

# INTRODUCTION

In the 1990s it is tempting to claim that the heyday of the beauty pageant is over. Fran Lebowitz has argued that the Miss America pageant “is so old-fashioned it’s actually quaint, like hoop-rolling, something from the turn of the century.”<sup>1</sup> Although the television audience still numbers in the hundreds of millions, many people think that the beauty pageant is passé, archaic, or simply overdone. Yet in November 1996, at the Miss World pageant, held in Bangalore, India, there were highly publicized protests on both feminist and nationalist grounds, leading Peter Jennings to declare that pageants “had a nation in an uproar.”<sup>2</sup> Throughout the 1990s, pageants held in places as diverse as Italy and war-torn Sarajevo explicitly used the stage and the contestants’ bodies as forums for public debate on who constitutes a “proper” representative of national identity.<sup>3</sup> And in the United States a bitter and emotional debate over the fate of “America’s children” was forged around the rape and murder of six-year-old Jon-

Benet Ramsey, a debate that focused on whether her active participation in children's beauty pageants was a crucial factor in her horrific death.

Clearly, any claim that pageants are over and done with seems a bit premature. Beauty pageants in the United States, especially the Miss America pageant, offer a glimpse at the constantly changing and always complicated stories about the nation itself: Who counts as part of the nation? What does it mean to be a specifically feminine representative of a nation? How are social concerns—such as racism, multiculturalism, and “family values”—mediated in and through women's bodies on a public stage? And what are the social and cultural conditions through which particular kinds of representation can occur?

The 1990s, like every other decade in U.S. history, have been formative in terms of both national and individual identities. Late-twentieth-century commodity culture is a context in which questions and concerns about “identity” emerge front and center, with a relentless momentum. We need only to look at such contentious political debates of the 1990s as those on the future of affirmative action, sexual harassment in the military, and the Welfare Reform Act to understand that controversial questions about identity and “difference” become more volatile on the national stage. In contemporary popular culture, unruly celebrities and riotous popular events force our attention and our fascination (if by nothing other than their sheer ubiquitous presence) over debates concerning “appropriate” boundaries of contemporary racial, gendered, and sexual identities. And even as specific configurations of such mass-mediated debates concerning identity shift over time, public contests over the political and cultural stakes of identity are ongoing and continually manifested in and through the mass media.<sup>4</sup>

The beauty pageant is one site in which the meanings ascribed to individual and cultural identities are continually negotiated and often vehemently contested. The very title of the Miss America pageant insists on this kind of negotiation: there is the illusion of self-evidence in the pageants' claim on national feminine identity, because “Miss America” encompasses both gendered and nationalist representation. But the nationalism that is simultaneously invented and reflected within the beauty pageant incorporates more than the winner's grandiose title. The beauty pageant in fact represents a complicated arrangement of claims and em-

bodies a variety of nationalist expressions: it is a civic ritual, a place where a particular public can “tell stories to themselves about themselves,”<sup>5</sup> and it is a mass-mediated spectacle, firmly embedded within commodity culture, in a historical moment where almost all forms of social participation and social meaning are determined by a continuous interplay between representation and consumption. It is also a highly visible performance of gender, where the disciplinary practices that construct women as feminine are palpable, on display, and positioned as unproblematically desirable. And, it is a profoundly political arena, in the sense that the presentation and reinvention of femininity that takes place on the beauty pageant stage produces political subjects.

This book is about, among other things, the Miss America pageant. As Frank Deford once said, the Miss America pageant is “maligned by one segment of America, adored by another, [and] misunderstood by about all of it.”<sup>6</sup> This book attends to the ways in which the pageant has been both maligned and misunderstood, and attempts to account for the various reasons it continues to be adored. It explores the ways feminist ideologies remain convinced that the pageant does irreparable damage to women, as well as examines conservative ideologies and their relentless conviction that beauty pageants are a productive means through which young women learn self-esteem and confidence. As a way to pry open both these seemingly closed and convinced positions, this book offers testimony from beauty pageant contestants and explores the answers they give about pageants, gender, race, and the nation. In so doing, it develops a different story about beauty pageants and argues that, above all else, one thing is certain: the Miss America pageant does not mean one thing to one audience. It is not merely about pageantry, or kitschy culture, or the objectification of women, or overt racism, or reactionary nationalism. It is about all these things and more.

## BEAUTY PAGEANTS AS POPULAR CULTURE

This book argues that the beauty pageant defies a singular definition. Scholars, however, often simplify or even overlook its complicated production and articulation. The liability of conducting research on beauty

pageants has been called to my attention in many different forms; academic reactions to my work fall into two or three equally troubled camps. One of these reactions, perhaps the most damaging one, categorizes my work as “fun,” as something that does not contribute to a body of scholarly work on gender representation but instead merely reflects the common notion that popular cultural forms like pageants and other entertainment—and people’s responses to them—are uniform, simple, and uncontradictory. The dearth of scholarship on beauty pageants reflects this notion; these events are often and easily dismissed as frivolous, meaningless, or carnivalesque and therefore unworthy of serious and sustained intellectual scrutiny—or, at the other end of the spectrum, pageants and other forms of mass commodified culture are seen as simply reiterating and reproducing dominant ideology. In general, beauty pageants are grouped with popular cultural forms that are regarded as either too “low” to merit serious investigation or so obvious and opaque that vigorous interrogation would be both uninteresting and unnecessary.<sup>7</sup>

In categorizing work on popular culture and gender as “fun” and thus unscholarly and unprovoked by intellectual curiosity, many people assume that I became interested and involved in this project because I had once been a participant in a beauty pageant (sour grapes, perhaps?). Clearly, my work (as most other scholarly work) is at least in part autobiographical, insofar as this book explores the cultural production of femininity and I am a gendered female in contemporary U.S. commodity culture. Yet this is not what the assumption presumes: rather, it assumes that because of my gender, and because of my focus on what is usually regarded as an especially opaque form of popular culture, the only intellectual curiosity that could possibly be generated would be the result of my own personal investment as a participant in a beauty pageant. This is a dangerous dismissal, because it immediately and apparently unself-consciously defines particular cultural sites as worthy of intellectual attention and others—like the pageant—as, well, junk. In the introduction to her book, *The Queen of America Goes to Washington City*, Lauren Berlant recounts a similar tale about the cultural sites she finds interesting (which include the popular press, television sitcoms, and *The Contract with America*). A colleague explained that he “hated her archive”—a comment that Berlant saw as revealing “the professional juncture at which [she] and oth-

ers in cultural studies stand at the present moment: because humanists traditionally get value by being intimate with the classics (literary and theoretical), those who think through popular materials and waste thought on objects that were not made for it threaten to degrade the value of intellectual life in general and the value of the humanities in particular."<sup>8</sup> The beauty pageant is usually regarded as an example of such "popular material," in which "what you see is what you get."

