americans are unable to do so because, uh, some people out there in our nation don’t have maps. And, uh, I believe that our education, like, such as in South Africa and the Iraq, everywhere, like such as, and I believe that they should . . . our education over here in the U.S. should help the U.S., or should help South
Africa it should help Iraq and the Asian countries, so we will be able to build up our future.

It is undeniable that that answer – whether you repeatedly watched Upton deliver it on YouTube or you are reading it for the first time here – is, to put it in technical terms, a real doozy. Not only does seem to be the case that the content does not address the question posed by the judge, but Upton’s response basically consists of words strung together in a manner that is nearly incomprehensible.

Fulfilling his duties as host, Lopez maintained decorum and continuity in the final five segment of the pageant telecast by thanking Upton for her answer and moving seamlessly on to the next contestant. Perhaps unfortunately for Upton, as well as the Miss Universe organization, the public would not – arguably could not – react in the same fashion as the television host. The 49-second clip of Upton’s Q&A was uploaded to YouTube soon after it aired, and, as I discuss below, a barrage of commentary quickly followed. Upton may have been questioned in the context of a beauty contest – and a beauty contest for teenagers at that – but her response and the public discourse that it prompted appeared to possess a significant amount of political purchase.

The cultural value of pageantry was similarly debated less than two years later when Miss California Carrie Prejean faced a question from gossip blogger and Miss USA 2009 judge, Perez Hilton. Unlike Upton, who claimed in post-pageant interviews that she was unable to hear the judge’s question, Prejean not only heard her question clearly, but she might have seen such a question coming from miles away. Also contrasting with Upton, Prejean offered an intelligible answer to a more clearly contextualized question. The public conversation that ensued thus went beyond contemplating the contestant’s
intelligence and leaned instead toward concerns about pageants and representation, as well as what a potential Miss USA’s rights are, versus her duties.

The topic of Hilton’s question for Prejean – same-sex marriage – was not only an issue of national political importance, but at that moment in early 2009, Miss California’s home state was a particular hotbed of debate concerning the subject. The Miss USA pageant telecast aired only a few months after California voters passed Proposition 8 – a conservative ballot measure that banned same-sex marriage, making null and void the state Supreme Court’s decision in May 2008 to protect the “fundamental right to marry” for all of California’s residents. With that context in mind, any of the final contestants might have suspected that gay marriage would be among the judges’ questions. When Prejean randomly selected a judge’s name from a fishbowl, he prompted her to make an argument on that timely civil rights issue. Hilton asked, “Vermont recently became the fourth state to legalize same-sex marriage. Do you think every state should follow suit? Why or why not?” This was Prejean’s response:

Well, I think that it’s great that Americans are able to choose on or the other. Um, we live in a land that you can choose, same-sex marriage or opposite marriage, and, you know what? In my country, in my family, I think that, I believe that marriage should be between a man and a woman – no offense to anybody out there – but that’s how I was raised, and that’s how I think that it should be between a man and a woman. Thank you.

There are certainly some claims to dispute in Prejean’s answer, but on the whole, one can reasonably argue that she answered the prompt “do you think every state in the U.S. should legalize same-sex marriage?” clearly and appropriately, relative to her personally
held beliefs. This very well could have been a Miss USA Q&A that escaped broader attention, especially as Prejean’s commitment to “opposite marriage” aligns with the conservative, traditional frameworks of gender and sexuality that pervade the competitive female pageant across different national organizations, as well as local and regional contests.

Shortly after the telecast, however, Hilton posted a video blog explaining “why Miss California didn’t win Miss USA,”⁹⁵ which grabbed the attention of news media outlets, as well as social commentary from bloggers and columnists representing multiple perspectives on the gay marriage issue. In the two and a half minute clip, Hilton argued that Prejean did not lose because she does not believe in gay marriage, but rather, because her answer was “alienating” rather than “uniting” and “inspiring.” Hilton punctuated this argument with name-calling, declaring Prejean “a dumb bitch” and implying that she did not have even “half a brain.” Before long, Prejean and Hilton were recruited for print and television interviews regarding their exchange, the question of same-sex marriage generally, and the responsibilities of Miss USA relative to her individual political beliefs. Hilton’s video blog was premised on an underlying question, “Whose USA does Miss USA represent?” but the ensuing public discourses that surrounded the event evidenced a significant preoccupation with another question, “Same-sex marriage is a significant political issue, but how much stock should on place in a pageant contestant’s personal opinions on such a matter?” Although there are overlapping themes in Upton’s and Prejean’s interviews and the respective reactions that they drew, I turn first to brief and discrete discussions of “the public’s” engagements with each interview.
If beauty is the “only talent” that Miss Universe contestants are said to possess, as Frank Deford claims in his account of the pageant’s origins, and pageant audiences’ contemporary expectations are that Miss Teen USA will be judged as such, one may be taken aback by the fact that Upton’s interview performance in 2007 compelled a flurry of reactions from political commentators, citizen bloggers, news media, and even the entertainment world. Some folks defended Upton, but the majority either communicated their disgust at her inability to answer the judge’s question intelligently, or they took the opportunity to publicly shame the American institution of competitive female pageantry and Upton herself.

Arguably unwarranted ad personam attacks, or perhaps more appropriately, ad feminem attacks, accounted for most of the micro-commentary on the Upton affair. The comment stream on personal blogs like paulschreiber.com featured a spectrum of individual attacks, from the relatively benign – “Looks – 10, Brains – 0” – to the demeaning – “She is destined to become a stripper. Pole dancing is in your future. You can have a map of America on your g-string as you throw it into the crowd. Good luck with your career and please never speak again.” Other websites that featured stories on Upton garnered their fair share of similar attacks. To list them here would not be terribly productive, but the obviously sexist and sometimes ageist comments reflect a dominant negative attitude toward female competitive pageantry and its contestants. Further, it is these kinds of comments that comprised a great deal of the public conversation surrounding the event and that appear to have shaped journalistic and political responses to it.
Much of the longer-form reactions to Upton’s response indicated a collective feeling of embarrassment, as though “the American public” was in some way responsible for her flub. Rebecca Traister, the columnist behind the now defunct *broadsheet* column on Salon.com summed up this shared sentiment in a title: “Miss Dumb Blond U.S.A.? Our National Embarrassment Over a South Carolina Teenage Contestant’s World Knowledge.”

Traister’s snarky perspective on the infamous Q&A suggested her own condescension to pageants and contestants of Upton’s ilk, but also conceded that, in the moment of the interview, at least, Upton typified several fallback female stereotypes: “She falls into a particularly dirty sweet spot for Americans: young, pretty, blond, Southern and female. That she appears to also be sort of dumb completes our idealized vision of laughable femininity, and the popularity of the clip shows that her embodiment of our national punch line is going over like gangbusters.” As Traister’s article muddled over the positives and negatives of placing sole responsibility for the interview disaster on Upton, it also called into question the institution of pageantry and its espoused commitment to crowning model victors, as well as the complicity of U.S. audiences with the processes of pageantry, especially as that complicity reflects “our current national obsession with telling young people that everything they do is just peachy, that there are no wrong answers, that they’re special just the way they are and shouldn’t be judged for being themselves?”

Although some responses were harsh, and others implicated Upton in broader conversations about mediated discourses of women, femininity, and intelligence – in public appearances that immediately followed, Upton did not appear to be visibly shaken by the controversy. Further, although there were many Upton/pageant detractors, as the
smoke began to clear, there were a few journalists and other online posters who challenged the clarity and correctness of the interview question rather than the respondent. In an interview on the TODAY show, Upton was given an opportunity to “explain herself,” as well as a second attempt to answer the pageant interview question. In her do-over response, Upton defended her intelligence and implicated the “bad question” in her flub. She stated, “Personally, my friends and I, we know exactly where the United States is on a map. I don’t know anyone else who doesn’t. If the statistics are correct, I believe there should be more emphasis on geography in our education so people will learn how to read maps better.” Technology columnist for Salon.com, Farhad Manjoo, tacitly defended Upton by also taking issue with the interview question itself. Manjoo concedes that Upton’s public persona is simultaneously beyond reproach and kind of annoying, but, he argues, it is the question that was wrong, not necessarily Upton or her answer. The judge’s question included the following statistic: one-fifth of Americans cannot locate the United States on a world map. Manjoo reports that his research unearthed no such statistic, and in fact, a survey recently conducted by National Geographic showed that around 94% of 18-24 year olds could indeed locate the United States on an unmarked world map. A more timely and substantive question about “geographical illiteracy,” Manjoo contends, would have involved a prompt about technological advancements in mapping, as well as the relationships between Internet access and the ability to read maps and navigate world geography.

Gender played a significant role in the Upton reactions, but it was not the only identity discourse invoked by the infamous Q&A. Upton’s answer also prompted some
commentary about national identities in the Western hemisphere and ethnocentrism on the part of U.S. citizen. One commenter on Salon.com pointed out:

South Americans strongly object to calling the United States "America," on the grounds that the pair of continents constitutes "America," and the United States constitutes only a fraction of that landmass. Was Ms. Upton being culturally sensitive with her choice of phrase, or just totally insane? Do South Americans call people from the United States, "U.S. Americans?"  

Upton was likely unaware of it, but her use of the term “U.S.-American” was not a complete flub. U.S. audiences guffawed at the term, but it is not altogether nonsensical. The reaction of many Miss Teen USA viewers, and later, commentators, is indicative of a discursive hierarchy of national identities among North, Central, and South America. It is not only a linguistic difference that conditions residents of the United States to view the United States as the only America, or at least, the most American, America; a myopic historical and cultural perspective that is embedded in educational, political, and popular discourses of U.S. citizenship also supports a discursive tendency to place U.S. citizens at the center of the Americas. The term “U.S.-American” is sometimes employed in scholarly discourses of national or American identities. This word choice can be strategic, but it is also helpful to describe and differentiate national groups. Also, outside of the United States, academic and lay audiences tend to be specific in their references to countries in the Americas. In U.S. contexts, however, employing the term “U.S.-American” functions to decenter U.S. identity, challenging the assumption that the descriptor “American” alludes to U.S. citizens. Many reactions framed Upton’s use of the term as particularly illustrative of her own stupidity, but whether or not it was
inadvertent, the fact that she did describe citizens of the United States as “U.S.-Americans” was instrumental to prompting discussion of the rhetorical construction of U.S. identity and citizenship, especially as they are constructed relative to other American identities.

