

ABSTRACT

Posh Pageantry or Mere Fairytale? An Ethnographic Study of Pageantry in the Modern United States

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Pageantry has been belittled as an “archaic” and “passé” amusement, yet over time society has remained charmed with its search for a modern-day Cinderella. Today, the industry has burgeoned into a multi-billion dollar affair hosting a variety of pageants ranging from Miss America and Miss Rodeo America to television reality shows such as “Honey Boo Boo” or “Toddlers and Tiaras.” However, despite this rise in popularity, criticisms have failed to subside. This work will approach the arguments of critics by assessing pageants’ promotion of a “certain class of girl” through incorporation of past and present titleholder experiences as well as an ethnographic study of the various Miss Rodeo competitions. Moreover, by defining “contradicting identities,” this thesis will consider the struggle between a titleholder’s personal identity with that of an organizational or national ideal. This work will conclude by suggesting pageantry’s future implications as it relates to younger generations and changing demographics within American society.

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POSH PAGEANTRY OR MERE FAIRYTALE?
AN ETHNOGRAPHIC STUDY OF PAGEANTRY IN THE MODERN UNITED STATES

A Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of
Baylor University
In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the
Honors Program

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May 2014

TABLE OF CONTENTS

List of Figures	iv
Acknowledgements.....	v
Chapter	
1. INTRODUCTION.....	1
Defining Contradicting Identities	
Personal Autobiography	
Importance of Analyzing Pageantry	
Succeeding Discourse	
A Brief History	
Basic Components of Pageantry	
2. IDENTITY.....	18
The Idea of Identity	
A Titleholder's Identity: Studying Past and Current Titleholders	
3. MISS RODEO AMERICA SYSTEM.....	37
Miss Rodeo Texas System	
Who is a Rodeo Queen? What is Her Purpose?	
Personal Identities	
Pageantry Experiences	

4. FUTURE IMPLICATIONS AND CONCLUSION	54
Fairytale and Child Beauty Pageant Demographics	
Conclusion	
BIBLIOGRAPHY	61

LIST OF FIGURES

1. Margaret Gorman, Miss America 1921.....	23
2. Vanessa Williams, Miss America 1984.....	30
3. Nina Davuluri, Miss America 2014.....	34
4. Theresa Vail, Miss Kansas 2014.....	36
5. Marilyn (Scott) Freimark, Miss Rodeo America 1955.....	38
6. Ashley Bergfield, Second Title (Local Level), Sheridan County Fair & Rodeo Queen 2010.....	46
7. Ashley Bergfield, Beginning of Year as Miss Rodeo Austin.....	48
8. Ashley Bergfield, End of Year as Miss Rodeo Austin.....	49

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am beyond blessed to have completed this great accomplishment; however, it would not have been possible without the guidance of my mentor Dr. Offit and the support of my parents, Clifford and Judy Bergfield. Thank you for listening to my struggles, revising numerous rough drafts and helping me to complete this outstanding achievement.

CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

*There she is, Miss America
There she is, your ideal
The dream of a million girls who are more than pretty can come true
in Atlantic City
For she may turn out to be the Queen of femininity*

*There she is, Miss America
There she is, your ideal
With so many beauties she took the town by storm
With her all-American face and form*

*And there she is
Walking on air, she is
Fairest of the fair, she is
There she is - Miss America*

-Performed by Bert Parks, Miss America Song

America loves a beauty pageant. After months or years of preparation, the spectacle of pageant contestants flaunting their sculpted physiques and advocating on behalf of their chosen platform draws in audiences ranging from the tens to the tens-of-millions, making pageantry a big business. There are a variety of contests ranging from Miss America and Miss Rodeo America to television reality shows such as “Honey Boo Boo” or “Toddlers and Tiaras.” However, despite the success of pageants, there is scrutiny of the industry’s construction of femininity. For instance, in 1968 pageant protests were organized by groups such as the New York Radical Women

(N.Y.R.W) who condemned the Miss America pageant as a “perfect combination of American values - racism, militarism, capitalism - all packaged in one 'ideal' symbol, a woman” (PBS Online 2002). Such ridicule of pageants has not ceased, but today questions what Miss America promotes and represents.

Critics argue that pageants degrade women to an inferior status and furthermore reinforce domestic race and class divisions (Wolf 2002, Wolfe 2012, and Lieberman 2010). The recent crowning of Miss America 2014, Nina Davuluri, highlights tensions of race in modern-day pageantry. As an Indian-American, Davuluri experienced racism upon winning the crown- she was labeled and persecuted as an Arab who did not represent American values or ideas (Brinius 2013). Davulri’s ordeal is one example of several titleholders, especially those of color, leading this thesis to study whether pageant contestants and titleholders reflect a national identity and if so how accurately (Banet-Weiser 1999, Watson et. al. 2004).

Although pageants have selected ethnic women, the general absence of pageant diversity with America’s shifting demographics, questions the future of racial representation in pageantry. To recognize the reality of America’s changing demographics, statistics by the United States Census Bureau reveal that minorities will soon outnumber Anglos (Murdock 2013 and United States 2011). Scholar Steve Murdock analyzed this data and concluded that 92% of the total growth within the United States has been predominately non-whites while the white population is declining on average by 17% (Murdock 2013 and United States 2011). Considering these statistics and recent responses to Davuluri’s crowning, how will pageants adapt? Moreover, does a titleholder such as Miss America represent a national identity? Can she embody a country’s national

image- its values, beliefs and ideas? Do pageants favor traditional ideas of race and popular culture? Analyzing scholarly work and incorporating personal pageant experiences, this thesis will dissect how pageantry promotes an ideal feminine identity and additionally will define how contestants must balance national and personal identities.

Defining Contradicting Identities

By creating a dynamic combination of conformity and individuality, pageants challenge contestants to simultaneously balance representation of a title while expressing individuality. This dichotomy is pageantry's struggle because it suggests that girls must lose themselves to their titles while exhibiting unique and distinguishable personalities to win the crown.

Despite the notion that a national titleholder is the girl next-door, she is in fact an end product molded for display. A pageant is a search for a particular "breed" of girl who is expected to walk and talk as royalty and uphold the image of a national title (Banet-Weiser 1999: 38). To achieve this is no easy task. Ask a contestant how she prepared for a pageant and she is likely to tell you that she devoted months to excessive training. As a result, Miss America does not win because she is *already* the ideal, but has *learned* how to answer questions, *shaped* her flawless figure, and *adopted* the organization's values (*Secret World of Beauty Pageants* 1998). There is a rigorous process to winning- a contestant must master the components of a pageant and learn how to act and react to an organization's standards. The pageant is merely the finale to a contestant's endless hours

of preparation, revealing how dedicated she is to becoming the ideal titleholder and winning the crown.

Simultaneously, contestants are expected to be strong, confident and unique individuals who captivate the public eye (Banet-Weiser 1999). This requires girls to express themselves, yet acquire a pageant Barbie doll's qualities. Often individuality is expressed through one's talent, personal interview, and attire; nonetheless, there are basic standards that cannot be dismissed if a contestant seeks to win. Pageants desire a combination of deference and distinctiveness, an ideal that my personal experiences allow me to elaborate upon. As a prior Miss Rodeo Austin, current Miss Rodeo Houston-Harris County and contestant at last year's Miss Rodeo Texas pageant, I possess an insider's perspective into how contestants prepare for competition. The upcoming chapters of this thesis will incorporate these views and supplement them with scholarly critique to analyze the construction of national and personal identities and whether they conflict.

Personal Autobiography

Soiled by grease, dodging flying cow patties, and listening to hours of country songs has been my life as a farmer's daughter. For months at a time, I have lived in isolation without the hustle and bustle of the city. My summers have been spent on our family farm caring for animals, fixing fence, and running heavy machinery from dawn until dusk only to drop into bed exhausted from the physical demands of the day's work.

Each summer since age seven meant leaving civilization- Texas, and being exiled to our ranch in Northwestern Nebraska. Most girls choose not to be covered in grease or

manure, but operating a family farm is no option when it's your livelihood and lifestyle. Chores are necessary, obstacles arise and life is unpredictable on our farm, but this is where I come from, this is my home. Even with this volatile and rugged lifestyle, I discovered a passion, freedom, and beauty from the world's woes: horses. And ever since my father first plopped me on a pony until now, horses have been my solace. However, regardless of this passion, this thesis will not concern my passion for horses, but rather my observations and involvement in pageantry as a rodeo queen and the connection between the two.

Over the last couple of years many of my weekends have been a whirlwind of hairspray, sequined outfits and big smiles while representing The Star of Texas Fair and Rodeo (Rodeo Austin), a major non-profit organization. Rodeo Austin's mission has been to preserve our western heritage and promote youth education. Following an intensely competitive selection process in March of 2012, I was chosen to represent the world's fifth largest indoor rodeo as Miss Rodeo Austin. My year-long commitment required appearances including rodeos, fairs, parades, induction ceremonies and fundraising events.

Naturally, at my appearances people stared at my brightly colored monochromatic outfits, matching boots, hat complete with crown and of course, big, Texas hair! However, despite all the stares, girls both young and old flocked to my side to meet a "real" queen. As queen, I answered questions, posed for photos, signed autograph sheets and most importantly, encouraged girls to "rope their dreams." To my surprise, no matter where I traveled women of all ages saw me as a role model. Appreciating this, I tried to

make each woman I met feel special realizing that by taking a moment to listen, I could make a difference.

Being Miss Rodeo Austin 2012 and the current Miss Rodeo Houston-Harris County has given me the opportunity to motivate women to be their best selves. These women have revealed my desire to empower women to follow their dreams. By listening to their stories, I am now compelled to pursue a career investing in women's lives and advocating on their behalf. It is from this experience, holding other titles, competing in the Miss Rodeo Texas pageant and my current studies that I hope to reveal and discuss pageantry's numerous opportunities as well as how pageants affect all women.

Pageantry is a contested issue that will be discussed, but this thesis will also consider how individual and titleholder identities are constructed from contestants' first-hand experiences. Scholars seldom consider a contestant's voice which can result in hasty, ignorant and premature conclusions. Thus, this thesis will combine personal experiences and scholarly study to challenge readers to dismiss prior stereotypes and examine pageants in a new and creative way.

