

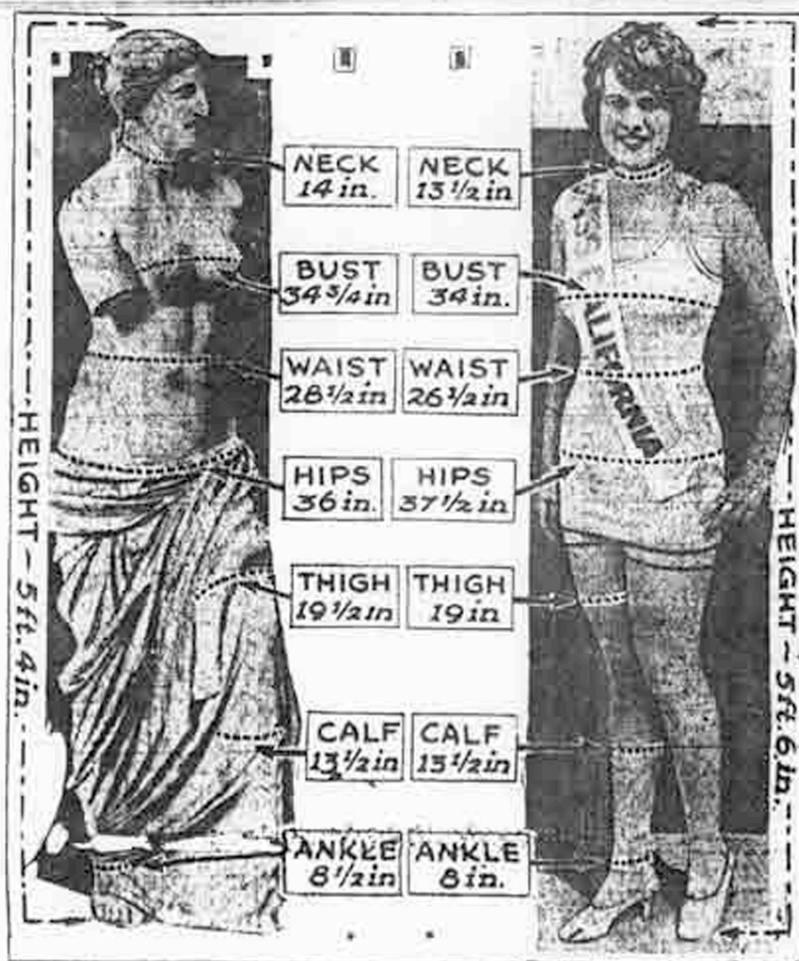


Figure 2.4. **Margaret Gorman.** Here, the first ever Miss America appears dressed as "Liberty." For the sake of comparison, notice the striking similarity between Gorman's stance and costuming, and that of the suffragette below. Also striking is a contrast: the suffragette appears together with a number of women and girls behind her, while Gorman appears notably alone. The photographs were taken a mere three years apart.
<http://www.cliohistory.org/films/american/missamerica/>



Figure 2.5. **Liberty.** Suffragette Florence F. Noyes as "Liberty" in a 1918 suffrage pageant. http://teachpol.tcnj.edu/amer_pol_hist/thumbnail310.html

BEAUTY QUEEN IS RIVAL OF VENUS



Oodles of pulchritude! You can see by a glance at the two glances above just how beautiful Fay Lanphier, selected in the national beauty contest at Atlantic City as "America's most perfect girl," shapes up alongside Venus de Milo, the world's accepted name of perfection for

shapely women. While the new queen of beauty does not answer the exact measurements of Venus, as to height and other incidentals, she was near enough to them, and pretty enough in the bargain to satisfy the judges at the beauty contest that she was America's most perfect girl. Last year Miss Lanphier ran second.

Figure 2.6. **Fay Lanphier.** Lanphier, as Miss America 1925, was apparently a favorite of nativists and eugenicists alike. This newspaper clipping from the Albany, NY *Times-Union* compares, inch by inch, "America's perfect" Lanphier to "the world's perfect" Venus de Milo: "Oodles of pulchritude! You can see by a glance at the two pictures above just how beautiful Fay Lanphier, selected in the national beauty contest at Atlantic City as 'America's most perfect girl,' shapes up alongside Venus de Milo, the world's accepted name of perfection for shapely women. While the new queen of beauty does not answer the exact measurements of Venus, as to height and other incidentals, she was near enough to them, and pretty enough in the bargain to satisfy the judges at the beauty contest that she was America's most perfect girl. Last year Miss Lanphier ran second."

<http://louisebrooks.livejournal.com/149946.html>



Figure 2.7. **Mary Katherine Campbell.** The day fifteen-year-old Campbell became Miss Columbus, before winning the second Miss America title in 1922, legend has it that she reported back to her mother innocently, ““They said it’s because of my figure. Mother, what’s a figure?”” and her mother replied indignantly, ““It’s none of your business!”” The following year, when Campbell became the only woman ever to win the Miss America title twice, one judge revealed his nativist leanings by boasting, ““She is typically American, an altogether ideal type. Her forebears for ten generations have been American born.”” <http://www.missamerica.org/our-miss-americas/1920/1923.asp>



Figure 2.8. **Alice Garry.** Garry was Princess America I, the first Native woman to hold that segregated title in the Miss America Pageant festivities. When Norma Smallwood refused to make an official appearance at the 1927 pageant because organizers would not pay her an appearance fee, Garry was asked to appear in Smallwood's stead.

http://www.ancient_voices.50megs.com/beauty.html

CHAPTER THREE

Beauty Not Bombs [Cold] War and [World] Peace in the 1950s United States

A couple weeks after the first Miss Universe competition in 1952, the *Los Angeles Times* ran a story on page two declaring, “Miss Universe Contest Rigged, Beauty Asserts.” The article revealed that Miss Italy, Giovanna Mazzotti, had publicly voiced complaints about the results of the pageant’s top five, in which she was not included. Mazzotti’s aim, apparently, was not to protest her own exclusion from the superior rankings. In typical self-deprecating fashion, she insisted, “I should have been ranked in last place. ... They were all so beautiful.”¹

Rather, she went on to disagree further with the judges’ choices. Politics, she asserted, should have no bearing on a contest where the criterion for entry was beauty. Yet the results of the top five seemed to have more to do with international relations than with how contestants looked:

Miss Hawaii, Elsa Edsmoan, who placed second, got there “because they have been promising statehood to those islands,” the Italian girl claimed.

“Miss Hong Kong was in third place just so the Orientals won’t think America has prejudices, and in spite of the war in Korea, beauty is still beauty.”

¹ “Miss Universe Contest Rigged, Beauty Asserts,” *Los Angeles Times*, July 14, 1952, 2.

She said Miss Germany, got fifth place “just so (Chancellor Konrad) Adenauer will know there will always be a place for Germany in America’s round table.

The winner was Armi Kuusela from Finland. The disgruntled Italian had a theory about that choice as well: the Olympics were to be held in Finland later that summer. A Finnish Miss Universe would preside as a figurehead over those proceedings, a most special and appropriate guest of honor at another international competition.²

Miss Italy’s keen analysis belied the stereotype of the ignorant beauty queen. Instead, she showed an impressive command both of world politics and of the symbolic import of international pageantry. From the inception of the contest that year, and throughout the 1950s, the people who organized the Miss Universe Pageant would insist that their competition had a lesson of peace to teach a world recently out of war. The United Nations, which had formed in 1945, gave male ambassadors a space to negotiate international politics. Miss Universe, on the other hand, gave women a space to enact international relations. Miss Universe organizers considered pageant contestants to be the “World’s Ambassadors of Goodwill,” innocuous because they were “beautiful,” young, feminine, and distanced from any meaningful political or economic agency. If men could be the war makers, then women could be the peacemakers, and Miss Universe would bring the women of the world together to make peace.³

At the center of the pageant was what Mazzotti called “America’s round table,” a metaphor for the politicized space of international intercourse and decisionmaking. A round table could have no head, and therefore the shape suggested equal participation of all nations present; but that did not matter when the whole piece of furniture was

² Ibid.

³ Many thanks to my colleague Urmila Venkatesh, for the thought-provoking conversations that helped grow this chapter to maturity.

American-owned. Miss Universe had been created as a partnership among three U.S. businesses and the local government of the City of Long Beach. The pageant was a symbolic space where the domestic and international needs of the United States always took first place. In the Miss Universe model, representatives from various nations were meant to meet each other, so that in meeting they might become friends. Their friendships were meant to stand in for national friendships, just as their bodies stood in for the nation. And since the contest was held in a resort town in the U.S., contestants were meant to enjoy their experience so that when they returned to their homelands, they would tell everyone how great the United States of America had been.

To date, those academic writers interested in U.S. pageantry have focused on the country's oldest and longest-running national pageant, Miss America, to the detriment of important analyses that only become clear by way of an international contest. I argue that what the Miss Universe Pageant did was to stage a view of the world from within the Cold War United States, through an international beauty contest. Only people from nations with governments and industries that were willing to participate in U.S. capitalism were also welcome to participate in the Miss Universe Pageant. A pageant where women actually wore the names of their nations, written in English, on their bodies made visible which countries' people were welcome inside U.S. borders, which countries were considered sovereign nations, and which countries were considered fit for sovereign self-government. At the same time, there was an equal and opposite narrative: the absence of countries that did not have the resources or desire to send a woman, clad in a bathing suit, to represent them in this style of U.S.-based international competition at all.⁴

⁴ See Shirley Jennifer Lim, *A Feeling of Belonging: Asian American Women's Public Culture, 1930-1960* (New York: New York University Press, 2006), 157.

Contestants at the pageant have never represented every country in the world, let alone other parts of the universe.

The shifting political position of the U.S. in the world called for what historian Christina Klein terms “a vast educational machinery designed to direct the attention of the American people to the world outside the nation’s borders.”⁵ When Klein says “educational”, she actually refers to a kind of cultural work that went on both within and outside formal schooling in the United States: “This internationalist education occurred in various places throughout the postwar social order, including grade schools, high schools, and universities. It also took place in less formal venues of education, such as the global imaginaries created by political elites and cultural producers.”⁶ Following Klein’s lead, I read the Miss Universe Pageant as a cultural product, the organizers of which were participating in an internationalist project specific to the politics of the early-Cold-War period in which that pageant was founded.

In this chapter, I argue that the purpose of the Miss Universe Pageant in the 1950s was twofold: to teach Americans about a world of capitalist peer nations and to teach the world about the friendly, welcoming, and benevolent leader that was the post-World-War-II United States. The question that seems to arise, though, is why this educational spectacle could not just be a cultural show. Why did the Miss Universe Pageant need to be a competition as well? The answer lies in the United States’ ownership of the “round table”: because contestants’ “competition” and judges’ “voting” reproduced the rhetoric of capitalist democracy; because pageant judges and organizers, representing the U.S. in a position of leadership, needed to be able to establish criteria for success and mete out

⁵ Christina Klein, *Cold War Orientalism: Asia in the Middlebrow Imagination, 1945-1961* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2003), 22.

⁶ Ibid.

judgment upon other nations according to that criteria. In short, Miss Universe was an opportunity in U.S. pageantry to display the nation's influence as the new capitalist, democratic world superpower.

Having recently emerged from a Second World War, the U.S. nation was in a place similar to where it had been in the early years of the Miss America Pageant. As in the 1920s, beauty pageantry in the 1950s played a role in the country's return to normalcy after a major, international military conflict. Whereas the post-World-War-I Miss America moment had been characterized by nativism, isolationism, and a strict adherence to whiteness as national racial identity, after World War II, Miss Universe appeared. The popularity that the competition achieved at a national level, within a decade, suggested at least that those within the United States could envision themselves as part of a world beyond the nation's borders. The participation of contestants of color from Asia, Latin America, and the Middle East in the early Miss Universe contests suggested, at least, that beyond those borders, the U.S. was part of a world that was not entirely white.

Beauty is the United Nations

On September 10, 1950, the day after winning the 1951 title, newly crowned Miss America, Yolande Betbeze, sat in a room with pageant organizers and sponsors. The representative from Catalina Swimwear, a longtime pageant sponsor, began explaining to Betbeze that she would have to appear in a Catalina swimsuit at a midwestern shopping mall that winter. Betbeze, a music student at the University of Alabama who had won the Miss America talent competition earlier that week with her rendition of "*Caro Nome*" from the opera *Rigotello*, was rumored to have interrupted, "I'm an opera singer; not a

pin-up!” The Catalina representative, shocked by this response from a woman whose winnings had come partially out of his company’s pockets, looked to the Miss America organizers for support. The organizers were more firmly attached to the image of respectability they had spent decades building than they were to funds from the swimwear company. They backed Betbeze instead.

Catalina was furious not to receive the return on their investment in the Miss America Pageant, which they had hoped for in the form of marketing exposure on the body of Miss America herself. They withdrew their support for the pageant, went back to their home state of California, and started their own beauty contest—one that would include both Miss USA and an international component—there.⁷

One of the first proponents of Catalina’s competition was the previous year’s Miss America, herself estranged from pageant organizers in Atlantic City. During a marketing appearance for Catalina, Jacque Mercer, Miss America 1949, began discussing Catalina’s new idea with company president E.B. Stewart. According to pageant historian Frank Deford, it was Mercer who suggested to Stewart that he call the new pageant Miss United Nations, after the international body founded only five years prior, to represent a spirit of peace and global cooperation that was to characterize the period following World War II.⁸ When the film studio Universal-International joined the project, though, the pageant ended up taking on the name by which it is known today: Miss Universe.⁹

⁷ Michelle Ferrari, *American Experience: Miss America*, DVD, directed by Lisa Ades (New York: Clio, Inc. and Orchard Films, 2002); Frank Deford, “*There She Is*”: *The Life and Times of Miss America* (New York: The Viking Press, 1971), 64, 179, 180-181; Sarah Banet-Weiser, *The Most Beautiful Girl in the World: Beauty Pageants and National Identity* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1999), 44, 221n6.

⁸ Deford, 181.

⁹ Deford, 181; Banet-Weiser, 44.

The early 1950s was not the first time beauty pageantry in the U.S. had seen such an ambitious title. In 1926—the same year that Norma Smallwood had taken the Miss America crown in Atlantic City—pageant organizers in Galveston, Texas had added an international component to their annual Bathing Girl Review, which was then in its seventh year. The winner of that international competition, the International Pageant of Pulchritude, had also been titled “Miss Universe.” The International Pageant of Pulchritude was the first major U.S. beauty pageant to include entrants from various locales outside the U.S., primarily European and Latin American countries. However, its run was nowhere near as long as that of the later Miss Universe, which has lasted into the present. Instead, five years after its inception, the International Pageant of Pulchritude had already disappeared.¹⁰

That earlier Miss Universe likely came to her premature end at the hands of the same pressures that put Miss America on hiatus in 1928. Other scholars of U.S. pageantry in the 1920s and 30s focus on the factors surrounding that first disappearance of the Miss America Pageant and not on other beauty contests. Those scholars indicate that religious women’s groups were targeting bathers’ revues in a number of seaside resort towns—including Atlantic City, Galveston, and Long Beach.¹¹ The groups related the semi-nude bodies of young women in bathing costume to sexual impropriety in ways that had and would always plague the pageant industry. However, in this particular time period, critics colored those arguments with a racist spin. Sexual impropriety became “white slavery” (prostitution) and “race suicide” (sexually transmitted disease), which the objecting

¹⁰ Candace Savage, *Beauty Queens: A Playful History* (New York: Abbeville Press, 1998), 25-33.

¹¹ Savage, 62-63; Deford, 247.

groups cited as motivations for their protests.¹² At the same time, the onset of the Great Depression made it difficult to continue staging productions, like pageants, that cost so much money to organize and were such vulgar expressions of conspicuous consumption. In Galveston, in particular, a series of hurricanes plaguing the Texas Gulf Coast—in 1929, 1931, 1933, and 1934—worked with the Depression to cripple the local tourism industry and events, like the Bathing Girls’ Review and International Pageant of Pulchritude, associated with it.¹³

There are few, if any scholarly works on this early Miss Universe. Pop historical surveys of pageantry, like Candace Savage’s *Beauty Queens: A Playful History*, that do make mention of the International Pageant of Pulchritude tend to credit conservative women and catastrophic weather exclusively for why that contest disappeared and, unlike Miss America, never returned. While it is clear that those were contributing factors, I argue that it was the cultural and political climate of the nation following the First World War that most firmly led to the Galveston pageant’s demise.

In the late 1920s, the U.S. legal system was preoccupied with restricting the number of immigrants who could enter the country at all and limiting even further those who would have the legal right to call themselves Americans, via naturalized citizenship, once here. By 1935, Miss America, who was selected only from amongst the nation’s citizenry, could rebound from economic pressures and social critiques to endure through the present day. But at a moment when nativism, isolationism, and xenophobia

¹² Notably, historian Candace Savage argues that it was the success of a black woman and a Jewish woman in a 1924 pageant in Flushing, New York that first sparked objections against pageantry from Young Women’s Christian Associations (YWCA) in the New York/New Jersey/Pennsylvania tri-state area. “Avoiding any reference to murky racial theories,” Savage explains, “their statement trod the moral high ground of womanly purity.” Miss America, as the geographically closest national pageant and the most successful one, was their primary target. It closed down temporarily just four years later. See Savage, 37, 63.

¹³ Savage, 33.

characterized the United States' position with respect to the rest of the world, an international pageant that invited women from other countries literally to wash up on American shores was unlikely to succeed.

Some twenty years later, when Catalina reincarnated Miss Universe, the political timing was much better. By the early 1950s, the United States was emerging as a new world superpower, interested in fostering—for both political and economic reasons—a global “family of nations” that would be welcoming of U.S. capital and allied in the fight against communism. The United States' prominent role in the formation of the United Nations, immediately following World War II, demonstrated that the country had opened up to active participation in a world outside its borders. Originally intended to be named after that international political body, a “Miss United Nations” turned “Miss Universe” promised a different kind of global interaction, an alternative to world war, one where competition was waged with beauty rather than bombs.

Beauty is World Peace¹⁴

In 1952, the first year of the contemporary Miss Universe Pageant, the United States had recently emerged from World War II and was in the midst of the Korean War. In light of those major international military conflicts, U.S. federal government and corporate interests found themselves charged with the task of reforming the U.S. public's view of other countries. Only years prior, the geopolitical space outside the nation had consisted of enemy nations to fight and “primitive” ones to protect, a world distant from the relatively safe shores of the continental U.S. Now it was to be seen as a rapidly

¹⁴ I am indebted to my colleague Colleen Woods, who was an invaluable source of information and inspiration for this section of the chapter.

modernizing world of economic partners. In a capitalist democracy, the projects of government and big business could only proceed successfully with the consent and participation of the U.S. public. As Klein argues in her book *Cold War Orientalism*, “The exercise of political, economic, and military power always depends upon the mechanisms of ‘culture,’ in the form of the creative use of language and the deployment of shared stories.”¹⁵ At a moment of great shifts in international power, culture was a means to re-educate the United States public about the rest of the world.

In that process, pop culture industries like international beauty pageantry served the important function of familiarizing the U.S. public with previously unfamiliar populations around the globe. Miss Universe, in particular, was a forum in which select nations became visible to Americans in perhaps the most unthreatening way imaginable: through young women whose racialized bodies came to stand in for the national populations they represented. The cultural work that went on in Miss Universe was particularly relevant to Latin America and the Caribbean, the Middle East, and especially Asia and the Pacific Islands. These were regions of the globe that housed former U.S. colonies and past enemies now repositioned as friendly, independent nation-states arriving at modernity—capitalistic, industrialized, urban, and middle-class—with the helping hand of the U.S.

In the period following World War II, the United States government was redefining relations with nations that were once sites of colonial possession and military occupation. An era of U.S. imperialism had begun with the purchase of Alaska from Russia in 1867, the annexation of Samoa in 1878, and the seizure of the Republic of Hawai‘i twenty years later. At the end of the Spanish American War in 1898, the Treaty

¹⁵ Klein, 6.

of Paris had transferred, from Spain to the United States, colonial control of the Philippines, Guam, Puerto Rico, and Cuba.¹⁶ Within four years of its annexation, Cuba had gained independence, with the U.S. maintaining rights of political and military intervention in Cuba's affairs. However, Alaska, Hawai'i, the Philippines, Guam, Puerto Rico, and what became American Samoa remained wholly in the possession of the United States, with the U.S. further expanding its empire through the purchase of the Danish West Indian Islands, later called the U.S. Virgin Islands, in 1917.

Throughout the first half of the twentieth century, the official status of each of those seven territories, including questions of whether their populations were fit for self-government and U.S. citizenship, shifted at different moments. When Miss Universe began in 1952, Hawai'i, Puerto Rico, and the Philippines all sent representatives to compete directly for that international title, while Miss Alaska appeared first as a contestant for Miss USA.¹⁷ This demonstrated that the relationship of those spaces to the U.S. "proper", whether they were part of the U.S. or rather part of the world outside of it, was not entirely clear.

By that time, however, the Philippines was the only one of the four that had actually gained status as an independent and self-governing nation. With the passage of the Tydings-McDuffie or Philippine Independence Act in 1934, the federal government of the U.S. had provided for the decolonization of the Philippines within ten years.¹⁸ The plan was delayed by World War II, when Japanese military forces invaded the Philippines, and the U.S. responded to protect its own colonial holding, stop Japanese

¹⁶ See Klein, 24, 244.

¹⁷ *Miss Universe Beauty Pageant: Official Program*, Long Beach, California, June 23 to June 29, 1952, 18, 23, 28, 31.

¹⁸ See Ronald Takaki, *Strangers from a Different Shore: A History of Asian Americans* (Boston: Back Bay Books, 1998), 331.

imperialist efforts, and maintain U.S. Armed Forces' strategic position in the Pacific. Under the terms of Japan's surrender in 1945, the United States occupied portions of Japan, acquired nations in the Pacific region—including the Northern Mariana Islands and South Korea—that had before the conclusion of the War been colonial possessions of Japan, and reclaimed control of the Philippines.¹⁹ The following year, the U.S. relinquished some portion of that control by negotiating a treaty to provide for the independence of the Philippines. The conditions of “independence” marked a transition from colonial to neocolonial. They allowed the U.S. government to continue exercising power over various aspects of the Philippines' economy for some time and for U.S. forces to maintain a presence on military bases in the Philippines for even longer.