What we *do* see in the Miss America pageant, however, is often complex and contradictory. Sorting out what exactly the beauty pageant means as a national phenomenon requires an investigation that recognizes the distinct yet interrelated elements that comprise not only the actual event itself, but also the vast and varied infrastructure that supports, sustains, and simultaneously reinvents it. Popular cultural forms such as the beauty pageant have been both celebrated and vilified as sites for scholarly inquiry in the last decade; though many have challenged an understanding of U.S. popular culture as merely a vehicle for the cultural industry, the legacy of the Frankfurt School has nonetheless proved to be remarkably resilient.<sup>9</sup>

The classic Frankfurt School position is that popular culture is a monolithic, and thus simplistic, kind of national formation. Of those studies that have successfully challenged this position, the more interesting have also situated popular culture within the context of commodity culture—indeed, *as* a commodity—but have gone beyond this to examine the narratives that produce the cultural form as well as the individuals who are involved in its production. In other words, many recent studies of popular culture have rejected an analysis of popular culture as merely an uncomplicated echo of dominant ideology and insisted on reading popular culture as "competing for dominance in a multiplicity of discourses."<sup>10</sup> Recent theorists of popular culture have pointed out the importance of examining various forms of popular culture as complicated and often illuminatory statements about social institutions and formations.<sup>11</sup>

Among other things, what these and other scholars of popular culture have insisted upon is that popular culture is a complicated terrain, not always easily assimilable to dominant ideology and practice. Rather, popular culture exists as a space that can be simultaneously conventional and unpredictable, liberatory and reactionary, personal yet anonymous, and

grounded in materiality while also being a realm where fantasy is played out. By reappraising and reconsidering those subjects or sites within popular culture that have been historically characterized as “just entertainment” or “low culture,” we can better situate civic rituals such as beauty pageants within a set of political, cultural, and economic practices that provide both the logic and the legitimation for their existence. Because of their emphasis on public spectacle and display, their gestures toward monarchy and medieval pageantry, and their relentless articulations of dominant norms of femininity, beauty pageants are clearly situated as a particular kind of cultural practice and, as such, call for a deeper intellectual attention.

Indeed, the title of the most famous of all beauty pageants, Miss America, is often the most overlooked artifact of the entire spectacle. This title has always insisted that we not separate the question of America from the notion of womanhood; it quite clearly calls up a relationship between discourses of nation and discourses of femininity, ultimately formulating the equation, “woman = nation.” Because there is no official state nationalist program in the United States, in order to chart the shifting meanings and emphases of specifically “American” nationalism, it makes sense to look to civic rituals, secular ceremonies, festivals, and beauty pageants.<sup>12</sup> Many studies address the various ways in which national identity for Americans is configured in specifically masculine terms: scholarly work on pin-ups (which focus on the men to whom these photographs were sent rather than the women who posed for them), studies of wartime constructions of masculinity, and academic investigations of a national masculinity articulated through the mass media have all theorized national identity as fundamentally masculine. Indeed, Benedict Anderson’s classic formulation of imagined communities has functioned as an important opening for exploring male national identity.<sup>13</sup> The question of where women are located on a national scene is vital yet relatively unaddressed. The Miss America pageant clearly states its nationalist claim, but because scholarship on the pageant has focused on its egregious treatment of women *as* women, this claim has been all but completely overlooked.

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. Following Anderson, I see nationalism as a specifically cultural artifact; extending his argument, I consider nationalism to be a discourse that mediates constructions of femininity and ethnicity in order to produce a particularly gendered notion of citizenship. In order to manage and control different styles and practices of citizenship, beauty pageants thus create imagined communities where nationalist discourse is produced as cultural tradition. Pageants confront national tensions about gender and race and, through performances of "diversity" and femininity, "resolve" these tensions. In this way, they are similar to other cultural traditions and rituals in contemporary U.S. nationalism: they do not necessarily attempt to erase existing inequalities (whether those of class, race, ethnicity, or gender) as much as they perform the function of confronting those inequalities (albeit on very particular terms), incorporating them into a common language and practice, and ultimately providing some sort of idealistic resolution.

Of course, in a diversely constructed society like the United States, the practice of "managing" citizenship always carries with it the potential for disruption or disjuncture. Historically, one of the tasks of nationalist rituals and discourses is to demonstrate the ability to contain disruption, to subvert potential crises, and to incorporate disjunctures onto smoother, less conflicted ideological landscapes.<sup>14</sup> Thus if contemporary forms and practices of femininity present a crisis of identity in the national imagination, and if the very real material and cultural conditions of an increasingly multicultural society produce in turn a crisis of racial and ethnic identity, American national identity in the 1990s can be (and has been) characterized as experiencing what amounts to an "identity crisis." But rather than stymie or even contradict the development of national consciousness, this national anxiety presents precisely the necessary context for its development. Within the site of the beauty pageant, the opportunity arises for the presentation—or the invention—of a national crisis and also for the possibility of containment or conversion. This promise, or these conditions of possibility, are offered through the vehicle of the female body, which comes to "represent" nationalism in terms of a particular image of femininity. This same female body, however, also "represents" the nation in terms of a particular culture or community.

This in itself is an important development in studies of nationalisms: an idealized concept of the “nation” actually *needs* women to sustain its cultural and political currency. The “nation,” especially in the United States, is formulated as an abstraction, and one is not necessarily compelled to fight for, to place beliefs within, or to give up one’s life for an abstraction. Rather, we are compelled by desires. Thus any concept of the nation must incite particular desires in its public to remain a legitimate institutionalized system of beliefs and practices. As we can see by a mere glance at the popular press and television programs, idealized figures of femininity have long been understood as a lucrative avenue for desire. Who better to incite legitimating desire than Miss America, the woman who performs on a popular cultural stage, expertly weaving desirability with respectability, and sexuality with morality?

The “America” in Miss America signals not only nation, but citizenship, and the “Miss” in the title calls attention to a particular representative of the nation, a specific kind of ideal, universal citizen (always keeping in mind that it is “Miss” America, not “Mrs.” or “Ms.”). Feminist critiques of pageants have questioned this relationship between femininity and nationality, exposing the implicit premise that the “ideal” American female citizen is defined in terms of heterosexual or subordinate femininity. Although this is a good starting point, it questions the relationship between gender and nation in a particular and limited way.

What these critics have not accounted for are the other dynamics at work in beauty pageants. Pageants are not only about gender and nation, they are also always (and increasingly visibly) about race and nation; more specifically, they are about gender and nation as racialized categories. When we take into account these facets of the specific cultural work that is performed and actualized within beauty pageants, we automatically disrupt the simple equation of woman = nation. Once the category of citizen is broadened to include multiple ethnic and racial categories, the equation no longer balances in quite the same way.