A direct connection to politics proper brought Upton back into the spotlight in 2008. Over a year after Upton’s interview, the Washington Post’s Jonathon Capehart made a telling comparison between the pageant contestant and Republican Vice Presidential candidate Sarah Palin. On his blog PostPartisan, and during an appearance on MSNBC on September 26, 2008, Capehart described Palin’s response to a question about her foreign policy credentials in this way:

[The] nails-on-a-chalkboard response, and the speed with which it ricocheted in cyberspace, reminded me of another embarrassing video clip of another woman aspiring to a higher position. I'm talking about 2007 Miss Teen South Carolina Lauren Caitlin in her quest to become Miss Teen USA. The analogy was significant – not only had a minute’s worth of airtime at a year-old Miss Teen USA pageant permeated collective consciousness, it reappeared as a part of the presidential election year political discourse. It was key that Capehart compared Upton to Palin and never invoked the not infrequent oratorical blunders of standing president George W. Bush. Bush’s reputation as a rather inept rhetor had become a bit of a running joke throughout his presidency. The gendered similarities and beauty pageant parallels made the Upton/Palin pairing a solid one. Palin, like Upton, had participated in pageants, and even though she was, in many ways, an accomplished politician, Capehart and the broader “public” were inclined to evaluate her by the same standards as former Miss
South Carolina Teen, Caitlin Upton. The most obvious suggestion behind the Palin/Upton comparison is that pageant contestants do not make capable political candidates. That is not necessarily a provocative claim, but considering that competitive pageants at most levels continue to promote their work based on a premise of inspiring regional or national patriotism, and that the victor of said pageants are to embody and represent the ideals of good citizenship, it becomes clear that there is a particular kind of active citizenship female pageant contestants are expected to practice, and it does not include inhabiting public office. In 2008, Palin’s quick ascension to “serious” politics demonstrated the possibility that someone like Upton could be a model for citizenship and embody the qualities of political leadership outside of pageant publics. Presuming their political intelligence feigned, voting publics were confronted with the implicit question, “Exactly how much do pageantry and politics share in common?” The answers they likely contemplated were made manifest in the public reactions to the interview segment at the 2007 Miss Teen USA pageant, as well as Capehart’s Palin/Upton comparison a year later.

As these artifacts demonstrate, the spectrum of public reactions to Upton’s Miss Teen USA interview response spoke to larger questions of individual rights and responsibilities, concerns about the role of competitive female pageantry in a climate of advanced gender equality, institutional culpability relative to the education and disciplining of children in the United States, and the potentially close relationship between pageants and politics. The conversations that Upton’s answer prompted reveal much about shared narratives of female citizenship in the United States, as well as the relationship between pageantry and citizenship. Carrie Prejean’s pageant interview in
2009 prompted similar conversations but magnified the concern of mixing pageants and politics.

Prejean found herself in an altogether different rhetorical position than Upton following her pageant interview. Whereas Upton seized upon the opportunity to publicly revise her initial answer, Prejean responded to her Q&A controversy by staunchly defending the position she supplied in her original response. In addition, because Prejean’s question concerned a provocative, and in many ways, partisan, political issue she faced different constraints in her post-pageant conversations. Upton’s question fell into a broad category of education, and although there are plenty of conflicting views on the state of education in the United States, it is generally unheard of for folks of any political persuasion to argue against education as a public good. Prejean’s interview question, however, focused on same-sex marriage, an especially divisive issue in legislative politics on both the state and national levels. As Prejean stepped forward to hear her question, pageant co-host Nadine Velazquez jokingly questioned, “Are we worried?” to which Hilton responded, “You should be!” The brief exchange turned out to be rather accurate foreshadowing. As was the case with Upton, Prejean was subjected to personal attacks in different public fora. Hilton’s vlog in particular overlapped with the most prominent themes across the Upton reactions – gender and intelligence. In that video, Hilton stated, “Now, let me explain to you – she lost, not because she doesn’t believe in gay marriage; Miss California los because she’s a dumb bitch, okay?” Hilton did go on to provide more support for the video’s central claim, stating that Prejean’s answer alienated people, and “Miss California, Miss USA, she doesn’t alienate, she unites, she inspires.” In addition, he suggested that a more appropriate and more
intelligent response for a potential Miss USA would involve a discussion of state and federal legislative rights and not a contestant’s personal opinion. The impact of the unwarranted – or at the very least, uncivil – *ad hominem* overshadowed the arguably more substantive arguments Hilton presented in his vlog, and perhaps rightly so. The Hilton/Prejean feud was thus widely covered, publicized, and critically dissected by commentators and pundits. As Prejean was becoming a spokesperson for a particular set of political beliefs, much of the public commentary on the controversy questioned why anyone should be concerned with a pageant contestant’s stance on gay marriage, anyway? Although the political purchase of her response rated low, in the comments thread following ABC News’ online reporting of the story, commenters provided Prejean with compliments – some more backhanded than others – praising her for stating her honest opinion. It is helpful to provide a sampling of the comments on that topic: “She should not be penalized for her political or religious views, even if they are offensive to many of us. Even dumb blondes have the right to voice their minds, not just be crowd pleasers”; “I applaud Miss Cal for saying what she thought.....it wasn't the best place to do it but she was asked the question and answered it honestly”; “With Miss Prejean's candid response to a polarizing question, I'm finally proud to be a Californian. The basic question was "What do you think...", which she answered with what SHE thought, should have won the contest for her simply because she had the guts to give a direct response to a direct question. The question itself [sic] put her in a no-win situation - it could not have been answered satisfactorily, and cost her the ability to win the contest. The only way she could have survived it would have been to avoid giving an answer. So I guess the lesson here is that not only politicians benefit from avoiding answering difficult questions, but
now it should be a societal norm?"; and one for good measure, “First of all, that question should not have even been asked at a beauty pageant! Way inappropriate! So would Miss Perez Hilton given [sic] her the crown if she lied in her answer? He asked a question, she answered it and stated her opinion. Why is that a crime? Go MISS CALIFORNIA!!"  

In these comments, the relative significance of Prejean’s answer is measured against generic standards of individual integrity, the structure and expectations applied to female competitive pageantry, and the right to freedom of expression in the United States. Although none are explicitly concerned with the potential political impact of her response, many of the comments express a kind of pride in or support for what they characterize as Prejean’s confident demonstration of free speech and American individualism. A perplexing dichotomy arises in which Prejean is revered for unapologetically stating her political beliefs – and she is justified in responding in this way, as the question asked “what do you think?” – yet the rhetorical power of those beliefs is undercut by the fact that she proclaimed them in the context of the Miss USA pageant. The following comment sums up this antithesis nicely:

To quote Perez Hilton, "She is not a politician, she's a hopeful Miss USA. Miss USA should represent everyone. Her answer alienated millions of gay and lesbian Americans, their families and their supporters." --------Since she's NOT a politician, making policy decisions, she's only giving a personal opinion. The fact is, no matter what her answer was she would have alienated millions of people, so why not just say what she believes? Perez was using the pageant to promote his own personal agenda, knowing the pressure she would feel to give a "politically
[sic] correct" answer. When that didn't happen he venomously lashed out against
her.\textsuperscript{109}

For all the insistence that Prejean had no links to politics proper, responses like this
revealed that Prejean’s position as a potential Miss USA and the pageant interview
segment were of some consequence in the arguably more generic contexts of enacting
democratic citizenship broadly and claiming one’s right to free speech, in particular.
Also, beyond public conversations and news media coverage of the controversy,
conservative media and anti-gay marriage organizations were eager to either “cash in” on
Prejean’s position or frame her as something of a darling of the Religious Right.
“Political influence” becomes a more ambiguous term when circumstances such as these
arise. In the weeks and months that followed, Prejean appeared on FOX News several
times to discuss the controversy and even landed the role of co-host on the cable news
channel’s morning show, \textit{Fox & Friends},\textsuperscript{110} filling in for regular host Gretchen Carlson,
who is no stranger to the world of competitive pageantry herself.\textsuperscript{111} Prejean also “made
television appearances at her San Diego church and on behalf of the National
Organization for Marriage, a group opposed to same-sex marriage.”\textsuperscript{112}

Prejean did not get to enjoy the strong public support for her free expression long.
Shortly after the Hilton/Prejean interview controversy, a good, old-fashioned nude photo
scandal befell Carrie Prejean.\textsuperscript{113} Around the same time the photos were released, the
Miss California USA organization began an investigation into whether Prejean had
violated her pageant contract, not only for violating “moral standards” by posing for
provocative photos, but also for “making personal appearances, giving interviews …
without permission from pageant officials.”\textsuperscript{114} It appeared that pageant officials were
particularly peeved about Prejean’s contract violations because they had literally invested in her as Miss California USA and a solid contender for the Miss USA title. Shanna Moakler, then co-executive director of Miss California USA, publicly confirmed that the organization paid for Prejean’s breast enhancement surgery prior to the Miss USA 2009 contest. Whatever remained of the same-sex marriage question controversy dissolved into full-scale scandal a few months later when someone released an amateur “sex tape” featuring Prejean.

Even before the more scandalous elements of Carrie Prejean’s public persona were revealed, the commentary surrounding her pageant interview and the ensuing “feud” with Perez Hilton was tinged with concerns about her standing as a model Miss USA contestant. Beyond the pageant, Hilton’s accusations challenged the unspoken, rather ambiguous conception of model-dom that female competitive pageantry promotes, prompting audiences to consider what it is exactly that Miss USA stands for — and by extension, Miss America — what her rights and responsibilities are, and taking those first two criteria into account, how she might best represent the majority of her fans (or, dare I say, constituents?). Prejean and Upton may not have been viewed as major political players, but as candidates for the highest offices to which girls in the United States are often taught to aspire, the provocative nature of their interview performances had a real impact on ongoing conversations about significant political and social issues, including gay rights and education. More broadly, Prejean and Upton sparked public concern about representation and the boundaries of democratic politics. Considering the extended media attention devoted to their responses, as well as the innumerable reactions they spurred across pageant publics and pageant audiences, it is difficult to argue that pageant
interviews do not reverberate outside of pageantry and in quintessentially political contexts.

