

**Beauty, Bodies, and Boundaries
Pageants, Race, and U.S. National Identity**

by

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In loving memory of Susan Peterson-Pace and Oni Faida Lampley,
who knew I could, long before I even imagined that I might.

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I have always been a nerd. In my senior year of high school, I was one of a number of students named an “Academic All-Star” by my local newspaper. A reporter working on the story interviewed each of us to ask what allowed us to do what we did in school, and my response at the time was, “Self-motivation: my parents got me started, and I did the rest myself.”

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CHAPTER ONE

Named After the Nation Introduction

In October of 2009, Nikole Churchill was crowned Miss Hampton University. As titleholder, Churchill would represent Hampton, a Historically Black College/University (HBCU), both as the school's homecoming queen and as a contestant in the Miss Virginia Pageant, a state contest the winner of which would go on to compete for Miss America. Churchill's win initiated so much controversy in the Hampton community that the story made news in major media outlets nationwide. For the first time in the history of this HBCU, their homecoming queen was not black.

News headlines and blog posts like "Crowning of White Miss Hampton Causes Controversy" and "The Newly Crowned Miss Hampton University is Not Black. OMG!"¹ called attention to Churchill's racialized difference on a campus where over ninety percent of the student population was black. Yet some Hampton students insisted that their objections were not about race. The fact that Churchill did not attend the school's main campus in Hampton, Virginia, made her an outsider in other ways as well. "Because she goes to the satellite campus in Virginia Beach," said one Hampton student in a local

¹ "Crowning of White Miss Hampton Causes Controversy," *Daily Press*, October 12, 2009; Erika Niedowski, "The Newly Crowned Miss Hampton University is Not Black. OMG!" *WashingtonCityPaper.com: City Desk*, October 13, 2009, <http://www.washingtoncitypaper.com/blogs/citydesk/2009/10/13/the-newly-crowned-miss-hampton-university-is-not-black-omg/>, Accessed May 16, 2010.

news interview, “she can’t adequately represent us, because she’s not around us.”²

Churchill, however, was unconvinced that the opposition she was experiencing was based in geography. Seeking support in what she was sure was a racially charged, even hostile, environment, the new representative of Hampton’s student body appealed to someone she thought would understand her position: President Barack Obama, the new representative of the national body of the United States of America.

The two had much in common, Churchill said in a letter she wrote to President Obama asking him to come speak at her school. In their respective positions, she felt that they were both “making changes in hopes people can stop placing so much focus on our skin color by letting that define what we can, cannot, should, and/or should not do.”³ Further, both Churchill and Obama, Churchill pointed out, had grown up in Hawai‘i, a place with a history of being looked upon as a sort of multicultural paradise within the nation. Hawai‘i had been the second of only two states in the country where white persons of European descent were not a majority population.⁴ Hawai‘i also had, as of 2008, the highest population of mixed-race individuals in the United States of America. It was along those very lines that Churchill and Obama had another similarity, one that went unmentioned in Churchill’s letter. Despite popular designations of him as “the first black President” and her as “the first white Miss Hampton,” they were actually both mixed race. Obama had a black Kenyan father and had been raised by his white

² “New Miss Hampton University Makes History,” October 21, 2009, <http://multimedia.boston.com/m/26995914/new-miss-hampton-university-makes-history.htm>, Accessed May 17, 2010.

³ Nikole Churchill, “Letter to President Barack Obama (D): Hampton University.” *Congress.org*, October 11, 2009, http://www.congress.org/congressorg/bio/userletter/?letter_id=4066513461&content_dir=politicsol, Accessed October 23, 2009.

⁴ The other state was New Mexico, where the majority of the population now is white, including individuals who identify as white persons of Hispanic origin. Hawai‘i’s current population, on the other hand, is primarily of Asian descent.

American mother. Churchill's mother was Italian, and though media coverage made no specific reference to her father's ethnic background, there was frequent mention of the fact that he was from Guam.⁵ In summary, Churchill revealed, for those and other reasons, "People are even nicknaming me, 'lil Obama.'"⁶

Perhaps their most important commonality, the one that made Obama and Churchill newsworthy, was that they had both been selected to hold titles with representational status. Of this, Churchill did make mention, saying, "I am proud to represent Hampton University and I am so proud having you to represent our home, our country." Because of the confluence of race and representation in each of their stories, Churchill wrote to Obama, "I feel as though you could relate to my situation, which is why I immediately wanted to contact you."⁷ Unfortunately, her choice to do just that only strengthened opposition from members of the Hampton University community, who felt Churchill was airing their dirty laundry by suggesting to a national public that racial discrimination existed at an HBCU. Churchill's letter was published on the Congress.org website, cataloged under the topic "Civil Rights." The school was shamed, and pageant officials encouraged Churchill to go public again, this time to apologize. When she did, within a week of sending her original letter, various media sources picked up her apology as well. As a brand new Miss Hampton University and a relatively new student at the