The acknowledgment that race, gender, and nation are interconstitutive categories is key to disrupting any simple examination of nation, gender, and popular culture. That is, though particular constructions of the nation function as a moral reminder about conventional gender relations and institutions, femininity itself, as a social practice, operates in a con-



stant state of flux and potential disruption. Dominant norms and conventions of femininity are constructed within the borders of a precarious balance: women simultaneously “need” to be protected and exploited, must be publicly displayed yet privately consumed, and are considered both the guardians of national morality and the largest threat to this moral foundation simply because of their gender.

Within beauty pageants, these long observed contradictions of femininity are even more complicated by the newly visible presence of nonwhite contestants. The nonwhite body functions as a specter—the marked other—against which the ideal female citizen is defined. And the pageant’s history of celebrating universal whiteness has become increasingly obvious as pageants are forced to confront contemporary demands that they reflect racial and ethnic diversity. Although “difference” is assimilated in the pageants, the assimilation process has been imperfect: despite efforts to uphold a universal standard of beauty for all women, the representation of women who have been historically excluded from this standard renders beauty itself an unstable category of experience. Moreover, an increasingly multiethnic and multiracial society threatens the traditional function of pageants as sites for the control of nonwhite identities through the enforcement of dominant, universal norms of beauty.

What occurs, then, on the stage of the national beauty pageant is the enactment of a particular kind of national dilemma, one that must continuously attempt to resolve tensions that characterize dominant practices of femininity and an increasingly diversified society—even as the pageant simultaneously celebrates and reinvents precisely these categories of experience. The categories of race, gender, and national identity seem at all times fixed and stable but are in fact always shifting. Thus the potential for disruption over the viability of dominantly constructed categories of race and gender always exists, lurking beneath the seemingly stable horizon. Because of the physical and national enactment of ethnicity and gender to which pageants are dedicated, these spectacles represent both a potential for national crisis and a source of national stability. In an increasingly diverse configuration of the nation, accompanied by an increasing absence of the notion of a universal citizen, pageants in the 1990s’ United States uniquely respond to moral panic over the current state of national identity. The performance of feminine subjectivity that comprises the cel-

eboratory heart of the beauty pageant functions as national assurance that despite the threats posed to dominant culture by fluctuating racial and gender codes, the pageant successfully manages and disciplines the construction of national identity, femininity, and ethnicity.

## FEMINIST DEBATES OVER BEAUTY AND REPRESENTATION

Though many respond to a project on beauty pageants by automatically relegating pageants (as well as research focused on pageants) to the realm of “low” culture, perhaps the most prevalent academic reaction to my work has been to automatically assume that my feminist analysis will follow in the footsteps of other feminist analyses of beauty pageants. The presumption is that the goal of my work must be to “expose” beauty pageants as repugnant rituals of feminine objectification.

This feminist position has a long history. The feminist protest of the 1968 Miss America pageant is often noted as heralding in the second-wave of liberal feminism in the United States, where the tossing of bras, high-heeled shoes, and other “instruments of torture” into a “Freedom Trash Can” was understood as a symbolic refusal of the constraints of patriarchal society.<sup>15</sup> The feminist argument that the Miss America pageant objectified and alienated women was at the forefront of the second-wave feminist movement, and, as Alice Echols has noted, importantly called attention to the way in which beauty practices and rituals constitute a particular kind of politics. This widely publicized protest led the way to a series of important feminist interventions to dominant representations of gender in the workplace, at home, and in the media. These interventions focused on the oppressive quality of dominant norms and standards of beauty and positioned various cultural sites such as assembly lines, corporate offices, advertising, pornography, and of course, beauty pageants, as harmful arenas, where the discrepancy between mass-mediated bodies of women and their “real” bodies was considered huge and damaging.

This critique of beauty pageants has been very powerful, and the overwhelming feminist consensus that pageants and other dominant norms and conventions of femininity are political practices that oppress and ex-

ploit women has made visible a wider range of choices for the construction of femininity. The analysis I develop throughout this work is indebted to feminist critiques of beauty pageants, but I nevertheless argue that this critique is formulated in simplistic terms and focuses primarily on the relationship between women and commodities, in particular the way in which pageants and other such displays of women construct women *as* commodities. For this feminist scenario, the objectified bodies of the contestants are the victims, and the pageant producers, directors, and public audience are the perpetrators. The theorizing of gender and the feminist assertion that women are in fact subjects has functioned as a vital opening to conduct research on beauty pageants, but it is an assertion that can take us only so far. We now need to complicate the picture by exploring precisely what kind of subjects are produced within beauty pageants and what practices and institutions not only sustain but work continuously to revise this production. As Susan Bordo, Sandra Lee Bartky, Teresa de Lauretis, and many others have demonstrated around other realms of femininity, theories of power and agency that understand gendered and raced bodies as effects and enactments *of* power rather than passive sites *for* power are required to generate a more complex understanding of productions of femininity—as both represented by dominant culture and self-representing within dominant culture. As these scholars have pointed out, a Foucaultian framework that calls for a reconfiguring of gendered and raced bodies on a political, social, and cultural landscape assists in analyzing the complicated and contradictory ways these bodies are disciplined and regulated.<sup>16</sup>

Judith Butler has argued that “[b]ecause there is neither an ‘essence’ that gender expresses or externalizes nor an objective ideal to which gender aspires, and because gender is not a fact, the various acts of gender create the idea of gender, and without these acts, there would be no gender at all.”<sup>17</sup> The “acts” of gender make us, produce us, construct us—even as we enact and construct gender ourselves. In other words, gender is *performative*: it is a constant, repetitive production of the self, and yet not *performance* in the classical theatrical sense, the sense of playing a specific “role.” Rather, a performative theory of gender proposes that the enacting of gender produces gender; it does not assume that gender already exists as a pregiven fact of nature, or an authentic core. Gender is a set of

practices, which are historically specific and conditioned by race and class. Gender is not outside of how women dress, act, and speak but is instead constituted by these and other practices.

Thinking about the production of gender in this way moves beyond a dominant feminist approach to popular cultural forms such as the beauty pageant. Although challenging the objectification of the female body can be a liberating practice, it also simplifies how everyone experiences gender. Stories about “infiltrating” beauty pageants, where feminist “spies” pretend to act as contestants in order to sabotage pageants, are interesting and often liberating disruptions, but they also assume that somehow the disciplinary practices of femininity in which beauty pageant contestants engage are outside of how feminists themselves are constructed as female in U.S. culture. Dominant definitions of femininity—indeed, gender itself—are not tangible “things” that somehow exist outside of our “real” selves. Feminists who oppose beauty on the grounds that it is oppressive are not more authentic than beauty queens. Even in situations where pageants are protested and challenged, the protesters themselves do not step out of the relations of power of which gender is but an effect; on the contrary, gender is continually reenacted. To assume that nonparticipation in beauty pageants or other overt beauty rituals exempts a woman from dominant definitions of femininity not only obscures the ways in which gender both produces and is produced by a particular definition of the self, but also implies an illusory notion of choice.