Are We Past the “World Peace” Joke?: Taking Pageant Questions and Answers Seriously

It has frequently proven true that the most memorable contestants are not the winners – those determined to be the embodiment of a pageant’s patriotic ideals – but those who reign in public memory as the queens of scandal and the crown-bearers of controversy. In an era in which any publicity is good publicity, when in fact, a good number of young, female Hollywood hopefuls seem to have built fruitful and lasting careers on the foundation of an amateur sex tape scandal, it would not be absurd to argue that the morally questionable route to celebrity is indeed the most effective one. Simultaneously, however, the scandal factor associated with these types of public missteps has significantly decreased. Not only are audiences desensitized to the nude photo/sex tape faux pas, but the commentaries and analyses that surround such scandals say nothing about the significance of pageantry beyond disciplining the feminine and/or the female in public culture. The question of pageant-as-exploitation remains significant, even in the early twenty-first century, but it is old hat relative to a cultural form that has always toed the line of tawdry and has seen its share of scandal.

The old version of the pageant scandal has perhaps gone stale, but recent pageant controversies are evidence of a kind of reinvigoration of the competitive pageant form. It is arguably the controversy factor that keeps pageant publics on their toes and audiences
somewhat interested in the performance of competitive female pageantry. Contemporary
pageantry is thus arguably illustrative of a “discourse theory of citizenship,” as the
pageant is one of the most recognizable and persistent models of female citizenship in
recent U.S. history. In the context of pageantry’s public controversies, one can
reasonably test Asen’s contention that “enactments of citizenship may be differently
available to different people,” and further, consider the significance of the multiple
public meanings and dynamics of power that lie therein.

In the specific cases of Upton and Prejean, reactions to those pageant
controversies indicate that the form is significant to U.S. culture and remains so because
it contributes to shared definitions of femininity and citizenship. As publics sort out
pageant contestants’ worth relative to pageant cultures in particular and U.S. culture
broadly, they contribute to discourses of gendered personhood and legitimize particular
enactments of citizenship. Not only are pageants potential pathways to education and
lifelong careers for their contestants, but they are also a means to enacting citizenship in
explicitly public ways. Citizenship may be understood not as a thing possessed by
individuals but a performative mode of public engagement, thus it is necessary to
include the ways in which pageant publics, and other marginalized or counterpublics,
enact citizenship in order to consider meanings and consequences for those performances
in the broader context of democratic deliberation and civic engagement.
Notes


3 Recently, in his article, “Fear and Loathing in Graduate School” in *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, Mark Braude bemoaned college ranking systems, “The idea of rating college programs like pageant contestants is also a troubling one.” And who could forget how Sarah Palin’s history as a pageant queen constantly invoked during her 2008 Vice Presidential run. The pageant is invoked in order to undercut the credibility of ranking systems and a political candidate, respectively, as the pageant is understood as a shallow, inconsequential competition.


6 Once semi-nude and compromising photos of Miss California USA 2009 Carrie Prejean and Miss Nevada USA 2006 Katie Rees were published on the Internet, both women were criticized for posing provocatively (both were eventually stripped of their titles – no

7 Photos of Miss USA 2010 Rima Fakih competing in a pole dancing contest in Detroit in 2007 were released after she was crowned. In spite of the scandal, Fakih remained the Miss USA 2010 titleholder. See “Top 10 Beauty Pageant Scandals,” *TIME*, http://www.time.com/time/specials/packages/article/0,28804,1873790_1873792,00.html (accessed January 4, 2012).

8 Caroline Schwitzky won her local preliminary for Miss Florida USA in 2011, the Miss Weston USA pageant, but she was de-crowned when photos of her as Miss Exxxotica were released. Schwitzky said she only competed in the Miss Exxxotica beauty contest at a porn convention and was not involved in the porn industry. See “Pageant Winner De-Crowned for Immorality,” 7News, March 10, 2011, http://www.wsvn.com/news/articles/local/21003741041239/ (accessed January 4, 2012).

As explained in note three, in just the past half decade, we have seen several pageant “scandals” of this nature, including the release of semi-nude photos of Miss California 2009 Carrie Prejean, admitted drug and alcohol abuse by Miss USA 2006 Tara Conner, and unearthed photos of Miss USA 2010, Rima Fakih, participating in – and winning – a pole dancing contest sponsored by a Detroit radio station.


Ibid. Bisbort defines “media scandal” as, “[A]ny media circumstance or action that knowingly and willfully ‘offends’ the truth by distortion, libel, outright lies, and manipulative propaganda. A celebrity scandal … is not a media scandal, unless the media had a hand in the event.”


Ibid.


Segal, “A Remorseful Queen Plays the Trump Card.”


As referenced above, the celebrity party girl or bad girl is not a novel idea, but has arguably become a significant pop culture meme in an age of constantly circulating nude photos, amateur sex tapes, and “money shots” taken by unrelenting paparazzi and consumed by mass audiences. The early 2000s trio of Paris Hilton, Britney Spears, and


24 See Deford, 158-160; and Riverol, 39-40.

25 A.R. Riverol contends that the Miss Universe Pageant “makes no bones about what it is,” i.e. it began as swimsuit-centric spin-off of Miss America, and it largely continues in that tradition today. Riverol, 41.


31 Riverol, 13.


33 “New Miss America Named: Tampa Beauty Chosen at Miami When Two are Disqualified,” *New York Times*, June 24, 1930.

34 See Deford, 140-146; and Riverol, 33.


According to Erich Goode and Nachman Ben-Yehuda, a moral panic is “a scare about a threat or supposed threat from deviants or ‘folk devils,’ a category of people who, presumably, engage in evil practices and are blamed for menacing society’s culture, way of life, and central values. The word “scare” implies that the concern over, fear of, or hostility toward the folk devil is out of proportion to the actual threat that is claimed.” Erich Goode and Nachman Ben-Yehuda, “Prologue,” in *Moral Panics: The Social Construction of Deviance*, edited by Erich Goode and Nachman Ben-Yehuda (West Sussex: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), 2.

44 See Craig Calhoun, ed., *Habermas and the Public Sphere* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1992) for selected critiques and analyses.

45 Phillips, 490.

46 Riverol, 50.

47 I also discuss the JonBenet Ramsey case in the context of pageant agency, or *pageancy*, in child pageants in Chapter Three.


50 Cooley, 92-93.


Banet-Weiser, 6-7.

Deford, 246.


It was Miss Illinois, Judith Ford, who was crowned Miss America 1969 in the pageant held in September of 1968. It is worth noting for factual purposes that beginning in 1950, the Miss America title was postdated. In recent years, however, the national telecast has changed locations and shuffled from network to network (in 2011, it returned to its original network, ABC), making for “many exciting challenges and fresh changes to The Miss America Organization.” Since 2006, the contest has been held in the month of January in Las Vegas, Nevada, and the title is no longer postdated. See Deford, *There She Is*; and “The 2000s – Decade in Review,” *Miss America*, http://www.missamerica.org/our-miss-americas/2000 review.aspx (accessed May 11, 2011).


Dow, 145.


Craig notes the complexity of the history of black beauty pageants and points out, importantly, that they “predated attempts to integrate all-white contests.” Ibid., 46.

Williams was technically Miss America 1984, as this was one of the years in which the national contest was held later in the year, and the title was thus post-dated by one year.

Kinloch, 99.

Banet-Weiser, 123-124.

Ibid., 131.

Ibid., 143.

Deford, 149.


Ibid.

Ibid.

Ibid.


Hilary Levey, “Here She Is … and There She Goes?” *Contexts* 6, no. 3 (2007): 72.

Riverol, 41.

The Miss America pageant used the phrase “bathing suit” until 1946, when it was replaced by the word “swimsuit.” See Riverol, 40.

See Deford 61-64.

Banet-Weiser, 44.

Ibid., 44-45.

Ibid., 47.

Ibid., 45-46.

Ibid., 45.

“Thought-provoking” is the term host Mario Lopez used to describe the questions in the final interview round of the Miss Teen USA 2007 pageant telecast. “Uhhh . . . What Did She Just Say?? Miss Teen South Carolina 2007,” *YouTube*, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qQdhMSEqhfg&feature=related (accessed May 3, 2011).

In another change of official pageant language regarding the more scandalous segment, the swimsuit component is now known in the Miss America pageant as “Lifestyle &

89 The only category that one might dispute as being based on appearance is Talent. Swimsuit and Evening Wear are straightforward beauty contest categories, but Talent requires contestants to demonstrate a skill or engage in an entertaining, high quality, expressive performance. It is important, however, that they look good while performing their talents, and it is standard practice to remain in pageant-appropriate attire, like evening gowns or custom-designed costumes that reflect the evening wear theme. Miss America details its scoring breakdown on its website, but Miss USA judging must be pieced together by visiting the state pageant websites. See “News: National Judging Process,” Miss America, http://www.missamerica.org/news/press-kit/national-judging-process.aspx (accessed May 3, 2011); and “Become the Next Miss USA,” Miss USA, http://www.missuniverse.com/missusa/info/become_the_next (accessed May 3, 2011).

90 Banet-Weiser, 74.


92 Banet-Weiser, 77.


Deford, 181.

Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca, 111.


See the “Comments” sections of the articles on Salon.com (see n. 79 and 81), as well as the ongoing comments – over four years later – listed under Upton’s infamous YouTube video (see n. 73).


Ibid.
In Spanish, there are several ways to refer to residents of the United States and/or North America, e.g. *estadounidense*, *norteamericano/a*. Latin American residents are also described by their country of origin or the region of America in which their birth country exists.


109 Ibid.


116 The “sex tape” in question might be better characterized as a “sext” that Prejean sent to her then-boyfriend at age seventeen. See Mike Celizic, “Carrie Prejean: ‘I Was Not


118 Ibid., 203.

119 Ibid., 204.

Conclusion

Alterna-Pageants, Anti-Models, and Possibilities for Feminist Citizenship

We cannot understand counterpublics very well if we fail to see that there are contradictions and perversities inherent in the organization of all publics that are not captured by critiques of the dominant public’s exclusions or ideological limitations. Counterpublics are publics, too.