While negotiating the terms of U.S.-recognized Philippine independence, United States government, military, and economic interests were also participating in war and decolonization in Korea—formerly under Japanese rule—and in the modernization of Japan itself. Americans in the United States had received, throughout World War II, messages from media and popular culture insisting that Japan was an enemy nation, backward, militaristic, and deserving of the destruction leveled against it by the United States' atomic bombs.²⁰ In addition, by the early 1950s, the White House and industries that profited from war needed to justify U.S. military intervention in the Korean War, which was taking place so shortly after the end of World War II and without official Congressional sanction.

Now, to strengthen the nation's position as a capitalist world superpower in opposition to the communist Soviet Union, those in power in United States industry and

¹⁹ See Klein, 163.

²⁰ Ibid., 4-5.

government needed the help of cultural producers to re-educate the rest of the nation's population, especially about Asian nations. Klein explains that cultural producers "did not simply reflect [the Cold War foreign policies pursued by Washington], nor did they determine them. Rather, they served as a cultural space in which the ideologies undergirding those policies could be, at various moments, articulated, endorsed, questioned, softened, and mystified."²¹ This was precisely the type of work Miss Universe did, creating a field of competition that suggested that any nation entering its own "Miss" was in as good a position as any other nation, including the U.S. itself, to be crowned the most beautiful in the world. Beauty, judged from within the United States and by U.S. standards, was a metaphor for modernity, as well as for belonging within a world of peer nations, led by a new American superpower.

To present the competition as fair and objective, pageant president E.W. Stewart focused much of his brief welcome message in the first Miss Universe Pageant Official Program on this spirit of equality. "We have selected an outstanding list of judges," he said, "who are fully experienced in appraising beauty from every land. Every girl will be assured an equal opportunity for the coveted titles of Miss United States of America 1953 and Miss Universe 1953."²² Stewart's use of the opening pronoun "we" operated as a reminder to readers that he and the other pageant organizers had chosen the panel of judges. This suggested that judges' decisions were likely to have been in line with the politics of organizers and their visions for the outcome of the pageant. Stewart then went on to highlight the "qualifications" of the judges, making without evidence the impossible claim that their expertise positioned them to evaluate fairly and accurately the

²¹ Ibid., 9.

²² E.W. Stewart, "Welcome!" *Miss Universe Beauty Pageant: Official Program*, 1952, 7.

cultural norms of feminine beauty local to “every land.” In reality, not only was “every land” far from represented amongst the twenty-eight Miss Universe contestants, but also, of the ten judges listed in that first program book, seven were from the U.S. Two others had biographies in the program indicating that they were born in European countries. Only one judge was nonwhite: Gilbert Roland, the Mexican-born screen actor who had, himself, grown up in the United States.²³

Taken as a whole, the 1952 Miss Universe Official Program did not support Stewart’s claims of “equal opportunity.” The program suggested instead the subordination of local beauty standards to “global” ones, which were actually subjective and Euro-American. Mostly American judges evaluated mostly American and European contestants to determine which woman—and by extension, which nation—would be deemed the most beautiful in a world mostly unrepresented in the competition at all. Even amongst those represented, there was not equality, but rather hierarchy, as suggested in the remainder of Stewart’s comments: “In all contests there must be winners, and there must be losers, and we know that your task will be to win or to lose graciously. Our hearts are open equally to the winners or to the losers, and we sincerely hope that this Pageant will bring you many happy hours and a true inspiration for world peace.”²⁴ Here, it becomes clear that Stewart was directing his comments not to audience members, but rather directly to contestants. By winning or losing with grace, they were to model that behavior for the nations they represented. In fact, this gracious winning or losing—in war, politics, or beauty contests—was the “inspiration for world peace”

²³ “These Experts Will Name Miss United States of America and Miss Universe,” *Miss Universe Beauty Pageant: Official Program*, 1952, 16-17. I also thank Vijay Prashad for clarification on Gilbert Roland’s biographical history.

²⁴ Stewart, 7.

Stewart mentioned. His formula positioned American pageant organizers as the “we” who hold the power of opening their hearts to winners and losers alike, just as those who hold the power of judgment in the competition are Americans, too. For Miss Universe, “world peace,” now a trite pageant aphorism, was from the beginning both a preoccupation and a state of global politics that depended on U.S. judgment, organization, and leadership.

Burton W. Chace, the Mayor of Long Beach, California, which hosted and sponsored the first Miss Universe Pageants, offered further commentary to support Stewart’s rhetoric in the program. Addressing not the pageant contestants but rather the local public and the broader Miss Universe audience, Chace submitted his own words of welcome and hopes for world peace, which I quote at length here:

[T]he City of Long Beach is host to the greatest pageant ever presented, whose chief purpose is not only to find the most beautiful girl in the world, but also to create good will and friendly spirit among the Nations of the World!

This gala pageant is not just an ordinary world beauty contest but a contest with inference on universal world peace. ...

The week of June 23 is to be a continuous “Show of Shows”—all graced by more feminine beauty than has ever been assembled any place in the world. These beautiful girl contestants are the World’s Ambassadors of Goodwill, and as such will be treated with the greatest of courtesy and respect, for when they leave our City we want them to become ambassadors for Long Beach.²⁵

In his welcome message, Chace echoed Stewart’s insistence that the pageant represented a comprehensive “world,” one in which the Miss Universe Pageant had the power and expertise to “find the most beautiful.” Chace went on to mention world peace explicitly, revealing again the pageant’s anxieties about peace in a world so recently out of war. However, in Chace’s syntax—“a contest with inference on world peace”—the proximity

²⁵ Burton W. Chace, “Joyful Greetings!” *Miss Universe Beauty Pageant: Official Program*, 1952, 5.

of the word “contest” with the phrase “world peace,” suggested, as did Stewart’s mention of winners and losers, that the avenue to peace was through competition. Like the word “appraising” in Stewart’s welcome message, the direct relation of competition to world peace pointed out both the capitalist undertones of the event and the fetishization of beauty as the value invested in each contestant.

What is notable, though, is that Chace ascribed additional worth to the contestants. The national representatives at Miss Universe were valuable not only because of their beauty but also because of their mobility. In traveling from their home nations to Long Beach, California and back, contestants’ interactions with one another and with the geographical space of the U.S. were meant to earn them the respect of others and the expertise to become what Chace called “the World’s Ambassadors of Goodwill.”

Like the discarded “Miss United Nations” title, the designation of “ambassador” indicated that the pageant was not just a presentational “Show of Shows,” nor merely a contest of winners and losers. Instead, the pageant was also a project in foreign relations, a politically and culturally educational event. It was an event from which Americans learned, by extrapolating from the bodies and behaviors of Miss Universe contestants, how the people of other nations looked and acted. In the 1958 Official Programme, pageant organizers described contestants by saying, “Speaking different languages and practicing diverse customs, they bring with them a richness of cultures and an outstretched hand offering friendship. In a practical way, they learn a lesson which transcends all national and international bounds.”²⁶ The charge of the contestants was to build goodwill, to learn—at the hands of American organizers, judges, contestants,

²⁶ “The Miss Universe Beauty Pageant,” *Miss Universe Beauty Pageant: Official Programme*, Long Beach, California, July 17-27, 1958, 11.

chaperones, and audience members—how to get along with one another. Then, by carrying that lesson back to their home countries in beautiful, feminine, and thus politically innocuous bodies, they would produce more goodwill. The intended result was what Chace called “international publicity and cooperation,” a combination of tourism and diplomacy for the benefit not only of the City of Long Beach but also of the world. In other words, world peace: devised from within the context of the United States, executed and dispersed by a select group of young women from around the globe.

Beauty is Modernity

The early 1950s was a time when the international conflict of World War II and the project of fighting Nazism and Japanese imperialism had given way to the international conflict of the Cold War and the fight between communism and capitalism. Anne McClintock argues that, often when nations were in conflict, “Female figures were planted like fetishes at the ambiguous points of contact.”²⁷ At such a moment, Miss Universe as a beauty competition among nations was a perfect example of how women were placed, as nationalist bodies, at “ambiguous points of contact.” In this context, what the contestants’ titles (i.e., “Miss USA”) did most emphatically was to point out a simple and direct formula of woman=nation that linked gender to nationalism.²⁸

While Miss Universe contestants competed in swimsuit and evening gown, categories already customary to contests like Miss America, the Miss Universe Pageant was marked as an international competition by the inclusion of a category called National

²⁷ McClintock elaborates this theory based on the historical specificities of European imperialism in the 19th century and contemporary conflicts among black and white South Africans. See Anne McClintock, *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender, and Sexuality in the Colonial Contest* (New York: Routledge, 1995), 24.

²⁸ See Banet-Weiser, 6.

Costume. The visual impact of the National Costume portion of the pageant was particularly striking: female bodies parading across a stage, dressed in costume designers' interpretations of the traditional dress of different nations, identified by a sash on which appeared only the name of a country, not the name of the contestant herself. The parade of nations as parade of women was symbolically powerful. The individual bodies of the women grouped together in international competition represented a clear juxtaposition of the local and the global. Not only the National Costume, but also the racialized features of the women stood in for the nation, the names of which were literally written across each contestant's body. This category of competition staged particularly clearly the equation women=nation. And beginning in 1962, when the pageant introduced National Costume as a judged element, it became particularly clear which nations were considered, in a U.S. context, worthy of recognition. Miss England won the first national costume competition. Miss Israel won the year after that.²⁹

The idea of having individual women's bodies stand in for different nations was, by no means, new to the U.S. or to the Cold-War era. Instead, the Miss Universe beauty pageant brought to life what Sarah Banet-Weiser calls a historically dominant trope for "figuring women as nationalist bodies": "women as iconic figures...situated peripherally to masculine national identity...as a spectacle that is decorative and symbolic (but not exactly an animated citizen)."³⁰ However, though they have been given that symbolic nationalist status, McClintock argues, "Women are typically ... denied any direct relation to national agency."³¹

²⁹ "Miss Universe®: History," Miss Universe Organization, <http://www.missuniverse.com/history/awards.html#costume>, Accessed March 9, 2008.

³⁰ Banet-Weiser, 158.

³¹ McClintock, 354.

That denial is actually a reason female representatives had freedom of movement from nation to nation that “real” male diplomats could not have. For instance, Shirley Jennifer Lim recounts in her book *A Feeling of Belonging*, that “Miss Japan toured the United States as a goodwill political act. Given the race hatred expressed so recently in World War II, Miss Japan represented Japan in non-threatening ways that (male) governmental officials could not. ... The queen and her attendants functioned as official representatives of Japan without as much of the hostility that political or economic representatives might generate.”³² It was precisely because Miss Japan did not have what McClintock calls a “direct relation to national agency” that she was seen as “non-threatening.” Miss Japan and her counterparts from other nations did not have the power to enact any changes in governmental policy, a level at which change would be meaningful to corporate or political leaders. This lack of governmental or economic agency gave these pop culture queens—goodwill ambassadors to what might have been a Miss United Nations—access to international spaces where the “real” male ambassadors of the United Nations could not necessarily go.

Because of this, the beauty queens of the Miss Universe competition were not merely the decorative spectacles of which Banet-Weiser speaks. They were also symbolic in a politically important way. Via travel and mass media, they could reach an international public that would never have direct access to the men at high levels of government and industry who were intimately connected to national agency. As Lim argues, “Public culture linked by mass media reportage enabled community to be redefined as groups connected through the figure of the beauty queen, instead of

³² Lim, 180, 181.

geographical proximity.”³³ It was for these reasons that the Miss Universe organizers were so invested in their pageant’s potential impact, real and symbolic, on world peace.

As part of that investment, Miss Universe organizers employed a volunteer Hostess Committee. By the early 1950s, hostesses, or chaperones, were already fixtures in the Miss America Pageant. These were volunteers drawn from the local community, usually middle-aged or older, mostly married, all women. Hostesses were charged with preserving the respectability of contestants during Pageant Week within a heterosexual paradigm, policing the sexual conduct of the younger women to the point of celibacy, especially when it came to interactions with men. The role of the Miss Universe Pageant Hostess Committee, though, seemed to extend beyond managing the behavior of individual contestants. Miss Universe hostesses had broader significance, so much, in fact, as to merit an entire page in the 1958 Official Programme, which introduced the volunteers by saying,

The Miss Universe Hostess Committee is the most important factor in creating the great spirit of international friendship that exists among the delegates during the Miss Universe Beauty Pageant. Each contestant has her own hostess and is guided and cared for with motherly affection. ...

The Miss Universe Beauty Pageant has never had a word of adverse publicity about a delegate during her competition at the Pageant. When you consider beautiful women from the four corners of the world becoming like sisters tho [*sic.*] they speak different languages and have different modes of living, one can well appreciate the ability, the kindness and the thoughtfulness of this well organized Hostess Committee.³⁴

Just as Miss America Pageant organizers had been since the early 1920s, the individuals behind the scenes at Miss Universe were preoccupied with the comportment of entrants and the implications of that comportment on respectability. However, in this international competition, organizers saw hostesses as even more important than the ones in Atlantic

³³ Ibid., 181.

³⁴ “Miss Universe Hostess Committee . . .,” *Miss Universe Beauty Pageant: Official Programme*, 1958, 15.

City. In fact, Miss Universe hostesses were “the most important factor” in the success of the event. This was because the Miss Universe Hostess Committee was charged not only with guarding the respectability of each contestant but with guarding the *relationships* among contestants as well. In the Miss Universe Pageant’s formulation of world peace, older, married women mentored, or rather “mothered,” younger unmarried women into friendship and “sisterhood.” The model that Miss Universe offered was one that feminized foreign relations. Here, women’s bodies—the guarded and the guardians—softened the sharp edges of imperialism, decolonization, global capitalism, and international politics. If the Cold War “universe” was to be a modern family of [capitalist] nations, as the United Nations for instance implied, that family would learn peace from its mothers and sisters.

The actions of contestants during Pageant Week were significant not only because they maintained the reputation of the pageant at home and of the U.S. abroad. The bodies and behaviors of foreign contestants, in how closely they could approximate U.S. standards, would also have served to prove their countries’ belonging as peers of the U.S., nations that were deserving of the kinds of accolades the Miss Universe Pageant had to offer. Hosting an international beauty pageant reflected the United States’ understanding of its position as the new world superpower. It was from within the U.S. nation that Miss Universe organizers could establish a competition among nations, appoint the judges for that competition, set the criteria for judgment, and offer monetary and other rewards to the country deemed to have best met those criteria each year. Sending a representative to that beauty pageant became a way for pageant organizers and

sponsors from other nations, especially the recently developed or decolonized, to represent their countries' arrival at modernity.

The designation "beauty pageant" would seem to suggest that looking beautiful was a simple requirement for entry. However, "beautiful" is always a complex and contested category with more dimensions than just the aesthetic. Feminist theorist Naomi Wolf even insists in her book *The Beauty Myth* that "[t]he qualities that a given period calls beautiful in women are merely symbols of the female behavior that that period considers desirable: *The beauty myth is always actually prescribing behavior and not appearance.* Competition between women has been made part of the myth so that women will be divided from one another."³⁵ Wolf's theory highlights the paradox of the Miss Universe contest and of beauty pageantry more broadly. Hostesses were employed to facilitate friendship among contestants. World peace, perhaps, even depended on that friendship. Organizers repeatedly listed contestants' camaraderie as one of the primary by-products of the pageant. Yet, because the beauty pageant was a contest with "winners and losers," competition between the women was really the point, not the camaraderie they developed despite it.

That paradox is clarified, however, by Wolf's further suggestion that "[t]he beauty myth is not about women at all. It is about men's institutions and institutional power."³⁶ In international pageantry, the beauty being adjudicated was code or metaphor, not only for the behavior of the young women contestants but, as importantly, that of the businesses and national governments those women represented. Where the Miss America Pageant was making its name on talent and respectability, Miss Universe organizers

³⁵ Naomi Wolf, *The Beauty Myth: How Images of Beauty Are Used Against Women* (New York: William Morrow and Company, Inc., 1991), 13-14. Author's emphasis.

³⁶ Wolf, 13.

insisted theirs was a contest solely about beauty. But just as respectability connoted feminine, bourgeois whiteness, “beauty” in the case of Miss Universe also had its underlying connotations, of capitalism and modernity.

When pageant Executive Producer Oscar Meinhardt described in the 1953 Official Programme the prerequisites to entry in the Miss Universe Pageant, he focused not on the contestants themselves but rather on the sponsors who sent them. What Meinhardt said was not at all about what an entrant should look or even act like. Instead, he laid out a much more complex process, marked by a number of tacit entry criteria: “Exclusive franchises were issued by the Pageant Headquarters to civic clubs, reliable newspapers, model and charm schools, theatre chains, Junior Chambers of Commerce and other reliable amusement enterprises in the various states and foreign countries. These franchise holders have the exclusive right to operate a Miss Universe Pageant and contest in their country or state. ... During the organization of these various state and foreign country contests world-wide publicity is generated by each sponsor plus the all-over publicity released by the Pageant office in Long Beach, California.”³⁷ The language of franchise and publicity firmly established the Miss Universe Pageant in a context of business and capital. And again, the power of Pageant Headquarters, located in Long Beach, to issue franchises and manage overall publicity demonstrated the centrality of the U.S., both to the project of Miss Universe and to an American view of the international “universe” the pageant represents.

What is particularly notable, though, is how Meinhardt’s description acted as a list of requirements for nations seeking to acquire franchise rights: they had to have civic

³⁷ Oscar Meinhardt, “The Quest for Beauty,” *Miss Universe Beauty Pageant Official Program: Special Issue*—California Magazine, Long Beach, California, July 9-19, 1953, 14.

clubs, like the League of Finnish War Invalids, which sponsored Armi Kuusela, the young woman who turned out to be the very first Miss Universe; “reliable” newspapers like Miss Puerto Rico’s sponsor Editorial El Imparcial, Inc.; or the broadly-defined “reliable amusement enterprises,” for instance Katubusan Cigar and Cigarette Co., which sponsored Miss Philippines in 1952, or African Consolidated Theatres, Ltd., a multi-year sponsor of Miss South Africa.³⁸ One of those organizations had to beat out any others in order to hold exclusive rights to the only Miss Universe franchise pageant in an entire nation. Local franchise holders, or sponsors, had to take responsibility for publicizing their contests, their queens, and the Miss Universe Pageant at large. Yet, ultimately, foreign sponsors had to defer to the leadership of a central Long Beach headquarters, and foreign nations to the leadership of the U.S. All of this presupposed that anyone in said nation could afford to sponsor, enter, and publicize a delegate, or that anyone in said nation wanted to in the first place.

In other words, Miss Universe participating nations had to demonstrate some of the key features of a modern, capitalist nation-state in the Cold War era: a government committed to participating in global capitalism; non-governmental businesses prepared to sponsor that participation; the financial means to orchestrate such sponsorship; standards of femininity that allowed for a young woman to appear alone in public, in bathing

³⁸ *Miss Universe Beauty Pageant: Official Program*, 1952, 18, 22, 23. *Miss Universe Beauty Pageant: Official Program*, 1953, 29, 36. In the first Official Program, only the international Miss Universe contestants are listed with the names of their sponsors. That year, many of those sponsors were radio, film, and print media companies, revealing the beauty contest’s placement within the entertainment industry. However, sponsors like Hotel El Panama are reminders of pageantry’s longstanding alliance with the tourism industry, and sponsors like Social Clubs of Peru reminders of pageantry’s upper-class aspirations. In the 1953 Official Program, where the Miss USA contestants’ sponsors are listed along with the Miss Universe contestants’ sponsors, there are even more obvious inflections of class. Many of the Miss USA contestants that year were sponsored by the “charm schools” Meinhardt mentioned, like the Ruth Tolman Charm Studio, which sponsored the entrants from both Idaho and Utah. See *Miss Universe Beauty Pageant: Official Program*, 1952, 18-19, 22-23, 28-29; and *Miss Universe Beauty Pageant: Official Program*, 1953, 17-21, 26-30, 33, 36.

costume, for show; a willingness to submit to more powerful nations, in this case the United States, but all while maintaining a national identity distinct from others.

In a decolonizing world, the franchising of pageants was an imperial act not of geopolitics but rather of culture. According to anthropologist Richard Wilk, pageants like Miss Universe enact cultural imperialism, wherein “an imported institution...imposes a western form of sexual objectification. Of course we know the story is actually much more complex, that local groups and interests have adapted and used the raw material of the pageant for their own very local purposes. ... In this way a foreign or global institution is taken out of its original context and made local; it is reappropriated and naturalized into a different system.”³⁹ What Wilk points out here is that, as the beauty pageant—and, in particular, the Miss Universe Pageant—opened franchises around the world, cultural and aesthetic values inherent to this American-born cultural form inevitably traveled with it. In 1950s international pageantry, those values were negotiated through the bodies and behaviors of women. The women who qualified embodied ideal femininity inflected with U.S. ideologies of youth, whiteness, and the tense union between the “virginity” of childless unmarried women and the sexuality of those same women’s seminude bodies on parade.

What complicated that act of cultural imperialism was just what complicates any imperial act: outside the United States, Miss Universe participating nations did not receive the beauty pageant format and then repeat it in some unadulterated manner.

³⁹ Richard Wilk, “Connections and Contradictions: From the Crooked Tree Cashew Queen to Miss World Belize,” in *Beauty Queens on the Global Stage: Gender, Contests, and Power*, ed. Colleen Ballerino Cohen, Richard Wilk, and Beverly Stoeltje (New York: Routledge, 1996), 230. The term “cultural imperialism” originated in communications studies, in the latter half of the twentieth century, to describe the impacts of mass media on modernizing nations. Wilk applies the term to televised and non-televised pageantry alike.