This position also denies the pleasure and desire experienced by beauty pageant contestants as they participate in these popular cultural forms. The production of femininity is one characterized by pleasure, among other things, and the contestants’ own accounts of their pleasure and desire when producing themselves as beauty queens should not be written off as mere acquiescence. The sheer excessiveness of a beauty contestant’s version of femininity, complete with elaborate hair styles, exaggerated makeup, evening gowns, disciplined physique, and commitment to feminine virtues, is an excess that is threaded through and through with particular connotations of desire.

My resistance to an argument that insists that beauty pageant contestants are victims of false consciousness does not mean I embrace a “post-feminist” position. This position, largely represented by the very public

feminist personas of Camille Paglia, Katie Roiphe, and Naomi Wolf, takes critical aim at the (perceived) recurring theme in much feminist work and practice that women—and women's bodies in particular—are vulnerable and in need of protection. It focuses on the notion that dominant feminist discourse has produced a society of victims—a society of women who are so focused on their own “victimhood” that they actually reinforce female passivity and powerlessness.<sup>18</sup> This critique is even more limiting than a narrow focus on objectified bodies, because it refuses to recognize power as a key constituent in the production of feminine selves.

Situating feminist reflection and theorizing about beauty pageants within current theoretical debates around issues of agency, subjectivity, and resistance may allow us to sidestep both the liberal impasse of freedom versus protection and a more narrowly constructed feminist understanding of pageants; as a result, we may discover a more sophisticated paradigm. What can we assume about the relationship between representation and the “real” when considering beauty pageants and beauty pageant contestants? What subjectivities are created through and within beauty pageants? Does the construction of subjectivity always imply or assume a notion of agency? What of subjectivity that both caters to and defines masculinist interests? Does such subjectivity necessarily mean that there is a lack of agency—or an agency that is denied or suppressed—among the contestants? Or does such a question already presuppose a set of assumptions about “genuine” or “authentic” agency—namely, agency defined by feminists?

#### METHODOLOGICAL DILEMMAS, OR WHAT TO DO WITH “WOMEN'S EXPERIENCE”

To even begin answering these questions, we must theorize gender and power in a way that entails understanding gender as a relation that not only signifies but also is defined by power. As always, when one attempts to understand the complexities of gender construction, one must address the issue of methodology. What is the best way to account for the cultural work that happens in beauty pageants? How do we understand the dimensions of power at work in these particular sites? Positioning myself

as a feminist means theorizing gender in terms that utilize a specifically feminist methodology.<sup>19</sup>

The tools I use in my research are intimately connected to my epistemological premise. I interviewed approximately fifty pageant contestants, producers, and directors, worked on the production of a local city pageant, and conducted detailed ethnographies of pageants, both smaller, more local productions and the more nationally significant televised spectacles. Because I think that self-representation is a necessary and crucial element in constituting gender, part of my work is an attempt to account for the experience of beauty pageant contestants. My choice to include the contestants' experience as evidence for the cultural practices that both sustain and construct beauty pageants is faithful to a feminist undertaking.

I am, however, faced with a dilemma: I must find a way to critique cultural discourses and practices that objectify, alienate, or otherwise fragment the female body without treating the contestants themselves as somnolent victims of false consciousness. This dilemma results from the distinction between my critique of gendered rituals and my own involvement within certain aspects of the dominant beauty system. It is crucial to recognize that this involvement can be a resource, not a limitation, in figuring the tensions and contradictions that characterize the production of beauty pageants.<sup>20</sup> To pretend that no dilemma existed would not only be intellectually dishonest, but also reproduce the precise feminist position I criticize—that of dismissively labeling pageants as “obvious” and “clear expressions of patriarchy.”

My initial response to this dilemma was a committed effort to interview the women involved, to allow them space to speak about what they are doing, and to seriously engage with what they have to say. How do they account for and explain their participation in pageants? How, and in what ways, do they distinguish themselves as different from their major critics, feminists? Interviews with several beauty pageant contestants show clearly that these women do not consider themselves victims.<sup>21</sup> As one beauty queen commented, “We’re not exploited. We’re up there because we want to be up there. . . . You’re up there and it builds confidence, it’s not degrading, other women may think it is, well, okay, don’t curl your hair.”<sup>22</sup> Indeed, most other women do not consider themselves victims who participate, in one form or another, in disciplinary practices intended

to produce a femininity both created by and reflected in dominant discourses.<sup>23</sup> Thus, although I find it personally difficult to place myself alongside Miss America, Miss Budweiser, or Miss Co-Ed as a product of a particular definition of femininity, I also find it too sweeping an indictment to claim that all women who participate in gendered disciplinary practices are victims, or as Stuart Hall has put it, "cultural dupes."<sup>24</sup>

My initial impulse to include women's experience as research evidence has remained only partially intact, but this methodological component to my work is nonetheless crucial for several reasons: including the contestants' experience belies any gesture toward a "genuine" feminist voice or standpoint, one that is only wrought from political struggle—in other words, this inclusion automatically rejects the distinction between false consciousness and "true" consciousness, or victim and critic. The experience of the contestants is also necessary to get at what de Lauretis calls the "potential trauma" of gender; in her words, gender is "not only the effect of representation but also its excess, what remains outside of discourse as a potential trauma which can rupture or destabilize, if not contained, any representation."<sup>25</sup> The only way to understand the processes of gender construction is to get at this "excess" of representation, to try to determine the ways in which excess is at odds with effects. As de Lauretis argues, the way to account for gender is to account for this tension: "The discrepancy, the tension, and the constant slippage between Woman as representation, as the object and the very condition of representation, and, on the other hand, women as historical beings, subjects of 'real' relations . . . are motivated and sustained by a logical contradiction in our culture and an irreconcilable one: women are both inside and outside gender, at once within and without representation."<sup>26</sup>

The testimony of beauty pageant contestants illustrates this slippage. The beauty pageant contestant cannot be conflated with her representation, and an account of her "experience" assists in theorizing how she, like all other women, is "at once within and without representation."