– Michael Warner, *Publics and Counterpublics*

Troubling Contests: Pageant Counterpublics and Alterna-Pageants

Ms. Wheelchair America, Miss Landmine, Miss Klingon Empire, Miss Plus America, Miss HIV Stigma Free, Miss Beautiful Morals – these are just a few of a variety of contemporary competitive pageants that challenge mainstream pageant models of identity and citizenship. Alternative pageant forms – or alterna-pageants, as I will refer to them here – represent a wide range of identities and ideological agendas.² In spite of their obvious differences, a quick survey of the alterna-pageants mentioned above shows that there are several shared characteristics that compose, in part, a rhetoric of pageantry in the United States.³ The titles of the contests alone reflect and reinforce the structural components of gender, age, and implied heterosexuality in competitive pageantry. A requisite component of a pageant title, the salutations Ms., Miss, or Mr.,⁴ perform the work of identifying and differentiating potential contestants and audiences. The title is also a primary indicator of the pageant’s topical or ideological focus, and with emphases like physical ability and illness, television fan culture, and internal beauty, the above
sampling of alterna-pageants evidences a desire to promote the value of “other” ways of being. These titles are noticeably more specific than those of the most famous recognizable mainstream pageants, Miss America, Miss USA, and even Miss Universe. It is implied (although clearly not practiced) that anyone – specifically, any biologically sexed woman who adequately performs femininity – can embody the ideals of Miss America. Like the mythic American Dream, hard work and determination are the only requisite qualities any little girl needs in order to achieve the title of Miss America or Miss USA. This is not so in alternative pageant cultures or pageant counterpublics. Alterna-pageant organizations are open about their selectivity. Indeed, the stated purpose of many alterna-pageants is to increase visibility and acceptance of marginalized groups – in essence, to normalize difference, to varying degrees, via one of the United States’ most traditional and normalized cultural performances, the pageant.

In effect, alterna-pageants tend to challenge dominant narratives that simultaneous reinforce expectations of exceptionality and normalcy, as well as perpetuate falsehoods about unencumbered equal access and complete freedom from discrimination. Intentionally or not, alterna-pageants thus help to reveal what is problematic about discourses of post-racism and post-feminism, which have gained traction in late twentieth and early twenty-first century public arguments that deny structural inequalities in the service of championing the unquestionable ability of the autonomous liberal subject. Alterna-pageant publics often do not express a desire to have their pageant organizations or their contestants folded into mainstream pageant culture. Rather, they tend toward a celebration of the otherness of their participants’ individual and collective identities as non-normative yet valuable components of U.S. culture and society as a
whole. Often, the objective of alterna-pageant organizations is not to gloss over the “otherness” in their identities, or to function in the ways that discourses of colorblindness and post-feminism do, but to make visible and de-stigmatize difference. Ms. Wheelchair America’s mission, for example, is “to provide an opportunity of achievement for women who happen to be wheelchair users to successfully educate and advocate for the more than 54 million Americans living with disabilities.”7 In addition to de-stigmatizing the physically disabled (female)8 body, an important part of Ms. Wheelchair America’s duties is to engage in rights-based advocacy work. Indeed, “The selected representative [of Ms. Wheelchair America] must be able to communicate both the needs and the accomplishments of her constituency to the general public, the business community and the legislature.”9 For this and other alterna-pageants, policy change is equally desirable to, if not more desirable than, achieving shifts in cultural attitudes. The political identity work that is part and parcel to Ms. Wheelchair America is evidence of the ways in which the concept of citizenship pervades pageant counterpublics, as well as those considered mainstream.

Alterna-pageants thus play a significant role in a rhetoric of pageantry in which competitive pageants are potentially liberating, or “significant sites for constructing notions of locality and community,”10 but are also simultaneously complicit in the potentially oppressive task of “[reinforcing] hegemonic social relations and [domesticating] race and class divisions.”11 Like proliferating historic and mainstream competitive pageant publics before them, alterna-pageants complicate implicitly coded, hegemonic ideals of U.S. identity and citizenship by making the anti-model the model. Often, there is an impulse in scholarly analyses of such challenges to normalized cultural
scripts to evaluate these transgressions as empowering, de-centering, even paradigm-shifting. However, as with mainstream female competitive pageants and child pageants, some alterna-pageants have been charged with exploiting their contestants by amplifying their otherness for political or commercial gain. Certainly transgressive potential exists in alternatives to mainstream pageantry, but a richer critical examination of the symbolic and material value of counterpublic pageantry reveals the complexity of alterna-pageantry in and of itself.

In recent years, for example, the Miss Landmine pageant has been subject to charges of exploitation in global media. Miss Landmine has taken place twice, in Angola in 2008 and Cambodia in 2009. The concept was conceived by a heterosexual, white, male, Norwegian film and theater director, Mortem Traavik, who visited Angola and was “struck” by two things: “the suffering caused by landmines that had left more than 80,000 people maimed after a 20-year civil war,” and “the Angolan passion for beauty pageants and their carnival atmosphere.” Although Traavik is not directly affected by the violent and disabling effects of landmines, he took up the cause for “non-Western” women who are. Traavik composed the Miss Landmine Manifesto, which declares, “Everybody has the right to be beautiful!” and cites several ideological commitments that support this declaration, including “female pride and empowerment,” “disabled pride and empowerment,” “global and local landmine awareness,” and “[challenging] old and ingrown concepts of cultural cooperation.” For those familiar with changing tides in discourses of victims’ identities and rights, perhaps the most provocative tenet is the commitment to “replace the passive term ‘Victim’ with the active term ‘Survivor.’” In publicity photos, Miss Landmine contestants are posed against a
variety of “exotic” settings – in two-piece swimsuits standing on the beach, or seated at bar, enjoying a cocktail. In nearly every case, the contestant’s leg and/or arm amputation is prominently featured, rather than obscured or hidden. Some wear prosthetic limbs, which is suggestive of the prize that the pageant winner receives – a customized prosthesis from “Norway’s leading orthopaedic clinic.” The individual components of the Miss Landmine pageant come together as a rich text for scholarly inquiry into the symbolic and material power of pageant rhetoric, especially as Miss Landmine in particular relates to matters of social justice. In response to the two Miss Landmine pageant performances in 2008 and 2009, numerous journalists and activists have posed the questions: who speaks for whom in the global movement to eradicate landmines, and are the means – the all-female, competitive beauty pageant – justifiable relative to the ends?

The structural elements of Miss Landmine, from origin story to pageant performance, prompt questions about its symbolic and material relationship with twenty-first century colonialism and white, heterosexist patriarchy. In spite of being in compliance with traditionally sexist and racist rhetorics of oppression, the organization claims a strong investment in empowering and furthering the rights of women and the disabled. “Everybody deserves to be beautiful” is the pageant’s unapologetic motto, but it is unclear if Miss Landmine is promoting the “natural” beauty of women mutilated by landmines or if the contestants are competing to win a prosthesis that will make their physical bodies more normal, and thus, more beautiful. How, then, does one proceed with a feminist rhetorical analysis of the Miss Landmine pageant? Is the attention that such a performance garners on a global scale more beneficial to victims/survivors of
landmine injuries than it is potentially oppressive or exploitative of the marginalized statuses that they arguably represent? Does – or can – a pageant like Miss Landmine positively effect change in rigid and sometimes restrictive pageant discourses of gendered identity and citizenship? The case of Miss Landmine is only one among proliferating and increasingly diverse iterations of twenty-first century competitive pageantry. The example is significant, however, as it prompts inquiries into the implications, even the consequences, of pageantry’s continued reliance on the mainstream pageant form to communicate not-so-mainstream messages. Miss Landmine is perhaps more easily problematized than alterna-pageants that are produced by and for the members of the publics that they claim to represent, but it is an illustrative example of potential complications of appropriating the mainstream cultural form of the pageant in order to diversify public discourses of identity, normativity, human rights, and civil rights. Mired in these apparent contradictions and subject to accusations and scrutiny from outsiders, alterna-pageants arguably remain capable of “[articulating] divergent identity projects.”20

The concluding section of this project proceeds in the grips of this conundrum.

In the remainder of this conclusion, I consider the significance of alterna-pageant publics in discourses of U.S. pageantry historically and presently, specifically those of gender impersonation pageants. Mainstream pageantry is simultaneously derided and celebrated, but it is widely accepted as a “normal” cultural performance by pageant and non-pageant publics alike. In mainstream pageantry, the model contestant symbolically embodies discourses of the most valued type of normative female personhood and citizenship in the United States. By contrast, alterna-pageant participants are often not “normal” by pageant audiences’ standards. This is not a “problem” for alterna-pageants,
as noted above, as it is the affirmation of difference and/or alleged deviance that propels them, in part. Achieving inclusivity may be a component of alterna-pageant rhetorics, like the duties of Ms. Wheelchair America imply, but it is often a celebration of the best of difference, or a model anti-model, that tends to drive non-mainstream pageantry. That said, it is important to note that I have, in effect, positioned “alterna-pageants” relative to mainstream pageants. Positioning the two types of pageantry in this way creates pageant/alterna-pageant binary and, by extension, a hierarchy in which mainstream pageantry occupies a higher tier than alterna-pageantry. However, I must stress that alterna-pageants not be solely defined as marginal publics orbiting a mainstream pageant public center, as they are indeed pageant publics unto themselves. Although pageants exist in discursive hierarchies, it is more appropriate to imagine all pageant publics as co-publics, rather than sub-publics—a power differential implied by comparing mainstream pageantry and alternative pageantry. Thus, in spite of my attempts to redistribute discursive power among pageant publics, I acknowledge that any discussion of pageantry in the United States elicits comparisons with the most recognizable pageant organizations and those organizations’ structures and traditions. Using that inevitability as a point of departure, I focus on alterna-pageants in this concluding section in order to explore how discourses of identity and difference in contemporary pageantry influence and are influenced by dominant conceptions of gendered citizenship in the United States.