⁵ See, for instance, Niedowski, "The Newly Crowned Miss Hampton University is Not Black. OMG!"; Jeff Greer, "Crowning of First Nonblack Miss Hampton University Creates Stir," *U.S. News & World Report*, October 23, 2009, <http://www.usnews.com/blogs/paper-trail/2009/10/23/crowning-of-first-nonblack-miss-hampton-university-creates-stir.html>, Accessed May 16, 2010.

⁶ Churchill, "Letter to President Barack Obama."

⁷ Ibid.

school, Churchill explained “that she wasn't familiar with HU protocol and didn't initially realize she overstepped her boundaries by taking her complaint directly to Obama.”⁸

The director of the Miss Hampton University Pageant was more worried about placements than protocols. She said of Churchill, “As far as I'm concerned, we need to get her ready to serve HU and to move on and represent us at Miss Virginia.”⁹ At the Miss Virginia Pageant, though, Churchill was apparently not ready enough to win. She lost to a black woman, Caressa Cameron, from Fredericksburg, VA. Cameron went on to compete as Miss Virginia in the January 2010 Miss America Pageant, where she won the national title. In doing so, Cameron became the tenth Miss America of color in the pageant’s eighty-nine-year history and only the seventh black Miss America since Vanessa Williams’s historic win in 1983.¹⁰

Though Cameron was the first black woman to win Miss America after five consecutive years of white women titleholders, her achievement drew very little attention at all. This was a radical shift from twenty-six years prior, when a national media storm had surrounded Williams, the first black woman to hold the title and the most famous of all Miss Americas. Although Williams carries to this day the title of “first black Miss America,” at the time she won the pageant her looks did not lend themselves to easy and immediate racial classification. Many who were viewing the pageant when Williams won had a similar experience to cultural critic Gerald Early, who confessed, “I had no idea while I watched the telecast that our new Miss America, then Miss New York, was black. I was watching the show on a snowy black and white television and the girls seemed to

⁸ “Miss Hampton University apologizes for letter to President Obama,” *Hampton Roads News: Daily news, local news and tv news - WTKR*, October 20, 2009, <http://www.wtkr.com>, Accessed October 20, 2009.

⁹ Greer, “Crowning of First Nonblack Miss Hampton University Creates Stir.”

¹⁰ “Our Miss Americas,” *Miss America*, <http://www.missamerica.org/our-miss-americas/miss-america-history.aspx>, Accessed June 24, 2010.

be either olive or alabaster. I had, rather uncharitably, assumed all the contestants were white.”¹¹ The light-skinned, green-eyed Williams drew opposition from various groups: those that thought she should not represent the United States of America because she was black and those that thought she should not represent black Americans because she was not black enough.¹² In the end, though, it was those that thought she should not represent the wholesome, girl-next-door image of Miss America who won out. Williams was compelled to resign the position as a result of sexually explicit photos released in *Penthouse* magazine, months before the end of her reign as Miss America in 1984, and hers became the best-known story in U.S. pageant history.

The thread woven through all the stories—Williams, Cameron, and Churchill—is a complex interplay among race, time, and representation that is especially visible in pageantry. In 1983, Williams’s light-skinned blackness raised questions about her ability to represent either the U.S. or the black communities within it. Twenty-six years later, a mixed-race U.S. President received a letter from a mixed-race Miss Hampton University, seeking his support against her opponents, who questioned her ability to represent a black community as well. Soon after, when a black woman beat out that mixed-race woman to win Miss America in 2010, that black woman’s ability to represent the nation was no longer in question the way it had been with Williams decades before.

What the stories also highlight is the reality that racial designations, and the “appropriateness” of racialized representation, vary by place as well. On the Historically

¹¹ Gerald Early, “Waiting for Miss America,” in *“There She Is, Miss America”*: *The Politics of Sex, Beauty, and Race in America’s Most Famous Pageant*, ed. Elwood Watson and Darcy Martin, (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), 176.