Rather, as Wilk points out, Miss Universe franchise pageants were adapted into a practice that in some way resembled the local. They were “reappropriated and naturalized into a different system.” Not surprisingly, this domestication of an imported cultural form was not without its conflicts, inconsistencies, and discomforts. Cultural contradictions arose from the reality that national winners needed to satisfy ideals of feminine beauty particular to their home countries. At the same time, they were beholden to Euro-American standards of beauty and behavior if they wanted their queens to be viable contenders for the coveted Miss Universe crown.

Lim illustrates that challenge in her discussion of the 1953 Miss Universe competition, wherein Miss Japan, Kinuko Ito, placed third. An editor of the Japanese American newspaper *Scene*, commenting on that year’s pageant, presented his formula for Japan’s success in world beauty pageants and, by extension, world politics:

“Japanese women have an attractiveness that their nation can be proud of. But as a rule, they are not physically built to conform to the standards applied at American or European bathing-suited beauty contests. Their beauty, by and large, is not the leggy sort. ... As soon as ‘cheesecake’ photos of Miss Ito began appearing in the papers, it became apparent that she was among the exceptions to the rule. She was taller than the average Japanese woman. ... So we detect a pattern. Whoever in Japan picks the girl sent to the annual ‘Miss Universe’ hoopla in Long Beach, Calif., obviously have adopted the criteria in force in the West. ... Japan’s recovery from the horrible misjudgments of her former militarist rulers is largely dependent upon how she makes out in her relations with the West, especially with its leader, the U.S. ... It seems to us that a serious effort to catch up is overdue, and that a good way to start is to consider the moral in Kinuko Ito’s body beautiful.”⁴⁰

The *Scene* editor began his piece by assuring Japanese American readers of his positive position on ethnic pride. However, he went on to recognize that Euro-American standards of feminine beauty were inclined toward “the leggy sort”—or height that grows from long legs—which according to him, Japanese women did not typically have. The editor

⁴⁰ *Scene*, September 23, 1953, 12, quoted in Lim, 159-160.

neither challenged the Euro-American beauty ideals at play in Miss Universe nor conceded that Japanese women were categorically not beautiful. Instead, he focused on the strategy of Miss Japan judges and organizers who apparently gave western standards primacy over Japanese ones in selecting a woman who would be both national beauty queen and Miss Universe contestant. Whether or not Ito was a popular choice in Japan, the editor argued that her third-place finish at Miss Universe was proof of her success. Furthermore, if Japan was to be as successful in international politics as Miss Japan was in international beauty pageantry, the editor argued that Japanese government and politicians ought likewise to learn Euro-American standards and submit to them strategically.

Still, the *Scene* editor did assume that there was an “average Japanese woman”—a category that excluded any women who, like Kinuko Ito, did not meet its standards—and that those in that category had “an attractiveness their nation can be proud of.” His invocation of ethnic standards and ethnic pride revealed the reality that, even while successful Miss Universe contestants had to be attentive to Euro-American beauty standards, there was still a level of difference amongst competitors required for the allegorical project of the pageant to succeed. Part of the creation of a modern nation-state involved establishing borders and delineating racialized space. The national beauty queen stood like a statue marking those borders, and her body was an example of what belonged within that space.

The presence of each body in international pageantry served to identify the boundaries between nations. Each contestant was a distinct national body, and the physical space between her and any co-competitor at any point in the competition marked

a representative national border. In the case of a beauty pageant, “beauty”, as the only explicitly stated criterion, was the metaphor that subsumed modernity. A nation that could not only hold a national pageant but also enter an international one and be selected the most beautiful demonstrated that it had truly “arrived” at modernity. And winners or losers, the presence of all those “beautiful” women’s bodies in international pageantry constructed a racialized mosaic of the modern world, but only as recognized from within the political confines of the United States of America.

Beauty is Colonized

Throughout its earliest years of competition, the Miss Universe Pageant was a joint project of Catalina Swimwear (a California-based clothing manufacturer), Universal-International Studios (a Hollywood film company), and the City of Long Beach, California.⁴¹ Because the identity of the pageants was tied so intricately to this West Coast location, the organizers of Miss Universe and Miss USA, I argue, were particularly invested in positioning the United States as part of a Pacific economy, a partnership of peer nations that bridged “West” and “East”, with American and Asian capital flowing freely across the Pacific.

In that world, Japan could no longer be depicted as the barbaric and antiquated enemy nation it had been just years prior. The Miss Universe Organization demonstrated this in 1958 when they touted Japan’s status as a “peer” nation by including a Japanese

⁴¹ In the earliest years of the 1950s, this partnership also included Pan American Airways. By the end of the decade, Max Factor Hollywood had signed on to replace the airline as one of the pageant’s four primary sponsors. See *Miss Universe Beauty Pageant: Official Program*, 1952, 5, 8, 13; *Miss Universe Beauty Pageant Official Program*, 1953, 5, 6, 8; *Miss Universe Beauty Pageant: Official Programme*, 1958, 11; *Miss Universe Beauty Pageant: Official Programme*, Long Beach, California, July 16-26, 1959, 9, 13.

woman, visual artist Miyoko Yanagida, on the Miss Universe judging panel.⁴² The presence of Yanagida in a position of judgment indicated that, like the Americans and Europeans who had dominated the judging panels of past years, a Japanese woman was now as worthy of evaluating the beauty of others, as she was of competing against it. In addition, the crowning of Miss Japan as Miss Universe a year later was a major coup. Historian Lon Kurashige argues that some, Japanese Americans especially, read Akiko Kojima's 1959 win as “the end of an era of anti-Japanese discrimination.”⁴³ That era had reached its lowest point with the internment of civilians of Japanese descent in concentration camps throughout the western U.S. during World War II. Like U.S. politicians who had conflated Japanese Americans with Japanese in order to justify internment, “Japanese American presses such as the Los Angeles *Kashu Mainichi* celebrated [Kojima's] victory as if one from their own community had won.”⁴⁴

What a Japanese Miss Universe seemed to do most for the pageant, and for post-World-War-II American culture at large, was to provide a way to include the Japanese and present them as peers without offering any kind of political power linked to governmental agency. Also, Kojima's win taken together with Yanagida's appointment to the Miss Universe judging panel indicated that, by the late 1950s, U.S. cultural producers could be nominally welcoming of Japanese from Japan while continuing to exclude and discriminate against persons of Japanese descent who made their homes within the borders of the American nation-state.

⁴² “Famous Personalities Will Name Miss United States Of America And Miss Universe,” *Miss Universe Beauty Pageant: Official Programme*, 1958, 13.

⁴³ Lon Kurashige, *Japanese American Celebration and Conflict: A History of Ethnic Identity and Festival, 1934-1990* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2002), 146, quoted in Lim, 179.

⁴⁴ Lim, 179.

As Miss Japan's win demonstrated, though, Miss Universe contestants and results did not only have bearing on immigrant populations within the U.S. The pageant staged an interactive map of U.S. intervention and imperialism as well. Miss Korea first appeared in the pageant in 1954, the year after the conclusion of the Korean War. Notably, though the entrant was always from South Korea, she was never designated as such. Instead, a Miss Korea suggested a unified Korean nation, or tacitly effaced the existence of North Korea at all. In 1959, Hyun Choo Oh's win in the "Miss Popularity" category—a title selected by pageant audiences rather than judges⁴⁵—seemed to indicate both South Koreans' recovery from the War and recognition of their friendliness, in contrast to North Koreans, by the American public. Miss Israel, likewise, competed in the very first Miss Universe competition and was rewarded with the second ever "best in National Costume" title. Meanwhile, in fifty-six years of Miss Universe competition, a Miss Palestine has never appeared.

Miss Philippines's presence from the very beginning as a contestant in Miss Universe, not Miss USA, seemed to represent Filipinos' fitness for self-government in the face of decolonization.⁴⁶ Miss Hawai'i competed for Miss Universe until 1960, when, on the heels of Hawaiian statehood in 1959, she began competing for Miss USA instead.⁴⁷ Miss Puerto Rico, who appears in the very first Miss Universe program, continues to compete directly for Miss Universe to the present day, as do Miss Guam and Miss U.S. Virgin Islands, though the latter two did not first appear in the contest until 1966 and

⁴⁵ See "Crowd Favorite: Korea Beauty Chosen as Miss Popularity," *Los Angeles Times*, July 22, 1959, 2.

⁴⁶ See *Miss Universe Beauty Pageant: Official Program*, 1952, 18.

⁴⁷ See *Miss Universe Beauty Pageant: Official Program*, 1952, 28; *Miss Universe Beauty Pageant: Official Program*, 1953, 30; *Miss Universe Beauty Pageant: Official Programme*, 1958, 21; *Miss Universe Beauty Pageant: Official Programme*, 1959, 31.

1979, respectively.⁴⁸ Such variation in contestants who competed in the Miss USA Pageant versus those who competed directly for Miss Universe illustrates the precarious and changing positioning of U.S. territories and other imperial holdings in cultural representations of the nation.

With selective inclusion of contestants from Asia, Latin America, and the Middle East—and with the conspicuous inclusion of only non-black participants from African and West Indian countries—the absence of black and indigenous Misses in both the Miss USA and the Miss Universe competition throughout the 1950s is glaring.⁴⁹ Latin American Miss Universe contestants in the 1950s were white, as they often are today, rather than brown (or “colored”), black, or indigenous. And in 1958, the Miss Universe Pageant included—as had Miss America Pageant with Princess America in the 1920s and 30s—a Native American representative who was actually the winner of a different pageant, Miss Navajo Nation. In the Miss Universe Pageant, this “Queen of the Navajo Tribe” was a segregated presence whose title as a “special guest” in the pageant program highlighted the fact that she was not actually present in an official capacity. As the 1958 Miss Universe Official Programme put it, “She will not compete in any of the judging, but will be honored throughout the Pageant events, wearing the beautiful traditional dress of the Navajo Indians.”⁵⁰ In other words, this Native woman was there most certainly to be decorative, perhaps even authenticating, but definitely not competitive.

⁴⁸ See *Miss Universe Beauty Pageant: Official Program*, 1952, 23; “Contestants,” *Miss Universe*, <http://www.missuniverse.com/members/contestants>, Accessed June 24, 2010.

⁴⁹ See *Miss Universe Beauty Pageant: Official Program*, 1952, 18, 19, 22, 23, 28, 29; *Miss Universe Beauty Pageant: Official Program*, 1953, 18, 19, 26, 28, 29, 30; *Miss Universe Beauty Pageant: Official Programme*, 1958, 21, 23, 37, 39, 41, 45, 47, 49; *Miss Universe Beauty Pageant: Official Programme*, 1959, 23, 31, 37, 39, 41, 43, 45, 49, .

⁵⁰ *Miss Universe Beauty Pageant: Official Programme*, 1958, 28.

The exclusion of black participants, however, was even more complete. The early Miss Universe Pageants had no black contestants in the competition, no black judges on the selection panel, no black actors in the pre-show, no black advertisements in the program book, no black “special guests” in the segregated line-up. On the judges’ page in the 1958 Programme, a general overview of the judging method explains, “Judges must consider the characteristics of the Latin American countries, the Nordic, the Anglo-Saxon, the Middle East and the Orient, in order to be universal in their decision.”⁵¹ In this consideration of “universal” judgment of beauty, Africa escapes mention, as does the non-Latin American Caribbean. Clearly, black beauty was not fathomable by Miss Universe judging criteria, as black participants were not fathomable by the pageant at all.

Contestants from Caribbean nations did appear as early as 1952, with Miss Puerto Rico competing in the first Miss Universe, Miss West Indies joining in two years later, and Miss British Guiana entering in 1958.⁵² The early Miss West Indies, in particular, seemed to be a sort of study in racial and ethnic hybridity as well as in the histories of colonialism written on their voices, bodies, and names. Miss West Indies 1958 was Angela Tong, a woman from Port-of-Spain Trinidad who was apparently, by surname and appearance, at least partially of Chinese descent.⁵³ In 1954, Baltimore’s *Afro-American* reported that “[t]he Latin looks of beautiful Evelyn Andrade, queen of the West Indies, kept officials in a tizzy here, during the world-wide beauty contest recently. Officials constantly attempted to address Miss Andrade in Spanish and were taken back

⁵¹ “Famous Personalities Will Name Miss United States of America and Miss Universe,” 12.

⁵² See *Miss Universe Beauty Pageant: Official Program*, 1952, 23; and *Miss Universe Beauty Pageant: Official Programme*, 1958, 21.

⁵³ See *Miss Universe Beauty Pageant: Official Programme*, 1958, 37.

at her crisp British accent.”⁵⁴ It turns out that Andrade was not Latina but rather the mixed-race daughter of a Syrian father and a black mother. While her Syrian ancestry meant that she was not racialized as “black” in her home country of Jamaica, Andrade’s mother’s race nonetheless prompted *Ebony* magazine to report: “Jamaican girl is the first Negro to enter top beauty contest.”⁵⁵

The *Ebony* reporter’s enthusiasm in claiming Andrade as “Negro” likely had as much to do with a paucity of contestants of black African descent in Miss Universe as it did with the U.S. one-drop rule. The earliest African contestant was a white Miss South Africa, who was a semifinalist in the first Miss Universe Pageant in 1952.⁵⁶ Until 1977, all African and Caribbean Miss Universe winners were white. The first black Miss Universe was not crowned until Janelle Comissiong from Trinidad and Tobago that year; the first black Miss Universe from the United States not until 1995. And the first black African Miss Universe came the latest: Botswana’s Mpule Kwelagobe, in 1999.

In the 1950s, the contemporary politics of colonialism and state power might have explained the absence of black contestants from the Miss Universe competition. As a performance of international diplomacy under the aegis of U.S. capitalism, Miss Universe would have been primarily concerned with forming relationships among nation-states that had the independent political agency needed to enact policies in support of global capital. Much of the African continent and the black nations of the West Indies were still colonized by European states in that decade. Therefore, one explanation for the exclusion of black women from participation in Miss Universe is that many black women in the world lived in colonized nations, and colonies did not have autonomous political agency.

⁵⁴ “Evelyn’s Latin looks startle beauty judges,” *Afro-American*, August 21, 1954, 7.

⁵⁵ Savage, 105.

⁵⁶ See *Miss Universe Beauty Pageant Official Program*, 1953, 29.

However, evidence from the 1950s Miss Universe Pageants does not entirely support an argument about colonialism and politics alone. Nor are colonialism and politics themselves extricable from race and racism. Miss Hong Kong, Miss British Guiana, and Miss West Indies for instance, competed before those places had achieved independence from British colonial rule. Yet even the contestants from British Guiana and the West Indies, who were representing countries or regions with substantial black populations, were not themselves black women. Nor were black nations that had been decolonized by mid century, like Haiti, Liberia, or Ethiopia, represented in Miss Universe at all. As much as the exclusions had to do with colonialism, therefore, they also had to do with race. Certainly, colonialism in the twentieth century skewed racialized power in favor of whiteness and against colonized nations populated mostly by people of color. In the case of Miss Universe, though, what was happening very explicitly was a complete elision of blackness from U.S. standards of beauty, modernity, and belonging. Insofar as nationhood and beauty were also about race, those involved in the Miss Universe Pageant could imagine neither a black contestant nor a black peer nation.

By the second year of competition, the reality of racialized exclusions belied Executive Producer Oscar Meinhardt's claim that "[t]he purpose of the Miss Universe Beauty Pageant is to further more friendly relations between the beautiful women of all countries in this world and the thought that world peace might yet be achieved when the world realizes there is so much beauty in it everywhere."⁵⁷ Such a statement of purpose suggested that beauty pageant contestants were both agents of friendship and objects of "realization": the rest of the world might strive for world peace by way of those women's beauty. But according to Meinhardt, it was only beautiful women who could teach

⁵⁷ Meinhardt, 14.

international friendship through their bodies and their relationships with each other. And according to the logic of the pageant, it was Miss Universe judges who could best determine which of the world's women—exclusively U.S., Latin American, European, Middle Eastern, or Asian—counted as beautiful. Black and indigenous women did not qualify.

The extreme phrases “all countries” and “everywhere” were Meinhardt's greatest exaggerations within the scope of the pageant. Miss Universe did not welcome the women of every country. Nor did Miss USA, which systematically excluded from participation women of color from *within* the United States, appear to recognize that there was “beauty everywhere” even within its own nation, let alone in any but select regions of the rest of the world. It is no wonder, then, that the Miss Universe beauty contest never succeeded in its aim to create universal world peace.

Instead, what the pageant represented was the reality that U.S. government, industry, and popular culture were asking Americans to come to terms with a world in which people of color existed. At the same time, though, those very agents of mainstream American culture were not extending that spirit of inclusion to persons of color inside the borders of the nation. As a result, mainstream U.S. beauty pageantry—including Miss USA's even more popular rival pageant Miss America, ongoing in Atlantic City since its reappearance in 1935—was a site of more discord than peace. By the early 1950s, marginalized communities were asserting their own cultural agency, not by attacking but rather by reformulating pageantry. By taking ownership of these cultural means of production, communities of color in the United States made claims on popular representation and national belonging.

“Beauty is Still Beauty”

When Giovanna Mazzotti accused the first Miss Universe Pageant of being “rigged” she was not far off. Miss Universe organizers had an agenda in mind. The agenda was to create a pageant that would stage the ideal of international politics, a worldwide sisterhood of nations under the leadership of the capitalist U.S. Because Miss Universe judges were primarily Americans, selected and trained by those who had organized the pageant, their decisions would have supported that vision. And in their eyes, beauty was not just beauty. Beauty was, much to that first Miss Italy’s dismay, politics as well.

Titles like “Miss Popularity” and “Miss Friendship,” and the nations that won them, revealed that looks were not the only thing being adjudicated in the Miss Universe beauty pageant. Instead, as Naomi Wolf argues, beauty was as much about behaviors as it was about bodies. In an international pageant, the behaviors of the participating nations toward the United States in global politics was as important as the behaviors of the women representing those nations during pageant week. In the 1950s, those behaviors were coded as “modernity”, or a nation’s ability to participate in global capitalism, and “world peace”, a nation’s willingness to submit to the political leadership of the U.S. government

Within that paradigm, a nation that could hold its own national pageant had achieved modernity. A nation that could send a representative to Miss Universe, and perhaps even win, had achieved the acceptance of the U.S. In a decolonizing world with more subtle forms of empire, women of color—especially Asian women—were “accepted” at Miss Universe as proof of the United States’ fair and benevolent leadership

of a modernizing, capitalist world. When many in the Soviet Union questioned the success of that leadership on the basis of persistent U.S. racism, communities of color within the nation used that critique, which they had been leveling against the mainstream for decades, to advocate for inclusion in U.S. culture and national identity.



Figure 3.1. **Yolande Betbeze**. In Miss America pageant lore, it was Yolande Betbeze’s refusal to pose in a swimsuit that served as the catalyst for sponsor Catalina Swimwear to start its own beauty contests: Miss Universe and Miss USA. Though Betbeze’s refusal was allegedly premised on her assertion that she was “an opera singer, not a pinup,” some photographer nonetheless managed to snap a shot of Betbeze posing in a Catalina swimsuit before the company pulled its sponsorship from the Atlantic-City-based Miss America competition and took off to start its own pageants in California.
<http://www.flickr.com/photos/aeillill/3218664359/>



Figure 3.2. **Woman = Nation.** The first ever Miss Universe semifinalists in 1952 are seen here, all in Catalina swimsuits. They are not identified by their own names or even the names of the companies that sponsored them. Instead, what appear on their sashes are the names of the nations they represent (written in English). Among these are Finland, Germany, Hawai‘i, and Hong Kong, the finalists against whom Miss Italy later leveled public complaints. Note that the only African contestant, Miss South Africa—who stands at a remove from contestants directly around her—is white.
<http://www.bellezavenezolana.net/MU/52/pics3.htm>



Figure 3.3. “**...And World Peace.**” Miss Universe and Miss USA participants onstage in 1952 offer a literal depiction of mapping the world on the bodies of contestants. In this rendition of the world, which centers the Western Hemisphere, note that the North American and European continents are the only ones entirely visible. The rest of the map is interrupted by an ad for sponsor Pan American Airways. Capitalism overtakes the world, as the tail of the oversized vessel cuts Africa and Central Asia in half, its body hides most of South America, and its nose renders Oceania and most of the Pacific Islands invisible.

<http://www.bellezavenezolana.net/MU/52/pics3.htm>

CHAPTER FOUR

Positive Protest Culture and Performativity in the 1960s United States

In early September 1968, on the night of the forty-first Miss America Pageant, a conversation took place in the national press between two black women who never actually talked directly to one another. First to speak was Bonnie Allen, a New Yorker who was described by *New York Times* reporter Charlotte Curtis as “a Negro Bronx housewife in her mid-thirties.”¹ Allen was on the boardwalk in Atlantic City as part of New York Radical Women’s (NYRW) anti-Miss America protest, the event that would emerge in U.S. women’s histories as the kickoff of the second-wave feminist movement.² Of some 100 or 200 picketers participating in the protest, Allen was one of only a handful of black women. Accordingly, the *Times* interviewed her about another demonstration:

¹ Charlotte Curtis, “Miss America Pageant Is Picketed by 100 Women,” *New York Times*, September 8, 1968, 81.

² This event, where protesters were falsely rumored to have burned their bras, has been written about extensively in both feminist literature and histories of the Miss America Pageant. See, for example, Candace Savage, *Beauty Queens: A Playful History* (New York: Abbeville Press, 1998), 1-9; Frank Deford, *There She Is: The Life and Times of Miss America* (New York: The Viking Press, 1971), 246, 255-260; Maxine Leeds Craig, *Ain’t I a Beauty Queen: Black Women, Beauty, and the Politics of Race* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 3-6, 8; Michelle Ferrari, *American Experience: Miss America*, DVD, directed by Lisa Ades (New York: Clio, Inc. and Orchard Films, 2002); Sarah Banet-Weiser, *The Most Beautiful Girl in the World: Beauty Pageants and National Identity* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1999), 10; A.R. Riverol, *Live From Atlantic City: The History of the Miss America Pageant Before, During, and In Spite of Television* (Bowling Green, OH: Bowling Green State University Popular Press, 1992), 92-93; Elwood Watson and Darcy Martin, eds., *There She Is, Miss America: The Politics of Sex, Beauty, and Race in America’s Most Famous Pageant* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), 8.

the Miss Black America Pageant, a “positive protest” against the racially exclusive Miss America Pageant sponsored by the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), which was being staged in Atlantic City that very same day.