Bearing in mind the “rhetorical history” and “rhetorical evolution” elements of this study, I ground this analysis of alterna-pageants in a discussion of the masque (alternatively, the masquerade or the pageant-masque). The masque provides an important point of comparison for the most popular kind of contemporary alterna-
pageant, the gender impersonation pageant. Gender is a primary component of pageantry throughout history and across its diverse forms, thus the potential challenge to mainstream pageant discourses of identity and citizenship should be examined first and foremost in gender impersonation pageants. In spite of feminist and queer challenges to the normalizing discourses of gender and sexuality in the last half-century, collective allegiance to “traditional” gender roles and “compulsory heterosexuality” remains firm. Gender impersonation pageants demonstrate just how much is at stake when those attitudes are challenged, even in a marginally valuable cultural form like the pageant.

The documentary film Pageant and the Miss Gay America website are the primary texts I engage in this brief analysis of counterpublic pageantry and alternative pageants. The subject of Pageant is the 34th annual Miss Gay America contest – a female impersonation pageant that is also one of the most sustainable and longest-running alternatives to mainstream competitive female pageants, Miss America and Miss USA. Pageant is educational in its focus on the Miss Gay America organization and the structure of the pageant, but it is also dramatic in its intimacy with its subjects, as it features Miss Gay America hopefuls and their families in their preparations for the national contest in 2006. The documentary provides a framework for understanding the rhetorical function of the Miss Gay America pageant in gender impersonation pageants and pageantry more broadly. In the United States, gender impersonation pageant participants inhabit an implicitly anti-model status, but within their pageant counterpublics, that anti-model status is the model. The concept – and often the embodiment – of the model anti-model in impersonation pageantry suggest a radical break from normative gender and other identity scripts. However, a closer look at
pageant counterpublics reveals much about the potentially transgressive nature of normatively gendered and sexualized citizenship and raises questions about the implications of uncritically praising the anti-model.24

Postmodern Masques: The Impersonation Pageant as the Model Anti-Model

Female and male impersonation pageants – or drag pageants, as they are popularly known – have a relatively long history25 and, to date, represent the most visible alternative to mainstream pageantry in the United States. It is arguably due to the primacy of gender performances in drag or female and male impersonation pageants that make this so. Because competitive pageants in the United States are first and foremost structured around the performance of normative, model gender roles – which, in turn, reinforce the heterosexual matrix,26 or heteronormative assumptions about the relationship between biological sex and sexual desire – pageant counterpublics that buck normative discourses of gender and sexuality are often perceived as presenting particularly subversive challenges to model subjectivity and citizenship in pageantry and in U.S. culture and society more broadly.

To those outside of impersonator pageant counterpublics, this alternative to the mainstream pageant appears to be a distinctly contemporary example of alternative pageantry. Gender play and pageantry, however, are old friends. Although mainstream pageant cultures are often strictly committed to enforcing gender conformity, there is historical and contemporary evidence that ambiguous or non-traditional gender performances have, at times, found an expressive outlet in the evolving pageant form.
One may indeed argue that changing attitudes toward LGBTQI communities in the last half-century has enabled the proliferation of gender non-conformist pageantry and its visibility, but the tradition of the masquerade, alternately known as the “pageant-masque” and the “masque,” is evidence that contemporary alternative pageantry and its discourses have roots in historical pageant practices.

The masque and gender impersonator pageant are by no means mirror images of one another, but they are arguably related by the “sensibilities” that they evoke, and the challenges to gender conformity that are often read onto them. One of the primary ways in which identity categories are blurred or violated in both the masque and the pageant is via “cross dressing.” Judith Butler famously argued that drag could be the ultimate parodic subversion of the notion that true gender identities exist, a theoretical position that has been roundly critiqued and eventually revised by Butler herself. In spite of any philosophical failings, however, the sentiment that informs this kind of gender troubling remains key to both prevailing and challenging discourses of gendered identity and citizenship in the United States. I turn now to a brief exploration of the particular historical and rhetorical functions of the masque and the alterna-pageant, placing particular emphasis on the gender impersonation pageant as a point of comparison. This exploration will enable an evaluation of the potential implications of such “gender troubling” in female impersonator pageants relative to broader pageant history and culture in the United States.

Arguably, contemporary interpretations of non-conformist competitive pageantry are more closely related to the masque than the Progressive Era historical pageant. Characteristically, alterna-pageants evidence a carnivalesque flavor that historical and
mainstream contemporary pageants in the United States have gone to great lengths to avoid or from which, they have attempted to distance themselves (whether those attempts have been successful or not is, of course, arguable). In the early twentieth century, however, pageant folk in the United States used the terms “masque” and “pageant” rather loosely, and on occasion, they might have used them interchangeably. The differences between masques and pageants were slight in the early 1900s, but those differences were noticeable to the keenest pageant minds. For example, it was American Pageant Association (APA) president and Progressive Era pageant master William Chauncy Langdon’s contention that the pageant and the masque could be differentiated by their “essential characteristics”: “The pageant is historical; the masque is philosophical.”

Further, in APA publications, the organization “officially acknowledged the distinction between the realistic ‘pageant’ and the abstract symbolic ‘masque,’ and that, properly speaking, [the APA] promoted local historical ‘pageant-masques’ – but continued to call them ‘pageants.’” The masque-versus-pageant debacle evidences a hierarchy among types of pageantry. Langdon’s division by essential characteristics suggests that the historical approach was considered to be facts-based, objective, and straightforward, whereas the philosophical quality of the “abstract” masque was seen as idealistic or potentially rife with questions about the nature of reality. The masque’s message was not as straightforward as the pageant – its unruly, artistic spirit allowed a bit too much room for interpretation. Langdon’s writings and official APA publications indicate that the historical pageant was better suited to the pageant movement’s didactic mission, so the practice of historical pageantry took precedence over the production of community masques.
An air of discomfort pervaded Langdon’s distinction between the two forms. David Glassberg notes that part of the APA’s enduring debate over the definition of pageantry contained a question of “whether or not to include abstract symbolism [a quality associated with the more ‘philosophical’ masque] as a component of historical pageantry.” Historical pageantry’s chief objective was to cultivate a homogenous, unified community identity. Local and national organizations like the APA used dramatic, large-scale, multimedia interpretations of historical events as the primary means to this end. Such interpretations may have allowed for some artistic license in the production stages, but the finished performance was presented as a factual account of the history of a place. It was the goal of these scenic dramas to produce a kind of nationalist reverence from the immediate audience – to communicate an “official” version of history and to discourage critical questioning. By comparison, the masque may not have been a radical or revolutionary rhetorical performance, but it did allow room for obvious abstractions or artistic creativity in the interpretation of historical events. As such, pageant masters like Langdon perceived the masque as “mere art or entertainment” rather than an “effective messenger” that could impact a community’s “social transformation.”

In the Progressive Era United States, the pageant and the masque did not tend to be, in practice, radically different forms. However, in a historical moment remembered for its proliferation of social reform movements and changes in cultural landscapes, the conceptual and definitional distinctions between pageant and masque evidence a discursively constructed sense of the former’s superiority over the latter. As the pageant form has shifted and transformed over time and across diverse publics, hierarchies of
pageantry have been translated to accommodate those changing contexts. Those
hierarchies are most often structured and maintained based on each pageant public’s
idealized performance of gender. The historical pageant/masque binary provides a
backdrop against which contemporary pageantry can be analyzed, and thus their
influence on public discourses of identity and citizenship can be more clearly discerned.
Although it is not directly descended from Progressive Era historical pageantry,
mainstream competitive female pageantry echoes its predecessor’s ideological
commitment to cultivating a largely homogenous national identity. A main difference in
the cultivation of this identity then and now is that it is explicitly gendered female in the
majority of competitive pageants. Historical pageants were not devoid of cultural
prescriptions; however, and they may also be remembered for abiding by hegemonic
discourses of male masculinity and female femininity. Remaining consistent with
dominant narratives of traditional gender performances and their presumed attendant
sexualities, the historical pageant has arguably helped shape contemporary pageant
hierarchies, both among mainstream pageant publics and between mainstream pageant
publics and counterpublics.

To this point, I have focused on the historical pageant/masque relationship in the
United States in the early twentieth century, but a broader detailing of the masque’s
history demonstrates another level on which the masque and the alterna-pageant are
related. Dramatic and literary histories of the masque or masquerade focus on what
might be recognizable as a more familiar collective understanding of the masque. In
popular forms of entertainment, from historical fiction to film, it is this definition that is
invoked most often: “An entertainment in which masked participants dance; a
masquerade, a masked ball.”37 This type of masque is one that conjures visions of the carnivalesque, the spectacular, even the socially deviant. Historical descriptions of outdoor and indoor masques suggest that less prudence and more debauchery was indeed a significant characteristic of the form. As he describes predecessors to the seventeenth-century masque, Arthur H.D. Prendergrast intones the derision with which early European masquerades were viewed:

The “Masques” … were probably the somewhat rude popular amusements more properly called *Mummeries or Disguisings*, which consisted mostly of buffoonery without any dramatic coherency; and even the best specimens of this class would be performed, not by the nobles themselves, but for their delectation by persons hired or pressed into the service for the occasion.38

Thus, the tradition of the masque, as it was passed on from the seventeenth-century European form, evokes unsavory connotations. In Prendergrast’s description, the masqued performers – buffoons, the lot of them – and the audience – nobles, for whom the vulgar amusement was staged – are discursively positioned in distinctly hierarchical ways. The details of the performance are missing, but the message is clear: in its earliest incarnations, the masque’s crudeness was to be embodied or performed by the commoner and gazed at by the nobles. As the court’s masque diversified into celebrations of religious and secular holidays, however, the performance of power relations was also reinterpreted. In her history of May Day celebrations, Jennette Emeline Carpenter Lincoln quotes this description by Sir Walter Scott of the strolling mummers, or maskers, in the throes of revelry:

The appearance of the crowd was grotesque in the extreme. It was composed of
men, women, and children, ludicrously disguised in various habits, and presenting
groups equally diversified and grotesque. Here one fellow with a horse’s head
painted before him and a tail behind him and the whole covered with a long foot
cloth, which was supposed to hide the body of the animal, ambled, caracoled,
pranced, and plunged as he performed the celebrated part of the hobbyhorse…. St.
George and the Dragon appear in action. A bear, a wolf, and one or two other
wild animals … men disguised as women, women as men … children wore the
dress of aged people and tottered with crutch sticks in their hands … while
grandsires assumed the infantine tone as well as the dress of children. Besides
these many had their faces painted, and wore their shirts over the rest of their
dress, while colored pasteboard and ribbons furnished out decorations for others.39

While this passage evidences a disdain for the “grotesque” scene, gone is the distinction
between the object to be gazed upon and the subjects controlling the gaze. All are
“revelers” in the May Day masque. However, the description of the performances is
particularly important in this scene. It is telling that Sir Walter Scott views humans
dressed as animals, “men disguised as women,” and children swapping identities with the
aged as “grotesque in the extreme,” a perspective that is a consistent component of
hegemonic discourses of identity, and especially gender and sexuality in contemporary
U.S. contexts.