Importance of Analyzing Pageantry

Spray tans, fake hairpieces and "world peace" are common perceptions of beauty contestants often characterized as shallow and senseless. Granted some competitors and competitions are superficial, many possess valuable insights that ought not be overlooked and/or dismissed. Instead, scholars should study the influence pageants have upon development of body image, self-esteem and personal identities, reflection of societal

roles/status and whether or not titleholders represent a national identity (Banet-Weiser 1999, Wolf 2002).

It is evident that society is engrossed with fashion, sex and beauty. From young girls wearing their mother's heels to plastic surgery for aging adults, all generations are obsessed with appearance and beauty. Seeing that pageants appeal to these yearnings of beauty and poise, these competitions are a direct reflection of society's values- assuming that Miss America is the ideal representative of American ideals.

Pageants are an international phenomenon affecting the average woman. In fact, the portrayal of the ideal woman relative to the booming beauty industry has generated a "\$33-billion-a year diet industry, the \$20-billion cosmetics industry, [and] the \$300-million cosmetic surgery industry" in the United States alone (Wolf 2002: 17).

Additionally, the growing presence of media tirelessly accosts women with images of fresh, young faces sporting flawless figures. This has encouraged women to buy gym memberships, follow fad diets and strive to become the ideal woman represented by the media and pageants.

Besides this, younger generations are exposed to a greater emphasis upon beauty through fairy tales and shows such as "Toddlers and Tiaras" (The Learning Channel). Society has introduced these shallow thoughts of beauty through hit shows such as "Honey Boo Boo" or "Toddlers and Tiaras" where toddlers wear heavy makeup and flashy dresses. In these examples, children are encouraged to prematurely develop into beautiful, successful women at ages of less than five. Hence, it is evident that ideas of beauty permeate all levels of society, making this thesis an innovative study of how

pageants affect societal perceptions of women, body image, personal identity and a titleholder's representation of a national identity.

Nonetheless, this thesis will directly not evaluate pageantry's influence upon women's body image seeing that numerous scholars such as Naomi Wolf, Londa Schiebinger, and Joan Jacobs Brumberg have already undertaken the issue. Rather, it will assess the importance of pageants in constructing a contestant's personal identity and a titleholder's representation of a national identity.

This past September the Miss America pageant received its highest rating in over nine years (with more than ten million viewers), demonstrating that the pageant continues to be important to the general public (Miss America Organization Press Release Sep. 2013). Moreover, the pageant made history as it crowned its first Indian-American Miss America generating mass conversation about America's cultural competency and identity. Is America ready for another non-white Miss America to symbolize the country's ideal? By analyzing the experiences of past titleholders and examining demographic research, this thesis will discuss the affect pageants have upon society as well as consider pageantry's future implications.

Scholars should not snub or slight studying pageantry as unimportant. In academia, scholars often define scholarly study to include examining historical texts, solving political and/or economic crisis, but these topics must not be the sum total. Alternatively, nontraditional subjects such as pageantry should be discussed to better understand how modern society and its ideas have been and are being shaped. Pageantry provides an insightful understanding to society's perceptions of women, as well as how contestants balance personal and national identities. The coming chapters will discuss the past,

present and future influence(s) of pageantry upon femininity and America's dynamic culture.

Succeeding Discourse

As previously discussed, this thesis seeks to distinguish and contrast personal and national identities fabricated by pageants. To develop this argument and its application, the following pages will provide a deeper analysis of identity construction. Though, before doing so, chapter one will conclude with a brief discussion of my personal background, origins of pageantry and components of a competition. Without this basic understanding of pageant history and structure, this thesis would lack an adequate foundation to build future arguments interrelating pageants and national identity.

Chapter two will focus on historical and contemporary debates of national identity. For almost ninety-two years, the Miss America pageant has crowned their ideal; however, throughout the years, several women have challenged the identity of Miss America. In particular, this thesis will discuss Vanessa Williams, the first African-American Miss America; Nina Davaluri, the current Miss America and first Indian-American to win Miss America; Theresa Vail, Miss Kansas 2013, and another pageant system, Miss Rodeo America. The chapter will conclude by asking: who is a national titleholder? What does she represent? Does/will her role change with the progression of time?

As an actual pageant contestant, chapter three will include and relate my experiences to the construction of personal and national identities. Unlike other scholarly writings, this thesis is a direct result of my participation within the field of study. Since 2006, I have competed in contests, represented several titles and served as a committee member

of a pageant. This involvement not only provides a contestant's perspective, but offers a unique insight into pageantry's mission and structuring. Furthermore, by providing an ethnographical or "behind-the-scenes" vantage, this thesis will spark conversation about how individual contestants struggle to balance personal and national identities.

In the concluding chapter, special emphasis is given to pageantry's future implications. Specifically, it will evaluate how pageantry and images of beauty affect younger generations. In 2009, TLC (The Learning Channel) hits "Honey Boo Boo" and "Toddlers and Tiaras" generated debate about whether childhood beauty pageants were transforming girls into "darling divas or damaged daughters" (Wolf 2002: 427). Critics argue that child beauty pageants evoke overzealous parenting potentially inducing physical and emotional harm to pageant princesses (Wolf 2002: 427).

Even so, these shows postdate original ideas of beauty depicted in childhood fairy tales. "Cinderella," "Sleeping Beauty" and "Snow White" illustrate how beautiful women can succeed and find their Prince Charming. Ideas of beauty are first instilled in young children and further developed throughout adolescence; thus women are instilled with ideas of beauty early in childhood. As a result, what are the future implications of emphasizing beauty at a younger age? How will this affect pageantry, personal and national identities? What are the correlations between childhood beauty pageants and fairytales? In conclusion, these questions will be addressed, but several additional questions will be posed to consider why pageantry is important to analyzing societal beliefs, ideas and perceptions.

A Brief History

Before plunging into the comparison of personal and national identities, familiarity with the history of pageants is important. It is unknown when the first beauty pageant was held, but primeval tales such as the “Greek myth of Paris and his golden apple, or stories about Queen Esther, Shahrazad, or even Cinderella” established the modern day roots of pageantry (although it may be assumed that women have always been judged for their form and figure) (Banet-Weiser 1999: 33).

Nevertheless, pageants began as an appeal to the “public’s lingering romanticism about medieval pageantry and [the] European monarchy” (Banet-Weiser 1999: 33). A variety of festivities including May Day celebrations and Mardi Gras first selected kings and queens to represent festivals and their respective home communities. During this time, middle-class white women were traditionally identified as the “moral guardians” of a community; and so by choosing a festival queen who was a middle-class white woman, she “invoke[d] civic pride [and] affirm[ed] [the] communit[y’s] values” (Banet-Weiser 1999: 34). These festival queens instilled the early notion that a titleholder symbolizes the values and morals of a community that she represents. Moreover, as a community’s ideal woman, she promotes a national identity reflecting the status and role of women within her society.

Within the United States, pageants officially began with the Miss United States Pageant in 1880, but it was not until the 1920s that pageants significantly influenced the struggle to define gender roles. In 1921 (a year after women received the right to vote), the first “Miss America Pageant,” known then as the “Atlantic City National Beauty Pageant/Fall Frolic,” was an attraction that invited women between the ages of fifteen

and seventeen to represent states, key cities, geographical regions, amusement parks and fairs. However, the original intent of the pageant was not to promote a national image, rather it was seen by the Hotelmen's Association as an opportunity to increase tourism after Labor Day. Still, the pageant's selection of a "certain class of girl" revealed that despite the desire for monetary gains it did seek to "reinstate a modest, asexual, domestic woman as the American ideal" (Watson et. al. 2004: 30). Margaret Gorman, the first Miss America, and subsequent titleholders were a statement to these changing times. Contrary to the period's "flaming" flapper girl- rising hemlines, bobbed haircuts, and freedom fighters; Miss America was a traditional, wholesome girl who possessed all the wholesome virtues of American womanhood.

From 1921-1934 the pageant continued to be successful, but with the appointment of Lenora Slaughter in 1935 as Director, the pageant was revamped into a spectacular event expanding the competition, presenting a scholarship, defining feminine respectability and declaring a nonprofit civic corporation status. These esteemed characteristics distinguished the Miss America pageant from other pageants as more than simply a beauty pageant. For instance, no longer were judges expected to identify the titleholder according to a hundred-point body breakdown score (Banet-Weiser 1999: 55-56):

- Construction of head: 15 points
 - Eyes: 10
 - Hair: 5
 - Nose: 5
 - Mouth: 5
 - Facial expression: 10
- Torso: 10
- Legs: 10
- Arms: 10
- Hands: 10
- Grace of bearing: 10

Instead, the Miss America organization was “dedicate[ed] to modest and honorable womanhood” with contestants who competed in a variety of events and a national titleholder who was poised in beauty, grace and intelligence (Banet-Weiser 1999: 40).

The title has continually sought an appropriate “class of girl” to represent the nation and its highest ideals, being one of the few pageants to offer considerable scholarships for higher education. The organization recognized that the “shine of a girl’s hair wasn’t going to make her a success in life” (Banet-Weiser 1999: 41); rather, the mores, ideas and platforms she espoused reflected the ideal Miss America and all-American girl.

Perhaps most significantly, as the largest provider of scholarships to women, the Miss America title has distinguished itself from its widely known Miss USA and Miss Universe counterparts. Since the pageant’s incorporation of scholarships, it has matured into a noteworthy philanthropy offering thirty-five thousand dollars to its Miss America titleholder and over eighteen million dollars to women at local, state and national levels (Banet-Weiser 1999: 45). On the contrary, the Miss USA organization is known for scandals, gorgeous girls and its “boobs and bounce” pageants (Banet-Weiser 1999: 44). Miss USA originated in 1952 when Catalina Swimwear, who produced the pageant after splitting from the Miss America organization, sought to further promote its swimwear line. Accordingly, the Miss USA pageant chose to focus on swimwear and fitness in lieu of talent or scholarship.