This important tension is brought into relief by the research methodologies of interviewing and ethnography. But what are the limits to legitimating "experience" as evidence? Joan Scott has argued that authenticating a notion of experience reconstitutes rather than challenges dominant discourse. As Scott argues, if feminists "take as self-evident the

identities of those whose experience is being documented and thus naturalize their difference," the category of Woman is universalized (in much the same way as the category of feminist is universalized within feminist standpoint theory), and as a consequence, the "universal sex opposition" is naturalized.<sup>27</sup> The move to include experience—as I've outlined it here—as not only a viable but also a critical component in determining subjectivity can, according to Scott, "reify agency as an inherent attribute of individuals, thus decontextualizing it."<sup>28</sup>

What would be more fruitful is an examination of the testimonies of both feminists and beauty pageant contestants as a series of competing truths, one just as socially constructed as the other. Neither the rhetoric of beauty pageant contestants nor the rhetoric of feminists should be understood as self-evident or the truth; rather, both should be placed in the context of the production of subjectivity. In other words, how do the words of beauty pageant contestants help us to understand tensions between representation and historical, material lives? Can the contestants' accounts reveal the spaces in which the construction of the feminine subject is unpredictable and unstable? To understand not only the difference between feminists and beauty pageant contestants but also the ways in which this difference is constituted relationally, we need to "attend to the historical processes that, through discourse, position subjects and produce their experiences."<sup>29</sup>

One way that beauty pageant contestants have been positioned as particular kinds of subjects is through "free choice" rhetoric—the choice to enter a pageant, the choice to construct oneself within the bounds of a particular femininity. This rhetoric is one that has perhaps ironically been enabled by the efforts of feminists over the last two decades to pave the way for women to make new choices about their lives. As the popular press is wont to do, the politics of feminism have been completely obscured in a discourse that utilizes elements of feminism in a neutralized if not reactionary manner. Remarking on the popular construction of disciplinary beauty rituals such as makeup and fixing one's hair as "creative expression," Bordo observes:

The one comment that hints at women's (by now depressingly well-documented) dissatisfaction with their appearance trivializes that dissatisfaction and puts it beyond the pale of cultural critique: "It's fashion." What she means is: "It's only fashion," whose whim-



sical and politically neutral vicissitudes supply endless amusement for woman's eternally superficial values. ("Women are never happy with themselves.") If we are never happy with ourselves, it is implied, that is due to our female nature, not to be taken too seriously or made into a "political question."<sup>30</sup>

Instead of making women's feelings of inadequacy about their self-image into a "political question," popular discourse instructs us to revel in the creation of a new self, a self that requires particular disciplinary practices in order to create a femininity that is exotic, novel, erotic, and fashionable. If cosmetic changes, such as perming and bleaching hair, wearing colored contact lenses, and plastic surgery help to create this new self, the beauty pageant is merely the forum for the expression of these creative acts. This discourse positions liberal notions of choice and agency as key elements of dominant discourse about beauty and femininity. Beauty pageant contestants consistently claim that the "new experience" of the pageant was their central motivation for entering; once in the pageant, when asked why they are there, they answer, "I'm here because I want to be, I want the experience."<sup>31</sup> As one contestant said, "Hopefully, [participating in pageants] helps you improve as a person. . . . You're not in competition with the other girls, you're in competition with yourself, to be the best 'you' you can be."<sup>32</sup>

When examined through the lens of this framework, the pageant contestant becomes the enthusiastic defender of democratic values in the world of "creative expression" and free choice. This cultural construction of a pageant contestant as a liberal citizen dedicated to democracy and self-agency lends even more credibility to the contestants' response to feminist inquisition: they point to their participation in pageants as examples of "doing what I want to do." The fact that beauty pageant contestants construct their feminine identities in relation to and because of power, not because that particular identity was chosen from some grab bag, is not remarked upon by these contestants; the conditions that condition the choices we all make (not only the ones beauty pageant contestants make) are erased or obscured.

Exploring the construction of experience of beauty pageant contestants also raises the question of subjectivity and identity. Scott's claim that "[i]t is not individuals who have experience, but subjects who are constituted through experience" historicizes experience and forces the contextual-

ization of the accounts of the contestants. It also compels me to take seriously constant critical self-reflection about my position in relation to the contestants. How I, as a feminist, would position beauty pageant contestants and historicize their experience is, in the words of Gayatri Spivak, "to make visible the assignment of subject-positions."<sup>33</sup>

The beauty pageant serves as a site in which these processes and their effects can be both marked and remarked upon. The pageant contestants embrace and resist different identities, identities that are constituted through the structuring of the pageant itself. And, through the words of the pageant contestants and accounts that rehearse why these women are participating in the pageants, we can understand the discursive processes that are both visible and invisible, and reactionary and potentially liberatory—processes that are part of the construction of the beauty pageant and, in the larger culture, of the beauty system itself.

## THE AMERICAN NATION AND REPRESENTATIONS OF RACE

[The success of the nineties' attacks on "Political Correctness"] activates a genteel white nationalism in which the red menace is directly replaced by the rainbow menace.

CHRISTOPHER NEWFIELD

The context of the 1990s and contemporary demands that all cultural forms reflect racial and ethnic diversity have forced pageants to confront their history of celebrating universal whiteness.<sup>34</sup> Appropriating the terms and language of diversity, the beauty pageant positions itself squarely in the center of national debates over identity and transforms the "crisis" of diversity—it accommodates diversity, performs and exercises toleration, and effaces any obvious signs of particular ethnicities or races. The nationwide debate around issues of diversity, which is situated centrally in fears about identity politics, is reinvented in the beauty pageant as a classic liberal tale about individual achievement in a land of opportunity.

"Political correctness" or "multiculturalism" has perhaps garnered more media attention than any other single cultural phenomenon of the early 1990s. Heated debates on these topics have largely focused on edu-

cational study, research, academics, and university curricula.<sup>35</sup> These debates, however, have also triggered a nationwide hysteria that finds a place in almost every political and popular cultural site: music, film, art, politics, and government. This hysteria has transformed into both the creation of and a response to what is being called a national crisis: a crisis of identity, a crisis of virtue, and a crisis of morals. The discourse of multiculturalism frames this crisis: as it is represented in the visions from the Right, the supposed cohesiveness of the "American identity" is rapidly disintegrating under the tyranny of identity politics and the assertions of "victimization" by numerous historically marginalized groups. As syndicated columnist George Will proclaims, "One way to make racial, ethnic or sexual identity primary is to destroy alternative sources of individuality and social cohesion, such as a shared history, a common culture and unifying values."<sup>36</sup> Multiculturalism's threat to the so-called common culture is perceived by the Right (as well as by some on the Left) as the "Balkanization" of U.S. society.<sup>37</sup> Balkanization results in the loss of the unified "American" identity as subcultures emerge and develop through the claiming of particular marginalized identities.