¹² The Congress of Racial Equality, a civil rights group headquartered in Harlem in Williams’s home state of New York, even issued a statement saying that neither Williams’ nor her mixed-race first runner-up Suzette Charles were “true representatives of Black people, because the features of ‘these attractive and talented young women are far closer to Mediterranean or Latino types than to classic black features.’” See “CORE: Miss America is not a Black beauty,” *New York Amsterdam News*, September 24, 1983, 1, 46.

Black campus where she was the first nonblack homecoming queen, a woman with a white mother and a father from the Pacific Islands was considered “white.” But in the broader national context where he was the first nonwhite president, a man with a white mother and a father from Kenya was considered, simply, “black.” Years prior, also in a national context, a light-skinned woman with light hair and green eyes was considered “black” but not “black enough.” What is clear in all three situations is that race is not only about perception—whether, for instance, Williams “looked black” or Churchill “looked white”—it is also about context and, as Churchill learned in the context of her Historically Black institution and its historically black beauty pageant, race is about representation as well.

In these ways, what happens in pageants raises important questions about race and representation in American culture. What does the change in winners each year mean about the communities those winners represent? What meanings are produced and circulated in mainstream pageants like Miss America with respect to race and other identity categories like gender, class, sexuality, and nation? What meanings are produced and circulated in pageants for communities of color? And why do people not directly involved in pageantry, like the objecting students at Hampton University, care what happens in pageants at all?

Pageantry is a unique site. It is the only kind of cultural performance wherein one woman is awarded, for a year, the power to represent an entire community, whether that community is as small as Hampton University or as large as the United States of America. Pageants are also cultural productions with a wide variety of participants—organizers, sponsors, audiences, contestants, winners—all of whom have a vested interest

in the pageant, its outcome, and the representational work it does or claims to do. Pageants are not simply reflections of changing norms about race and community. Pageants are part of broader discourses that take place in culture and politics, which do not just reflect race but actually produce it. Pageants can also get national attention, as evidenced in Churchill and Williams's stories, and therefore they are relevant nationally. It is because pageants claim to do the impossible work of producing a single representative of often expansive, complex, and heterogeneous communities that, when Miss America is black for the first time or Miss Hampton University is not, people suddenly care about who beauty queens are, where they are from, how they look, and what they do. And it is the impossibility of the task that makes pageantry worth studying, because in hundreds of pageants nationwide each year, people continue to undertake that impossible work nonetheless.

“The Changes Our Nation Is Making”: Statement of Purpose and Arguments

As Miss Hampton University, Nikole Churchill was certainly aware that the students she was representing, at least, had strong opinions about who she was, where she was from, how she looked, and what she did. Recognizing how race, representation, and nation all mattered in her own pageant story, Churchill implored President Obama, “I am hoping that perhaps you would be able to make an appearance to my campus, Hampton University, so that my fellow Hamptonians can stop focusing so much on the color of my skin and doubting my abilities to represent, but rather be proud of the changes our nation is making towards accepting diversity.”¹³ Like Churchill, I recognize that, in pageantry, connections between “the color of...skin” and a person’s “abilities to represent” are

¹³ Churchill, “Letter to President Barack Obama.”

especially salient. Furthermore, I am interested in how the “changes our nation is making” are expressed and produced through pageantry, even in ways that are visible to people not directly involved in pageants themselves.

The purpose of this project is to describe relationships among race, gender, and U.S. national identity, in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, using beauty pageants as case studies. In this project, I argue that pageantry is an important site for the production of race, gender, power, privilege, and nation. More specifically, ideal femininity and the women’s bodies selected to represent those gendered ideals are key focal points out of which race, nation, and the relationships between them emerge. I argue further that histories of pageantry are intricately linked with histories of U.S. colonialism, empire, and global capitalism, and that the bodies that represent the nation in pageantry change along with changes in foreign and domestic policies. Finally, I argue that communities of color have engaged those histories and utilized pageantry strategically, by insisting on the centrality of people of color to U.S. national identity, and by reimagining the nation as a transnational space where people of color are not systematically excluded.

I use the term “national identity” to refer to the ways in which a group of people understand themselves in relationship to each other, as part of a nation. Of course, while I employ the singular noun “identity,” the very notion of national identity suggests plurality, since not all individuals within a nation understand their relationships to all other individuals in the same way. Also, not all individuals within a nation have equal power to share their understandings with, or impose them upon, other members of the nation. Some conceptualizations of national identity are dominant, because they are

connected, for instance, to national media outlets or powerful corporate funding structures and therefore circulate more readily and more broadly than other national identities. However, those conceptualizations of national identity that are not dominant still circulate, if in a more limited way, and can even have an impact on dominant national identities. In recognition of that reality, this project examines how multiple national identities are produced and expressed through national pageants in the United States of America.