Today, both Miss America and Miss USA are popular pageants, but this thesis will not compare the two pageants; instead, it will consider how the oldest and most-widely known pageant, Miss America, promotes personal and national identities. To study both national pageants would fail to offer depth to this thesis, but moreover it is apparent that

the Miss USA pageant would be more applicable if this thesis were to focus upon how pageants influence women's perceptions of body image. Alternatively, the following chapters will analyze how personal and national identities are constructed suggesting that the Miss America pageant is more relevant to this thesis with its history of minority titleholders and recent crowning of Indian-American, Nina Davuluri.

Basic Components of Pageantry

Unfortunately, the general public has minimal knowledge of pageantry besides what appears annually on television. Thus, the subsequent paragraphs will provide a broad overview of the swimsuit, evening wear, interview and talent competitions.

Miss America System

Lifestyle and Fitness in Swimsuit. Making up fifteen percent of each contestant's total score, the swimsuit competition is the most controversial of pageant events. Commonly described as a "meat market," vulnerable contestants strut across a stage appealing to a crowd of "hungry onlookers." It is in this moment that a woman is totally silenced to a mere body walking to a choreographed routine. The swimsuit competition, to an extent similar to the evening gown, ignores the individuality of each woman and instead appeals to "the reassurance of tradition" as each woman is judged according to the fitness of her body. Thus, "the swimsuit competition is not a performance but a spectacle" of femininity "about visual consumption of bodies, about homogeneity and about containment" (Banet-Weiser 1999: 61). Women who do not have the "firm," "rigid," "tight" or "contained" flesh do not have the means to win the pageant; their

“uncontrolled flesh-lumpy buttocks and thighs that jiggle” are believed to be reflections of their inner moral qualities that likewise are “uncontrolled” (Banet-Weiser 1999: 68).

Contestants, as well as pageants, have gone to desperate measures to ensure that the ideal body is presented with techniques such as “gluing the swimsuit to the body with a sports adhesive spray,” “rolling a rolling pin over thighs to flatten cellulite” and “taping” breasts to create greater cleavage (Banet-Weiser 1999: 68, 73). All of these techniques reflect the desire to regulate the body and control its display; however, the Miss America pageant has disputed that it is not a beauty pageant consumed with the presentation of a sexual object, but a public statement of dedication to physical fitness and ideal womanhood. In fact, the Miss America organization “asked American viewers to call a toll free number and vote whether the seventy-three-year old pageant should retain the swimsuit competition as part of the judging process” and surprisingly “an overwhelming seventy-three percent of the viewing audience voted that the swimsuit competition was a crucial factor in the decision-making process leading to the crowning of Miss America” (Banet-Weiser 1999: 59). This overwhelming statistic suggests that American culture glorifies the human body and views Miss America as a representative of America’s national identity. It should then be considered whether contestants go to extreme measures to attain the ideal body and by what means this influences the typical woman’s view of her own body.

Evening Wear. Similarly, the evening wear competition is the classic display of breath-taking beauties silently strolling across the stage. This portion of the competition is a basic component to any pageant whether it is Miss America, Miss USA or Miss Rodeo America. As in the swimsuit competition, contestants are judged on their

physique and poise as they model dresses that they personally selected to reflect their individual personalities. Besides this, contestants are rarely given the opportunity to interact with the judges or the audience until the end of the competition when asked onstage impromptu questions. The evening gown competition is reflective of swimwear considering that girls are seen and not heard.

Interview and Talent. Contrary to the homogeneity within the swimsuit and evening wear competitions, the interview and talents portions reflect each contestant's individuality. The Miss America pageant stresses the representation of the ideal body and image; though, it also desires contestants to be smart, poised, confident, goal-oriented, feisty and individual, but only to an extent. While it claims to appreciate a natural contestant, it actually desires someone who is "naturally spontaneous" (Banet-Weiser 1999: 95). Yet, this quality does not come naturally, but is achieved through rigorous training. Contestants must assume an ability to "educate the nation in terms of civility and to demonstrate the moral qualities of women as national figures," thus leading them to practice answering of questions in a certain manner for personal and onstage interviews, choosing a particular talents and performing talents with "social taste and distinction" (Banet-Weiser 1999: 112). The necessity to triumph in these areas assures that upon being crowned, Miss America is able to handle any situation while also representing the organization in a positive light.

It is evident that pageants seek a titleholder who is a combination of beauty, grace, and intelligence considering that in most pageants the interview and talent portions comprises more than fifty percent of a contestant's final score. Whether a girl is quirky or spunky, performs gymnastics or opera, these areas of the competition encourage a

contestant to be unique. Nevertheless, this complicates the desire for girls to express individuality and conform to the image of the ideal titleholder. In this nuanced study of pageantry and culture, this thesis will take a closer look at the balance of personal and national identities.

CHAPTER TWO

Identity

“Maligned by one segment of America, adored by another, misunderstood by about all of it, Miss America still flows like the Mississippi, drifts like amber waves of grain, sounds like the crack of a bat on a baseball, tastes like Mom’s apple pie, and smells like dollar bills... good old Miss America still talks like Huckleberry Finn... and towers over the land like the Ozarks. She really is the body of state, and the country is in her eyes.”

-Frank Deford, *There She Is: The Life and Times of Miss America*

“Good Old” Miss America is often depicted as an emblem of the American spirit and dream, but can she capture the essence of an entire nation? Deford’s statement above suggests that she is the epitome of the all-American girl, characterizing all that is good about our nation; however, she is more than simply a slice of “apple pie” or the smell of dollar bills; as Miss America, she struggles to embody the nation’s identity and symbolize an ideal vision of femininity.

This substantial undertaking requires Miss America to train, adopt, and exemplify a specific image while striving to maintain her independent sense of self. She is expected to represent an American national identity, but this characterization is often blurred and unclear. Can America be epitomized into one woman? Who is she? What ideas, values and beliefs does she and should she promote?

Over time, America has demographically shifted from a mainstream white society into a diverse, melting pot of cultures. As a result, Miss America may not exemplify America in its entirety, but holds onto the organization’s antiquated white upper-middle class values. This chapter will detail the many conflicts that occur when the white, upper-

middle class ideal meets twenty-first century culture in the legendary Miss America pageant.

The Idea of Identity

Who am I? The definition of identity is a complex concept including a variety of factors such as ethnicity, race, gender, sexual orientation, etc. However, its basic meaning “refers to where one (a person or a group) belongs, and what is expressed as ‘self-image’ or/and ‘common-image,’ what integrate[s] them inside self or group existence, and what differentiate[s] them *vis-à-vis* ‘others’ (Golubovic 2010: 25). Simply put, identities are either defined by one’s self or according to others. As a result, how people behave, interact, and are viewed is subject to perceptions of similarities with and differences from others (Huntington 2004: 22). Thus, individuals may be seen in a variety of ways; from the particulars of one’s ethnic heritage to nominal groups such as jocks or band geeks, there are an infinite number of identities. Nonetheless, for the purpose of this thesis, identities are broadly categorized and defined as either personal or national. The following chapters will further define and provide examples of personal and national identities, but it should be noted that in pageantry, a contestant’s individual identity often differs from pageant ideals to explain a term later used- “contradicting identities.” Thus, in order to win, a contestant must balance personal and national identities.

American National Identity

A person's identity reflects individual qualities, but what defines a national identity? As a national titleholder, Miss America is to be the "body of state, [with] the country in her eyes" (Deford 1971: 147). Seeing that she symbolizes American values and ideals, she should recognize who she represents and understand what defines America; otherwise, she may not be a true representative of America or Americans.

In defining America's identity, there are common qualities midst those who consider themselves Americans. However, because America is diverse in peoples, cultures, ideas, religions, etc., it is difficult to identify a sole, distinguishing feature as purely American. In a scholarly study, researchers Rodriguez, Schwartz and Whitbourne investigated the characteristics shared between Americans. Past national identity studies had struggled with the "meanings and affective valences ascribed [to] 'American identity' and the ways in which these...relate to personal and ethnic identity" (324). Yet, Rodriguez, Schwartz, and Whitbourne's study compared personal and ethnic identity with data from 2004 to 2006 using a multiethnic sample of 287 college students who responded to the following qualitative and open-ended questions (Rodriguez et.al 2010: 324, 330):

1. "When you think of the word *American*, what characteristics or traits do you think of?"
2. "In what ways do you consider yourself an American?"
3. "In what ways do you consider yourself something other than American?"
4. "How American do you feel?"

From the research, what defines the American identity? The following numbers describe how participants perceive America's identity construction (Rodriguez et.al 2010: 335-336):

- 65% of participants defined according to personality traits or values including "liberalism," "equality" or "freedom"
- 18.1% described physical or racial characteristics
- 10.1% considered speaking fluent English important
- 9.1% suggested iconic symbols such as McDonald's or baseball

A majority of respondents characterized Americans for their intangible ideas; still, a significant percentage specified physical or racial characteristics as defining.

Can an American be identified by his/her appearance? Common responses to the survey's questions revealed a strong correlation between ethnicity and the degree to which one felt American. Those who were "Latinos and Blacks, on average, [felt] less American than Whites," (Rodriguez et.al 2010: 343) and were more likely to express a negative description of the American identity than whites" (Rodriguez et.al 2010: 343). Moreover, when asked how they were 'something other than American' "almost three quarters of Latino participants and about 60% of Black participants - compared to less than half of White participants - described their heritage culture" (Rodriguez et.al 2010: 338). The study claims that this discrepancy reflects the historical experiences of minorities in the United States as well as the continuing socioeconomic disparities between these groups and White Americans (Rodriguez et.al 2010: 343). Nonetheless, these statistics suggest that cultural ancestry- a European ethnic background- makes one "more American" than someone non-white and more likely to identify with his or her

minority ethnic heritage. These conclusions are important because Americans continue to identify themselves as a homogenous white society despite being a diverse people.