With these histories of the masque in mind, I turn to gender impersonation
pageants in the United States in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Once known as
drag pageants – a categorization that still holds today – gender impersonation pageants
have become increasingly popular in LGBTQI cultural contexts in particular. It is first
necessary to define this kind of pageantry and determine how it relates to mainstream competitive pageantry in the United States in the early twenty-first century. In female and male impersonation, individual contestants compete against one another in an exaggerated performance of gender. In most cases, but certainly not all, the contestant performs a gender that does not align with his or her biological sex. Female impersonator pageants are thus composed of biologically male contestants, and male impersonator pageants with biologically female contestants. It is this characteristic of impersonator pageantry that leads to its characterization as drag performance. Cross-gender performance and the necessary stylization of that performance in the contestant’s style of dress, behavior, and mannerisms align with the historical practice of drag.40

As noted above, there is a kind of kinship between the masque and the drag or impersonation pageant, but one must be careful not to consider them interchangeable with one another. Both forms exude a vernacular quality that the didactic historical pageant lacks, but this does not mean that masques or gender impersonator pageants should not be understood as serious cultural performances. In terms of public memory, literary history, and persistent discourses of the masque indicate, it is a performance arguably less invested in an expression of integrity than the contemporary female or male impersonator pageant. By conflating the two, one runs the risk of undermining the credibility of the impersonation pageant. Indeed, the tagline on the homepage for one of the most enduring female impersonator pageants, Miss Gay America, proclaims in bold, blue typeface: “Miss Gay America…. Where illusion, integrity, professionalism and talent become one!”41 The slogan not only reflects the Miss Gay America organization’s
view of itself as “a symbol of excellence since 1972,”42 but also provides a serious characterization of the pageant for participants and external audiences to consider.

The emphasis on integrity, professionalism, and excellence is significant, considering collective popular and scholarly characterizations of drag as “camp.” The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines the adjective “camp” as “ostentatious, exaggerated, affected, theatrical; effeminate or homosexual; pertaining to or characteristic of homosexuals.”43 Susan Sontag ambiguously defined camp as a “sensibility” or “taste,” also, as an “unmistakably modern … variant of sophistication.”44 Anthropologist Esther Newton condenses the *OED’s* and Sontag’s explanations in *Mother Camp: Female Impersonators in America*, referring to “camp” as “homosexual humor and taste.”45 In other words, “camp” encompasses or describes a lot of things that are not taken seriously in dominant U.S. culture. Newton further explicates how professional drag queens “represent the stigma of the gay world,” in part, as purveyors of “camp”:

The clever drag queen possesses skills that are widely distributed and prized in the gay world: verbal facility and wit, a sense of “camp” … and the ability to do both “glamorous” and comic drag. In exclusively gay settings such as bars and parties, drag queens may be almost lionized. But in public – that is, any domain belonging to the straight world – the situation is far different. Female impersonators say they never recognize a homosexual whom they know unless they are recognized first. One homosexual man put it to me succinctly when I asked him if he had ever done professional drag: “Hell no,” he exclaimed, “it’s bad enough just bein’ a cocksucker, ain’t it?”46
This passage touches on several significant themes relative to the role of pageantry in collective narratives of identity and citizenship and enables an analysis of changing views of female impersonation and homosexuality as represented through pageantry. Once the “stigma of the gay world,” gender impersonation pageants provide a “legitimate” platform for professional drag queening in the twenty-first century. Although “bein’ a cocksucker” remains the root of the “stigma,” collective perceptions of the value of “camp” have arguably changed, especially as camp performances have become discursively balanced by legitimizing narratives of essential maleness and masculinity. I turn now to a brief interrogation of one example of female impersonation pageantry that evidences changing discourses of valuable identities in pageant counterpublics and potentially resonates in broader discourses of pageantry and citizenship.

Miss Gay America is No Lady: A Rhetoric Pageant Masculinity and Authenticity

The documentary film Pageant, shot in 2006 and released in 2008, follows five female impersonators and their families and friends as they prepare to compete in the 34th Annual Miss Gay America (MGA) pageant. The five hopefuls have won local or regional titles that have qualified them to be contestants in the national Miss Gay America contest.

Pageant begins with a quick primer on Miss Gay America. The first shot in the sequence, which is simply white text over a black background, ambiguously states: “The Miss Gay America Pageant is about the art of illusion.” This statement fades and another fills the screen: “The use of female hormones or surgical body enhancements is
forbidden.” The stark and straightforward intro suggests the tone of the film will be serious – perhaps an overtly political qualification of female impersonation as an art or a commentary on the pageant as an expressive outlet in LGBTQI communities.

However, as the film’s soundtrack fades in – a hybrid of Lawrence Welk’s champagne music and Rodgers and Hammerstein’s score to the musical *Cinderella* – and the text disappears, the first of the film’s images are lighter than the pseudo-disclaimers portend. Here are individual contestants in the process of preparing for competition. There is a close-up of one contestant applying hot pink lipstick and heavily lined lips, a shot of another securing her falsies into place with duct tape, and after a few more demonstrative tidbits, the film’s title appears over a shot of all fifty contestants onstage as the final round of the pageant commences. Each contestant is adorned in a black evening gown, and the group is divided in the center of the stage in order to clear a literal path for those who have cleared the metaphorical one for them. The current year’s contestants have made way for past Miss Gay America winners who parade onstage and create a visual timeline that functions as a tribute to the organization’s groundbreaking pageant legacy and its continued commitment to the highest standards of the art of female impersonation.

As the film’s opening sequence explains, MGA officials define the contest as a female impersonation pageant in which illusion is the only permissible strategy. Specifically, “Contestants must be male, at least twenty-one (21) years old and can not have or be on any type hormone. Absolutely no breast implants, cosmetic or body enhancing implants below the neck or silicone (or any other similar type product-chemical) injections, excluding the face, will be allowed before or during the contestant's reign.” In order to participate, contestants must meet the MGA requirement of being a
biological male, but in spite of the title of the contest, they are not required to identify as homosexual to participate. *Pageant* repeatedly quotes MGA participants on their dedication to the performance of “illusion,” but it is implied that the illusion of gender is preferable to any attempted illusory performance of sexuality. The owners of the MGA pageant nearly admit it themselves: “Does the contestant have to be gay? No…. But it does help.”

“Female impersonator” as an identifying term has referred to a biological male who dresses in drag, or “cross dresses,” and performs an impression of a notable female celebrity. Cher, Liza Minnelli, Barbra Streisand, and other female celebrities who have achieved iconic status among gay male audiences are among the most popular identities of male celebrity female impersonators. “Drag queen,” however, has been a term used to describe any female impersonator – the celebrity component is not required – although the persona adopted by the impersonator may parody a celebrity or effect a celebrity quality all its own. Rupaul might be the most widely recognizable drag queen of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. Rupaul’s drag identity is original, and Rupaul is a celebrity drag queen. These distinctions are not universal, nor do they hold up in all impersonator contexts (e.g. pageants, impersonator revues, drag balls). MGA’s contestants usually represent a bit of a mixed bag – the majority of the contestants featured in *Pageant* perform an original identity, but they may draw from inspiration from an iconic female celebrity. For example, Coti Collins is David Lowman’s drag persona, but he performs as country singer Reba McIntyre and film legend Judy Garland when he is Coti Collins.
The opening sequence of *Pageant* and the particular constructions of illusion relative to gender and sexuality that it reveals prompt an inquiry into a rhetoric of alterna-pageant identity in comparison to and/or contrast with mainstream pageant identity. In this opening, the most obvious difference between Miss Gay America and mainstream competitive pageantry is the primacy of discordant gender performance in the former. The successful “illusion” of performing the gender that is opposite to one’s biological sex and self-proclaimed gender identification is presented as the most heavily weighted criterion of impersonation pageants. For Miss Gay America hopefuls, the quality of the illusion is best communicated in the “talent” category, which is worth forty percent of the total score. “Talent” draws on evaluation criteria from the “evening” and “solo talent” categories, but not “male interview” or “on-stage interview.”

The structuring and weighting of these evaluation criteria reflect those of the “real” Miss America pageant, in which aesthetic qualities are literally more valuable than the contestants’ “ability to communicate.” The most valued components in MGA’s model rhetoric are thus a reflection of mainstream competitive pageantry, and they heavily on the element of gender illusion. The significance of the illusion is reinforced by the insistence on biological maleness, which is maintained and measured in the “male interview.” The successful MGA hopeful performs the illusion of femininity or femaleness while maintaining a male identity outside of the confines of the pageant and other impersonation contexts.

Among alterna-pageants, Miss Gay America was among the first to directly challenge mainstream pageant culture from LGBTQQI communities, but it is certainly not the only one. The USofA Pageants system boasts female and male impersonator
divisions, as well as a Mr. Gay USofA contest in which gay, biologically male
contestants compete as such.\textsuperscript{50} The bread and butter of impersonation pageantry is the
female impersonator pageant, however, and Miss Gay America and Miss Gay USofA
appear to parallel one another in many ways. In spite of their similarities, there is one
significant distinction between Miss Gay America and Miss Gay USofA. Miss Gay
America and Miss Gay USofA contestants are required to be male. However, “The
Official Miss Gay USofA Pageant does not discriminate against entertainers with silicone
and/or hormones. The use of silicone and/or hormones will not be considered by any
judge scoring the contestants.”\textsuperscript{51} The Gay America/Gay USofA binary arguably reflects
the relative highbrow/lowlbrow distinction between what could arguably be considered
their mainstream parallels, Miss America and Miss USA. Miss Gay America presents
itself as deeply committed to the “art of the illusion.” Beneath that commitment is an
implied correlation between professionalism and female impersonation, as well as a
hierarchical distinction between Miss Gay America and drag shows or transgender
pageantry. In remaining committed to the practice of female impersonation, the
organization suggests that it is more legitimate than Miss Gay USofA or other pageants
that have “looser” gender identity criteria.