According to the *Times*, Allen, like other black women participating in NYRW’s protest, was “aware of the Miss Black America contest, but [she] was not sure what [she] ought to do about it.” To illustrate that ambivalence, Curtis quoted Allen as saying, “I’m for beauty contests. ... But then again maybe I’m against them. I think black people have a right to protest.”³

Late that night, the first Miss Black America title went to nineteen-year-old Philadelphia native Sandra Williams. An interview with her, also reported in the *New York Times*, demonstrated a similar lack of conviction about the tactics of the other set of Miss America protesters, Bonnie Allen included. “They’re expressing freedom, I guess,” *Times* reporter Judy Klemesrud quoted Williams as saying. “To each his own.”⁴

The ambiguities illustrated in Williams and Allen’s conversation, by such qualifications as “I think” and “I guess,” demonstrate the rhetorical tensions that arose from being a politicized woman of color in the 1960s United States. On that Saturday in September, Bonnie Allen had chosen to identify with an organization that represented itself as addressing the political issues of U.S. women. Sandra Williams, on the other hand, had chosen to identify with one that positioned itself as representing black Americans. The NYRW and the NAACP, with their distinct and even competing forms

³ Curtis, 81.

⁴ Judy Klemesrud, “There’s Now Miss Black America,” *New York Times*, September 9, 1968, 54.

of protest, did not seem confident engaging one another's efforts. It is no surprise then that Allen and Williams were not either.⁵

Allen, Williams, the NYRW and the NAACP did all have one thing in common: their use of protest as a means of rejecting Miss America Pageant ideals, which made whiteness and normative femininity central to what it meant to be an American. By the late 1960s, visible national protests for Civil Rights, against the Vietnam War, and by the Black Power Movement had normalized the practice of talking back against the state, of being public and vocal about not accepting uncritically what the political leaders of the nation called right, necessary, or true. Normalizing the practice of talking back meant there were more tactics created and shared for how to talk back, and more organizing around doing it. As Maxine Leeds Craig points out, many of the women involved in the NYRW protest had been politicized by their involvement in the Civil Rights Movement, and had learned the very format of their anti-Miss-America action from anti-racist agitation.⁶

What made Miss America such an important site for protest in 1968 was the incredible popularity of pageantry, and of that pageant in particular, in the mid-century United States. The first time a Miss America coronation was televised in 1954, the broadcast broke all records for ratings up until that point. Throughout the 1960s, the Miss America telecast continued in that same vein. The pageant was the highest-rated television program five out of ten years that decade.⁷ In fact, it was with the help of television that Miss America truly became a national symbol, traveling from Atlantic

⁵ For an intersectional reading of the media coverage of the two "protests", see Maxine Leeds Craig, *Ain't I A Beauty Queen: Black Women, Beauty, and the Politics of Race* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 3-6.

⁶ Craig, 4.

⁷ Ferrari, *American Experience: Miss America*.

City through the airwaves each year, carrying an image of ideal femininity with a national title into television-viewing homes around the country.

The gendered ideals underpinning notions of appropriate femininity harkened back to those that gave rise to Miss America in the first place. The racial inflections of 1960s U.S. national identity, though, were different than they had been in the 1920s. The post-World War I moment had been characterized by nativism, isolationism, and strict adherence to whiteness as national racial identity. After World War II, on the other hand, the appearance of Miss Universe in the pageant industry, and on national television beginning in 1963, suggested at least that the United States could envision itself as part of a world beyond its own borders. In engaging Americans in this new global vision, mainstream cultural producers now asked that housewives consume not only household goods but also images of women of color from select locations around the world. For U.S. women of color this would have been particularly difficult. Even as they were watching, in their own homes, Miss Universe contestants of color being welcomed into the imagery of U.S. culture, women of color within the U.S. continued to be excluded from mainstream pageantry.

In the 1960s, social movements had galvanized around combating racism and sexism, all in the context of an era of widespread protest against the War in Vietnam. For the Civil Rights Movement and an emerging Women's Rights Movement, the racist and heteronormative femininity portrayed through now very popular mainstream pageantry was an obvious target for protest. Whether implicitly by custom or explicitly by pageant rules, "white" was the tacit modifier in Miss [White] America. Beginning in the 1930s, Miss America organizers included in their contract for state and local franchises eight

entry criteria for contestants. The criteria included mandates about marital status, level of educational achievement, and vague language stating that entrants must possess beauty and poise. Rule seven, though, was very specific in stating, “Contestant must be in good health and of the white race.”⁸ The Miss [White] America Pageant’s explicitly racist rule demonstrated the exclusionary nature of that contest. However, the NAACP-sponsored Miss Black America contest demonstrated that pageants could also be powerful tools to give public voice to those not “of the white race.” The very title “Miss Black America” named someone who was both woman and person of color, but Miss Black America was not just any woman of color. As her title suggested, she was a woman of color who represented the ideals of “Black America,” an entire of-color nation.

Because pageantry offered such a useful space for representation and the performance of marginalized identities, other communities of color were also using pageants as a way to achieve visibility and consolidate group identity. This chapter reads two such pageants, Miss Indian America and Miss Chinatown USA, alongside the Miss Black America Pageant. By the time of the first Miss Black America Pageant in 1968, Miss Indian America and Miss Chinatown were already established, annual, national events. The Miss Indian America Pageant began in 1954, two years after the first Miss Universe competition, at a time when federal policy was pushing native people off of reservations. Miss Indian America was one effort on the part of a number of tribes to celebrate reservation cultures even as reservation populations were being displaced and

⁸ “Primary Sources: 1948 Pageant Contract,” *American Experience: Miss America*, <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/missamerica/filmmore/ps.html>, Accessed March 6, 2009. During the time this rule was in effect, a few women of color did make it into the national Miss America competition, including Mifaunwy Shunatona, a Native woman, in 1941; a number of Miss Puerto Ricans through 1961; and a Chinese American woman, Yun Tau Zane, who was Miss Hawai’i in 1948. See Deford, 250. This suggests again the contingent status of “whiteness” in the U.S., and the historical reality that it consistently excluded any woman who openly identified as “Negro,” African American, or black.

depleted.⁹ In 1958, Miss Chinatown USA, another national of-color pageant, began as a celebration of Chinese American culture. Miss Chinatown USA carried overtones of capitalist conspicuous consumption and anti-communism, designed to distance a Chinese American community in the Cold-War U.S. from associations with the communist People's Republic of China.

What set the 1960s apart from other periods in U.S. pageantry is that it was the first time a number of of-color pageants emerged on a national level, not just as local celebrations of community identity. As Shirley Jennifer Lim argues in *A Feeling of Belonging*, Cold-War politics actually produced an opening for people of color to assert national belonging in an otherwise racially exclusive U.S.: “The Soviet Union’s assertion of the lack of racial progress in the United States as proof against the fairness of a capitalist democratic political system provided an opportunity for Asian Americans (and other racial minorities) to claim a place in the nation.”¹⁰ Miss Indian America, Miss Chinatown USA, and Miss Black America are the focus of this chapter because they are the of-color contests with national titles that emerged during this period. The titles of the pageants represent national claims: if there could be a Miss Indian America, that meant inherently that there was an “Indian America,” a national space comprised primarily, if not entirely, of Native people. This chapter argues that the popularity of pageantry allowed communities of color to use Cold-War politics to their advantage and use pageants to “claim a place in the nation” by imagining the nation in a way that destabilized associations between whiteness and U.S. national identity.

⁹ Wendy Kozol, “Miss Indian America: Regulatory Gazes and the Politics of Affiliation,” *Feminist Studies* 31, no. 1 (Spring 2005): 75.

¹⁰ Shirley Jennifer Lim, *A Feeling of Belonging: Asian American Women’s Public Culture, 1930-1960* (New York: New York University Press, 2006), 124.

In studying of-color pageants, scholars often ask whether such contests are imitating or resisting mainstream events like Miss America. I am neither interested in nor satisfied with that question, because it centers the mainstream as the thing to which everything else must respond. Instead, I argue that all pageants are performative sites of culture. By “culture”, I do not mean a deliverable product, “authentic” and unchanging through time, but rather a process engaged in by pageant participants and the communities that the pageants represent. By “performative”, I refer to Judith Butler’s theory about gender as created through the performance of repetitive acts.¹¹ I read pageants through the lens of Butler’s theory. Because pageantry is a performance in the literal sense, it is also an outstanding site for observing the nature of performativity, in the theoretical sense. Such a reading also expands upon Butler’s theory, because pageants are sites wherein participants mobilize not just gender but also race and class in order to produce ideals of nation. By calling pageants “performative”, I mean to say that pageants are not reflections of the times but rather public performances in which what is performed—gender, race, class, nation—is also what is created by the performance.

My argument, therefore, is threefold. First, the unprecedented popularity of pageantry and the confluence of that popularity with Cold-War culture and politics gave communities of color the opportunity to make, through pageants, claims about their place in the nation that resonated with and were visible to the mainstream. Second, the claims those communities made, with pageant titles like Miss Black America, Miss Indian America, and Miss Chinatown USA, re-centered the nation on the margins. That is to say that, in national of-color pageantry in the 1960s, what participants were creating was a

¹¹ See Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1999), vii-xxvi, 171-180.

new kind of nation—not just the United States of America but rather Black America, Indian America, Chinatown USA. In those new articulations of nation, communities and individuals that were typically marginalized with respect to dominant U.S. national identity moved to the center of an imagined “nation” that was named after them. Third, performativity and culture are interconnected processes that create gender, race, class, and nation in pageantry. The result of that creation in national of-color pageants of the 1960s was not only a different kind of nation but also a different kind of typical national female subject, re-centered on the margins.

Community Queens

Miss Indian America, Miss Chinatown USA, and Miss Black America were not by any means the first of-color pageants in the United States. For over half a century, of-color pageants had been dealing with issues of community, ethnicity, and authenticity. Photographic beauty contests in newspapers for communities of color had begun in the late nineteenth century, just as white contests had. By the middle of the twentieth century, live contests where women competed in-person in local festivals’ pageants and parades had been taking place for years in Latino, Asian American, black, and Native communities.

“Latin American Queen” contests, in which Latina women in the United States competed for panethnic titles, began as early as 1933, with mention in mainstream newspapers by the early 1940s. Tampa, Florida’s popular annual Latin Carnival, with a contest to crown “Queen Latin America,” was first reported in the *Washington Post* in

1941.¹² Nine years later, the *New York Times* picked up the story. The paper called Tampa's festival "one of the strongest links between this port city and Latin American republics to the south," with a particular focus on U.S.-Cuba relations.¹³ That same year, the *Chicago Daily Tribune* had a brief article on the "Queen of La Fiesta" pageant held by that city's Latin American Institute, as part of their spring formal.¹⁴ Throughout the mid-century period, the *Los Angeles Times* had frequent mention of "La Reina de Churubusco," "Miss Latin America," and "La Reina del Carnaval," queens of the city's Latino festivals and balls. These annual celebrations—including the popular Black and White Ball, which was fashioned after a Mexico City tradition—were sponsored jointly by clubs and consulates representing various Latin American nations.¹⁵

As is the case with pageants in Latino communities, live beauty contests for black and Asian American women date back to the earlier part of the twentieth century. Sociologist Rebecca Chiyoko King O'Riain focuses her book *Pure Beauty* on West Coast/Pacific Japanese American community festivals. The first of these was Los Angeles's Nisei Week, which crowned its first beauty queen in 1934 and inspired Honolulu's Cherry Blossom Queen contest, which began in the early 1950s.¹⁶ On the East Coast, sociologist Maxine Leeds Craig writes about a Miss Fine Brown Frame

¹² "Fiesta Spirit at Tampa," *The Washington Post*, January 26, 1941, L8.

¹³ C. Winn Upchurch, "Fiestas in Tampa: Plans for Latin American, Gasparilla Carnivals," *New York Times*, January 22, 1950, 95.

¹⁴ "Latin Fiesta to Pick Queen at Dance May 13," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, April 28, 1950, 13, 14.

¹⁵ "Latins to Pick Queen Tonight," *Los Angeles Times*, July 7, 1945, A1. "Girls Seeking Queen Title Call on Consul," *Los Angeles Times*, August 11, 1948, A2, A3. "Student Wins Crown as Mexican Carnival Queen: Dark-Eyed 16-Year-Old Chosen by Popular Acclaim to Reign Over Pre-Lenten Latin Event," *Los Angeles Times*, February 25, 1952, 2. "Mexican Beauty Queen Crowned at Annual Ball," *Los Angeles Times*, September 2, 1952, A1.

¹⁶ Rebecca Chiyoko King-O'Riain, *Pure Beauty: Judging Race in Japanese American Beauty Pageants* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006), 10-11. In 1958, the *Los Angeles Times* reported that Eurlyne Howell, reigning Miss USA, and Jean Yasui, the current Nisei Week Queen, would both appear as special guests at the Latin-American colony's annual Black and White Ball. Howell, in fact, was slated to crown the next "Reina de Churubusco." See "Latin-American Colony Queen to be Crowned," *Los Angeles Times*, August 24, 1958, A3.

contest in Harlem, named after the popular song. In addition, there was Miss Africa, a black American pageant held in New York City, which crowned in 1957 a woman from the Bronx. And Craig also mentions a pageant that took place at the Negro Press Photographers' Ball, which had started in the mid 1940s.¹⁷

Lim indicates that, by the 1950s, a number of pageants were staged by groups aiming to consolidate community and promote civil rights. For instance, "Beginning in 1948, a major civil rights group, the Chinese American Citizens Alliance (CACA), held patriotic queen contests. Such contests sought to demonstrate the community's identification with and loyalty to the United States" at a time when many feared that animosities between the United States and communist mainland China would be generalized to affect the lives of Chinese Americans.¹⁸ The CACA in San Francisco came up with an informal name for its festival queen, who became the earliest "Miss Chinatown." Likewise, the Miss Navajo Nation Pageant began at a time when the relationship of Native communities to the U.S. government was shifting in precarious ways. One of the most well known Native community queens, Miss Navajo Nation was first chosen by audience applause at the Navajo Nation Fair in 1952, during an era when the federal government was engineering termination policies designed to end U.S. recognition of Native tribes as sovereign nations.¹⁹ In fact, according to American Studies scholar Wendy Kozol, in Native American communities, "tribes, powwows, and rodeos

¹⁷ Craig, 55-59, 63.

¹⁸ Lim, 128.

¹⁹ Miss Navajo Council Inc. "Pageant History," *Official Site of Miss Navajo Council, Inc.*, <http://www.missnavajocouncil.org/history/pageanthistory.htm>, Accessed March 16, 2009. Interestingly, from 1956-1962, two titleholders were selected each year: Miss Traditional Navajo and Miss Modern Navajo. The exception was in 1957/1958, when Charlotte Lawrence Greenstone held the single title of Miss Navajo Nation. If Greenstone represented both the traditional and the modern, then it is no wonder she was invited to participate that same year as a "special guest"—but not as a contestant—at the Miss Universe Pageant, which rendered her title "Queen of the Navajo Tribe." See *Miss Universe Beauty Pageant: Official Programme*, Long Beach, California, July 17-27, 1958.

all sponsored beauty pageants [by mid-century], many of which continue today.”²⁰ When Miss Indian America began in 1954, those local contests began sending their winners to compete for the pan-Indian title.

What set Miss Indian America, Miss Chinatown USA, and Miss Black America apart from other of-color pageants that preceded them were those later contests’ rhetorical claims on *national* communities of color, centered in the United States of America. Through the inclusion of “America” or “USA” in their titles, the Miss Indian America, Miss Chinatown USA, and Miss Black America pageants articulated relationships to the United States nation just as Miss America and Miss USA, the two most well-known national pageants, had before them. Miss Indian America, Miss Chinatown USA, and Miss Black America did employ many of the same elements of pageantry that Miss America and Miss USA had popularized up to that point. Organizers of all five pageants invited young women from various locales across the nation to compete against one another, wearing evening gowns and answering on-the-spot questions, to choose one winner per year who would represent an entire national community. However, by distinguishing whiteness from U.S. national identity, Miss Indian America, Miss Chinatown USA, and Miss Black America enacted major departures from their mainstream counterparts, Miss [White] America and Miss [White] USA. Miss Indian America, Miss Chinatown USA, and Miss Black America abandoned the unwritten adjective “white”, substituting in explicit modifiers of their own. In the process, they produced alternative kinds of national spaces: Indian America, Black America, and the Chinatown USA.

²⁰ Kozol, 75.

In Kozol's description of the Miss Indian America Pageant, she presents a model of how those of-color pageants of the 1960s were actually engaged in the work of nation building. As part of an effort to mark off and manage the boundaries of an Indian America, Kozol explains that "[t]he original goals of the pageant included the desire to improve relations between Indians and non-Indians, picking up the rhetoric of 'goodwill ambassador' familiar from other beauty pageants."²¹ Such a goal took for granted an interior space of authentic Indianness and the exterior space of a nation and world outside a pan-Indian community. Kozol's mention of the "goodwill ambassador" calls to mind Long Beach Mayor Burton Chace's employment of a similar phrase, when he called the earliest Miss Universe contestants "the World's Ambassadors of Goodwill." The charge of an ambassador, by definition, is to mediate between national spaces, not just within them. If Miss Indian America was a "goodwill ambassador," functioning "to improve relations between Indians and non-Indians," then pageant organizers were implicitly suggesting that "Indian America" was its own national space. At a time when the federal government was ceasing to recognize Native tribes as autonomous nations, a Miss Indian America Pageant suggested that the boundary between Indians and non-Indians, even within the U.S., was not only an ethnic or racial one but a national one as well.

The movement of the beauty pageant format from the national space represented by Miss America to the internal-national, or nation-within-a-nation, space of Miss Indian America was like an act of cultural imperialism—or the imposition of cultural norms upon a dominated group external to the nation. However, this was not exactly the same as with Miss Universe and its international system of franchise pageants. What was different with Miss Indian America, and Miss Chinatown USA and Miss Black America, was that

²¹ Ibid.

these pageants had a more complex relationship with the U.S. nation, as they were articulating alternative “nations” but from within the geopolitical space of a single nation-state. In these cases, cultural imperialism was more like cultural *colonialism*, where an exclusionary practice of the mainstream enters the communities of the marginalized within the nation. Still, Miss Indian America was not merely Miss America in a pan-Indian context, nor was Miss Chinatown USA just a reproduction of Miss USA set in Chinatown, nor was Miss Black America a Miss America duplicate pageant that took place down the street. The of-color contests demonstrated how beauty pageantry had been “reappropriated and naturalized into a different system.”²² And while all national pageants are about defining and representing those who “belong” within a national community, the aims of Miss Indian America, Miss Chinatown USA, and Miss Black America were categorically different from those of their white, mainstream counterparts.

“Better Than Being Miss America”

From the time each of the three national of-color pageants was conceived, its format was both descriptive and prescriptive, describing an of-color American nation while at the same time prescribing appropriate behavior for a normatively feminine, nonwhite national subject. The first of the three pageants, Miss Indian America began contemporaneously with the earliest Miss Universe and Miss USA Pageants in the 1950s. In the early 1950s, federal government policies toward Native communities had moved

²² Richard Wilk, “Connections and Contradictions: From the Crooked Tree Cashew Queen to Miss World Belize,” in *Beauty Queens on the Global Stage: Gender, Contests, and Power*, ed. Colleen Ballerino Cohen, Richard Wilk, and Beverly Stoeltje (New York: Routledge, 1996), 230. The term “cultural imperialism” originated in communications studies, in the latter half of the twentieth century, to describe the impact of mass media on modernizing nations. Wilk applies the term to televised and non-televised pageantry alike.

away from supporting reservations and in the direction of assimilation by large-scale, coerced relocation of Native people into urban spaces: “After World War II, conservative politicians in Congress as well as high-level administrators at the [Bureau of Indian Affairs] ... argued that reservations segregated Indians and kept them from fully assimilating into U.S. society as citizens. Congressional legislation in the 1950s began to implement termination policies ending trust responsibilities that protected lands and resources on reservations. Relocation programs, a central component of termination policy, were designed to assimilate Indians into mainstream society.”²³ As Kozol points out, the problem with federal termination policies is that they impoverished reservations, separated individuals from the communities that had always supported them, and included no provisions for self-determination of the displaced individuals encouraged to move off the reservations or of the reservation communities themselves.

Under such conditions, Kozol argues, communal cultural practices like “beauty pageants helped to ameliorate exploitative conditions and address social and cultural needs,” especially for those who remained on reservations because they dismissed, or did not have the resources to respond to, the federal government’s efforts.²⁴ To that end, “The Miss Indian America contest began in 1954 and was held each year in Sheridan, Wyoming, until 1984 when it moved to Bismarck, North Dakota. The event includes a pageant parade, a fashion show of traditional tribal dress and an Indian giveaway in which each contestant gives a personal possession to her sponsor. The contestants are

²³ Kozol, 73-74.

²⁴ Ibid.

judged on their abilities to interact with people, their knowledge of Indian culture, and their performance in the talent contests.”²⁵

Like the Miss Indian America Pageant, the Miss Chinatown USA Pageant was part of an effort to consolidate and represent community identity in the face of a precarious political climate. Miss Chinatown USA began in 1958 as a new focal point for the Lunar New Year celebration held annually since 1853 in San Francisco’s Chinatown. Judy Tzu-Chun Wu, a historian of the Miss Chinatown USA Pageant, indicates that those in the Chinatown community who started the pageant were very aware of how easily Chinese Americans could be conflated with communist Chinese in the hostile, anti-communist environment of the Cold-War United States. Therefore, “To distance themselves from the negative images of ‘Red China,’ pageant and festival organizers emphasized a non-aggressive conception of Chinese culture,” one that simultaneously emphasized American assimilation and Chinese cultural preservation.²⁶ Miss Chinatown USA contestants participated each year in an evening gown competition, just as Miss USA and Miss America contestants did. In addition, though, the Miss Chinatown USA Pageant also included eastern dress or Cheong-sam (Chinese long gown) category and an interview or “quiz” portion in which the requirement to respond in a Chinese dialect linked non-English language skills to being authentically Chinese American.²⁷

In the year of Miss Chinatown USA’s tenth anniversary, the Miss Black America Pageant premiered on the other side of the country, in Atlantic City. Often referred to in

²⁵ Ibid., 75.