Miss America and Whiteness. These results mirror pageantry's search for the ideal woman. Since 1921, the Miss America pageant has claimed that it seeks a typical and ordinary titleholder, yet its interpretation of the American national identity has chosen to be within the "bounds of whiteness" (Watson et. al. 2004: 70). Similar to the identity study (Rodriguez et.al 2010), pageantry has characterized an ideal American woman to be white and middle-class; "within this space, traditional markers of identity - race, class, and ethnicity - [have been] diffused and flattened out so that they better accommodate the politics of whiteness that structure the entire event" (Banet-Weiser 1999: 155).

The Miss America pageant first established this standard when meek schoolgirl Margaret Gorman was named the original Miss America at fifteen-years-old. Gorman's modesty and innocence countered the rebellious flapper girl image and stereotypical portrayals of minorities. For example, unlike common representations of "all black women as 'Mammies,' 'Sapphires,' or 'Jezebels,'" Gorman was "publicly hailed" by many Americans as the "type of woman that America needs, strong, red-blooded, able to shoulder the responsibilities of homemaking and motherhood" (Watson et.al. 2004: 3, 10). Furthermore, as described by scholar Betty Friedan, Gorman's win promoted "the feminine mystique-" a nostalgia for Victorianism that encouraged "the cult of domesticity and the institution of motherhood as integral for American women (meaning white middle- and upper-middle-class able-bodied women)" (Watson et.al. 2004: 10).



Figure 1: Margaret Gorman, Miss America 1921

Beginning in 1935 with director Lenora Slaughter, the Miss America Organization ensured that Miss America was a “certain class of woman” (Watson et. al. 2004: 30). Contestants were required to affirm that they had not committed acts of “moral turpitude” including never having been married, been pregnant, borne a child, been arrested, etc. (Watson et. al. 2004: 5). The pageant bylaws extended past unscrupulous behavior to control Miss America’s image as when judges refused to crown Miss California, Claire James, in 1938 because she had violated the rules and worn lipstick; it appears that James’ ruby, red lips had challenged the Miss America Organization’s search for a domestic and docile titleholder.

Besides these requirements, the pageant also promoted whiteness by requiring contestants to be in ‘good health and of the white race’ (Rule Seven) (PBS Online 2002). According to PBS’ history series the “American Experience,” it was twenty years for the first Native American to compete (1941), twenty-seven years until the first Asian and Hispanic contestants (1948), and almost fifty years for the first African-American contender (1970) (PBS Online 2002). It should be noted that these numbers do not even consider the lapse between minorities competing and actually winning the title;

moreover, many minorities have not had a representative win the Miss America title. The Miss America Organization states that, “Miss America represents the highest ideals. She is a real combination of beauty, grace, and intelligence, artistic and refined. She is a type which the American Girl might well emulate” (Miss America Organization Website 2014), but do the majority of Miss Americas, of whom many are white, relate to or reflect the general public’s diversity? The exclusivity of the Miss America Organization and pageants in general is present seeing that a homogenized, white image has been created and promoted to describe the ideal titleholder. In fact, Asian American comedian Margaret Cho remembers seeing the pageant:

‘My father was very into it. And then, at one point when I was a little girl, I said oh I want to be one of those contestants. I want to grow up and do that, and he said no, oh no, you cannot do that, no. ...and I took it to mean that the beauty pageant was not open to all women. I mean my father thought that this whole pageant was fascinating and we would pick out the winners, but I was not allowed to even entertain the fantasy of becoming one of these women. And I thought well maybe I'm just not pretty enough. Maybe I'm just not white’ (PBS Online 2002).

Posh pageantry’s history of whiteness continues today to be an issue; however, in particular W.E.B. Du Bois’ theories examine African-American’s past strife to overcome the color line in white America.

Pageantry and Race. Pageantry exemplifies W.E.B. Du Bois’ racial stratification theory. In *The Souls of Black Folk*, Du Bois explains how “The problem of the twentieth century is the problem of the color line - the relation of the darker to the lighter races of men in Asia and Africa, in America and the islands of the sea” (Du Bois 2010: 347). This “preexisting social and cultural structure” originated from colonization, but developed into an “internalized attitude” within the American community that continues to view Negroes as inferior to whites (Du Bois 2010: 349).

Additionally, Du Bois' theory of "the veil" alienates minority pageant contestants from those who are white. The metaphor of "the veil" describes the "Negro [as] a sort of seventh son, born with a veil" that separates him from the world of whites (Du Bois 2010: 351). Du Bois recalls a personal narrative of how he discovered himself as an outcast. The exchange [of visiting cards between several young children] was merry, till one girl...refused [his] card" and it dawned upon him "that [he] was different from the others" (Du Bois 2010: 351). The white majority lacked empathy for him and instead labeled him as "unclean" because of his skin color. Hence, he was "shut out from their world by a vast veil" (Du Bois 2010: 351). He "had thereafter no desire to tear down that veil, to creep through," but "lived above it in a region of blue sky and great wandering shadows" (Du Bois 2010: 351). Hence, Du Bois' metaphor of "the veil" can be applied to pageantry's affinity towards whiteness as ideal considering that in 1923 African-Americans appeared on the stage for the first time; nevertheless, they were not competing for the coveted crown, but acted as "slaves" in the pageant's musical number (PBS Online 2002). This disdain reveals that the pageant viewed these "slaves" as something sub-human to the superior, white Miss America. As such, it took almost twenty years for the pageant to begin blurring the color line when the first "ethnic" contestant vied for the title.

Du Bois' final concept - double consciousness - describes the "otherness" experienced by African-Americans. The identity of a Negro as both a black and American creates a "two-ness" that causes one to "always [be] looking at one's self through the eyes of others, [and] of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity" (Du Bois 2010: 351). Accordingly, an African-

American has “two souls, two thoughts, two reconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body” that struggle to unite him as both a Negro and an American (Du Bois 2010: 351). These contending perspectives come short of creating a single unique identity, but continue to construct him into a man that white society wants him to be: inferior and recluse. In a society of discrimination, pageantry highlights minorities’ struggle to discover a voice and identity. Titleholders such as Miss America 1984, Vanessa Williams, recognize the discipline and training required to succeed at the Miss America pageant- a pageant constructed on white ideals- as well as the need to identify with one’s heritage and develop a sense of self. Through Williams’ reign and others, pageants have “slaved” over the inclusion and acceptance of diversity at the Miss America pageant (Banet-Weiser 1999: 126).

A Titleholder’s Identity: Studying Past and Current Titleholders

Miss America 1984, Vanessa Williams

Prior claims that the Miss America pageant was a “lily-white affair” ended after Vanessa Williams, the first African-American Miss America, was crowned in 1983 (Banet-Weiser 1999: 134). It took sixty-two years since the original Miss America (Margaret Gorman in 1921), for the pageant to begin dissolving the color line. Williams represented a broadened understanding of American womanhood; however, her subsequent fall from victory questioned her racial identity and challenged minorities’ inclusion in the representation of America’s national identity.

Upon being crowned, Williams was celebrated for tearing down the veil of discrimination in a predominately white Miss America pageant. The notorious ‘Rule

Seven' requiring contestants to be members of the white race had finally been abandoned after nearly a century, thus allowing minorities to begin competing in 1970 (PBS Online 2002). But as the first African-American to be crowned Miss America, Williams would be applauded for her crowning achievement; unfortunately, this praise would only last ten months into her reign- her title would soon be rebuked, and her image shattered by *Penthouse* magazine's release of nude photographs.

As the first black Miss America, Williams walked a tightrope of acceptance between pageantry's whiteness and her colored community. Until Williams, beauty was synonymous with whiteness, but Williams' crowning suggested that society was evolving to allow all women to represent the American ideal. Throughout time, racist stereotypes described African-American women as barbaric, sexual and immoral creatures contrary to white women who were upright and respectable. Hence, to be competitive in pageantry, a black woman must transcend these narratives and "successfully pass for the 'essence' of white;" the challenge being to not be "too black" (Banet-Weiser 1999: 116-117). Paradoxically, seeing that the Miss America Organization now applauds diversity, contestants have been recognized for their race, but still qualities distinguishing one as a minority are blurred to better accommodate the perpetuation of whiteness. Williams succeeded in balancing this dichotomy, but was neither easily received by her black community nor by white society.

Praised but then chastised, Williams attempted to balance her black identity with the idealized image of a White Barbie Doll. Pageantry's color-line was gradually blurred after Williams' crowning, but she struggled to be accepted by whites who viewed her as a member of the black community and also by many blacks who rejected her- seeing her

European features as “less than black” (Banet-Weiser 1999). Unlike the dark skin, broad noses, full lips and kinky hair of many blacks, Williams was the “perfect match ... [to the] stereotypical image of a (white) beauty queen: ‘She has all the stunning qualifications, with wide, green eyes and a full mouth boldly branded on a sunny, oblong face. Her brown shoulder-length hair falls in loose waves highlighted with gold’” (Banet-Weiser 1999: 136). Regardless of her black skin color, these characteristics appeared to the black community as those of the white race; thus, Williams was never fully recognized by African-Americans. These physical traits and her downfall would ultimately alienate her in a gray zone between the two races.

The release of nude photographs resulted in Williams’ exile by the black community and further tainted the African-American identity. No longer was Williams congratulated for her crowning achievement; rather outrageous headlines buzzed: ‘Sleaze,’ ‘Missed America,’ ‘Pageant of Hypocrisy,’ and ‘There She Goes...’ (Banet-Weiser 1999: 124). As a result, Williams’ reputation was damaged and she was asked to resign the Miss America title.

Her disgrace went beyond her image and affected the African-American community who again experienced racism that described black women as “Mammies,” “Jezebels” and “sexual predators” (Banet-Weiser 1999). There was a bitter hope among blacks that a “simplistic race pride would save” the oppressed community (Early 1990: 135) and that influential leaders such as Williams would empower African-Americans in a predominately white county. Nevertheless, Williams’ misconduct reversed progress towards a colorblind Miss America pageant and nation. The image of minorities was stained and would be a future struggle of minorities in a white pageant society.