In mainstream pageant culture, Miss America presents itself as a “scholarship
program” for young women, whereas Miss USA arguably “makes no bones about what it
is.”\textsuperscript{52} This distinction implies that Miss USA accepts its legacy as a bathing beauty
contest and shamelessly uses it to its advantage, whereas the Miss America organization
has worked hard to deny its history as such and has washed away the shame by turning
into “the world's largest provider of scholarship assistance for young women.”\textsuperscript{53} In the
case of Miss Gay America versus Miss Gay USofA, one may read a similar type of strategic distancing onto their differing stances on body modification. Miss Gay USofA allows surgical breast enhancement and hormones and thus straddles a discursive line that separates distinct and discrete performances of gender. While Miss Gay America’s contestants embody the credo that “the boys are boys,” potential Miss Gay USofA’s physical bodies may straddle the borders of gender performance and biological sex favored by heteronormative assumptions about gender and sex. Richard Tewksbury argues that there are several groups from which female impersonators “adamantly distinguish themselves.” In particular, female impersonators emphasize the distinctions between the art of illusion and the perceived – and officially sanctioned – psychosexual deviance of transvestites and transsexuals. Miss Gay America 1989, Vicki Vincent, makes the point of differentiation in Pageant when she states, “All of the things that I have on as far as attire is concerned have nothing to do with anything sexual – there is absolutely no bodily pleasure that comes from this.” Following Tewksbury, then, Miss Gay America contestants engage in performances of “emphasized femininity … not for women’s self-affirmation,” but rather, in order to affirm “men’s differences from women.” The organization’s emphasis on boys being boys thus indirectly reinforces “hegemonic masculinity,” even as it challenges them by conferring model status on the man who does the best job of being a woman.

Our collective understanding of masculinity is derived from non-normative performances of masculinity. Judith Halberstam makes this argument by focusing on “female masculinity,” but her claim reaches beyond females. “Masculinity,” she writes, “becomes legible as masculinity where and when it leaves the white male middle-class
body.” When embodied in the “typical” male, masculinity is arguably invisible, or, in the case of extreme performances of “normative masculinity” by white males, it “turns into a parody or exposure of the norm.” Using this approach to masculinity in the context of pageantry, it is arguable that even in the most feminine of female competitive pageantry, masculinity helps co-construct the substance of the pageant.

In this rich context of gender troubling pageantry, what are the particular rhetorical functions of Miss Gay America across pageant counterpublics and in broader cultural contexts? What do MGA (and similar contests’) rules, guidelines, restrictions do for gender as potentially transgressive identity category – especially relative to pageantry, and further, as pageant identity/subjectivity relates to citizenship? One journalist covering the Miss Gay D.C. 2012 pageant took issue with MGA’s rules relative to gender and sexuality, reading those rules as discriminatory toward transgender contestants. Amanda Hess, of TBD.com, highlights a passage in the MGA regulations stating that pageant officials may subject any gender suspect contestants to an “examination” (contestants must agree to the exam) and/or face disciplinary suspension or disqualification. Hess writes, “So, the contest excludes trans people – who are a big part of the drag scene in D.C., actually – under threat of physical examination. (Just like the Miss America pageant!) Botox is cool, though.” Hess’ commentary emphasizes the ways in which MGA’s rules communicate an established hierarchy in the world of gender impersonation pageantry, a hierarchy that is arguably reflective of divisions in communities represented under “the wider LGBT umbrella.” As an alterna-pageant that challenges normative discourses of gender performance, MGA appears to provide a space for the practice of transgressive or empowering pageantry, and arguably, it does. The
distinctions constructed in MGA’s rules, however, also have potentially oppressive functions, as Hess explains:

In many ways … women and trans people still lack equal representation the [LGBT] community today. Drag has the potential to break through the binary to promote free gender expression for everyone. But not if it means crowning men impersonating women while perpetuating the marginalization of lesbians and trans people.⁶³

This example, like the others analyzed throughout this study, speaks to the simultaneous liberating and constraining characteristics of pageantry. Where the historical pageant held the promise of unifying individuals in a community, it also sought to homogenize collective identity and thus marginalize non-dominant groups. The better babies contests of the early twentieth century resulted in tangible improvements to infant health and healthcare, yet they propagated eugenic ideals that perpetuated discriminatory practices, as well as hegemonic discourses of an ideal type of personhood. Contemporary child pageants purport to build their participants’ confidence through competition, but mediated representations of the glitz world evidence the grossly materialistic, hypersexualized, and exploitative structure of child pageantry. Competitive female pageantry, with its claims to promoting scholarship and stewardship among women, still relies heavily on their objectification, and, like many of its pageant predecessors, champions a strict view of model citizenship that is exemplified in light complexion, thin body type, and a normatively feminine performances of gender and sexuality. Contradictions such as these abound in pageantry, which makes it difficult to argue that the pageant could provide real challenges to limiting discourses of citizenship, even in its
more “extreme” forms. The radical potential of female impersonation pageantry, for example, is reigned in by its limits on contestant eligibility, thus working in the service of gender trouble” in U.S. culture – like gender impersonation pageantry – historically have not “encouraged reassessment of cultural assumptions about human bodies and sexual desire.” Rather, they have been “more often positioned within the larger body of public argument as aberrations in nature’s plan and hence worked to reify dominant assumptions about human bodies and sexual desire.”

**From Pageant Histories to Pageant Futures: Pageantry’s Rhetorical Implications for Feminist Citizenship**

It has been more than twenty years since Judith Butler questioned the assumption that “women” are the subjects of feminism. While scholarly views on feminisms and their subjects have proliferated, critiques of liberal feminism, or perhaps more appropriately, critiques of the co-optation of liberal feminism in the name of emphasizing female agency and gender equality demonstrate that “women” remain the assumed subjects of feminism. In co-opted discourses of feminism, women are thus constructed as the primary champions of or obstacles to female advancement and empowerment. Bonnie J. Dow has demonstrated that contemporary mediated discourses of competitive female pageantry promotes “a particular version of liberal feminism—one that emphasizes individualism, self-actualization, and achievement within existing social hierarchies—as the only feminism.”
Pageantry does not provide an unproblematic challenge to the conflation of “feminism” and “female” or the co-optation of feminist discourses. However, as a perpetually developing and adapting rhetorical practice in U.S. culture, pageantry illustrates the possibilities for challenging fixed notions of model identity and citizenship, for particular pageant publics and universal pageant audiences alike. The rhetorical history of pageantry that I have told in this study reveals the processual nature of pageantry and demonstrates the relationship between that process and the processes of becoming subject and citizen. In the world of pageantry, for better and worse, participants do not always adhere to normatively defined and collectively understood identity scripts. This does not mean that a female impersonator is accepted on the same stage as a potential Miss America. However, there are hopeful – if flawed – transgressions of cultural norms in the Miss Gay America pageant, which asserts itself as a competition whose male participants model integrity in suits as well as sequins. “Abnormal” subjects are made eligible for citizenship in discursive equations and challenges such as these – that is to say, Miss Gay America is largely modeled on the objectives of Miss America, which may appear wholly restrictive, but model Miss Gay America contestants are awarded for challenging the order of the heterosexual matrix via the performance of gender illusion, an achievement that is equated with integrity and excellence. The more nuanced narrative of pageantry that is told through the case studies herein thus trouble our notions of stable identities and how we order and value those identities and also present us with an opportunity to sit with the potentially unsettling notion of intersectional and dynamic citizenship.
In this study, I have focused on the pageant, a cultural form largely marked as female, in order to explore these questions through analyses of the rhetorical constructions of feminized identities and citizenship at particular moments in U.S. history. In these analyses, I have shown that the landscape of pageantry is not always easy to navigate, and arguments of model citizenship vary across pageant publics. In spite of these differences, however, an identifiable rhetoric of pageantry has emerged. This rhetoric relies heavily on the use of model arguments of identity that serve to co-construct and reinforce hegemonic discourses of subjectivity and citizenship. The architectonic *topoi* and model arguments that constitute this rhetoric uphold the longstanding pageant objective to promote nationalism, even as that objective has changed and/or adapted as pageant publics have diversified. The fact that pageantry remains a regular and popular cultural practice in the United States in the twenty-first century is indicative of the power of its rhetorical influence. The subjects of this study are clearly illustrative of how pageantry touches particular pageant publics and universal pageant audiences, women and men, people of diverse races, ages, socioeconomic classes, physical abilities, sexual orientations, etc. However, I wish to be somewhat conservative in my conclusions about the range of that influence, considering pageants have particular salience in their respective publics consistently, but that salience crosses over into “the general public” with less regularity, as in the case of pageant scandals and controversies. In sum, there something overwhelmingly rhetorical about pageants – they hold some meaning for nearly everyone in U.S. culture, but they mean the most to those publics that they call into being.
The cases presented in this study demonstrate that pageantry has been able to sustain its rhetorical influence, in part, due to the ability of the form and its attendant publics to adapt and change. It is in that dynamism, however slight, that the transgressive promise of pageantry resides, and aspirations to a more nuanced view of feminist citizenship might be cultivated.

Feminist citizenship is by no means a new concept, but when considered in the context of pageantry, feminist citizenship may be able to transgress limits of gender imposed by the assumption that “women” are the subjects of feminism. I am suggesting that feminist citizenship may be “transgressive” in a rather simplistic reading of the term. To suggest transgression is to imply that there are boundaries or limits, and feminist citizenship that breaches limits of gender, sexuality, race, etc., may be positioned to take notice of the transgressions – positive, negative, or otherwise – that are part and parcel of the rhetorical history of pageantry in the United States. In pageantry, there are opportunities for women, men, transgendered females, girls, boys, lesbians, homosexual men, fat women, female impersonators, drag kings, amputees, and single heterosexual women to be models. The diversity of pageant publics might inform a kind of feminist citizenship that entails a willingness to accommodate and adapt to changing contexts of civic engagement and participation in public life in the United States. However, it would also recognize that with identification comes difference, and considering the adaptations and developments in the structure of pageantry over time and across publics, it is clear that there will always be constraints on inclusive citizenship. Sometimes, those constraints are necessary, in order to avoid an entirely relativistic view of citizenship. As the rhetoric of pageantry demonstrates, there can be core characteristics that resonate
across disparate interpretations of the form. Thus, in a sense, Ms. Wheelchair America\textsuperscript{73} and Mr. Black Penn State\textsuperscript{74} represent wholly different publics, yet they engage in characteristically similar performances with overlapping objectives.