I draw my definition of national identity from Benedict Anderson's definition of "nation." In his book *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origins and Spread of Nationalism*, Anderson defines a nation as "an imagined political community—and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign."¹⁴ I stretch Anderson's parameters by understanding the nation to be a cultural community as well as a political one. That is to say that national identity can exist, as it does in pageantry, even in the absence of any formal political structure like a national government to tie a community together.

Nonetheless, I agree with Anderson's suggestion that nations are imagined, because "members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion."¹⁵ Anderson argues that widely available, vernacular, print media first allowed broad readerships in eighteenth-century Europe to imagine themselves as part of a national reading public. In the twentieth- and twenty-first-century United States—with the popularity of film, video, the internet, and televised media—visual images have become another important medium of national identity. In such a field, the national

¹⁴ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origins and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1991), 6.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

beauty queen serves as an embodied “image of... communion.” She is a visible symbol, a representation of the nation, through which individuals can imagine themselves to be similar to one another because they can imagine themselves, in some way, to be similar to her.

I use the term “race” as a concept that brings together embodied representations and imaginings of similarity, which are central both to national identity and to pageantry. Michael Omi and Howard Winant, in their seminal text *Racial Formation in the United States* define race as “a concept which signifies and symbolizes social conflicts and interests by referring to different types of human bodies.”¹⁶ Omi and Winant’s assertion, and that of numerous other scholars whose work preceded and followed theirs, is that race does not adhere to people’s bodies. Race is not a genetic condition that is inherent to each individual at or before birth. As sociologist Maxine Leeds Craig points out, “If race was an essence, entirely constituted biologically in the body, then its meaning would be stable throughout time. But race, for all of the intransigence of racial domination, is much more fluid than that.”¹⁷ Even though race is not natural or biological, it is nonetheless real. It is a social, cultural, and historical system of representing similarities and differences among people, which takes as its primary cues the way humans look and where, when, and to whom they are born. The meanings of race may not be stable, but race is meaningful nonetheless.

¹⁶ Michael Omi and Howard Winant, *Racial Formation in the United States: From the 1960s to the 1990s* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 55. Authors’ emphasis.

¹⁷ Maxine Leeds Craig, *Ain’t I a Beauty Queen: Black Women, Beauty, and the Politics of Race* (Oxford: Oxford University Press), 9.

I focus on race because it is, as Omi and Winant insist, a concept that “continues to play a fundamental role in structuring and representing the social world.”¹⁸ Beyond that, though, I focus on race in the context of national identity because race and nation are inherent to one another. Philosopher Etienne Balibar explains that “discourses of race and nation are never very far apart.”¹⁹ This is because, “racism is not an ‘expression’ of nationalism, but *a supplement of nationalism* or more precisely *a supplement internal to nationalism*.”²⁰ Balibar’s argument is that racism and nationalism are mutually constitutive. They make one another possible, and they make one another happen. This is true not merely in a theoretical way but rather because, as Omi and Winant indicate about race, that is how those phenomena have been articulated historically. In other words, it is as impossible to understand race and nation apart from one another as it is to select one woman to be a representative of both. And that impossibility makes race and nation worth exploring in tandem. I say “race” and “nation” rather than “racism” and “nationalism” because, while my project is centrally about racism, it is less about nationalism. “Nationalism” carries overtones of jingoism, not just identifying collectively but also identifying as “the best” compared to other nations. This project is not a story of American exceptionalism. Instead, it is about national identity: how race and nation are expressed as collective identity through gender and culture, and the inclusions and exclusions that creates.

Beauty pageants are a unique site for revealing relationships among race, nation, identity, gender, and culture. I chose pageantry as an object of study for this project

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Etienne Balibar, “Racism and Nationalism” in Etienne Balibar and Immanuel Wallerstein, *Race, Nation, Class: Ambiguous Identities*, Translation of Etienne Balibar by Chris Turner (London: Verso, 1991), 37.

²⁰ Ibid., 54.

because of three main features of pageants. First, pageants are contests, which means there are winners. A winner is chosen as the one contestant who best embodies the criteria established by those who run the pageant, to represent the community for which the pageant is named. Therefore, a winner—in body, behaviors, personal history, and origin—is a representation of certain ideals of collective identity. Second, because pageants happen annually, they offer a medium through which to track changes in those ideals of collective identity historically. Finally, I chose pageants as a site of study because pageants are performances, and a staged performance with a live audience is a particularly effective reminder that culture and collective identity are created even as they are consumed. Culture and collective identity are processes negotiated by many parties, not static products that remain intact and unchanged through time and space.