²⁶ Judy Tzu-Chun Wu, “Loveliest Daughter of Our Ancient Cathay!’: Representations of Ethnic and Gender Identity in the Miss Chinatown U. S. A. Beauty Pageant,” *Journal of Social History* 31, no. 1 (Fall 1997): 7,10.

²⁷ See Wu, 5-31.

historical literature as the NAACP's pageant,²⁸ the first Miss Black America Pageant was actually a project of Fashionable Publications—a Philadelphia-based publishing house that specialized in fashion and culture magazines for black women—with support from the NAACP.²⁹ Scheduled to coincide with the crowning of a new Miss America in 1968, the Miss Black America Pageant was also close in format to that oldest and most famous mainstream American pageant. As with the Miss America Pageant, pageant week for the earliest Miss Black America contests included a motorcade along the Atlantic City boardwalk and preliminary competitions in which contestants paraded in swimsuits and evening gowns, performed talent routines, and answered onstage questions “testing their alertness.”³⁰ All of that took place in advance of the selection of finalists who competed again in those same categories on the pageant's final night, when Miss Black America was crowned.

Where the Miss Indian America Pageant had its Indian giveaway and Miss Chinatown USA its Cheong-sam category, Miss Black America likewise included elements that distinguished the black American pageant from the white American one being held in Atlantic City that same week. Miss Black America organizers did not adhere to the one-representative-per-state structure that Miss America organizers had instituted in 1938.³¹ Instead, the original Miss Black America contestants “were taken from black beauty contests across the country, such as the Miss Harlem, Miss

²⁸ See, for instance, Craig, 3-6 and Ferrari, *American Experience: Miss America*.

²⁹ See John Katz, “Pageant Director Seeks To Instill Black Pride,” *Atlantic City Press*, September 7, 1968; S. William White, “8 Girls Named Finalists In Black America Pageant,” *Evening Bulletin*, September 7, 1968; Mary Willmann, “Creation of Miss Black America Pageant Assailed by Rival Company,” *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, September 1, 1968, Section 1, Page 14.

³⁰ White, “8 Girls Named Finalists in Black America Pageant.”

³¹ Jeanne Houck, “Timeline: Miss America,” *American Experience: Miss America*, <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/missamerica/timeline/timeline2.html>, Accessed April 24, 2010.

Washington D.C., and Miss NAACP competitions”³² in order to “represent a cross-section of the black women of America.”³³ To authenticate the pageant as a black cultural event, organizers did not only draw contestants from across the country, they also drew components from outside the country as well. Four days after Miss America Pageant participants had paraded the boardwalk with “lavish floats and musical marching units,”³⁴ the Miss Black America motorcade rode down some of the same streets, accompanied by “Bongo players in African garb.”³⁵ That first year, the Miss Black America procession arrived at Convention Hall, the longtime Miss America Pageant venue, only moments before the NYRW protest began.³⁶

As the winner of the first Miss Black America Pageant, Sandra Williams especially represented the turn that both black femininity and pageantry had taken in the U.S. by the late 1960s. To win Miss Black America, she wore a big Afro. She swept the semifinals talent competition with a dramatic monologue entitled “I Am Black.” For her talent performance on the final night of the pageant, she “bounded out on the runway in a bright yellow jumpsuit with bells around her ankles and performed the ‘Fiji,’ a frenetic African dance.”³⁷ She enacted a particular kind of black authenticity that relied on a natural hairstyle, a declaration of black identity, and an “African” dance that mirrored organizers’ choice of “Bongo players in African garb” as the musical accompaniment for the first Miss Black America boardwalk parade.

³² John Katz, “18 Black Beauties Vie For Their Own Crown,” *Atlantic City Press*, September 7, 1968, 13.

³³ “Negro Beauties Parade Down The Boardwalk,” *Philadelphia Inquirer*, September 7, 1968, 14.

³⁴ “Top Headlines of the Week: 100,000 See Pageant Parade,” *Atlantic City Press*, September 8, 1968, Highlights of the Week: What Happened.

³⁵ “Negro Beauties Parade Down the Boardwalk.”

³⁶ John L. Boucher, “Black Pageant Girls on Parade: 14 Compete For Crown,” *Atlantic City Press*, September 8, 1968.

³⁷ Klemesrud, 54.

The fact that Williams's dance shared a name with a Pacific Islands nation, and that no accounts of the event indicate the "Fiji" dance's country of origin, suggest that what Williams performed to much acclaim on that night in September of 1968 was not an authentic dance from the African continent. More likely, the dance was an American interpretation of moves that Williams, who was a dance teacher, had learned in the African dance classes she had taken and taught.³⁸ Still, it was relevant that Williams presented her performance as an African dance, that onlookers including the press believed it to be such, and that judges rewarded Williams the Miss Black America title at least partially because of her "African dance" performance.

In the 1960s era, Africa had become a focal point of pride for many black Americans living under U.S. racism, who watched on television and read in newspapers as black Africans struggled successfully against colonialism on the continent. Craig explains: "One impetus for the transformation in the way young blacks saw themselves was the emergence of independent black nations throughout Africa."³⁹ The rise of Africa in the imaginations of young black Americans was manifested in black cultural nationalism, which "embraced African culture as the source of a renewed black nation in America."⁴⁰ By 1968, black cultural nationalism and the non-specified Africanness it espoused had gained widespread prominence and acceptance amongst many black Americans of various socioeconomic backgrounds.⁴¹ A Miss Black America whose talents made even oblique reference to the African continent represented a number of

³⁸ See "Saundra Williams, 19, of Phila. Named First 'Miss Black America,'" *Evening Bulletin*, September 9, 1968; Special to the Daily News, "Philadelphia Girl, 19, Chosen First 'Miss Black America,'" *Daily News*, September 9, 1968.

³⁹ Craig, 81.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 95.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 155.

black Americans who looked beyond a racist America and toward a decolonizing Africa for their assertions of racial pride.

Racial pride was a key underlying factor in the staging of the first Miss Black America pageant. When describing the purpose of the pageant two days before the final coronation, J. Morris Anderson, president of both Fashionable Publications and the pageant itself, was quoted by the Philadelphia *Evening Bulletin* as saying, “We just want black women, who have pride and want to be seen, to express those desires.”⁴² For the “Black America” that Morris and his pageant aimed to represent, an evaluation of beauty was coterminous with an evaluation of racial pride. In such a field of competition, Williams’s Afro ‘do was as much an asset as her “African” dance. According to Craig, because the Afro was a style that relied on the texture of many black persons’ unstraightened, natural hair, “Afros expressed black racial pride. However, in the mid-1960s, natural hairstyles...and other symbols and practices of black identity conveyed more than self-love; they expressed defiance against the dominance of white culture.”⁴³ Newspaper photos of Miss Black America show that Williams beat out at least a few other contestants with straightened hair for the crown.⁴⁴ This meant the natural hairstyle was preferred by the contestant who chose to wear it and by the judges who rewarded her with the national title. Such a preference was an expression of what those involved in the

⁴² White, “8 Girls Named Finalists In Black America Pageant.”

⁴³ Craig, 99. For more on relationships among black women’s hair and the politics of collective identity, racial pride, and racial uplift, see Ayana D. Byrd and Lori L. Tharps, *Hair Story: Untangling the Roots of Black Hair in America* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2001), esp. 50-71; Ingrid Banks, *Hair Matters: Beauty, Power, and Black Women’s Consciousness* (New York: New York University Press, 2000), esp. 10-11, 15-16, 86, 124-127; Kathy Peiss, *Hope in a Jar: The Making of America’s Beauty Culture* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 1998), 205-213; bell hooks, *Killing Rage: Ending Racism* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1995), 120-125; Kathy Russell, Midge Wilson, and Ronald Hall, *The Color Complex: The Politics of Skin Color Among African Americans* (New York: Anchor Books, 1992), 81-93.

⁴⁴ See Len Antell, “Miss America Begins Reign; Black Queen Charges Bias,” *Philadelphia Inquirer*, September 8, 1968; “Saundra Williams, 19, of Phila. Named First ‘Miss Black America’”; Special to the Daily News, “Philadelphia Girl, 19, Chosen First ‘Miss Black America’”; Boucher, “Black Pageant Girls on Parade”; Katz, “18 Black Beauties Vie For Their Own Crown,” 13.

pageant believed best represented U.S. blackness in 1968. The preference for a natural hairstyle was also a challenge to the ideals of beauty and national identity on display in the Miss America Pageant down the street. When reporters asked Williams if she preferred the title she had just won to the more popular national title that Illinois blonde Judith Ford had been awarded earlier that evening, Williams's response was unequivocally affirmative. Being Miss Black America, she said, was "better than being Miss America."⁴⁵

Indeed, in pairing traditional elements of white pageantry with the expectation that those elements be performed in decidedly nonwhite ways, the of-color national pageants required that their contestants do what was expected of Miss America and more. Elaborating on the comparison between Miss America and Miss Indian America in particular, Kozol notes, "The more famous Miss America pageant has long promoted its role as a scholarship competition to differentiate it from other beauty contests. Features such as the talent contest also help to establish an aura of respectability around the specularly that is central to these pageants. Similarly, Indian beauty contests require contestants to demonstrate their competency with Indian history and traditional craft skills. More than respectability, however, is at stake here. Traditional skills legitimize Miss Indian America's claim to represent 'Indian America.'"⁴⁶ Miss America utilized the classed and racialized notion of "respectability" to link American authenticity to bourgeois whiteness. This played out in the talent competition as judges consistently

⁴⁵ Klemesrud, 54.

⁴⁶ Kozol, 79.

rewarded, with higher scores, talents with white, Eurocentric roots, like classical ballet or Yolande Betbeze's operatic singing.⁴⁷

To prove authenticity and thus representative capacity, Miss Indian America needed a broader set of performative skills, for instance producing beadwork, singing a Mohave Bird Song, and performing a baton dance routine set to the music of a major Hollywood motion picture.⁴⁸ Just as Miss America's "Rule Seven" mandated that all entrants be "in good health and of the white race," of-color U.S. pageants' eligibility rules specified that contestants have a certain "percentage" of ethnic heritage or be able to demonstrate a tribal affiliation.⁴⁹ In Miss Indian America, Miss Black America, and Miss Chinatown USA, authenticity was a notion that was important for the work of re-centering the nation on the margins. After all, a different kind of nation called for a different kind of ideal feminine representative, and the three of-color national pageants articulated both the nation and its ideals. Racialized entry criteria worked together with skill or talent requirements to indicate which young women were welcome and eligible to participate, and who were the members of the community that those women—especially the winner—would represent.

⁴⁷ See Banet-Weiser, 106-122, esp. 107, 113.

⁴⁸ Kozol, 79.

⁴⁹ The Miss Chinatown USA pageant even requires paternal lineage to demonstrate authentic Chinese heritage. The second on a list of eight qualification criteria states, "You must be of Chinese ancestry, meaning your father must be of Chinese descent." To prove contestants' qualifications, a line on the Miss Chinatown USA asks for "ORIGINAL VILLAGE ANCESTRY (PATERNAL)." See Tiger Business Development Inc., "Miss Chinatown," *Chinatown San Francisco*, <http://www.sanfranciscochinatown.com/events/misschinatown.html>, Accessed March 4, 2009. See also "Application Form," http://www.chineseparade.com/pdf/2009_miss_chinatown_application_form.pdf, Accessed March 4, 2009.

“The Challenge of a Modern World”

Pageantry is not only about consolidating identity within a community; it is also about representing that identity to onlookers from outside the community. For communities of color in the United States, which are often further marginalized from national identity at times of intense international conflict or domestic upheaval, consolidating and representing identity become increasingly important in such moments. As Lim argues, in the early years of the Cold War, “‘American’ signified middle-class fashion and style. Not only had more Americans achieved that economic status during the postwar boom, but Americans felt compelled to display appropriate identity markers. As opposed to the ‘drab’ socialist or communist proletariat, the middle-class American possessed the consumer goods, such as the telephone and living room furniture, that showed faith in a capitalist society.”⁵⁰ Like Norma Smallwood’s cookstove of decades prior, domestic consumer goods signaled “appropriate” bourgeois femininity in the U.S.

In the 1960s context of the Cold War and the cultural fight between communism and capitalism, the international stakes for U.S. women were even higher. Beauty pageants, and the conspicuous consumption that characterized them, were a perfect way for women to prove their Americanness. Women of color, though, were barred from competition in mainstream pageants like Miss America and Miss USA by rules and prejudices. So national of-color pageants became an important and accessible means for those women to lay claim to bourgeois identification and thus to “belonging” within the nation.

⁵⁰ Lim, 133.

Saundra Williams put this most plainly when she said to reporters on the night she became Miss Black America, “My parents are middle-class Negroes.”⁵¹ While one newspaper reported that Williams was “the daughter of a Philadelphia building contractor”⁵² and another listed his profession as “electrician,”⁵³ the most detailed information came from *The New York Times*, which reported, “[Williams] said her father is an electrical engineer at the Philadelphia Navy Yard.”⁵⁴ The variance in the articles makes it unclear how Williams’s father might have described his own work. However, the *Times* reporter’s use of the phrase “[Williams] said” may indicate that “electrical engineer” was the closest thing to a quotation directly from Williams and perhaps the most accurate account of how she presented her father’s profession. Certainly, more than “electrician” or “building contractor,” “electrical engineer” offered the best evidence to support Williams’s assertion that her parents were “middle-class Negroes.”

The newspapers also reported a list of hobbies that positioned Williams as a member of the bourgeoisie. In addition to the “African” dance that she performed to win the pageant, Williams also studied and taught ballet. Beyond dancing, she was a student of piano and violin.⁵⁵ Her engagement with those particular instruments as well as ballet dance represented her alignment with Western cultural forms and normatively feminine pastimes. Furthermore, the *Times* reported that “Besides dancing, her hobbies are cooking (“I specialize in spaghetti”) and sewing. She made the long white gown she wore in the

⁵¹ Klemesrud, “There’s Now Miss Black America.”

⁵² “New Miss America Prefers Sweatshirts to Evening Gowns,” *Philadelphia Inquirer*, September 8, 1968. Antell, “Miss America Begins Reign; Black Queen Charges Bias.”

⁵³ Special to the Daily News, “Philadelphia Girl, 19, Chosen First ‘Miss Black America.’”

⁵⁴ Klemesrud, “There’s Now Miss Black America.”

⁵⁵ See “Saundra Williams, 19, of Phila. Named First ‘Miss Black America’”; Klemesrud, “There’s Now Miss Black America”; Special to the Daily News, “Philadelphia Girl, 19, Chosen First ‘Miss Black America.’”

finale, even to the point of sewing several hundred paillettes on the bodice.”⁵⁶ Williams’s mention that she specialized in spaghetti, an Italian dish that had become standard U.S. fare, again represented at least some affinity on her part for Euro-American cultural forms. And whether or not she was wealthy enough to purchase her own evening gown, her choice not only to sew it but to announce to reporters that she had done so, meant that Williams was representing herself according to the logics of domesticity and the norms of Euro-American femininity.

The feminized persona that Williams performed stood in stark contrast to that year’s Miss America, Judith Ann Ford. Unlike Williams, who counted cooking among her hobbies, Ford was “[n]ot by her own definition the best cook in the world.”⁵⁷ A self-proclaimed “tomboy,” Ford told reporters that she “prefer[ed] sweatshirts to evening gowns.”⁵⁸ In other ways as well, Williams seemed more a typical beauty queen than Ford. Ford, when “asked what she looked forward to most in her role as Miss America said, ‘I don’t know. I never thought of that.’”⁵⁹ She admitted further that she “doesn’t even know what Miss America does.”⁶⁰ Williams, on the other hand, presented herself to reporters as knowing exactly what she would do as Miss Black America. Not only did she express her desire to become a social worker interested in “helping underprivileged children” she was also very articulate about why she felt not just being any beauty queen but rather being Miss Black America in particular was important: “I’d like to help the

⁵⁶ Klemesrud, “There’s Now Miss Black America.”

⁵⁷ Robert Shoemaker, “New Miss America Prefers Cutoff Jeans to Miniskirts,” *Evening Bulletin*, September 9, 1968.

⁵⁸ “Miss America Says She Was A Tomboy,” *Atlantic City Press*, September 9, 1968; “New Miss America Prefers Sweatshirts To Evening Gowns.”

⁵⁹ Antell, “Miss America Begins Reign; Black Queen Charges Bias.”

⁶⁰ “New Miss America Prefers Sweatshirts to Evening Gowns.”

Miss Black America Pageant any way I can. I think it's important to show the country that black is also beautiful."⁶¹

Anderson, the pageant's president, had a similar message, representing "black" as both bourgeois and beautiful. "'We just want to show what is beautiful in black America here,' Anderson said, 'We didn't come down here angry or to prove a point.'"⁶² Asserting that "black is beautiful" and performing the beauty queen role with greater aplomb than the nation's most famous beauty queen, Williams and the Miss Black America organizers used the pageant as a way to reverse narratives of black inferiority. They did so by mobilizing nonthreatening bourgeois imagery to present Black America as a location of normative femininity, not as a space of protest and anger. Craig, in her reading of such efforts, points out that "[a] frequent strategy employed by race leaders was to gain social honor for the race by incorporating conventional representations of gender into newly articulated representations of the race. On contest runways, black beauty queens paraded alternative and hegemonic visions with each step."⁶³

For Chinese Americans, a community with a large immigrant and second-generation population at the time the Miss Chinatown USA Pageant began in 1958, "conventional representations of gender" and "newly articulated representations of the race" were necessary both to refute stereotypes of racial inferiority and to demonstrate assimilation. Wu explains, in her history of the Miss Chinatown USA Pageant, that "[t]he pageant provided a means for Chinese Americans to demonstrate their assimilation by inviting young, educated women to participate in an event which was becoming popular

⁶¹ "Saundra Williams, 19, of Phila. Named First 'Miss Black America.'"

⁶² White, "8 Girls Named Finalists In Black America Pageant"; Katz, "18 Black Beauties Vie For Their Own Crown."

⁶³ Craig, 166.

in American society during the post-War era, the beauty pageant. At the same time, the pageant also sought to preserve Chinese culture among those who were merging into the mainstream.”⁶⁴ What is notable in Wu’s comments is that young women, whose experiences and behaviors were coded as “educated,” could serve as evidence of assimilation for an entire community, mediated through a pop culture phenomenon. The care that pageant organizers took to enumerate the qualities of a winning Miss Chinatown USA contestant demonstrates the representational power of the young women who competed:

From the very beginning of the pageant, organizers had an ideal image of Miss Chinatown contestants as the perfect blend of Chinese and American cultures. Businessman and community leader H. K. Wong, who is credited with coming up with the idea of the pageant, explained that contenders for the crown must have the ‘looks that made China’s beauties so fascinating’ as well as the language skills to answer ‘key questions’ in their own native dialect during the quiz portion of the competition. In addition to these Chinese attributes, contestants had to display modern American qualities. They needed ‘adequate education, training and the versatility to meet the challenge of the modern world.’⁶⁵

Pageant organizers saw the ideals of Chinese America, or the “Chinatown USA”, as a mix of essentialized Chinese and American attributes. On the Chinese side were “fascinating” feminine beauty and non-English native language skills. On the American side, contestants needed to demonstrate an unspecified “adequacy” of education and an unspecified type of training, as well as the flexibility to meet an unspecified set of challenges particular to the modern world.

Organizers’ rhetoric positioned “modern” together with “American,” listing the “versatility to meet the challenge of a modern world” as a necessary American quality of contestants. This seemed to suggest that modernity was not among contestants’ Chinese

⁶⁴ Wu, 7.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

qualities. In fact, those who organized and participated in Miss Chinatown USA often experienced their efforts to achieve the pageant's ideals as a tension between modernity and authenticity. The Miss Chinatown USA pageant was conceived as both a ploy to draw tourists to San Francisco's Chinatown and a celebration of cultural pride for those who already lived there. In addition, when the pageant began in the late 1950s, there were anti-communist political undertones. Those undertones had multiple origins, as they represented the anti-communist political orientations of many San Francisco Chinatown businesspersons while also serving to distance Chinese Americans from communism in mainland China, and the censure from capitalist America that came with it.⁶⁶ As a result of various and sometimes competing aims, pageant organizers found it at times difficult to balance all the narratives of Chinese American community identity the pageant was supposed to be expressing.

While some in the San Francisco Chinatown business community were invested in presenting what they thought of as a "modern" or "Americanized" Chinese Americanness, they found that tourists were more interested in seeing an antiquated, orientalist Chinatown that they could read as significantly different from their everyday lives.⁶⁷ At the same time, many Chinese Americans involved in the pageant itself saw the importance of representing Chinese traditions through the event. The pageant provided an opportunity to teach people within and outside the community about Chinese culture, to show respect for an ancestral homeland, and to demonstrate the authenticity of Miss Chinatown USA as a *Chinese* American cultural icon. Illustrated in the goals of the pageant was a dilemma typical to marginalized, immigrant and second-generation

⁶⁶ Ibid., 5, 6, 10.

⁶⁷ Ibid., 9-10.

communities. There was a need to prove cultural assimilation in the nation of residence and maintain cultural preservation with respect to the nation of origin, to assert belonging in one homeland without jeopardizing connections to the other.