Society has recognized the historic importance of Williams' reign, but many have tarnished her accomplishment as a political affair. For instance, when ethnographer Sarah Banet-Weiser interviewed pageant participants in 1990 and 1991, numerous stated that a white titleholder would win because of her "genuine, natural, self-evident beauty" whereas the presence of minorities competing in and winning pageants was "noncoincidental and purposeful" (Banet-Weiser 1999: 127). This prejudice labels minorities as something other than another contestant, by deeming them unequal to the white ideal. Williams experienced this racial reproach and responded by saying that "At times I would get annoyed because people and the press aren't focusing on me as a person and are focusing on my being black" (Banet-Weiser 1999: 134). It is obvious from Williams' experience that race was critical to the nation and the Miss America pageant. In fact, Banet-Weiser concludes that the harassment and decrowning of Miss America would have been different for a white titleholder—"she would have also been asked to relinquish her crown-but her act would have been publicly condemned as an individual moral failing" whereas Williams was characterized as an erotic and uncivilized representative of the black community (Banet-Weiser 1999: 144).

To mend Miss America's tainted image, future titleholders were conservative and morally upright. Suzette Charles, Miss America 1984B and first runner-up to Williams, fulfilled the final months of Williams' year. Charles, also an African-American, sought to heal the damages to both the Miss America crown as well as the black community (Banet-Weiser 1999). Her reign was a quiet attempt to restore the crown to its grandeur; yet, her white successor, Sharleen Wells (Miss America 1985), characterized the white ideal (Watson et. al. 2004: 113). Wells, a white Mormon from Utah who claimed

virginity at the time of her win, returned the pageant to respectability by countering Williams' erotic image. From Wells onward, the Miss America pageant gradually diversified, but over time it has continued to struggle with the issue of race.

It is evident that the Miss America pageant's original crowning of naïve schoolgirl Margaret Gorman in 1921 continues to impact contestants. Williams may have blurred the color-line, but her downfall questioned minorities' inclusion in the representation of the American ideal. Her crowning broadened the American identity to include minorities considering that the pageant to date has had several titleholders of color, but titleholders have continued to struggle with the prestige of whiteness within the Miss America pageant, how has the image of the ideal woman progressed?



Figure 2: Vanessa Williams, Miss America 1984

Miss America 2014, Nina Davuluri

Several Miss America titleholders since Williams have developed the pageant's diversity, yet none as profoundly and recently as the crowning of Miss America 2014, Nina Davuluri. Adorned in a "jewel-bespeckled crimson and turquoise...outfit, and barefoot with a set of...anklet bells," Davuluri danced her way to the Miss America

crown (Bruinius 2013: 1). As the first woman of South Asian descent to win the title, Davuluri's historic crowning was announced after she performed a Bollywood dance and responded to a final question about ethnicity in terms of beauty; Davuluri was asked about Chinese-American journalist Julie Chen's decision to have eyelid surgery to advance her career.

'I don't agree with plastic surgery; however, I can understand that from a standpoint,' Davuluri said. 'But more importantly, I've always viewed a Miss America as the girl next door, and the girl next door is evolving as the diversity in America evolves. She's not who she was 10 years ago, and she's not going to be the same come 10 years down the road. So I wouldn't want to change someone's looks or appearance, but definitely be confident in who you are' (Virani 2013).

Immediately after being crowned, numerous onlookers responded with racist comments on social media sites such as Twitter disparaging Davuluri's South Asian ancestry as un-American. The ignorance of many mistakenly believed her to be an Arab or Indonesian and also claimed that since her parents immigrated to the United States, that she was less than a true American (Golgowski 2013: 3). Yet, Davuluri is an American born in Syracuse, New York, was an honors student at the University of Michigan, and in the near future aspires to attend medical school in America (Miss America Organization 2013). Below are several of the prejudiced comments discovered by Indian Country Today, an online media publication (ICTMN Staff 2013):

@JTomes84 *'Miss America is brought to by their sponsors PF Changs and 7-11.'*

@kalebistootcute *'Man our president nor our new Miss America isn't even American I'm sorry but Miss Kansas I salute you your the real American.'*

@Not_MissAmerica *'More like Miss Terrorist.'*

@MeredithRoanell *'This is Miss America... not Miss Foreign Country.'*

@Granvil_Colt *'And the Arab wins Miss America. Classic.'*

This is not the only criticism Davuluri has experienced. Upon being crowned Miss New York 2013, Davuluri claimed that she had received similarly prejudiced responses and told the media that if she was to become Miss America she would again experience the same, but on a larger scale (Botelho 2013).

In addition, as the new Miss America, Davuluri has been both congratulated and condemned by her greater Indian community. The negative opinions of some have implied that in India she would fail to succeed as she has done in America because of her dark skin; the fairer the skin, the more beautiful (Bruinius 2013z; 3, Judkis 2013: 3). This shows that the issue of skin color extends beyond America's borders; so, the color line is not an exclusive issue to American identity, but an international problem that challenges humanity.

Despite these critical remarks, Davuluri has responded by saying that "I always viewed myself as first and foremost American" and that regardless of these comments "I have to rise above that" (Golgowski 2013: 2). Ironically, Davuluri's platform is "Celebrating Diversity through Cultural Competency" which specifically confronts both America's and the pageant's struggles of embracing diversity. As a result, Davuluri is a national spokesperson promoting tolerance and acceptance of America's kaleidoscope of cultures, religions, and races.

But have Davuluri's efforts succeeded? She suggests that America and the Miss America Organization have progressed, thus stating that she is 'thankful there are children watching at home who can finally relate to a new Miss America' and may realize that 'regardless of race, their socioeconomic status, their religion that anyone can

become not only Miss America, but anything' (Botelho 2013). Clearly, Davuluri believes that as the nation diversifies so does the image of Miss America and the acceptance of colored contestants as pageants evolve.

However, regardless of her historic win and moving message, do bigoted reactions of some viewers counter this elusive embrace of diversity? Vanessa Williams' momentous win in 1984 as the first black Miss America marks exactly thirty-years preceding Davuluri's crowning in 2014. These titleholders' significant wins supposedly tore down the veil of discrimination, but it appears that as years have passed racism has endured. Rather than evolution, the notorious rule seven ("requiring contestants to be white and of good health") (Watson et. al. 2004: 30) has continued to taint the image of the ideal Miss America today as it did in 1921 or 1984 (PBS Online 2002). Just as black women were debauched, Davuluri has experienced similar prejudice by being called an Arab and terrorist (Watson et. al. 2004: 3, 10). As shown by the racist tweets, America is not progressing as the Miss America titleholder proposes, but is struggling with the color line. Although pageantry may be crowning women of color, the nation is anxious when defining America's identity. This suggests that America has not progressed towards tolerance, but proves that there is an ever-present struggle to broaden the characterization of the ideal American woman. As a result, several questions arise: If Davuluri is un-American, what defines an American? Must Miss America be white to be the ideal representative for the nation? What future progress will the pageant and nation make with America's changing demographics?



Figure 3: Nina Davuluri, Miss America 2014

Miss Kansas 2013, Theresa Vail

Typified as the all-American girl, Theresa Vail has been hailed as the ideal Miss America candidate. At the 2014 Miss America Pageant, Vail was chosen out of the fifty-two contestants by the American public as the “People’s Choice.” Although Vail was not within the top-fifteen of her own accord, this recognition (“People’s Choice”) boosted her into the finalist group, but failed to progress her into the top-five. Vail did not win, but press coverage preceding and throughout the pageant characterized her as the girl-next-door who represented “true” American values. A tomboy, hunter, competitive shooter, and National Guard member, Vail was supported more than any other contestant in pageant history (Miss Kansas Pageant, Inc. 2013: 2). Was it her tattoo of the Serenity Prayer (she is the first contestant in pageant history to display a tattoo), military service, Southern roots, hobby of hunting or blond, white figure that wooed the public? The actual reasoning is unknown, but it is evident that many believe her to be characteristic of the ideal American woman. Below are several comments posted on Twitter in her support:

@tiyasircar *'Upon further review of the ol' Internet #MissKansas should've won bc she's a gun-totin, deer-huntin, blonde white chick & THAT reps America.'*

@MikGigs *'If you're not for Miss Kansas, then you're not for America.'*

@belebenard *'If America was a woman.... #MissKansas.'*

@Duramaxx_Darlin *'If Miss Kansas isn't American enough to represent our country then priorities need to be changed.'*

@BriSchartz *'Miss Kansas was AMERICA'S CHOICE. Miss New York was the choice of 5 judges. Now, who's the real winner here? #MissAmerica.'*

The dichotomy between comments received by Vail and Miss America winner Davuluri represent America's struggle with diversity. Unlike Vail (a white), Davuluri (an Indian-American) experienced harsh criticism for her ethnic heritage. For instance, online media outlet Indian Country Today highlighted one tweeter's comments that neither our 'president nor our new Miss America isn't even American I'm sorry but Miss Kansas I salute you your the real American' (ICTMN Staff 2013). Comments such as this reveal America's current struggles with diversity, whiteness and changing demographics. Consequently, "Davuluri came seemingly out of nowhere- all the pre-pageant buzz was like an old-timey sideshow, devoted to the proudly tattooed Miss Kansas and the one-armed Miss Iowa" (Judkis 2013: 2). Hence when Davuluri was crowned, she challenged the American ideal, questioned stereotypes and bothered those unwilling to broaden society's characterization of the ideal American woman.



Figure 4: Theresa Vail, Miss Kansas 2013

Whiteness is not an issue of the past, but today requires society to define American qualities. Pageantry reflects how society has instituted a bias for whiteness beginning in 1921 to modern-day comments regarding Davuluri and Vail. From this, pageantry has promoted a white representation of America's national identity, but several titleholders such as Williams and Davuluri have slightly blurred the color line and tested society's definition of the American ideal. Therefore, several scholars claim that the veil of discrimination has been torn down, but issues of race (as revealed in the tweets concerning Davuluri) continue to be present and festering. The Miss America Organization has expanded its contestant pool from the original 'rule seven,' but today there have still been few colored titleholders. Thus, how will society confront the nation's shifting demographics with the increased presence of minorities and decreased number of whites? Will Miss America evolve with the changing times? How will the nation respond to her? The succeeding chapters will discuss pageantry's future implications as well as my personal experiences as titleholder within the Miss Rodeo America system.