What is clear about the multicultural debates is that the term *multiculturalism* is the new code word for race in the United States, a code that Hazel Carby argues is just as effective "as the word 'drugs' or the phrase 'inner-city violence' at creating a common-sense awareness that race is, indeed, the subject being evoked."<sup>38</sup> In a historical moment characterized by a dismantling of affirmative action and national debates over presidential apologies for slavery, multiculturalism is situated in the cross fire. To flesh out the contours of the current moral panic in the United States, one must recognize that race is at the center of the anxiety. Indeed, race informs, constitutes, and shapes the crisis.

Combating and diffusing the Right's hysteria about multiculturalism has meant popularizing or democratizing the very notion that poses the biggest threat within the whole debate: the concept of "diversity." The language of diversity has been used in popular culture, in politics, and in academics as an indication that difference is recognized, as an identification with diverse demographics, and as an acknowledgment of a variety of subcultures. Not surprisingly, part of the practice of democratizing diversity has been to commodify it; retail corporations such as Benetton

and Esprit routinely use images of diversity as hip new ways to sell clothing,<sup>39</sup> and the cosmetics industry is capitalizing on an ever-widening new ethnic market. As *Vogue* magazine puts it, "Jesse Jackson's Rainbow Coalition may have been wishful thinking in the political arena, but in the beauty business it's become a reality."<sup>40</sup> The media widely uses "diverse" representatives in advertisements and television programs: children who watch public television are exposed to images of African American, Latino, and Asian children happily romping with huge purple dinosaurs, and public service announcements for children contain positive messages about combating racial prejudice alongside warnings about guns and drugs.

Thus, one of the various strategies involved in managing diversity is through the representation of difference. The body is, above all else, representation, and if displays of the female body—in the media, in film, and in advertising—are displays of black and brown female bodies, then diversity is in fact represented. The African American model Tyra Banks and the Latina model Daisy Fuentes offer living, breathing evidence that diversity sells and is equally captivating for consumers of all colors. Diversity becomes a commodity that is purchased through the representation and display of nonwhite feminine bodies (predominantly by white consumers who come equipped with an excessive dose of liberal guilt about race). Most white Americans want to believe that they are "tolerant" and that they legitimate the beauty of Fuentes or the musical talent of rap star Queen Latifah through consumption. Purchasing products that package diversity allows white consumers to believe that they are enacting tolerance without the messy problems of actually redistributing resources or living the effects of affirmative action. Thus the ironic, unintended effect that characterizes the realm of representation becomes one in which white Americans *feel* more tolerant than ever, even as they continue to live in an increasingly segregated nation.

This language of diversity has resulted in anything but a recognition of diverse cultures and traditions. Rather, the use of "diversity" in popular discourse has reduced the threat of identity politics by entrenching diversity within commodity culture, within the language and politics of liberalism, and inside a circumscribed representation of the female body. As such, Carby's questions remain particularly appropriate: "Is the empha-

sis on cultural diversity making invisible the politics of race in this increasingly segregated nation, and is the language of cultural diversity a convenient substitute for the political action needed to desegregate?"<sup>41</sup> The slick, commodified image of diversity that is repeatedly deployed—by the media and other forms of popular discourse—as a cover story for the material and cultural conditions of a society diverse in race, ethnicity, and class assuages national tensions about race and legitimates the ideas of people like Rush Limbaugh about the necessity of accepting the "American way." The mass-mediated debates over multiculturalism are both the symptom and the enactment of the anxiety caused by the new vision of a multiracial social order—now posed as an alternative and critique of white supremacy and male dominance.

The beauty pageant, and especially the Miss America pageant, needs to be situated centrally within this context. The cultural work the beauty pageant performs creates an idealized subjectivity that corresponds to a 1990s' version of hip diversity. Alongside its nationalist claims and its celebration of a particular feminine subject, it also offers the dialectic of racial crisis and containment, where the potential threat of making racial or ethnic identity primary is made visible and then summarily converted to the successful production of "self-defining participants in a free society."<sup>42</sup> Miss America is the face who is simultaneously the face of America, the face of womanhood, and the face of diversity. The presence of black and brown female bodies on the stage does not dismantle the privilege of whiteness that frames the pageant. On the contrary, this presence, harmoniously situated alongside white female bodies, works to include whiteness as a key player in the game of diversity.

## SO, THERE SHE IS . . .

Rather than understanding beauty pageants as simple, obvious expressions of male dominance, we must begin by situating contemporary pageants within the political context of the 1990s. In particular, the context of the debates over multiculturalism provides a point of entry for analyzing pageants as sites for cultural work that produces national female subjects in postindustrialist United States. Particular definitions of gen-

der and race always inform the construction of national identity, even as these definitions present the constant potential for transgression. The challenge is to balance the two, or discover a way to ease a nation's anxiety about itself, to stabilize national identity even while reflecting some part of the reality of what that nation looks like. The beauty pageant is precisely this balancing act; it pieces together an ideal from separate parts and manages not only to convincingly call that ideal a whole, seamless identity, but also to spectacularly demonstrate the pleasure of power.

Taking into account the pleasurable and productive aspects of power, while simultaneously acknowledging the ways in which power—through both ideology and material effects—creates the feminine subject, is to understand gender as both representation and self-representation. This understanding entails more than merely considering the different cultural representations of the female body. Kathy Davis urges “feminists to recover the body as a locus of ongoing political struggle, a site of feminist practice in relation to the practical lives of women's bodies. Feminists need to pay special attention to the ‘collusions, subversions, and enticements through which culture enjoins the aid of our bodies in the reproduction of gender.’”<sup>43</sup> Davis's project on the practice of cosmetic surgery serves as a useful departure point for thinking through issues and dilemmas regarding beauty pageants. Like Davis, my central question within this project has been framed in simple terms: why do women participate in beauty pageants? What is it, exactly, about these events that continue to motivate women, even in the face of various critiques? It is not so difficult to imagine why contestants so easily dismiss feminist critique, given the popular construction of feminism as hysterical and overly paranoid. But it is more difficult to explain contestants' continued participation in the face of criticism from various commentators on both the Left and Right, commentators who decry the supposed inherent vacuousness of the event and, by extension, of the contestants.