Reading a non-indigenous, of-color pageant like Miss Chinatown USA side-by-side with an indigenous one like Miss Indian America helps to illustrate not only what challenges of representation operated within marginalized communities in the U.S. but also how those communities operated with respect to mainstream cultural institutions. Kozol cites literary scholar Leah Dilworth to explain that, in the case of indigenous peoples, “[T]he rhetoric of colonialism and empire building often relies on the dialectical contrast between modernity and an ahistorical primitivism. Such rhetoric locates ‘authentic’ Indians in an edenic past untouched by history or civilization, thus connecting authenticity to primitivism.”⁶⁸ Whereas mainstream norms read Native authenticity as connected with a primitive past, Asian authenticity was seen as linked to ancient civilizations. Thus, as historian Vijay Prashad points out, “These migrants ... used their past glory as currency to purchase respect [in the United States].”⁶⁹ As they did so, however, they found themselves negotiating between the purchasing power of ethnic pride and the stereotypes of the mainstream—the power of white American cultural producers who owned the cultural means of production.

Non-Chinese officials in San Francisco encouraged Miss Chinatown USA organizers to “emphasize an ‘Orientalist’ image of Chinatown by creating cultural practices that were not relevant to Chinese Americans.”⁷⁰ One reporter even recommended, for the economic sake of the San Francisco community, that Miss

⁶⁸ Kozol, 71.

⁶⁹ Vijay Prashad, *The Karma of Brown Folk* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), 118.

⁷⁰ Wu, 9.

Chinatown USA pageant contestants ride in sedan chairs rather than in the floats they typically used for the New Year parade. The result, he suggested would be to please tourists, because, ““Wouldn’t they write their folks and friends across the country about that eerie spectacle of Chinese queen and Chinese princesses being carried in Chinese sedan chairs? . . . And, consequently, with a proper Chinese sense for reality, wouldn’t [that] lure more tourists and their dollars into San Francisco and Chinatown?””⁷¹ The reporter’s repeated use of the word “Chinese,” his implication that the “Chinese queen and Chinese princesses” in the parade were actual monarchical personages, and his perplexing use of the adjective “eerie” all point to the perceived “difference” of Chinese American cultural practices.

For the difference to be a valuable commodity for presumably non-Chinese American tourists, the reporter recommended that organizers exaggerate that difference. What is most troubling, though, is the white reporter’s presumption to be able to evaluate “a proper Chinese sense for reality.” In that moment, he uses “the rhetoric of colonialism and empire building” of which Kozol speaks. That rhetoric reassigns the power of authentication outside the community in question, artificially fusing Chinese American authenticity with a white American man’s anachronistic misplacement of pre-modern Chinese culture.

To walk the line between cultural preservation and national assimilation, and to reassert the power to represent themselves, marginalized communities took advantage of those kinds of mainstream misconceptions. Miss Chinatown USA organizers utilized those misconceptions by pairing them with intimate knowledge of contemporary politics

⁷¹ Donald Canter, “Speech,” Chinese Historical Society of America, 1965, CHS-SF, box 3, folder 27, quoted in Wu, 9.

to represent authenticity. According to Wu, Miss Chinatown USA organizers aligned themselves and their pageant with what they called Confucian ideals of restraint, pacifism, dignity, fatalism, and contentedness in order to present a Chinese American identity that was antithetical to revolutionary, communist China. In the 1960s, a large-scale public event like Miss Chinatown USA offered a single opportunity to bring together Chinese Americans who now lived across the country. The annual pageant aimed to consolidate and visualize an essential culture they could all share, to celebrate their place in the American populace, to distance them from negative images of a China “fallen” to communism, and thus to protect them from the kind of dispersion and persecution that West-Coast Japanese and Japanese Americans had suffered in World War II.

“To Claim a Place in the Nation”

Even though fears about communism were what cast Chinese Americans as a potential threat internal to the American nation, Cold-War politics were not simply a reality from which marginalized communities in the U.S. needed to protect themselves. Lim also points out that discourses of communism and capitalism—and in particular, the Soviet Union’s critiques of U.S. racism—gave nonwhite populations in the United States an opportunity to challenge racialized exclusions and thus to “claim a place in the nation.”⁷² When United States business and government needed to prove the superiority of the nation against the Soviet Union’s rhetorical attacks, those who were objects of racism found themselves in a strategically advantageous position. United States discourses of liberal inclusiveness relied on the presence of people of color within the

⁷² Lim, 124.

nation for authentication. National beauty pageants like Miss Indian America, Miss Chinatown USA and Miss Black America, I argue, were part of an effort of marginalized communities to present themselves as both self-determining and necessary to the success of U.S. culture and politics in the international context of the Cold War.

Pressure from Soviet criticisms, as well as civil rights efforts on the part of marginalized communities within the U.S., made it so that, by the 1960s, people of color could be recognized not only as a permanent presence in the nation but also as a necessary presence. Whereas there had been a long history in the U.S. of policing and containing marginalized people by excluding them, the 1960s were characterized by a different strategy for containment. Before, keeping people out, for instance with exclusive immigration and naturalization policies, had been the primary response of U.S. culture and politics toward of-color immigrant and second-generation populations. The early Cold War period saw a shift toward nominal incorporation of communities that were “not going anywhere” instead.

Native histories offer models for understanding how mainstream U.S. institutions respond to marginalized populations that are “not going anywhere.” The history of indigenous people in the nineteenth- and twentieth-century United States is marked by efforts on the part of Christian missionaries and the Bureau of Indian Affairs to assimilate Native children by removing them from their communities into segregated boarding schools in order to erase cultural markers like non-English language skills.⁷³ Mid-

⁷³ See Andrea Smith, *Conquest: Sexual Violence and American Indian Genocide* (Cambridge, MA: South End Press, 2005), 35-54.

twentieth-century termination policies were part of a similar effort on the part of the federal government to assimilate residents of reservations into urban spaces.⁷⁴

The problem with such targeted, government-sponsored assimilation policies was not only the negative effects those policies had on established communities, but also the very concept of assimilation itself. From a Native Studies perspective, and from the position of marginalized groups more broadly, Kozol dismisses the notion of assimilation as a useful paradigm. She asserts that “[t]he concept of assimilation relies on a center/periphery model that envisions outsiders who learn to conform to normative society without a corresponding impact on dominant culture.”⁷⁵ Kozol instead borrows the idea of “affiliation” from postcolonial studies, because “affiliation is a better model for understanding marginalized groups’ relationships with the nation. Affiliation, far more than assimilation, acknowledges the dialogic nature of identity formations.”⁷⁶ Whereas assimilation means disappearing into an otherwise unchanging mainstream, I read affiliation as indicating agency on the part of the marginalized to build identity by aligning strategically with various elements of race, gender, ethnicity, and nation. National of-color pageants illustrate this notion particularly well.

Miss Chinatown USA, Miss Indian America, and Miss Black America were products of a historical moment when U.S. politicians and industry leaders needed people of color in the nation, in different ways than before, in order to prove the efficacy of capitalist democracy. It was also a moment when the popularity of Miss America meant that pageants were a recognizable cultural form through which communities of color could produce and disseminate visions of the nation wherein those communities were

⁷⁴ Kozol, 74.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 68.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*

central to national identity rather than marginalized from it. Because of those historical conditions, the cultural work that organizers and winners did in national of-color pageants did not merely reference mainstream cultural forms like Miss America. Nor did cultural work enact simplistic, separate modes of nonwhite authenticity. Instead, through culture, communities of color affected mainstream notions of national identity as well.

Culture is not just an item to be protected against being lost to a colonizer or to a new homeland. Just as the notions of cultural imperialism and cultural colonialism demonstrate, manifestations of culture travel. When they reach their destination, they are reformulated to fit the norms of the local. However, the process is not unidirectional. The cultural practices of the colonized inevitably reach the colonizers as well. And even as marginalized individuals move to urban spaces or to new nations, the culture of the reservation or of the home country is itself ever changing, not frozen forever as it was in the moment of leaving. Whether people stayed or went, culture as they experience it is always being composed of interconnected elements, drawn from the various histories and geographical spaces through which their lives have moved.

Just as culture is a process, reading pageants as performative sites demonstrates how gender and the production of normative or ideal femininity is a process as well. The act of parading in a bathing suit, the gesture of the beauty queen's signature wave, her expressed desire for world peace, all of these are pageant clichés that actually *produce* normative femininity. As Butler puts it, they “create the illusion of an interior and organizing gender core.... If the ‘cause’ of desire, gesture, and act can be localized within the ‘self’ of the actor, then the political regulations and disciplinary practices which produce that ostensibly coherent gender are effectively displaced from view. The

displacement of a political and discursive origin of gender identity onto a psychological 'core' precludes an analysis of the political constitution of the gendered subject and its fabricated notions about the ineffable interiority of its sex or of its true identity."⁷⁷ The suggestion that feminine gender follows naturally from individual female bodies is a problem because it prevents an understanding of how external forces and discourses cause the acts, gestures, and desires that produce supposedly reflect an inherent and authentic gendered core. The beauty queen does not wave just because she is naturally moved to do so. She does not state aloud her desire for world peace just because that is what she, as a woman, naturally wants. Focusing on the contest and not just the queen reveals how gender is always producing culture and culture is always creating gender. The rhetoric of organizers, the guidance of hostesses, the behaviors of contestants, the responses of audiences, and the validation of judges are all part of culture, which creates and is created by gender in pageantry.

Examining of-color pageants as performative sites of culture produces more thoughtful intellectual interrogations of pageantry. The question is not so much whether national of-color pageants like Miss Indian America, Miss Chinatown USA, and Miss Black America imitated mainstream contests like Miss America and Miss USA or resisted them. Nor does it seem meaningful to ask whether Miss Indian America, Miss Chinatown USA, and Miss Black America were responses to strategic inclusions and exclusions enacted by white pageantry, or even what kind of responses they might have been. Instead, if culture is a process, gender is produced through ongoing processes, and both processes happen quite visibly in of-color pageantry, then what are those pageants *creating*? What, in those of-color communities, is actually being produced?

⁷⁷ Butler, 173-174.

A theoretical framework that focuses on culture and performativity reveals how pageantry relates gender and nation to specific racialized communities, and how that relationship is always inflected with the material realities of a specific historical and political moment. In the 1960s United States, this meant that many black Americans felt they had to combat a long history of anti-black racism with messages of black racial pride. Many Chinese Americans felt they had to distance themselves from a “threatening” Red China in order to protect their communities from persecution. Many Native Americans felt they had to consolidate culture and community to build up reservations that were being depleted of people and resources by federal policies of termination and assimilation. In all three cases, there was a need to produce spaces of belonging, self-determination, and sovereignty in an otherwise racially exclusive nation.

Thus, Miss Indian America, Miss Black America, and Miss Chinatown USA did not just illustrate a balancing act between modern and authentic. They were not just demonstrating community identity that was a little Native or black or Chinese plus a little white American with a hyphen in between. Instead, those pageants were actually articulating something new. Through national of-color pageantry, Miss Indian America, Miss Black America, and Miss Chinatown USA asserted their communities’ visibility and centrality to national identity by imagining alternative nations: an America of Indians, a Black America, a USA composed entirely of Chinatowns.

These were new kinds of national spaces with new kinds of national sovereignties and a new kind of national identity. That identity was consolidated into one woman and embodied, for a year, by her looks and behaviors. That woman, a beauty queen, was a representational manifestation of femininity in the culture of the marginalized—a Native

woman singing a Mohave bird song, a Chinese American woman waving from a float rather than from a sedan chair, a U.S.-born black woman dancing the Fiji. These women were not simply bridges between static cultures. Instead, it was their bodies that delineated the very boundaries of those nations-within-a-nation. By inhabiting titles like Miss Indian America, Miss Chinatown USA, and Miss Black America, they refused to participate in the “seamless” association of whiteness with American national identity.

Re-Centered on the Margins

Miss Indian America, Miss Chinatown USA, and Miss Black America provided examples of how communities of color negotiated national belonging and of-color authenticity. Against the backdrop of the Cold War, the nominal incorporation of communities of color was important for those in power in U.S. government and industry to refute Soviet claims about U.S. racism and demonstrate the superiority of a capitalist democracy. The realities of international politics gave U.S. communities of color new kinds of agency. National of-color pageants and the rhetoric of “Indian America,” “Chinatown USA,” and “Black America” demonstrated how those communities could redraw the boundaries of the nation so that people of color became central to national identity.

As always, the pageants were only one part of a larger discourse on race and gender within the context of the U.S. nation. Just as in the 1920s, the advent of those new pageants coincided with landmark moments of race and racialization in federal statute and case law. In 1965, the United States Congress passed an Immigration Act that would remove any remaining barriers to immigration that were explicitly racial. In 1967, the

Loving v. Virginia Supreme Court decision ended nationwide the kind of state miscegenation laws on which Mexican American Joe Kirby had built his annulment case against his Negro wife Mayellen thirty years prior. Those key legal decisions represented and produced changes in the face of the nation, just as such changes were represented and produced in pageantry.

The children of immigrants and mixed-race unions in the era following the 1965 Immigration Act and *Loving* grew to maturity in the mid 1980s, when liberal discourses of “race-blind” multiculturalism dominated national identity. It was in that period of the mid 1980s, fifteen years after the 1968 Miss America protests, that Vanessa Williams finally became the first black woman to win the Miss America Pageant. Williams’s win ushered in a new, unprecedented moment in pageantry, one in which light-skinned women of color, mixed-race women, and women who were children of nonwhite immigrants began winning mainstream pageants and representing the nation as Miss America and Miss USA for the first time.

Nonetheless, even as Williams and others “integrated” the pageants of the mainstream, communities of color continued to hold their own pageants. As the twentieth century gave way to the twenty-first, those who participated in of-color pageants produced race, gender, class, and nation in ways that not only challenged dominant modes of national identity but also offered new understandings of what a nation is.



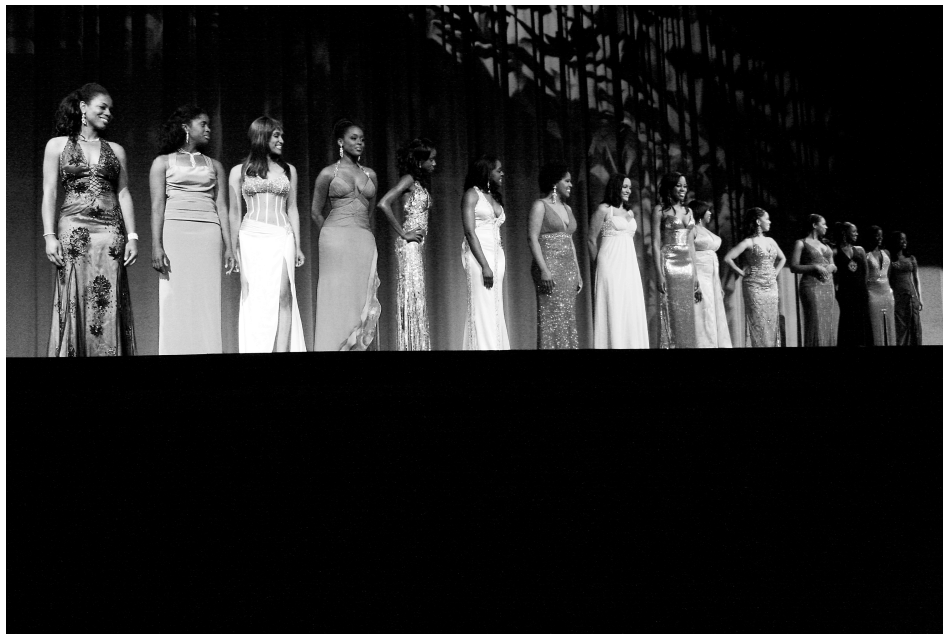
Figure 4.1. **Miss Navajo Nation.** Throughout the late 1950s and early 1960s, the Miss Navajo Nation pageant was bifurcated into separate contests, one to select a “Traditional Queen” and the other to select a “Modern Queen.” The contestants for both contests in the same year are pictured together here. The group shot is a striking illustration of how young women embody “authenticity” and “modernity” through pageantry.

<http://www.missnavajocouncil.org/history/pageanthistory.htm>



http://gateway.proquest.com/openurl?url_ver=Z39.88-2004&res_dat=xri:bsc:&rft_dat=xri:bsc:multimedia:ji8252

Figures 4.2 and 4.3. **Miss Black America.** Fifteen contestants in a Miss Black America Pageant appear (above) lined up for a primarily black audience. In this photograph from 1972, the two contestants with straightened hair are the ones in the minority. This is a far cry from what an onlooker would see thirty-five years later in a contemporary African American pageant like Miss Black USA (below).



Photograph by author.

CHAPTER FIVE

Heading Home Diaspora and Panethnicity in the Early 2000s United States

In the spring of 2008, the Miss Black USA Scholarship Pageant was not held in the USA at all. It was held in The Gambia, in West Africa. A press release from the organization explained the counterintuitive choice, describing that year's contestants as "Spirited! Passionate! Empowered! They come from all walks of life, but they have one thing in common -- the Diaspora." The press release went on further to outline a diasporic journey that would be enacted in the week leading up to the pageant: "The journey for the crown will commence in Arlington, VA on May 20th and culminate on Friday, June 1st in the Gambia, West Africa. This year's pageant theme is '**A Royal Journey Back to our Roots**'; A queen is not defined by where she lives, but where she comes from."¹

Organizers of the pageant who wrote the press copy used the term "Diaspora" to reconcile what otherwise appeared to be contradictions as early in the press release as its title: "Miss Black USA Contestants Vie for the Crown on Gambian Soil." The syntax of the phrase "Miss Black USA" along with the proximate appearance of the words "contestants" and "crown" suggested that what those contestants were "vying" for was a beauty queen title. What was confusing was what that title or "crown" might have

¹ "Pageant Information," *Miss Black USA Scholarship Pageant*, February 2007, <http://www.missblackusa.org/pageantinfo.htm>, Accessed March 26, 2007.

been. Was it a Gambian contest, as implied by the fact that it was to take place “on Gambian soil,” or an American one? That the article was released from “Silver Spring, MD” situated the story in the U.S., but the first sentence suggested that what was being represented was beyond just the United States.² The three interjected adjectives “Spirited! Passionate! Empowered!” are standard pageant fare. Pageant applications, interviews, and onstage questions typically ask contestants to use three words to describe themselves. What followed, though, was what seemed at first to be a statement about class diversity—“They come from all walks of life”—but went on to address a concept that ties race and nation to a history of displacement via enslavement, emigration, and empire: “the Diaspora.”

One thing worth interrogating is, which of the many features of diaspora were those who organized and participated in the Miss Black USA Pageant staging? In a 1994 article, anthropologist James Clifford cites William Safran’s summation of diaspora, in which the main features are, “[A] history of dispersal, myths/memories of the homeland, alienation in the host (bad host?) country, desire for eventual return, ongoing support of the homeland, and a collective identity importantly defined by this relationship.”³ Clifford argues that a population or a discourse need not fit all Safran’s criteria to be understood as diasporic. Rather, what often characterizes diasporic consciousness is that it is “about being American or British, or wherever one has settled, differently.”⁴

What is noteworthy about pageantry, and about the Miss Black USA Pageant in this case, is that, in all the materials produced for a pageant—eligibility requirements, contestant applications, press releases, programs, websites, staged productions—those

² Ibid.

³ James Clifford, “Diasporas,” *Cultural Anthropology* 9, no. 3 (August 1994): 305.

⁴ Ibid., 312.

participating in the event in various capacities express community, discourse, and collective identity. And in twenty-first-century, non-indigenous, U.S., of-color pageantry in particular, those communities, discourses, and identities could all be described as diasporic. In staging contemporary of-color pageants, participants make visible the myths and memories of the homeland through themes like Miss Black USA's "A Royal Journey Back to Our Roots." They call upon a history of alienation in the U.S. host country by holding national pageants that are separate from the mainstream, like Miss America and Miss USA, and exclusively for women of color. They facilitate the return of individuals to the homeland through the practice of holding a U.S. pageant outside the U.S., in places like the Gambia. And, through various means, they build collective identity out of transnational relationships.

In this chapter, I use diaspora as an analytical tool to interrogate the cultural work of of-color pageants in the first decade of the twenty-first century. Drawing simultaneously from the definition Clifford lays out and from the Miss Black USA press release's use of the term, I understand diaspora as a conceptualization of collective identity that pulls together individuals who are similarly racialized but who live in different nations into one transnational group. The collective identity of groups in diaspora is not predicated only on race, though. It is predicated on an imagination of shared ancestry that, sometimes, though not always, manifests in similar customs in the present day. Furthermore, the centrality of a place of ancestry to the formulation means that groups in diaspora may live in one place, identify with another and therefore never completely feel at home in either one. This is what Clifford refers to as "the copresence of 'here' and 'there,'" where neither "here" nor "there" need be a specific nation-state,

but rather may represent “a shared, ongoing history of displacement, suffering, adaptation, or resistance.”⁵

For people of color in the U.S., like the Miss Black USA Pageant organizers, diaspora can create the possibility for marginalized groups of color to imagine spaces that they share with others who are racially like them, spaces where they are not marginalized, but rather central. As was the case with Miss Black America and Miss Chinatown USA in the 1960s, for example, diaspora as expressed in the Miss Black USA press release is a geographical formulation, a lived geography that reformulates centers and margins.

While the Miss Black USA press release’s explicit mention of “Diaspora” might have been unusual for pageantry, that contest is not the only contemporary of-color pageant in the U.S. that could be described as diasporic. In fact, when the Miss Black USA Pageant was first staged in Washington, DC in 1987, it was one of three pageants for women of color that were initiated at that same time that have continued to the present day.⁶ The Miss Asian America Pageant had begun two years prior in San Francisco, and the Miss Latina USA Pageant—now Miss Latina US—was held for the first time in San José, Costa Rica in 1986.⁷

It is, in some ways, counterintuitive that the mid-1980s was the time period in which those three of-color pageants began. Vanessa Williams’s historic Miss America win had preceded the initial Miss Black USA Pageant by a mere three years. Even when Williams was publicly shamed by sexually explicit photographs released by *Penthouse*

⁵ Ibid., 306, 318.