CHAPTER THREE

Miss Rodeo America System

To balance prior discussion of national identities, this chapter will present an ethnographic study examining personal identities. By introducing the history and structuring of the Miss Rodeo America system, contrasting pageant ideals with contestant individuality and reflecting upon my experiences as a contestant and titleholder, this chapter will illustrate the dichotomy between contradicting identities.

“Miss Rodeo America symbolizes the youth of our nation who wish to further promote Agriculture and the sport of Professional Rodeo, and in doing so, promote the great western way of life. She is the ideal, agricultural oriented American girl, and is the person who will represent Professional Rodeo and our Agricultural Industry as she travels the length and breadth of our country.”

-Miss Rodeo America Organization

Since 1955, the Miss Rodeo America Organization has interlaced pageantry's beauty with the beasts of rodeo. As the all-American cowgirl, Miss Rodeo America represents the glitz, glamour, dust and diamonds true to the sport's western heritage. Although Miss Rodeo America is a national “Ambassador of Good Will and Integrity who will promote the Professional Rodeo Cowboys Association, our Agricultural Industry and our Western traditions” (Miss Rodeo America, Inc. 2013: 1), she participates in a pageant similar to those contestants of the Miss America Organization. This dual appeal to pageantry presents a unique critique that compares the construction of national and personal identities.

Miss Rodeo America titleholders are supposedly chosen for character, but a review of past and present titleholders suggests that character is identified with whiteness. The inaugural Miss Rodeo America pageant hosted by International Rodeo Management in Casper, Wyoming first selected Marilyn (Scott) Freimark out of nine contestants in 1955 (Swisher 2010: 1). (Information regarding Freimark's reign is minimal, but proves unnecessary in analyzing the commonalities between Miss Rodeo America and Miss America.)



Figure 5: Marilyn (Scott) Freimark, Miss Rodeo America 1955

Since then, fifty-nine national representatives have continued to foster the wholesome image of the Miss America title (Miss Rodeo America, Inc. 2013). In fact, the Miss Rodeo America Organization has listed several of ideal qualities of their representative:

1. Community leader
2. Promoter of the Western lifestyle
3. Horse enthusiast
4. Good Sportsmanship
5. High moral and ethical standards
6. Knowledgeable about rodeo
7. Animal welfare advocate
8. Ability to converse about rodeo
9. Intelligent
10. Friendly
11. Sincere interest in the future of agriculture
12. Interested in advancing her future career

These qualities appear to be well-rounded, but the organization's idealistic portrayal of Miss Rodeo America mirrors the Miss America Organization's quest for a "certain class of girl" (Watson et. al. 2004: 30). However, unlike the Miss America Organization, the Miss Rodeo America pageant has not had contestants from all fifty states and moreover never a winner of color; rather, titleholders have been exclusively blond and of the white race. This lack of diversity within the Miss Rodeo America Organization presents an interesting study of whether rodeo queen pageantry absolutely promotes whiteness or if a titleholder characterizes those involved within rodeo as I have observed. Hence, the organization may not deliberately attempt to discourage diversity as the Miss America Organization did with its infamous Rule Seven (See Chapter Two) (PBS Online 2002), but selects a titleholder representative of rodeo competitors who are predominately white.

Miss Rodeo Texas System

“To provide a quality state pageant, maintaining an environment where contestants, participants and committee members will be enriched by the experience of the pageant. To provide scholarships for educational opportunities. To support the queens as they represent Texas, our Western Heritage, the sport of professional rodeo, the western apparel industry, and as they model goodwill and integrity for the youth of Texas.”

-Miss Rodeo Texas mission

Before competing for Miss America, a contestant must first hold a state title.

Since I have competed in the Miss Rodeo Texas system, the following information will outline this pageant’s logistics for later discussion relevant to my experiences.

A majority of state pageants are similar- the purpose being to select a new state queen to represent the sport of rodeo, agriculture industry, associated sponsors and in general, western heritage. The selection process is commonly held on an annual basis where a queen serves until her successor is chosen at the following year’s pageant; however, several states without pageants appoint a representative. The Miss Rodeo Texas organization hosts one of the nation’s most competitive pageants by annually attracting approximately four to eight contestants who compete in June in San Antonio.

Application Process

Eligibility in Texas requires that an applicant presently hold a title, yet if failing to possess one, a temporary title may be created. To apply, purposed contestants aged eighteen to twenty-four submit a detailed application highlighting their prior titles, equestrian and rodeo experiences, academic successes, extracurricular activities and a statement explaining their desire to win. Upon its completion, one must mail in her application, pay the five-hundred dollar entry fee, and submit a recent photo in full rodeo queen attire.

Judges

The Miss Rodeo Texas organization and/or pageant director invites six “qualified” judges of various backgrounds and skillsets. Supposedly, these individuals compose a well-rounded panel that brings forth expertise from several areas. Even so, these individuals may never have received formal training in judging rodeo queen pageantry. Examples of past judges have included those affiliated with state universities, business personnel, western clothing designers, horsemen, veterinarians and those involved directly/indirectly with rodeo.

Scoring

The selection of Miss Rodeo Texas is based upon scoring within three categories- personality, appearance and horsemanship. Interestingly, the organization has neither released a rubric describing the breakdown of scoring nor provided contestants with individual results following the pageant. Contestants are only informed that judging occurs at several events to include: personality, appearance, horsemanship, speech, rodeo knowledge, current affairs, personal interview skills, and photogenics. Purportedly, as the contestants appear, interact with judges, and perform speeches, ride a horse or model, each contestant is awarded “points.” Again, the composition and number of points available within each category remains undisclosed, but in any event final scores are not made available at any time.

At the pageant’s coronation, the two highest recorded contestants are asked two final questions: one question regards the specifics of rodeo while the other concerns a current event or seeks to unveil a personal opinion. It should be noted that a contestant’s prior performance and points are entirely disregarded at this point. Rather, the judges’

final selection is of their personal preference- a judge may choose to regard or disregard the additional questions irrespective of whether a contestant answered her questions correctly or provided the best response.

This troubling reality suggests that the selection of a titleholder is subjectively determined by a judge's bias versus objective scoring. A contestant may win several categories and answer her questions acceptably, yet not be chosen as the new titleholder. Likewise, it is possible that the point spread between two finalists is significant, though the contestant earning the highest number of points is not selected. History records prior pageants where this has occurred.

Following the Pageant

In general, contestants may not contact judges following the competition and in any event, judges are neither required to justify nor explain their choices. Beyond this, the Miss Rodeo Texas organization does not provide feedback making it difficult to determine why a contestant did not win.

A question then arises: why compete? Obviously, some contestants pursue Miss Rodeo Texas' significant scholarship, desire its associated networking prospects, or seek to compete at Miss Rodeo America. Others may have competed numerous times and have persistently failed, but participate because they enjoy the experience or seek the skills acquired through pageantry. Finally, there are those who compete with high hopes of wearing the crown the following year. In any event, life affords many situations with unfair results. Pageantry simply challenges contestants to handle defeat, learn lessons and build character.

Who is a Rodeo Queen? What is Her Purpose?

Personal reflections are important to understanding the selection process and duties of a rodeo queen. Miss Rodeo America emulates the Miss America pageant in many regards, but these western women are not as Sandra Bullock in *Miss Congeniality* (2000)-sporting a bikini or performing Beethoven's "Fifth Symphony"- instead, they don bedazzled leather fashions and display talents of horsemanship. A classic pageant consists of competition in photogenics, modeling, horsemanship, speech, interview and impromptu questioning. At the conclusion of the pageant, category winners are selected for the best in personality, appearance and horsemanship followed by announcement of the overall winner.

Once the euphoria subsides, a victor's duty of promoting rodeo, agriculture, and the sponsors begins. For instance, as the national spokesperson for the Professional Rodeo Cowboys Association, "Miss Rodeo America travels approximately 100,000 miles attending different rodeos, schools, civic group meetings and special events to raise awareness about the sport of rodeo during her yearlong reign" (Swisher 2010: 2). Her ambition, as an Ambassador, is to "turn a spectator into a true fan" (Chenae' Shiner, Miss Rodeo America 2013), to reveal beauty amid rodeo's beasts and to educate others of the sport she is honored to represent. For three hundred and sixty-five days a year, she is a rodeo queen who is the face of agriculture and rodeo, but behind the mask, an individual and a cowgirl with a unique and personal identity that distinguishes her from others. Public opinion may chastise queens as appearing to be plastic, but a titleholder struggles to balance her charm with organizational expectations.

Personal Identities

Besides embodying a national image, titleholders must also balance their personal quirks and identities. As explained in chapter two, groups and individuals are identified by characteristics that distinguish one as different from the many. Personal identities are formed by how people behave, interact, and perceive themselves, making personal identities subject to an individual's views of how they relate to others (Huntington 2004: 22). Accordingly, pageant contestants may identify themselves by individual talents, platforms, ethnic backgrounds or personality traits, thus occasioning one's identity to range proportionately to her self-image and personally created label. Identities are numerous, but, as mentioned, this thesis generally terms them as personal or national- respectively reflecting a contestant's need to balance her individual qualities with an organization's gold standard. Contestants strive to clearly communicate who they are by means of such identities, though, disharmony between a contestant's personal identity and the image of a national titleholder often occurs. Previous chapters analyzed the construction of national identities, a titleholder's representation of Miss America, and society's retort. Now by way of narrative, this thesis will discuss personal aspects of pageantry from the perspective of a contestant.

Pageantry Experiences

Local Pageantry

Barbies, princesses and fairy tales no longer are mere childhood fantasies- I have been a rodeo princess, reigning atop a royal steed and galloping into a future strewn with numerous royalty titles. In 2006, I saddled up for the beginning of my journey after

winning a local title near our ranch in Northwestern Nebraska. Ignorant, blissful, and naïve, I was excited after competing and winning the title on my first attempt. Never had I been exposed to rodeo queen pageantry nor had I competitively partaken in rodeo events; the Old West Trails Rodeo changed this and was the onset of a challenging yet rewarding future in pageantry.