“[A]s women are marked in language by gender, they are marked in society as sex,” Monique Wittig has argued.\textsuperscript{75} Pageants, as overtly feminized spectacles of hegemonic nationalist narratives, are similarly marked. However, pageants are not now, nor have they ever been, solely concerned with women. The mainstream historical pageant modeled collective U.S. identity, sacrificing differences within communities in order to advocate for sameness. Better babies contest sought to spread the word of eugenics and improve infant health. The glitz pageant simultaneously exploits and empowers its child contestants – female and male. Competitive female pageantry models female citizenship, and thus differentiates it from male citizenship in the process. Female impersonation pageants provide a platform for challenging “straight” ideals of gendered citizenship but ultimately rely on hegemonic narratives of gender and sexuality to define them within pageant culture. As the artifacts analyzed in the in this study illustrate, pageantry has always included participants of both/all genders/sexes and functioned symbolically to both identify with and differentiate from normalized assumptions identity and citizenship in the United States. Still, in spite of the diversity of pageantry, pageantry remains to be collectively understood as a proponent and producer of a particular type of female citizenship exclusively. Even in alterna-pageanty, there are often clearly defined limits on who can participate and in what capacities. Over the course of the twentieth century and into the twenty-first, the pageant has provided one way of measuring who counts and in what capacity.
In his 1975 history of the Miss America pageant, Miss America historian and former judge Frank Deford wrote, “There is, unfortunately, always a tendency … to make a beauty queen more important than she is, and to assume that the issue has great bearing on the whole female race.” I am arguably vulnerable to a similar critique here, but I believe that I have shown that pageantry has both a long rhetorical reach and limited capacities to exert influence outside of its publics. The pageant may not provide a radically revolutionary model of how to discursively construct citizenship or how to enact it, but it can provide insight into the dynamic nature of our collective notions of identity and citizenship and inform progress in diverse aspects of public life – from increasing the visibility of marginalized populations in mass media to adopting legislation that ensures equal opportunities to all citizens. Indeed, the pageant is “more important” than it seems.
Notes


2 I have not included race or ethnicity-specific pageants in this list, in spite of the fact that they do provide alternatives to mainstream pageant ideologies. Inclusiveness often appears to be the rationale behind competitive female pageants that make race and/or ethnicity a primary evaluative component of their contests. The alternative pageant structures and performances that I explore in this chapter tend to take an approach that is less concerned with inclusiveness in mainstream pageant culture and more focused on highlighting difference as a means to inclusion in U.S. culture and society as a whole. Additionally, race and ethnicity remain significant identity components of these “other” pageants and the ways in which they formulate discourses of valuable subjectivity and citizenship. Thus, I do not abandon race or ethnicity here, but rather, consider their significance in an intersectional analysis of alternative pageant publics.

3 This argument also extends to competitive pageantry as it is performed across the globe, as those pageants tend to reflect the form as it was established and made popular in the United States by Miss America. See, for example, Colleen Ballerino Cohen, Richard Wilk, and Beverly Stoeltje, eds., *Beauty Queens on the Global Stage: Gender, Contests, and Power* (New York: Routledge, 1996).

4 “Mr.” is noticeably absent from the short list of alterna-pageants provided. Although there are alterna-pageants for “misters,” the overwhelming amount of pageants – mainstream or marginal – contain the titles Miss or Ms. and are competitions for women or evaluate contestants based on feminine or female gender performance. Drag king or
male impersonator pageants are an arguable exception to this rule, which I examine later
in the chapter.

5 Thomas F. Pettigrew defines “post-racism” as “the claim … that we are now entering a
new era in America in which race has substantially lost its special significance.”
Pettigrew questions the validity of this claim in the context of the election of Barack

6 Elaine J. Hall and Marnie Salupo Rodriguez identify four claims that are consistently
presented in media discourses of postfeminism, including 1) decreased support for the
women’s movement, 2) growing support for antifeminism among particular groups, 3)
the claim that feminism has become irrelevant, and 4) a discernible rise in “no, but …”
feminism. A content analysis of these claims leads Hall and Rodriguez to conclude that
“postfeminism currently is a myth; women continue to support feminism and find it
relevant in their lives.” Elaine J. Hall and Marnie Salupo Rodriguez, “The Myth of
Postfeminism,” *Gender and Society* 17, no. 6 (2003): 878-902.

7 “Welcome: The Mission of Ms. Wheelchair America,” *Ms. Wheelchair America*,

8 An abandoned website evidences an attempt to get a Mr. Wheelchair America up and
running in 2007, but it was apparently not a sustainable project. See “Mr. Wheelchair
America,” *Dreams Incorporated*, http://www.dreamsforever.info/mrwheelchair.htm
(accessed June 18, 2011).


11 Ibid.

12 See chapters three and four for more on child and competitive female pageants.

13 I am consciously breaking with the examination of U.S.-only pageants here. As the title implies, Miss Landmine has taken place in countries where landmines are a hazard of everyday life – Angola and Cambodia, specifically. I argue the break is justified by the fact that the Miss Landmine pageant is structurally quite similar to the U.S. model of traditional female competitive pageantry, and it is perhaps the most famous and recent in terms of alleged pageant exploitation.


17 Ibid.

18 The iconic symbol of the Miss Landmine pageant is, mostly, the figure of a woman seen on public toilet doors worldwide. Under the recognizable figure’s triangle dress, however, one of the legs is been amputated at the knee. See the Miss Landmine website, http://miss-landmine.org/.


20 Tice, 250.

21 I am borrowing from the language of “co-cultural communication” here. Mark P. Orbe has argued that using the prefix “co-” rather than “sub-” avoids “the negative/inferior connotations of past descriptions … while also acknowledging the great diversity of influential cultures that simultaneously exist in this country. Although these co-cultures exist all around us, their experiences are often made invisible by the pervasiveness of the dominant culture.” I wish to achieve similar aims by employing this language and its connotations relative to pageantry. See Mark P. Orbe, “Laying the Foundation for Co-Cultural Communication Theory: An Inductive Approach to Studying ‘Non-Dominant’

22 I discuss my usage of both “rhetorical history” and “rhetorical evolution” in the introduction.


24 It is important to note here that I am focusing mainly on female impersonation pageantry, but there is a rich tradition of male impersonation, or drag kinging, that must be taken into account in future research of alterna-pageants or pageant counterpublics. Following Judith Halberstam, I understand that male impersonation is not interchangeable with female impersonation, and the former is/can be practiced in wholly different contexts and may indicate divergent rhetorical and cultural implications from the latter. For more on drag kinging, see Judith Halberstam, *Female Masculinity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1998).

25 Institutionalized female impersonation pageantry in the United States began with the first Miss Gay America pageant in 1973. See “The Miss Gay America Pageant History,” *Miss Gay America*, http://www.missgayamerica.com/Pageant%20History/Main%20Page.htm (accessed February 3, 2012). However, gender impersonation as an individual or cultural practice, and also as work, predates the temporal confines of this study, i.e. 1900-present. For broader studies of female impersonation and/or drag, both outside of pageant contexts and over longer periods of time, see Roger Baker, *Drag: A History of Female Impersonation on the Stage* (London: Triton Books, 1968); Esther


27 I am admittedly painting with a rather broad brush here, but in an effort to be inclusive and to cover a wide range of pageant counterpublics, I am indicating the following categories with this acronym: lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, questioning, and intersex.


29 Butler, 186-189.

30 See chapter one of this study for the particulars on Progressive Era historical pageantry.


33 Ibid.

34 That is not to say that historical pageants were objective retellings of a community’s history, but rather, that the pageant was often packaged and sold as such by the APA and
its pageant masters and board members – especially as compared with other theatrical interpretations of historical figures and events.


36 Glassberg, 75.


40 This is a functional explanation of impersonator pageantry that is works for the purposes of this analysis, but as with mainstream historical and contemporary competitive pageants, there is diversity in the impersonator pageant community, and there may be impersonator pageant publics that would challenge this definition. For more on drag and female impersonation, in particular, see Esther Newton, *Mother Camp: Female Impersonators in America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979), 3.


42 Ibid.

44 Sontag, 275-276.

45 Newton, 3.

46 Ibid., 3-4.


Transvestism and transsexuality are often perceived or diagnosed as “sexual and gender identity disorders” as detailed in the current edition of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-IV), first published by the American Psychiatric Association in 1994. Transvestism, or “transvestic fetishism,” is further categorized as a “paraphilia,” where transsexuality is gender identity disorder, which is “characterized by strong and persistent cross-gender identification accompanied by persistent discomfort with one’s assigned sex.” There has been much debate in the communities close to these diagnoses as to whether they should remain disorders or be subject to revision in the forthcoming fifth edition of the manual. See American Psychiatric Association, *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, 4th ed., Text Revision (Washington, DC: American Psychiatric Association, 2000), 535-582; and Judith Butler, *Undoing Gender* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 75-101.


Halberstam, 2.

Ibid.

Ibid., 4.

63 Ibid.


65 Ibid.

66 Butler, Gender Trouble, 2-8.


69 See Chapter One of this study and Rosi Braidotti, Metamorphoses: Towards a Materialist Theory of Becoming (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2002), 22.


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VITA

Mia E. Briceño

Education


Selected Conference Presentations


Invited Presentations
“Fit to Be Crowned: Pageants and (Anti-)Models of U.S. Subjectivity.” The Pennsylvania State University, Department of Communication Arts and Sciences Colloquium, February 2011.

“Fit to Be Crowned: Pageants and (Anti-)Models of U.S. Subjectivity” and “Things I Wished I Had Learned Before Entering a Ph.D. Program.” California State University, Northridge, March 2010.