⁶ “Celebrating 22 Years of Scholarship, Beauty & Talent,” *Miss Black USA Scholarship Pageant*, <http://www.missblackusa.org/aboutus.html>, Accessed June 5, 2010.

⁷ “History,” *Miss Asian America® Pageant*, <http://www.missasianamerica.com/MAAP.html>, Accessed June 5, 2010; “History,” *Miss Latina US: An Official National Preliminary to Miss Latin America*, <http://www.missuslatina.com/History.html>, Accessed June 5, 2010.

magazine and compelled to resign the following year, she handed her title over to first runner-up Suzette Charles, a mixed-race woman with a black mother and an Italian American father. Just months before Charles took over as Miss America, a mixed-race woman won Miss USA as well. Mai Shanley, whose father was Irish American and whose mother was Chinese from Taiwan, became the first mixed-race Asian American woman to win that major national pageant. Shanley held the Miss USA title until 1985, the same year that the first Miss Asian America Pageant was held in San Francisco. Her reign as Miss USA ended when she passed on the crown to another mixed-race woman, Laura Martinez-Herring. Martinez-Herring, the daughter of a Mexican mother and a father of German descent, is the first Miss USA ever identified as Latina. Still, the very next year after Martinez-Herring's unprecedented Miss USA win, the Miss Latina USA Pageant began.

Williams and Charles sharing the 1984 Miss America title, and Shanley and Martinez-Herring winning Miss USA in the years immediately following, were occurrences that suggested that, by the mid-1980s, black, Asian American, and Latina women—or at least mixed-race women of those backgrounds—could win mainstream pageants. Still, that did not make the Miss Black USA, Miss Asian America, and Miss Latina USA Pageants unnecessary or irrelevant. In fact, as communications scholar Sarah Banet-Weiser argues, “[T]he presence of African American and other nonwhite contestants in recent beauty pageants both responds to accusations that pageants do not include women of color and reinscribes the primacy of whiteness celebrated within the pageant. The presence of nonwhite contestants obscures and thus works to erase the racist

histories and foundations upon which beauty pageants rest.”⁸ Miss Black USA, Miss Asian America, and Miss Latina US are the focus of this chapter because they are the three national of-color pageants that started in the 1980s era of liberal multiculturalism—when mixed-race black, Asian American, and Latina women were representing the nation through mainstream pageantry—and continue to be held today.

This chapter is about the Miss Black USA, Miss Asian America, and Miss Latina US Pageants in that present-day period. Analyses of the three pageants are based on press materials, like the Miss Black USA 2007 press release, as well as on pageant websites, program books, and ethnographic fieldwork conducted at the pageants between 2006 and 2009. During that time, I conducted participant-observations as a VIP audience member at one Miss Latina US Pageant, one Miss Black USA pageant week, and four pageant weeks for Miss Asian America. By “pageant week,” I refer to the annual series of events for pageant participants—including sponsor visits, meals, rehearsals, and photo opportunities—in the week leading up to a pageant. As an audience member, I attended all public events to which I could purchase a ticket. By purchasing a VIP ticket, I gained access not only to the pageant performance, but also to public receptions for judges, sponsors, VIP audience members, contestants, and winners that preceded or followed the final night of each pageant.

In my participant-observations, I learned that the Miss Asian America and Miss Latina US Pageants construct and represent collective identity through panethnicity. “Panethnicity” is a concept widely used in Asian American and Latino studies to connote identity via coalition or affiliation. As Yen Le Espiritu explains in *Asian American*

⁸ Sarah Banet-Weiser, *The Most Beautiful Girl in the World: Beauty Pageants and National Identity* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1999), 125.

Panethnicity, panethnic identifications can be created by forces both external and internal to a group. Prior to the 1960s in the U.S., terms like “Asian American” and “Latino” did not exist as they do today, to describe Vietnamese, Filipino, or Korean Americans, or persons of Peruvian, Dominican, or Puerto Rican descent. The development of “Asian American” and “Latino” as U.S. identity categories demonstrated that panethnicity can form from without, as a response to categorizations that “lump together” Asian Americans or Latinos as such, because of a racist inability to distinguish among individuals’ ethnic backgrounds. Panethnicity can also form from within, as a strategy for pooling resources and producing collective action to agitate for the needs of an aggregated identity community.⁹

Espiritu’s work on panethnicity has been foundational in Ethnic Studies scholarship and for understandings of Asian American and Latino identities outside the field of Ethnic Studies. However, because Espiritu’s paradigm focuses so much on the political dimensions of panethnicity, it is, in some ways, limited. In this chapter, I expand upon Espiritu’s work by exploring panethnicity as a cultural rather than a political system of identification. To investigate panethnicity in this way, it is important to look not at single-ethnicity pageants but rather at pageants like Miss Asian America and Miss Latina US, where the presence of individuals of multiple ethnic backgrounds is instrumental to performances of nation and national identity. My aim here is to intervene in Ethnic Studies scholarship by juxtaposing the three pageants to reveal some of the limitations and alternative applications of both panethnic and diasporic paradigms.

⁹ Yen Le Espiritu, *Asian American Panethnicity: Bridging Institutions and Identities* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1992), esp. 1-14.

At the Miss Asian America and Miss Latina US Pageants, panethnicity is made visible through the inclusion of an “Ethnic Costume” portion of the contests. In the “Ethnic Costume” category, contestants appear onstage to introduce themselves to the audience, wearing a traditional costume of an Asian or Latin American nation, respectively. The appearance of this very visible representation of the different ethnicities that make up Asian America or the Latina US draws attention to the fact that Miss Black USA does not include any such expression of panethnic identity. At the same time, the Miss Black USA organizers’ explicit engagement with the term “Diaspora” draws attention to the fact that in Miss Asian America and Miss Latina US, racialized difference is obscured by discourses of ethnicity. In fact, the Miss Asian America and Miss Latina US Pageants do express diasporic identifications, even as organizers of those pageants do not use that term. The way that each of the three pageants is staged makes visible different kinds of articulations of both diaspora and panethnicity.

That the pageants are both panethnic and diasporic is the primary reason they are the subject of this chapter. Studies of “ethnic pageantry” in the U.S. could be considered an emerging field. However those texts that examine of-color beauty contests—like Judy Tzu Chun Wu’s work on the Miss Chinatown USA Pageant, Nhi Lieu’s explorations of Vietnamese American *ao dai* pageants, Rebecca Chiyoko King-O’Riaian’s historical and sociological survey of Japanese American Cherry Blossom Queen contests on the west coast, Shirley Jennifer Lim’s chapter on pageants in mid-century Asian American communities, or Maxine Leeds Craig’s chapter on African American pageantry—tend to look at pageants in which contestants are considered, and even required, to be of a single ethnicity. No currently existing literature does the work of this chapter, which expands

upon what has been written about pageantry by investigating three panethnic pageants, using ethnicity as a tool to trouble static notions of what constitutes a nation.

What the Miss Asian America, Miss Black USA, and Miss Latina US pageants have in common is participants' assertion that contestants, and winners especially, form a connection between distinct geopolitical spaces.¹⁰ The Miss Asian America Pageant website proudly reports that "Ambassador Matthew Lee of the Republic of China calls Miss Asian America, 'the bridge of American friendship to Asia.'"¹¹ In his welcome message in the 2006 Miss Black USA program, the president of The Gambia, His Excellency Yahya A.J.J. Jammeh, expresses his hope that contestants will form "a bridge between African-Americans and Gambians in particular, and diversify our relationship to all levels and spheres."¹² The metaphor of the bridge demonstrates how both ethnicity, as panethnicity, and race in diaspora can be simultaneous expressions of "here" and "there." Through beauty pageants, the bodies of contestants become "bridges" that traverse geographic boundaries to define community: "a queen is not defined by where she lives but where she comes from."

The choice of Miss Black USA organizers to hold their pageant outside the USA offers one model of what marginalized communities do in the face of persistent, unrelenting exclusion from national identity. They do not abandon the concept of nation entirely, as a collective identity that produces their exclusion. Nor, for that matter, do they give up the practice of national pageantry. Instead, they reformulate what nation

¹⁰ I use the word "participants" to designate all those who participate in pageants at various levels: organizers, staff, sponsors, volunteers, judges, audience members, and contestants. I use the word "contestants" to distinguish only the group of women who compete in the pageant itself.

¹¹ "About Our Pageant: History," *Miss Asian America® Pageant*, <http://www.missasianamerica.com/MAAP.html>, Accessed June 7, 2010.

¹² Yahya A.J.J. Jammeh, "Greetings From His Excellency The President Alhaji Dr. Yahya A.J.J. Jammeh," *Miss Black USA Scholarship Pageant Celebrating 20 Years of Scholarship, Beauty & Achievement: A Royal Journey Back to Our Roots* (Winterset, Iowa: GoldenTree Communications, 2001), 5.

means. It is not the “Black America” of the 1960s, which was imagined within the U.S. nation-state. Rather, it is a “Black USA,” an “Asian America,” a “Latina US” forged out of transnational connections to ancestral homelands that are both physical and imagined. Through transnational connections, what are understood in the U.S. to be racial “minority” populations turn out not to be in the minority at all. Taken together, for instance, the Asian and Asian descended people of the world constitute a majority. The Miss Asian America, Miss Black USA, and Miss Latina US pageants of the early twenty-first century represent, as in the 1960s, a re-centering of the nation on the margins. Only, in the present day, the nation is re-centered not within the confines of the nation-state, but rather in a way that makes national identity transnational.

“The Whole Woman”

The Miss Asian America Pageant was founded in 1985 by San Francisco native Rose Chung, who had won the Miss Chinatown USA Pageant only four years prior. Originally one small portion of a larger Asian American Arts Festival, the Miss Asian America Pageant has grown into an autonomous event. Chung remains actively involved as president of the pageant, which is now partnered with Monster Cable, the home entertainment and consumer electronics company that provides the \$5000 for the winner’s scholarship; the Asian Liver Center at Stanford University, to which all proceeds from Miss Asian America Pageant merchandise sales go each year; and Asian Perinatal Advocates, a San Francisco area nonprofit organization combating domestic violence in Asian and Asian American families. Officially titled “Rose Chung Presents: Miss Asian America Pageant,” the contest is held each year in San Francisco, with

pageant week events culminating in a final night of competition at the Palace of Fine Arts Theater.¹³

The mission of the pageant is “to showcase young Asian American women in a high quality production that will best represent their culture, beauty, intelligence and talent.”¹⁴ To that end, contestants compete each year in five categories. The first is a Judges’ Interview, a portion of the contest in which judges interview one contestant at a time in advance of the VIP Reception the day before the pageant itself. On the night of the pageant, all contestants compete in Ethnic Costume, Swimsuit, and Evening Gown. Then, after an elimination, only the top ten finalists compete in a “Poise and Personality” category. For “Poise and Personality,” each contestant must prepare and memorize a “platform speech,” a brief presentation describing a social issue of relevance to the Asian American community that she would champion during her year as Miss Asian America. In the past four years, winners’ platforms have been as diverse as “Assisting children and families in strengthening their relationships and preserving the family unit,” “Promoting the Performance Arts in Life,” “The American Red Cross,” and “Keeping the Arts in Schools.”¹⁵

After her platform speech, each finalist also offers an extemporaneous response to a question asked of her onstage. The onstage question is not judged. However, it is the last time the judges and audience see a contestant perform individually before the final

¹³ “About Our Pageant,” *Miss Asian America® Pageant*, <http://www.missasianamerica.com/MAAP.html>, Accessed June 19, 2010.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ Vincent Ma, ed., *Rose Chung Presents 24th Annual Miss Asian American Pageant 2009* (San Francisco: Miss Asian America Inc., 2009), 18; Thomas Li, ed., *Rose Chung Presents 23rd Annual Miss Asian America Pageant 2008* (San Francisco: Miss Asian America, Inc., 2008), 18; Vincent Ma and Garin Wong, eds., *Rose Chung Presents 22nd Annual Miss Asian America Pageant 2007* (San Francisco: Miss Asian America Inc, 2007), 19; Vincent Ma and William Jay, eds., *Rose Chung Presents 21st Annual Miss Asian America Pageant 2006* (San Francisco: Miss Asian America Inc, 2006), 19.

announcement of placements and titles, including that year's Miss Asian America. Other titles awarded on the final night of the pageant include "First Princess," the first runner-up to Miss Asian America; "Second Princess," the second runner-up to Miss Asian America; "Miss Asian California," a title that goes to the highest-scoring non-winner from anywhere in California; "Miss Asian San Francisco," a title awarded to the highest-scoring non-winner from San Francisco, as long as she has not already been crowned "Miss Asian California,"; "Miss Congeniality," a title for which contestants vote; "Miss Community Service" and "Miss Scholastic Achievement," awards determined by Miss Asian America Pageant staff members based on essays submitted by contestants in advance of the pageant; and "Miss Talent," the winner of the optional "Talent Showcase," who, up until 2009, could also be Miss Asian America herself. Every contestant who wins a title is considered a member of that year's Miss Asian America Pageant Court.

The use of the words "Princess" and "Court" in the Miss Asian America Pageant are as much reminders of pageantry's pseudo-royal aspirations as is the Miss Black USA Pageant's 2007 theme: "A Royal Journey Back to Our Roots." While the "roots" to which that theme referred were a diasporic connection to the African continent, the original roots of the Miss Black USA Pageant were in a nonprofit corporation, The Miss Black USA Pageant and Scholarship Foundation, Inc., founded by Maryland resident Karen Arrington in 1986. The organization put on the inaugural Miss Black USA Pageant the following June in Washington, DC, and the first winner, Tamiko Gibson, was from Arrington's home state of Maryland. With a mission "to provide educational opportunities to outstanding young women of color and to develop the 'whole woman

mind, body, and spirit,” the Miss Black USA Pageant and Scholarship Foundation, Inc. echoes the Miss America Organization’s insistence that it is not a beauty pageant.¹⁶ Rather, according to both organizations, Miss Black USA and Miss America are scholarship competitions, designed primarily to offer the financial means for young women in the United States of America to pursue education.

In addition to those similarities in organizers’ rhetoric, the Miss Black USA Pageant’s structure more closely resembles that of the Miss America Pageant than does the structure of Miss Asian America. Whereas Miss Asian America contestants can come from anywhere in the country, usually resulting in a preponderance of contestants from the pageant’s home state of California, in Miss Black USA, there can be no more than one contestant per state. Some states, like Virginia, have state titles that contestants must win, in live competition, in order to compete in the national Miss Black USA Pageant. Other states, like Michigan, have no state pageant, and residents of those states seeking to compete in the national pageant must submit applications, photos, and talent performance videos directly to the national organization. As a result, the states represented at the national competition vary somewhat each year. In 2008, for example, thirty-eight “delegates,” including one from Washington, DC, competed in the Miss Black USA Pageant. Connecticut, Delaware, Idaho, Maine, Montana, New Mexico, North Dakota, South Dakota, Utah, Vermont, Washington, Wisconsin, and Wyoming were not represented.

During pageant week at the national competition, Miss Black USA delegates compete in both preliminary and final rounds of four categories. Again, there are Judges’

¹⁶ “About Us: Mission,” *Miss Black USA Scholarship Pageant*, <http://www.missblackusa.org/aboutus.php>, Accessed June 19, 2010.

Interviews that precede the final night of the pageant, as well as Evening Gown and Talent competitions. One of the original categories of Miss Black USA competition, Swimsuit, has been replaced by a “Physical Fitness” section, in which contestants walk the runway onstage in tennis or other gym outfits, rather than in the bathing suits typical to U.S. pageantry. All contestants compete in the judged preliminary competition, and all contestants perform group dance routines on the final night of the pageant. After the opening dance on the final night, though, the pageant emcees announce the fifteen contestants who will continue on in the competition. Only those finalists compete again in Talent, Physical Fitness, Evening Gown, and Onstage Interview, where they are evaluated by a different panel of judges than that which scored the preliminary competition.

Unlike Miss Asian America, Miss Black USA has no “Court.” So the announcement of placements at the end of the final night of the pageant focus on the winner, who also has a reception in her honor following her onstage crowning. The winner, that year’s Miss Black USA, holds the title until the next pageant. Because the Miss Black USA Pageant is not held as consistently as Miss Asian America, some winners, like Celie Marie Dean who was Miss Black USA 2005-2006, hold their titles longer than a year. Because the location of the pageant changes each time it is staged, Dean was crowned in Washington, DC but became the first Miss Black USA to crown her successor outside the United States—in The Gambia, where Kalilah Allen-Harris became Miss Black USA 2007. The following year, Allen-Harris passed on her title at the national pageant in Las Vegas, Nevada, and the year after that, in 2009, the pageant moved back to Washington, DC, where it began.

Miss Black USA was not the first of the three pageants to take place outside the United States. In fact, holding the national pageant in international locations had been an integral practice of Miss Latina US long before Miss Black USA contestants traveled to The Gambia in 2007. Miss Latina US was an outgrowth of an organization founded by Acirema Alayeto, a Miami resident of Cuban descent, in 1981. That year, Alayeto's organization, Organización Miss América Latina, held a contest for young Latin American women in Miami, with the aim of selecting a winner to represent the city in a larger Latin American pageant in Mexico. By its third year, the Miami contest had been established as an international pageant in its own right. Young Latinas from Arizona, California, Florida, Nevada, and Texas competed with women from Latin American nations for the title of Miss América Latina.¹⁷

In 1986, the Miss América Latina Pageant was held, for the first time, outside the United States. It was there, in San José, Costa Rica, that the U.S. contestants competed in a separate event, the Miss Latina USA Pageant, to select one representative to represent the nation at Miss América Latina. The following year, both the Miss Latina USA and Miss América Latina Pageants were staged in Bolivia, and in 1989 they were held in Mexico.¹⁸ Not until the early 2000s, when the pageant was renamed Miss Latina US and the Organización Miss América Latina added a Miss Teen Latina US contest, did the U.S. competition return to the U.S. Now officially partnered with Barceló Hotels and Resorts, the most recent Miss Latina US Pageant took place in May 2010 at the Barceló resort in Punta Cana, Dominican Republic.

¹⁷ "Historia del Certamen Miss America Latina del Mundo," *Miss América Latina del Mundo*®, <http://www.missamericalatina.com/Historia.html>, Accessed June 7, 2010; "History," *Miss Latina US: An Official National Preliminary to Miss Latin America*.

¹⁸ "History," *Miss Latina US: An Official National Preliminary to Miss Latin America*.

In its present-day form, the Miss Latina US Pageant is held simultaneously with the Miss Teen Latina US Pageant, and both “Miss” and “Teen” contestants compete in the same categories. The first, as in Miss Asian America and Miss Black USA, is a Preliminary Interview with judges, conducted in either English or Spanish, whichever of the two languages “the contestant feels most comfortable speaking.”¹⁹ Then, on the final night of the pageant, Miss Latina US contestants, much like Miss Asian America contestants, compete in “National Costume/Traje Típico,” Swimsuit, Evening Gown, and a “Final Speech” that includes both prepared and extemporaneous responses.

Whereas the Miss Asian America Pageant exercises no limitations on where in the United States contestants may come from, and Miss Black USA follows the one-per-state Miss America model, the Miss Latina US Pageant employs a unique structure that is a hybrid of the two. As with Miss Black USA, a contestant can either compete in a preliminary state pageant or, in states where there is no local competition, apply directly to represent her state of residency at the national pageant. However, unlike in Miss Black USA, Miss Latina US contestants have the option of representing either the state they are from or their ethnic background. A contestant can make the latter choice, for instance, if she is a young woman of Peruvian descent from New Jersey, but someone else has already won the New Jersey title. Rather than competing as Miss New Jersey Latina, the contestant can still compete at the national pageant under the title “Miss Peru US Latina.” The juxtaposition of state titles with what Miss Latina US organizers call “heritage titles” is a unique representation of the coexistence of “here” and “there” within the pageant’s expressions of both diaspora and panethnicity.

¹⁹ “Miss Latina US Competition Info: What You Can Expect,” *Miss Latina US: An Official Preliminary to Miss Latin America*, <http://www.missuslatina.com/Competition.html>, Accessed June 7, 2010.

Ethnic Local, “Ethnic Mix!”

At a recent Miss Latina US Pageant, one of the pageant hosts explained that contestants, especially those with state titles, were “not only representing their states but also representing their culture and themselves.” The Miss Latina US heritage titles, though, seem to represent something different. The particular syntax of the heritage titles—“Miss Mexico US Latina” rather than “Miss *Mexican* US Latina”—denotes nation rather than ethnicity. With such a formulation, the contestant who holds a heritage title becomes a “bridge” between the U.S. and the Latin American nation her title represents, just as Miss Black USA and Miss Asian America contestants have been, at some point, called upon to act as bridges between their minoritized American communities and African and Asian nations, respectively.

In the case of Miss Asian America, Rose Chung’s vision has been that, for the twenty-five years of its existence, her pageant has served “as a bridge between the Asian American community and our nation as we educate our communities of our shared cultural heritage and provide a positive image to all Americans as the face of Asian America.”²⁰ Chung’s comments, from her welcome message in the 2008 Program Book, are rich with meaning about diaspora, community, and culture. The noun “America” in the pageant indicates nation. The modifier “Asian”—unlike, for instance, the word Chinatown in Miss Chinatown USA—suggests that the national community is panethnic and transnational. “Asian” is diasporic, signifying both the Asian continent and the people of various ethnicities identified by that continental descriptor in the United States. It is reasonable to assume that when Chung says “our nation,” she is referring to the U.S.

²⁰ Rose Chung, “Message from Rose,” in Li, 3

Yet, if the pageant is meant to be a “bridge between the Asian American community and our nation,” then Chung’s assertion is a paradox: the nation is separate from an Asian American “us,” but it is “ours” nonetheless.

Further complexities appear as Chung addresses notions of community. She presents the “Asian American community” as a cohesive whole. Then later, she refers to the plural and heterogeneous “our communities” before returning to the unifying assertion that those communities have a “shared cultural heritage.” This is the heritage that the pageant will model in its claim to be the representative “face” of a national space called “Asian America.”