The responsibilities of a local titleholder are limited, but progressively a queen will learn tips, tricks, and expectations from the rodeo community as well as fellow titleholders. Being the Old West Trails Rodeo Princess, the totality of my duties included:

1. Appearing at the organization's nightly rodeo for three days,
2. Presenting sponsor flags on horseback,
3. Pushing cattle out of the arena,
4. Personally visiting and thanking sponsors,
5. Crowning the next year's titleholder,
6. Congratulating the newly named Miss Rodeo Nebraska at her coronation;
and
7. Attending several other minor events throughout the year

This brief list reflects local titleholders' few obligations, and furthermore proves to be a learning experience introducing young women to pageantry. The embarrassing pictures of my first two titles (achieved through local level organizations) capture a novice's mistakes of a misshaped hat, straight and stringy hair and unbelievably gaudy outfits, but these experiences gradually transformed me from a former barnyard cowgirl into a fabled rodeo queen with long golden locks, pristine horsemanship, and unequivocal rodeo knowledge. Similar to Sandra Bullock's overnight transformation in *Miss Congeniality* (2000), I was being groomed to perfection. The idyllic rodeo queen was no longer a fantasy, but a reflection of the persona I was adopting.



Figure 6: Ashley Bergfield, Second Title (Local Level), Sheridan County Fair & Rodeo Queen 2010

Miss Rodeo Austin

Several years lapsed between titles, but I accomplished my ultimate ambition of winning a prestigious title. After competing in March of 2012, I was selected as Miss Rodeo Austin to represent the fifth largest rodeo in the world- The Star of Texas Fair and Rodeo. As such, I was required to make appearances at various rodeos, fairs, parades, induction ceremonies and fundraising events. These duties reflected those of my previous local titles, though, the rodeo committee and my director had greater expectations such as a flawless physical appearance, extensive miles of travel, and a great deal of time and patience. It was during this challenging year that I leapt from princess to classic rodeo queen demanding that my personal identity be molded to complement the image of Miss Rodeo Austin. However, before discussing my personal transformation, this thesis will briefly describe the “classic” rodeo queen.

The Classic Image. Comparable to Miss America’s “certain class of girl,” rodeo queen pageantry has fabricated the image of an ideal and anglicized titleholder (Watson et. al. 2004: 30). As mentioned earlier, the Miss Rodeo America Organization, and to

greater extent rodeo queen pageantry, lacks diversity. Due to this, the stereotypical rodeo queen has been illustrated as a white, middle class, blond haired doll that does not represent America's melting pot, but instead is characterized as a rural, all-American, farm girl.

Resembling marionettes, contestants are seasoned by state organizations, clinics, and coaches to mimic the nationally romanticized titleholder. It is believed that success is achieved by fluffing one's curls, wearing leather gowns, slathering on heavy makeup and responding to questions by favoring "world peace." Unfortunately, pageantry has cultivated this competition of automatons by selling an unrealistic image of an ideal titleholder via clinics intended to indoctrinate and educate the aspiring, as well as by other means to include severe criticism and comment. It is important to recognize that neither Miss America nor Miss Rodeo America are genuinely the all-American girl next door; rather, their flaws have been masked. Therefore, it is imperative to acknowledge that all contestants are not alike nor can all personify the current Miss America or Miss Rodeo America- simply, it is not reflective of a contestant's individuality.

Personal Narrative Continued. Likewise, the Miss Rodeo Austin pageant has nurtured the idyllic rodeo queen image. During my year the rodeo committee envisioned a capable Ambassador, but measures and demands upheld by those of pageantry proved arduous. From polished boots in a dusty arena to daily attire at non-appearances, I was criticized constantly. Some of these comments proved beneficial, but a majority were nit-picky and petty raves such as fixing a broken nail immediately or failing to wear a cowboy hat while driving, basically useless harassment. It was as if spies were monitoring my every move and slyly reporting their cynical sightings to the chief of

command, and then without questioning, I was to be reprimanded. This constant nagging was tiring, irksome and unconstructive.

To appease my superiors, I hardened by becoming a plastic, manageable doll. Prior personal qualities faded behind a painted mask as I learned to offer politically correct responses, dress as Miss Rodeo America, and mimic fellow titleholders. Pictures display the outcome of my strenuous makeover, transforming me from a guffawing, unkempt teenager at the beginning of the year, into a glamorous Miss Rodeo Austin.

This metamorphosis, however, reared insecurities and bruised my fragile self-confidence. Pageantry is to be an empowering experience for women, but personally it discarded my identity to favor and resemble an ideal prompted by organizational standards. Others tore me down to remake me into a puppet, but after reflecting on my experiences as Miss Rodeo Austin, I have reassessed who I am, have attempted to rebuild my wounded self-esteem and have displayed my personal identity in pageants ever since.



Figure 7: Ashley Bergfield, Beginning of Year as Miss Rodeo Austin 2012



Figure 8: Ashley Bergfield, End of Year as Miss Rodeo Austin 2012

Thus, to recognize the pressures of conforming to pageant ideals, a short anecdote illustrating a rodeo queen's duties and image in relation to personal and national identities.

Clay pigeons, guns and giraffes, oh my! A fall day was spent as Miss Rodeo Austin at Texas Disposal Systems' Exotic Game Ranch for an annual fundraiser- a Shoot Out Sporting Clay tournament. Over three-hundred outdoor enthusiasts and local businesses flocked to event in support of Rodeo Austin's mission: "Promoting Youth Education-Preserving Western Heritage."

At the event, attendees competed in a shooting tournament that required them to successfully target clay pigeons. Those teams accumulating the highest scores won prizes, but those with meager aim could buffer their failed attempts by purchasing mulligans (a second chance to hit a target). My responsibility, as Miss Rodeo Austin, was to peddle these mulligans while taking pictures with the teams. It was expected that contenders would purchase products from royalty rather than random folk, but personally I preferred to greet and converse with guests or partake in seemingly more meaningful

tasks. Indeed, the day's assignment ultimately proved subpar- the royalty only sold three mulligans throughout the entire event.

Considering my duties that day, are titleholders merely marketing tools? If so, pageantry thrives in pre-packaging its universal product - titleholders - to represent countless organizations. These beautiful Barbies are perceived as brainless bimbos whose bodies can be manipulated and minds managed to sell various products, attract additional business or raise awareness to a particular issue. This suggests that pageants are merely a competition to select who has been trained to abide by an organization's standards. Consequently, contestants hoping to be the final victor recognize this ambition and strive to align their interests with that of an organization or possibly the image of a national titleholder. Once again, this frivolity suggests that pageantry require a contestant to abandon her personal character in exchange for a broader titleholder identity.

Besides selling mulligans, I met with our queen coordinator who criticized several titleholders and promoted pageantry's ideal. The Miss Rodeo America pageant was quickly approaching and in response the pageant community was buzzing in anticipation. Contestant photographs had recently been released encouraging many to gossip and predict who would be selected as the pageant's next "golden girl." That afternoon, at the fundraiser, the Miss Rodeo America pageant was a vibrant topic of discussion amid the queens and our coordinator. Initially our comments were mere speculation, but soon it devolved to our coordinator's blunt criticism. Shuffling through the pictures, she pinpointed the faults of each girl and marked the entire group as subpar- too big hair, too fat, too pale- her standards seemed unattainable seeing that her critical eye deemed every contestant unfit for the crown.

Our coordinator's callous remarks reveal the significance national identities have upon individual contestants. Each contestant being viewed had been confidently nominated as her state's finest, but none were viewed favorably by our director. She disregarded the unique qualities of each contestant, preferring the association's ideal white, blond and trim flawless figure. From her perspective, as the greater world of pageantry, a true contender or national representative was a certain "class of girl" (Watson et. al. 2004: 30).

It is pertinent to this discussion to mention that our director was a prior Miss Rodeo Texas. Today she is not representative of the ideal woman, but instead the faded pageant queen - her former class and charm have gradually worn into someone wrinkled with the progression of time. Now, she is a normal person who sadly is characterized by bitter words and biting criticism. Perhaps her comments highlight disillusion between her prior ideal and current condition. Nevertheless, it is evident that pageants define an ideal rodeo queen to be a woman distinguished for her beauty and poise. Yet, as shown by my director, pageantry's highest standards are difficult if not impossible to maintain.

Despite our coordinator's harsh criticisms of my personal imperfections, my experience as Miss Rodeo Austin has led me to reflect upon my character and deliberate the perceived dichotomy between personal and national identities. Am I willing to become another "pageant automaton?" How should I balance my inner and outer beauty? Will I seek to please or be myself regardless of other's perspectives? As Miss Rodeo Austin, I pondered these questions, but I truly tested my standards after competing in June of 2013 for Miss Rodeo Texas.

Competing at Miss Rodeo Texas. With luggage loaded and restless nerves, I was eager to win the Miss Rodeo Texas pageant. The four-daylong event was held from dawn until dusk with various judged categories in horsemanship, speech, interview and modeling. In the months preceding the competition, I had devoted countless hours to preparation- from memorizing inane facts to handling horses and whittling a toned physique, I was confident that my hard work would be rewarded.

Throughout the competition, I proved a strong competitor, favored among many. At the pageant's coronation, the lights were dimmed, the music heightened, my heart pounded in anticipation and it was announced- I was one of two finalists. Within minutes, my competitor and I braced the "sudden death round" and each was bid the "crowning" question. Mine was elementary; I knew the answer; and I believed that I had won. Conversely, my contender failed to correctly answer her question (which was typical throughout the entirety of the contest). Yet again, when tensions arose, the outcome was disappointing- I was not Miss Rodeo Texas, my contender was the victor. The uncanny announcement baffled not only me, but the audience who sat in silence- it seemed that no one understood the judges' reasoning or selection!

Since then, I have struggled to discern why the judges chose the other contestant. What was wrong with my performance? What distinguished me, the first runner-up who answered my questions correctly, from the winner who responded incorrectly? Why have no critiques been provided to encourage improvement? How do I learn from this experience if I have no basis for the judges' decision?