Davis's solution to her dilemma about cosmetic surgery was to take “the member's point of view,” where, “without forgetting feminist critical perspectives of women's involvement in the feminine beauty system, [she] bracketed the notion that women and their bodies are determined or colonized by this system in order to see if (and how) [she] might find a way to believe the explanations they themselves had.”<sup>44</sup> I found a similar way to reconcile, or at least negotiate, my own dilemma of privileg-

ing beauty pageants contestants' experience while simultaneously critiquing cultural discourses and practices that produce beauty pageants and certain manifestations of the female body: I look at the thematic use of classic liberal stories of individual achievement and pluralist tolerance within the pageant. In other words, rather than merely dismissing these liberal tales as part of a powerful system in which women and their bodies are "determined and colonized," I situate the pageants, and the ways in which liberal discourse is operationalized within pageants, in a particular historical context. Making the connection between the various available cultural narratives about individualism and diversity or pluralism—drawn from feminist discourses, popular discourses, political discourses (with a particular eye toward the recent spate of neoconservative "feminists" such as Peggy Noonan and Arianna Huffington)<sup>45</sup>, and discourses about race and ethnicity—and the reliance upon liberal notions of individualism, equal opportunity, pluralism, and the like within beauty pageants allows us to conceptualize pageants and the women who participate within them as neither complete victims nor entirely free agents. We need to begin by considering the pageants' and contestants' claim that beauty pageants are important sites for the construction of national feminine identity, and that constructing national identity in the United States means not only being a particular kind of woman, but also embracing a specific definition of diversity.

Beauty pageants are occasions for the construction of a particular feminine subject that corresponds with these kinds of discourses and practices. In line with this, my original overly simplified question—"why do women participate in beauty pageants?"—must be amended to include a more complicated set of issues: in this current cultural and political climate, what is the distinctively "feminine" way in which women can wield power (a way that does not simply recuperate the dismissal by radical feminists that women with power are merely women in masculine positions, acting like men, because power is only configured as masculine)? In order to answer this question, we need to take seriously contestants' claims that beauty pageants are a step toward an individual woman's experiences of embodiment. We need, in other words, to take another look at the construction of feminine identity in U.S. culture in the 1990s, to situate and contextualize claims of postfeminism and diversity rather than dismiss them as reactionary and accommodating discourses.

If beauty pageants provide a space through which women can realize an experience of embodiment and the possibility of agency, one of the ways they realize this is, ironically, through a particular construction of the female body. The female body is situated in a cultural and political climate that has become increasingly hostile to various feminisms and feminist claims, a climate where postfeminist spokespersons such as Camille Paglia and Katie Roiphe have transformed feminist thought (at least in mainstream media) into something which is "psychologically motivated," "old-fashioned," or simply paranoid.<sup>46</sup> Beauty pageants in this context belong to a "set of social practices which evoke strong reactions and heated debates about what constitutes an appropriate or adequate feminist response," and through these tensions, pageants find a place within post-feminist rhetoric and practice.<sup>47</sup>

The 1990s' postfeminist call has been to urge women to "return" to the body, to explore its multiple pleasures, and to revel in its creative possibilities.<sup>48</sup> "Returning to the body," however, does not mean passively accepting a masculinist definition of the female body as empty and at the same time all-encompassing, that common experience women have of being *nothing* but a body even as they are made to understand that the body is *everything*. On the contrary, the feminine body is popularly considered as both a site for pleasure and an active, thinking subject. And so beauty pageants, rather than operating as simple showcases for displaying objectified bodies, are actually a kind of feminist space where female identity is constructed by negotiating the contradictions of being socially constituted as "just" a body while simultaneously producing oneself as an active thinking subject, indeed, a decidedly "liberal" subject. Beauty pageants produce the feminine body as a site of pleasure. This particular identity, argues Davis (paraphrasing Iris Young), is one of "feminine embodiment," which is the condition of "being caught between existence as just a body and the desire to transcend that body and become a subject who acts upon the world in and through it."<sup>49</sup> This notion of being an actor in the world, of both existing as a body and transcending that body, is the relentless theme of beauty pageants.

In fact, feminism played an indirect role in shaping how beauty pageants are now defined. Contestants have appropriated elements of (mainstream) or liberal feminist discourse as part of their self-presentation.



Interviews with contestants are riddled with statements about self-confidence, assertiveness, the importance of careers, and perhaps most important, "individual" choice. The pageants themselves change according to changes in dominant collective notions of gender, notions that are influenced by (and occasionally give credit to) mainstream liberal feminist discourse. For example, at the opening of most beauty pageants, each contestant offers a short, introductory autobiography. This goes hand in hand with the pageant being a scholarship competition: these brief histories inevitably reference career and education as the most important personal goals of the contestant. This is a shift in the image of Miss America, the "ideal" American woman who was "able to shoulder the responsibilities of homemaking and motherhood."<sup>50</sup> The idea that this woman would consciously choose a career over family, even if temporarily, is an important result of feminist movements in the United States.

Beauty pageant contestants perform an elaborate balancing act between representing themselves in terms of liberal personhood and individual achievement and participating in a competition dedicated to the display and maintenance of an ideal feminine form. The fact that the swimsuit competition within beauty pageants recently changed its name to the "physical fitness competition," and that some pageants no longer require contestants to wear high heels with their swimsuits, does not eclipse the fact that the swimsuit competition is just that: a competition where women parade in front of a panel of judges in a swimsuit. But this apparent paradox of feminine embodiment is precisely what allows pageants to maintain popularity in this political and cultural climate. The pitting of the swimsuit competition's object against the interview's subject reflects the popular sentiment of being sexual and serious at the same time—a sentiment that finds its way to Virginia Slims ads as well as Naomi Wolf's theoretical musings. In other words, the pageant attempts to accommodate the contradictions of constructing oneself as a feminine subject in U.S. culture in the 1990s.

## ABOUT THE BOOK

The televised Miss America pageant that millions watch every September is really the end product of a highly complex process that involves re-

gional and state volunteers, chambers of commerce, local sponsorship, and thousands of contestants. *The Most Beautiful Girl in the World* begins with an investigation of this process and with a consideration of the various strategies and material means that are necessary for contestants to compete on the Miss America pageant track.

In situating the Miss America pageant as a highly commodified, mass-mediated feminized spectacle, chapter 1 demonstrates that the pageant has vigorously defined itself, practically from its inception, as a civic event that is about respectable femininity and “typical” American beauty and morality. The strategies employed by Miss America officials, from the constant chaperoning to a strict no-alcohol policy to a commitment to charity organizations, have functioned to establish the pageant as an annual American ritual set apart from other beauty pageants. Thus chapter 1 suggests that the Miss America pageant has for most of its history been dedicated to making a claim on national feminine identity.

After this description of how both producers and pageant contestants conceive of the beauty pageant, chapter 2 explores the anatomy of the Miss America pageant itself. It begins with a description of what is perhaps the most (in)famous element of the spectacle, the swimsuit competition. Then the chapter describes the contestants’ own understandings and sentiments about this event, focusing on their complex reconciliations about participating in the swimsuit competition (an event in which many of them feel uncomfortable participating) and their obvious enthusiasm for the rest of the pageant.