The pageant’s eligibility rules take up the project of defining who belongs within that national space and what kind of person can best represent it. The current Miss Asian America Pageant application requires that aspiring entrants be, “One-fourth Asian, a legal resident of the United States, female, between the ages of 17-27, single and never married or pregnant.”²¹ In this description, ethnicity and nation combine with gender to delineate ideal Asian American femininity. The requirement that a contestant be an adult but young, of marriageable age but who has never been married or pregnant, echoes standards that are common in U.S. beauty pageantry. Those standards produce desire for a woman who is simultaneously virginal and sexually available. This ideal is meant to be innocuous because it is young, feminine, and malleable, such that others’ narratives of nation might be projected more easily onto the winner’s body.

What sets Miss Asian America apart from other pageants, though, is that entrants may come from anywhere in the United States, but they must be of Asian descent. From the perspective of organizers, contestants’ ancestral ties to Asia lend cultural authenticity

²¹ “OUR EVENT,” *Miss Asian America Pageant®: The 24th Annual Contestant Search*, Application, 2.

to a community that is not only American but also specifically *Asian* American. On the application, organizers abstract from the individual to the national. They follow up the language of blood quantum—“one-fourth Asian”—with a list of nations in Southeast, East, Central, and South Asia from which contestants may draw acceptable ancestry. The first country on the list is Myanmar, the last is Pakistan, and there are forty-six enumerated in between. The application further states that ancestry from “the ethnic Asian groups of the former Soviet Union” is also acceptable, and to be even more inclusive, pageant organizers offer a disclaimer: “Please contact us if you have any questions about your ethnic qualifications.”²² As in any pageant, the Miss Asian America eligibility rules outline individual requirements in order to define community identity. In this case, pageant organizers value broad pan-Asian ethnicity in the delineation of Asian American nation.

Those values play out not only in the way Miss Asian America Pageant organizers write eligibility rules but in how they handle pageant week activities as well. During the week of rehearsals and sponsor visits leading up to one recent pageant, Miss Asian America staff members assigned table seating each time contestants went for a meal at a sponsoring restaurant. At the first such dinner, a disagreement arose between Chung and a member of the pageant staff who was arranging contestant name cards. Chung interrupted the staff member’s activity to say, “We don’t want all the Bay Area contestants at one table,” and the staff member countered, “No! Ethnic mix!” Chung responded again, insisting, “Well, we don’t want all out-of-towners at one table!” and staff member answered, with finality, “We don’t want all Vietnamese at one table either!”

²² *Miss Asian America Pageant*® Application, 2.

The staff member's principle of "ethnic mix" is central to the Miss Asian America Pageant's enactment of panethnicity and Asian American cultural authenticity.

Panethnicity is an inherently coalitional identity concept. Its aim is not to assimilate, and thus erase, difference but rather to recognize distinct ethnic categories and draw them into a collective identity. The Miss Asian America Pageant is a celebration of ethnic difference at the same time that it is an effort to consolidate those differences into a panethnic Asian American national community. In many national pageants, like Miss America, Miss USA—and even of-color pageants like Miss Black USA—entry criteria only allow for one contestant per state. In those competitions, locality is defined by a contestant's state of residency, which is also the place she represents in the pageant. Miss Asian America, on the other hand, eschews one-per-state rules and foregrounds instead "ethnic mix," thus producing a concept of the local that has more to do with Asian ethnicity than it does with American geography.

In her study of mainstream pageants, Banet-Weiser argues that, "Although the pageants attempt to both construct and maintain a definition of *community* that best suits their contestants, there is no actual community in the way pageants define them. Zip codes are the best means the contestants have for determining such boundaries."²³ Banet-Weiser illustrates her point with an anecdote about a contestant in a local pageant who accused another contestant, a young woman named Mary who ultimately won the competition, of not actually living in the zip code that marked off the boundaries of the area that the local pageant represented. Banet-Weiser's analysis is that, "Despite the fact that the entire scandal consisted of misinformation about a zip code, it took on monumental proportions because it dared to question the authenticity of not only Mary's

²³ Banet-Weiser, 52-53.

representative status but also her own personal integrity.”²⁴ Because communities are defined primarily by geography in pageants like Miss America and its system of feeder contests, contestants like Mary must demonstrate that they are local to the areas they represent. It is the “local” in pageantry that imbues contestants with authentic representational status.

The concept of the local is about how a person is supposed to be similar to the people around her. Neighbors, for instance, are similar at least geographically because they occupy the same space. In the Miss Michigan Pageant, a woman has to be from Michigan or be a resident there to participate, because the idea is that, if she wins, she represents the state of Michigan. In Miss Asian America, the category of state, like Michigan or California, is not relevant, because the Miss Asian America Pageant is not about producing a lived map of the United States of America as a collection of states but rather producing a lived map of Asian America as a collection of contestant ethnicities.

Whereas the boundaries of the “local” in mainstream pageants are marked off by zip codes, in the Miss Asian America Pageant, the “local” is defined very differently. At a pageant where contestants are primarily differentiated by ethnicity rather than residency, it is contestants’ ethnic backgrounds that give them the power of authentic representation. Thus, the Miss Asian America Pageant is a unique site for representing what I call the “ethnic local.” “Ethnic local” is a concept I use to describe one way in which geography is lived through bodies, in pageantry and beyond. The term indicates that, through ethnicity, the body is linked to place as a means of defining where someone is from and who are the other people in the world they are most like. The geographic concept of the “local” usually places locality within a nation, the “ethnic local,” or

²⁴ Banet-Weiser, 53.

sameness through ethnicity, can be transnational and diasporic. This is uniquely visible in of-color pageants like Miss Asian America, where nation is constructed through panethnicity, and the bodies of young women—not the zip codes they inhabit—mark off the boundaries of represented place and of authenticity.

The way contestants introduce themselves to the audience and judges at the pageant demonstrates Miss Asian America's enactment of authenticity, representation, place, and nation—replacing the geographical local with the “ethnic local.” Contestants are required to script their own introductions, which they present to audiences at the VIP Reception preceding pageant night, as well as on the night of the pageant itself. The application form provides a template for what that introduction should sound like:

“*Anyeong hashminika*. Hello! My name is Hannah Kim hailing from the great state of North Dakota. I am 20 years old and a Communications major at the University of Notre Dame, and I am very proud to be representing the Korean American community of the Midwest. *Kamsahamnida*.”²⁵ In this sample introduction, the greeting and thanks in Korean culturally authenticate the contestant's Asian ethnicity through language. The statement, “I am very proud to be representing the Korean American community of the Midwest,” fuses ethnic pride with regional identification to produce the “place” that the contestant represents. Though the hypothetical contestant hails from North Dakota, she is not acting as a representative of that state. And while contestants' introductions over the past three years of competition have identified them with regions of varying sizes—the East Bay, the Bay Area, Northern California, California, the West Coast, America, and, in a few cases, no region at all—the one thing every contestant says in her introduction is which ethnicity she is proud to be there representing.

²⁵ *Miss Asian America Pageant*® Application, 6.

On pageant night, contestant introductions take place during the Ethnic Costume competition. Ethnic Costume is clearly of special value to pageant organizers, as it is the portion of the pageant that carries the highest weight: 35% of the contestant's final score in 2008. It is also the first time the audience sees contestants during the pageant. Twenty or so young women appear in their own renditions of the traditional costume of an Asian nation they are there to represent. They dance together to Asian or "Asian-inspired" music, and then they line up and step forward one at a time to introduce themselves. Alone at the microphone, each contestant is ethnically marked and identified by the style of her traditional costume, the sound of her surname, the appearance of her body, and the words in her non-English greeting. Costume, language, and body together produce the ethnic local. And when contestants regroup for a final pose, they visually represent panethnic, Asian American identity.

Of the three pageants analyzed in this chapter, Miss Asian America and Miss Latina US are most alike in their representations of panethnicity and of the ethnic local. Miss Latina US also includes an ethnic costume competition. "National Costume/Traje Típico" is the first time audiences see contestants speak at the pageant, as they introduce themselves and their ethnic backgrounds while wearing a costume meant to represent traditional dress of a Latin American nation. As in Miss Asian America, contestants' "National Costumes" vary both by the region and the time period to which the costumes are typical, and all such interpretations are the contestants' choice. The result, according to the host at a recent pageant, is, "These costumes represent the diversity we have in our Latin heritage...the beauty and diversity of our culture: Latino culture here in the U.S. as well as in Latin America." As simultaneous representations of "here" and "there," Ethnic

or National Costumes in Miss Latina US, as well as in Miss Asian America, are the clearest, most striking expression of diaspora and panethnicity. The costume itself is based on a myth or memory of the homeland, an interpretation of what the contestant believes to be typical or traditional in the nation that contestant chooses to represent at the pageant. Together with the body that wears the costume, and the other bodies in competition, costumes constitute the ethnic local, out of which an Asian America or a Latina US is produced, policed, and performed.

By reading the performance closely, though, one reality that emerges is that the representation of panethnicity in the Miss Latina US Pageant, as in the Miss Asian America Pageant, presents challenges for contestants with multiethnic or mixed-race identities. Among Miss Latina US's eligibility rules is a requirement that a contestant "[b]e of Latin American or Iberian origin by birth or ancestry and residing legally in the United States." To hold a heritage title, specifically, a contestant must either have been "[b]orn in the country of representation" or "[h]ave a parent/grandparent born in the country of representation."²⁶ In order to prove eligibility in those regards, the application form asks for "Birthplace," "Parents Origin," and "Grandparents Origin." There are no apostrophes to indicate whether the words "Parents" and "Grandparents" are intended to be singular or plural possessive nouns. Nor are there specifications on the pageant's website about blood quantum. As a result, a contestant can enter the pageant who does not have two parents or four grandparents "of Latin American or Iberian origin."

In a recent Miss Latina US Pageant, at least two contestants introduced themselves as multiethnic. One was Mexican and Italian and the other was Dominican

²⁶ "Miss Latina US™ Competition Info," *Miss Latina US: An Official National Preliminary to Miss Latin America*.

and Italian.²⁷ Of twenty-three contestants who appear in the Miss Asian America 2009 Pageant Program, seven indicate they are multiethnic. Of those seven, two list a non-Asian ethnicity—also Italian.²⁸ The winner of the Miss Asian America Pageant in 2006 was Jennifer Field, who identified as Korean/English/Irish/German American.²⁹ The Miss Asian America Pageant application even encourages contestants, under the line where they are to write their ethnicity, to “list all known.”³⁰ However, in the actual practice of the Ethnic or National Costume competition, a contestant’s choices in representing her ethnicity are constricted by the fact that she wears only one costume. Therefore, in the visual tableau of Asian America or the Latina US, as performed through Ethnic and National Costume, multiethnic identities are obscured.

More broadly, the Miss Asian America Pageant staff member’s egalitarian principle of “ethnic mix” is limited by the pragmatic realities of putting on a pageant. Despite the twenty-one heritage titles listed as available on the Miss Latina US Pageant website, contestants at the 2008 pageant only introduced themselves as Bolivian, Mexican, Nicaraguan, Peruvian, Cuban, Dominican, Puerto Rican, Brazilian, Spanish, and Salvadorian. Despite the expansive list of qualifying ancestral nations, Miss Asian America contestants tend overwhelmingly to identify as being of Chinese, Filipino, Vietnamese, Japanese, Thai, Korean, and—less often—Indian descent. Of the twenty-three 2009 Miss Asian America contestants, fourteen were from the Bay Area and an

²⁷ Italian is not one of the ethnicities considered by Miss Latina US Pageant organizers to be authentically Latina.

²⁸ Ma, 18.

²⁹ Ma and Jay, 19.

³⁰ *Miss Asian America Pageant*® Application, 5.

equal number were listed in the program as being at least partially of Chinese descent.³¹ The rhetoric of all-encompassing, Asian or Latino panethnicity is mitigated by the limits of social networks, and local demographics. The visual medium of pageantry demonstrates that complex, plural identities are difficult to represent in simplified tableaux that represent panethnicity as being composed of monoethnic parts. In the case of Miss Asian America, there is a primacy of Chinese American, Bay Area identity, because the founder and many of the sponsors and staff are more intimately connected with San Francisco Chinatown than with any other Asian American community. That reality demonstrates that even when representations of nation are panethnic and transnational, hegemony can still operate, and there are still those who remain marginalized, invisible, and excluded.

Bridges Between “Here” and “There”

Choices made by organizers in the Miss Black USA Pageant also represent the privileging of certain identities, and certain historical narratives of diaspora, over others. The February 2007 press release that described the pageant’s diasporic movement between the North American and African continents, indicated that at this, the first Miss Black USA Pageant to be held both inside and outside the U.S., contestants would “board a chartered flight to the West African country of The Gambia, where they will rediscover the culture, history, and beauty of the African people.” There is a rhetorical synecdoche that operates in the sentence, in the press release, and in the pageant organizers’ decision

³¹ Ma, 18-25. In 2008, those numbers were twenty-three contestants, eleven from the Bay Area, and twelve listed as being at least partially of Chinese descent; in 2007, twenty-one contestants, eleven from the bay area, twelve of Chinese descent; in 2006, twenty contestants, nine from the Bay Area, twelve of Chinese descent. See Li, 18-19; Ma and Wong, 18-19; Ma and Jay, 18-19.

to hold Miss Black USA in The Gambia. The Gambian people are generalized as “the African people.” The Gambia stands in for the entire African continent, which the press release argues may not be where contestants “live” but is ultimately where contestants “come from,” a place to which they must have ties in some way, because a person can only “rediscover” what she has already discovered once before.³²

The press release does not make clear all the reasons Miss Black USA organizers decided to hold their pageant in The Gambia, specifically, but it does enumerate some. In particular, “The Gambia is most notably known as the birthplace of Kunte Kinte and where the late African-American author, Alex Haley filmed the highly acclaimed television mini series ‘ROOTS.’” The use of passive voice leaves it open to speculation to whom it is that the nation of The Gambia “is most notably known” in the way described. This is especially the case given that the press release goes on to say, “The Gambia, small as it is in terms of land mass, is a ‘cultural giant’ by any stretch of the imagination. With a land area of only 11000 square kilometers, it is home to several ethnic groups, each with their own distinct cultural forms and traditions.” It seems inexplicable why such a “cultural giant,” home to so many on the African continent, would be best known for an American TV miniseries based on a book by an African American author.

The explanation, though, is that the perspective from which the press release is written, is the perspective of a black individual in the U.S. who works for the Miss Black USA Pageant. This is a vantage point from which The Gambia, and Africa more broadly, are made mostly visible through U.S. literature and popular culture, and mostly relevant as the ancestral homeland of African Americans, especially famous African Americans

³² “Pageant Information,” *Miss Black USA Scholarship Pageant*.

like Alex Haley. In the 2007 Miss Black USA Pageant program, founder Karen Arrington echoes the sentiments expressed in the press release: “This year, thanks to the hospitality of His Excellency Yahya A.J.J. Jammeh, the pageant has traveled to The Gambia, West Africa, our ancestral home.”³³ Haley’s ancestral home is generalized to be “our ancestral home,” where it is unclear whether “our” refers to pageant participants, African Americans, or a different, equally unspecified group. One thing is meaningful about Arrington’s statement, though. Both her comments and that year’s pageant theme, “A Royal Journey Back to Our Roots”—where “Roots” infers individual and collective heritage as well as Haley’s book and miniseries—demonstrate how powerful popular culture can be as a medium through which communities are imagined and homelands understood to be one’s own.

On the page opposite Arrington’s welcome message in the 2007 Miss Black USA Pageant Program is another welcome message, from His Excellency The President Alhaji Yahya A.J.J. Jammeh, the president of The Gambia. In his greetings, Jammeh thanks the organizers of the pageant, as he believes, “The choice of The Gambia as host is not only an indication of the historic and brotherly ties that bind us together as one people, but also of the trust and confidence in our capacity to handle the logistic requirements of the Pageant.” Much of Jammeh’s comments are along the lines of trust and confidence, as he seems concerned with Americans’ negative perceptions about the African continent. To highlight The Gambia’s record of success in various areas, Jammeh points out, “Indeed, The Gambia has hosted similar international events—Miss Millenium, Miss Ecowas, as

³³ Karen Arrington, “Welcome to the Miss Black USA Scholarship Pageant,” *Miss Black USA Scholarship Pageant Celebrating 20 Years of Scholarship, Beauty & Achievement: A Royal Journey Back to Our Roots*, 4.

well as the AU Summit which brought together over 30 Heads of State and Government.”³⁴

It seems at first odd that Jammeh would enumerate beauty pageants ahead of the AU Summit in his statement, as though popular culture were of greater import than politics. However, what becomes clear is that he is aware both of his audience and of the longstanding connections between pageantry and tourism: “The delegates and entire Miss Black USA family are warmly welcomed to The Gambia.... We want all of you therefore to freely move out of your hotels and mingle with your Gambian brothers and sisters, thereby experiencing the true Gambian culture and hospitality firsthand. During your visit, we want you to take time and enjoy the agreeable climate, the exotic fauna and flora in tranquil settings, and our unpolluted sandy beaches.”³⁵

Jammeh seems to have multiple aims in presenting The Gambia in this paradisiacal way to readers of the pageant program. One is to make them feel comfortable in their visit. Another is to educate them about the continent, as he “strongly believe[s] that after your sojourn in The Gambia, you will be counted among the young ambassadors of Africa and help dispel most of the negative information on Africa which, in itself, is a manifestation of the racist sentiments against the Black race.” Jammeh’s use of the term “ambassadors” harkens back to the diplomatic projects of Miss Universe organizers in the 1950s. Additionally, though, his inclusion of the phrase “racist sentiments against the Black race” is part of a larger effort to draw a connection between Miss Black USA Pageant participants and the African continent. To that end, he says, “We also enjoin you to consider your stay in The Gambia as a cultural journey to your

³⁴ Jammeh, 5.

³⁵ Ibid.

home in Africa away from your home in the USA. We do hope that your visit will not begin and end with the pageant, but that it will help build a bridge between African-Americans and Gambians in particular, and diversify our relationship to all levels and spheres.”³⁶ Addressing pageant participants as “our brothers and sisters from the Diaspora,” Jammeh utilizes the same language as pageant organizers did in their press release to imagine the Miss Black USA Pageant and those who participate in it as “bridges” between “here” and “there.”

Despite such diasporic thinking, in years when the pageant is not so explicitly identified with the African continent, one thing that emerges is a privileging of African American identities over other black identities that might be represented by contestants in the pageant. In 2008, the Miss Black USA Pageant partnered with Heart Truth: A National Awareness Campaign for Women About Heart Disease. As part of the pageant week events, there was a public ladies luncheon for which contestants were required, and guests encouraged, to come wearing the symbol of the Heart Truth campaign: a red dress. At the “Red Dress Luncheon” various individuals spoke on the subject of black women and heart disease, repeatedly making reference to those gathered in the room by saying, “We as African American women.” The address carried the inherent assumption that the contestants, who were all present at the event, were African American. Yet, the Miss Black USA eligibility rules, unlike those for Miss Latina US or Miss Asian America, make no mention at all of racial or ethnic requirements. Therefore, a contestant of any ethnic background can compete in the national pageant, as long as she has self-selected as “black” and made it through a state pageant or the at-large application process.

³⁶ Ibid.

The result is that contestants in the Miss Black USA Pageant may be Afro-Caribbean, Afro-Latina, aboriginal Australians, or immigrants directly from Africa, and yet they are addressed as “we African American women.” One of the challenges of the term “African American” is that it is an ethnic term that has come into use as a racial designation. The noun “American” in the phrase “African American,” though, is not used in a hemispheric way to indicate a resident of any part of the Americas. Rather, the term “African American” is used actually to distinguish U.S. blacks from others in the Americas and in the world. “African American,” then, is a more specific and exclusive identifier than “black.” The pageant may be called Miss Black USA, but the “we African American women” rhetoric of participants causes other black identities to be invisible.

Syntactically, “African American” is a diasporic term, one that connotes both there (Africa) and here (America). The definition of diaspora indicates that if the communities represented in pageantry are communities in diaspora, then they are linked to other people located outside the United States. Yet, the rhetoric present at the Miss Black USA Pageant is U.S.-centered. Africa may be where contestants “come from” but only in a distant, ancestral way. Miss Black USA, like much of African American Studies, does not focus on ethnic difference. And that is where the logics of Asian American Studies and Latino studies, and of the Miss Asian America and Miss Latina US Pageants, are useful. The notion of panethnicity can be applied to Miss Black USA to reveal and challenge the homogenizing assumption that “black” in the U.S. equates to “African American.” Though the historical conditions for each of-color community’s entry into the United States were very different, blackness in the U.S. was created just as Asian Americanness and latinidad were: as a conflation of distinct ethnicities into a

single group. Thus, positive panethnic identification can work in revealing the heterogeneity—of histories, ethnicities, and countries of origin—of blackness in the U.S. and combating the homogenizing force of the term when it is used to designate race alone. This especially is a reminder that, as with panethnicity, hegemony operates even when members of a community think of themselves as diasporic, and that in re-centering on the margins, the marginalized can create new exclusions of their own.

“Ways to Stay and Be Different”

Although the choice to stage a pageant outside the U.S. enacts diasporic movement back to the homeland, that movement is only ever intended to be temporary. The national identity performed in Miss Black USA, Miss Asian America, and Miss Latina US is not about leaving, but rather, as Clifford says, about “ways to stay and be different.” Panethnicity and diaspora make present-day imagined national spaces—the Black USA, Asian America, the Latina US—transnational. In those spaces, as represented through national pageantry, the “ethnic local” replaces the geographic local as a more salient representation of who is similar and who most authentically belongs.

Still, a “Black USA” is in the USA, and an “Asian America” is American. While those spaces are performed as diasporic and transnational, they remain centered on the United States of America. As such, the alternative geographical formulations may influence dominant narratives of national identity, but they are also still influenced by the histories and challenges presented by the workings of race and ethnicity in minoritized communities. And the formation even of alternative national identities, ones that center the margins, reinforces the reality that national identity—like race, gender, class,

sexuality, and culture—is not a static product. It is a process that, no matter how it is positioned, will continue, by its nature, to exclude.