Numerous frustrations festered following the pageant, but several of my colleagues have discussed a possible rationale for my loss- appearance. Ironically, the

judges selected me as the winner of this category at the pageant, but some conclude that because I am tall and athletically built, that I do not characterize the meek and petite image that the organization seeks. If this is true, not only will I never win the competition, but it can be concluded that pageantry in fact pursues an idealized titleholder who conforms to the organization's standards. Thus, contestants like me will perpetually be struggling to balance their sense of self with the flawless ideal promoted by pageantry.

Pageantry is analogous to any competitive sport- you either win or lose, but regardless of the titles, I have realized that as from the film *Cool Runnings* that "if you are not enough without the gold, you'll never be enough with the gold." Each competition, clinic, director and fellow contestant has had a memorable impact upon my development by helping me to mature into a confident and poised woman. From my experiences, I have learned that the skills learned from pageants are innumerable; whether in public relations, interviewing or appearance, a prior pageant contestant will be prepared for an array of future opportunities including those within her particular career field. Unlike a majority of today's youth, pageant contestants are provoked to discover who they are, what they represent, and consider their future plans. Pageantry is unsurpassed in its preparation: it does not solely degrade personal identities, but challenges those brave girls seeking to become women of character.

CHAPTER FOUR

Future Implications and Conclusion

“Beauty is unbearable, drives us to despair, offering us for a minute the glimpse of an eternity that we should like to stretch out over the whole of time.”

-Albert Camus

The inane quest for beauty captivates all generations: from tots wearing mothers' high heels to older women's Botox treatments, there is a universal desire to be as pageantry's perfect woman. Pageantry's search for the ideal titleholder mirrors many women's hopes of having an ageless and slender physique of a poised pageant princess; however, this fantasized ideal is an erroneous delusion that misrepresents America's diverse society. Stereotypically, Miss America has been described as a white, middle-class, all-American girl, but today the national definition and image of an American has broadened to include a kaleidoscope of cultures, ethnicities, races, religions, etc. In the preceding chapters, this thesis discussed pageantry's past and present, but in conclusion several questions will be posed to encourage further consideration of pageantry's future implications: How are younger generations affected by pageantry? Is there a correlation between America's shifting demographics and pageantry's antiquated promotion of whiteness? What influence(s) will pageantry have upon the future?

Fairy Tales and Child Beauty Pageants

“Magic mirror on the wall, who is the fairest one of all?”

“Famed is thy beauty, Majesty. But hold, a lovely maid I see. Rags cannot hide her gentle grace. Alas, she is more fair than thee.”

-Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs (1937)

Beginning in diapers, the notion of beauty is introduced to children through popular fairy tale mythologies. During the nineteenth century, fables such as “Snow White,” “Rapunzel” and “Sleeping Beauty” were published, but since then, many of these folktales have continued to influence contemporary understandings of a woman’s identity (Watson et. al. 2004: 111).

Through thematic structuring, fairytales portray heroines as princesses possessing qualities of ideal womanhood. For example, Cinderella is a “passive, blond and childlike” slave to her step-family until a fairy godmother magically transforms her into a blushing beauty dashing to the ball in search of her prince (Watson et. al. 2004: 114). This suggests that the Ash Girl’s transformation into a lady was necessary if she was to charm the prince and live happily ever after.

According to researcher Kay Stone, this construction of femininity is important because fairytale’s antiquated ideals of womanhood can have long-lasting effects upon perceptions of beauty, women, and race (Watson et. al. 2004: 113). She argues that the “princess ideal is an inescapable social force” in which tales indoctrinate unrealistic notions of beauty (Watson et. al. 2004: 112-113). These images personally affect women, but moreover young, impressionable children who being read such stories develop naïve and misconstrued ideas. If fairytales were not read to be to children, how and what would

shape their views? What additional connections can be made between pageantry, fairytales and one's outlook on the all-American girl? Although this thesis will not address these questions, it seeks to present them so as to consider the greater association amid pageantry, fairytales and their interrelation when describing the ideal woman.

While fairytales introduce beauty ideals, this country's child pageant industry has experienced scathing criticism by asserting induced physical and emotional harm from a child's participation in pageants. In 2009 with the release of hit television shows such as "Honey Boo Boo" and "Toddlers and Tiaras," children's pageantry gained widespread popularity that brought harsh international scrutiny.

To prepare for such pageants, parents mask little girls' flaws with wigs, heavy makeup, false eyelashes, and fake teeth (Lieberman 2010: 749). This transformation has concerned many scholars such as Laura Pappano, an education and gender specialist, who warns that pageants 'blur the lines between what is cute and what is sensual,' but moreover encourages many children to become too sexy too soon (Wolfe 2012: 439). For instance, on "Toddlers and Tiaras" competitors Mia (two-years-old) and Maddy (four-years-old) respectively appeared in a cone-shaped "Madonna" bra and Dolly Parton outfit for their talent competitions (Wolfe 2012: 427). In these examples, Mia and Maddy were urged to prematurely express themselves as beautiful, successful and sexy adult women despite their young ages.

In response to children's pageantry, the public has claimed that girls are "trained to act like hookers, pole dancers and or strippers" (Wolfe 2012: 428-429). Considering this, do pageants exploit children? Should pageants be legally regulated with specific protections granted to young participants? Does emphasis upon physical appearance,

sexuality and competition encourage jealousy/envy and self-destruction? In the long term, what effect(s) will pageant participation have upon a child's development? Are these pageant princesses "darling divas or damaged daughters?" (Wolfe 2012: 427). Again, this thesis will not consider these questions further, but proposes them only to suggest future inquiry into the various types of pageantry, individuals who compete and/or are affected by pageantry and for initiating discussion of how pageantry influences the construction of identities.

Demographics

Is America a progressive society embracing diversity? Historically, America's Anglo origins have fostered a predominant white majority, yet censuses (conducted by the U.S. government) currently reveal that demographics are gradually shifting with the growth in minority populations. Due to this occurrence, there is a possibility that prior preconceptions of America as a white society will be reevaluated and defined, to better resemble the country's colorful composition. What will become of the American identity? How will it evolve to portray this melting pot of cultures? In chapter two, this thesis discussed researchers Rodriguez, Schwartz and Whitbourne survey of the American public to profile American qualities that could propose a uniform national identity. The results showed that there is a correlation between one's ethnicity and the degree to which he/she felt American. As such, participants considered one's ethnic background to be the principal basis to identifying one as an American; hence, it was assumed that a European ethnic background is "more American" than someone who is non-white. This is important to America's changing demographics because it assumes

that whiteness is associated with being an American, but furthermore complicates the future definition(s) of the American identity.

Recent statistics from the United States Census Bureau affirm America's sweeping multicultural transformation. In 2010, the Department of Commerce conducted a census revealing that minority populations are growing at a faster rate than whites and that by 2043 non-whites will outnumber whites (United States 2011: 3-4). Additionally, the study concluded that while the Hispanic and Asian populations each grew by 43 percent, the white population only grew by 6 percent out of the total U.S. population growth of 9.7 percent (United States 2011: 3-4).

These predicted figures prove the possibility of an impending challenge to the American identity. In the past, the country's culture has been recognized in light of its white ancestry, but as this façade morphs with the country's blend of peoples, so too should the American identity broaden to embrace all peoples. However, in doing so, will America muddy or lose a distinct identity? Will it continue to clutch onto its white identity despite diversification? May it not have an identity? Is this possible? Regardless of these many questions, it is obvious that society's cultural mosaic is quickly changing and therefore will soon require reconsideration of who is an American and how does one assume this identity.

A contemporary example of this struggle with identity was recently seen when Nina Davuluri was crowned Miss America 2014. As the first Indian-American to have won the title, Davuluri experienced crude criticism and racism by some who ostracized her as an Arab as well as inappropriately identified her as someone who did not represent American values or ideas (Brinius 2013). However, to further highlight this matter, the

American public selected white, Midwestern, and National Guardswoman Theresa Vail, Miss Kansas 2013, as the “People’s Choice.” Both women received mass media attention, but for adverse reasons – one of disgrace and the other of praise. While Davuluri was criticized for her cultural heritage, Vail was applauded for her patriotism and all-American qualities.

Considering the statistics previously discussed and these responses to the Miss America pageant, will the country accept future titleholders who are not white, blond and overtly patriotic as Vail? Has America progressed socially to the extent that it claims? Is Miss America truly representative of the country’s diversity? Over time, pageants have evolved to select women of color, but as this thesis has discussed, there is a pronounced absence of diversity that will challenge racial representation in pageantry as it relates to America’s future demographics.

Conclusion

*There she is, Miss America
There she is, your ideal
The dream of a million girls who are more than pretty can come true
in Atlantic City
For she may turn out to be the Queen of femininity*

-Performed by Bert Parks, Miss America Song

Throughout the years, dreams of princesses and pageants have fascinated the American public when selecting the “Queen of femininity” and American ideal. Most notably, this has been popularized through the Miss America Organization’s characterization of the ideal American woman as a white, slim, and naïve girl. To reflect this stereotype, contestants seeking to win a crown have thus become like puppets of a

fake and fabricated image promoted by pageants; nonetheless, while contestants may appeal to such organizational standards, it is also expected that they express individuality. This thesis has analyzed this struggle in terms of contradicting identities with a discussion of those who have been past and present titleholders as well as offered insights into my own rodeo queen experiences. Seeing that pageantry appeals to millions of young women, is a multi-billion dollar industry (Lieberman 2010: 741) and hosts a variety of contests ranging from Miss America and Miss Rodeo America to television reality shows such as “Honey Boo Boo” or “Toddlers and Tiaras,” it is important to analyze how the selection of an “certain class of girl” reflects societal ideals (Watson et. al. 2004: 30). America is no longer dominated by a white society, but is a kaleidoscope of cultures that is questioning the definition of the ideal woman. Cinderella, Snow White, and Rapunzel may be fairytales, but these fantasies were once America’s past reality. Yet, with the changing times, who is Miss America today? What does she represent? Who will she become in the future? Stay tuned because pageantry is in the competition to define America’s future identity.

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