Chapter 2 details the various negotiations involving the contestants’ discomfort with the swimsuit competition by framing their comments within a discussion of other pageants that focus more intensely and more singularly on the female body. At the same time, this chapter situates the swimsuit competition as an event that is about the physical and moral disciplining of women’s bodies. In other words, the swimsuit competition requires the contestants to wear swimsuits that are designed to never come in contact with any body of water and are strictly regulated in terms of how many inches of skin may be exposed, and the chapter argues that it is precisely this disciplining that makes the swimsuit competition an absolutely necessary element of the Miss America pageant. It is necessary because it is the performance of the female object, a performance that is

then juxtaposed to the interview and talent competitions, which are performances of the female subject.

The third chapter of *The Most Beautiful Girl in the World* details these performances by focusing on the interview and talent competitions. The chapter begins with a discussion of the pageant interview and describes the various expectations the Miss America pageant places on this event. The interview competition has two distinct elements. The first is the main interview, conducted with every contestant in front of a panel of judges in a closed space, which takes place before the public viewing of the pageant. The second component involves only the top five finalists in the pageant and focuses on the chosen "issue platform" of each finalist. In chapter 3, the contestants discuss the typical questions asked in the main interview, the questions' significance in terms of revealing personality, "poise," and career and educational goals, and the various strategies undertaken to "give a good interview." The chapter details the importance of the interview, not only as a means to establish the Miss America pageant as a respectable event that is fundamentally about personality and intelligence (and thus not beauty), but also as a crucial element in the self-construction of pageant contestants as modern liberal subjects.

Chapter 3 also explores the talent portion of the Miss America pageant. The talent competition is worth 40 percent of a contestant's total score and is uniformly thought of by pageant participants as the most important element of the entire event. This chapter suggests that the talent competition establishes the pageant as a "middlebrow" event; as such, it demonstrates through the performances the contestants' commitment to moral virtue and gestures and women's investment in what are usually thought of as high cultural forms. The popularity of vocal and instrumental numbers, and the relative failure of talents such as stand-up comedy, ventriloquism, and popular contemporary dance, offer evidence that the talent competition is a performative space in which contestants establish themselves as members of a particular cultural elite. The chapter further argues that the talent competition is a fundamentally racialized event, one in which every talent (especially those performed by women of color) are culturally and socially coded as white. This sets the stage for chapter 4's discussion of the pageant's strategies for accommodating difference and diversity in light of a long history of racial exclusion—a history during

which, until the late 1940s, each contestant was required to list their genealogy as part of their biographical profile.

As a way of framing this discussion, chapter 4 focuses on the story of Vanessa Williams, who was crowned the first African American Miss America, for 1984. This chapter contextualizes Williams's reign—which abruptly ended after ten months when *Penthouse* magazine published nude photographs of Williams and another woman—within the cultural and political climate of the 1980s. Arguing that this historical moment was characterized by the extreme demonization of people of color in the mass media on the one hand, and the emerging recognition that celebrating diversity was a lucrative marketing and political strategy on the other, this chapter situates Williams's "fall from grace" as one that reinvigorated dominant stereotypes of black female sexuality as insatiable, wanton, and indiscriminate.

Chapter 4 further argues that the Miss America pageant, like other popular cultural forms, establishes clear conditions through which the representation of race occurs. In the particular case of Vanessa Williams, the condition through which race was filtered (and thus obfuscated) was sexuality. More specifically, the fact that Williams simulated (heterosexual-defined) lesbian desire in the pages of *Penthouse* diverted attention from her race and focused on the ways in which her apparent sexuality disrupted the heterosexual matrix of the pageant.

Although chapter 4 focuses primarily on Vanessa Williams, it also argues more broadly about the pageant's troubled history in representing racialized identity. Drawing together the themes of race, gender, and the nation, it discusses how the Miss America pageant offers a performance of feminine subjectivity that manages and disciplines the construction of national identity, despite the threats posed to national culture by fluctuating racial and gender codes.

As chapter 4 identifies these cultural processes as they are framed by Williams's troubled reign, chapter 5 situates two other extraordinary Miss Americas as particularly appropriate representatives of the nation. These two—Bess Myerson, Miss America 1945, and Heather Whitestone, Miss America 1995—were crowned in part because they provided safe answers to national questions about idealized American femininity. The chapter argues that Myerson and Whitestone represent a kind of embodied na-

tional community, one in which female icons of the nation assuage fears about ambivalent definitions of who and what a nation should be.

Bess Myerson was crowned the first (and only) Jewish Miss America—a significant event in its own right, but the historical moment of 1945 U.S. society lent even more importance to her selection as a national representative. Myerson was a figure of femininity that the nation needed symbolically at that particular moment—a need that hasn't expressed itself in quite the same way since, at least within the Miss America pageant.

Heather Whitestone, crowned fifty years after Myerson, also responds to national concerns and questions about feminine identity through her difference. Whitestone, who is deaf, is the first Miss America with a disability. Her deafness is constructed by the pageant as an obstacle Whitestone was able to “overcome,” and as such represents a subjectivity that accommodates, rather than highlights, difference. In the cultural climate of the 1990s, when hysteria over identity politics and difference seems to continually reach new heights, Whitestone's innocence and purity, characterized by her deafness, trumps the politics of identity and offers a revitalized version of American femininity. The chapter further argues that the visual regimes of the nation shifted with the televising of the pageant, and that Whitestone, who dances ballet by feeling the beat of the music through her feet, responds uniquely to this shift by offering a feminine subjectivity that is visually and ideologically innocent.

In an attempt to discover whether there might be an international corollary to the Miss America pageant's efforts to establish a national feminine identity, chapter 6 turns to international pageants such as Miss World and Miss Universe. By showing that similar strategies of defining femininity are used in pageants such as Miss India and Miss Tibet, the chapter suggests that international pageants are also dedicated to establishing a feminine national icon that can be situated in a “family of nations.” However, despite the similarities between the Miss America pageant and international beauty pageants, a westernized understanding of idealized femininity is not a universally shared condition. Chapter 6 concludes with a consideration of the possibility that although pageants may have format and structure in common, feminine sexuality plays itself out differently in different contexts and within different sets of national politics.

The book concludes by considering the implications of its methodol-

ogy and findings for future investigations of feminized spectacles in late-twentieth-century U.S. culture. I suggest that the Miss America pageant appropriates liberal feminist rhetoric and is situated as a postfeminist space in the late 1990s—and although the pageant is not necessarily the road to feminist reform, this road itself is a complicated one, full of excess and contradictions. The pageant attempts to reassure national tensions about femininity, but because femininity is an unstable and unfixed category, the pageant cannot accommodate all of these tensions. In fact, the Miss America pageant does complex cultural work in terms of race, gender, and the nation.