Because national identity is a guiding analytic of this project, I focus only on national pageants; this includes both mainstream and what I call “of-color” pageants that originate in the United States of America. I have chosen to use the word “of-color”, rather than the more commonly used “ethnic”, to designate pageants exclusively for women of color—in this project Miss Indian America, Miss Chinatown USA, Miss Black America, Miss Asian America, Miss Black USA, and Miss Latina US. I do this as a way of insisting that, just as whiteness is a race and white people are not raceless, white people are also not without ethnicity. Ethnicity is a term that ties race together with national origin. While I identify as racially black, I consider myself to be ethnically Ghanaian American, a label that indicates my countries of origin by birth and by ancestry. Because white people also have race and countries of origin, there are white ethnics as well. Therefore, the use of the term “ethnic pageant” to indicate pageants for

women of color is misleading. So I choose to use the more specific term “of-color” instead.

In this project, “mainstream” serves as shorthand to designate the longstanding, well-known, widely televised, majority white pageants Miss America, Miss USA, and Miss Universe. I call those pageants “mainstream” because they have been in existence for many years, since 1921 in the case of Miss America and since 1952 in the case of the other two. They are nationally televised, for instance by NBC Universal, which co-owns Miss USA and Miss Universe. They are heavily funded, for instance by Donald Trump, the other co-owner of those two pageants.²¹ Because of longstanding reputations, national media circulation, and the spectacle and prize money that corporate funding facilitates, mainstream pageants can attract and accommodate many more participants than the other pageants included in this study. In 2009, for example, over 12,000 women competed in the entire Miss America Pageant system, which includes local pageants like Miss Hampton University, state pageants like Miss Virginia, and the national Miss America Pageant itself.²² At the Miss Latina US Pageant that same year, the total number of contestants was eighteen. For my purposes, the term “mainstream” operates to distinguish between of-color pageants and the Miss America, Miss USA, and Miss Universe Pageants, which in the present day include women of color even though they remain majority white contests.²³

²¹ See “About Us: Corporate History,” *Miss Universe*, <http://www.missuniverse.com/info/corporateinfo>, Accessed June 23, 2010.

²² See “Organization Info: Key Facts and Figures,” *Miss America*, <http://www.missamerica.org/organization-info/key-facts-and-figures.aspx>, Accessed June 24, 2010.

²³ See “Competition Info: 2010 National Contestants,” *Miss America*, <http://www.missamerica.org/competition-info/national-contestants.aspx>, Accessed June 23, 2010; “Contestants,” *Miss USA*, <http://www.missuniverse.com/missusa/members/contestants>, Accessed June 23, 2010; “Contestants,” *Miss Universe*, <http://www.missuniverse.com/members/contestants>, Accessed June 23, 2010.

I use the term “mainstream” with the awareness that it has a tendency to establish a limiting paradigm of margins and centers. A margin-center framework can assume that what is at the center—white, male, native-born, heterosexual, able-bodied, middle- and upper-class—is always at the center. Whatever is not at the center is automatically pushed to the margins, and there is little if any attention paid to what might fall between. Such a simplistic rendering reifies the notion that anything mainstream is normative, and anything else is thus not normal. Although I recognize the limits, I mobilize the framework of margins and centers throughout this text. In doing so, I do not mean to call up an image like facing pages in an unwritten diary, with the mainstream at the spine in the center, the margins at the outer edges, and only empty, unoccupied lines in between. Instead, I imagine something like a geometric plane, extending forever in all directions and composed of an infinite number of points. Any circle drawn in the plane will have its own margin—the outer boundary at the circle’s circumference—and center. Still, there are an infinite number of points that can fit inside the circle, not just empty space. Different points can end up closer to the center or closer to the margins depending on where and how big the circle is drawn, which is itself a reminder that even marginalized communities have their own centers and peripheries. If the circles can overlap and the points themselves can shift, as individual and collective identities do, the image then captures the complex nature of identity, race, culture, and pageantry.

To narrow the focus of this project, then, I only include national pageants for adult women. Though pageants for little girls have gained some prominence in popular culture over the last few years—as depicted in the 2007 film *Little Miss Sunshine* or in the television show *Toddlers and Tiaras*, currently airing on the cable network TLC—I

do not examine them here. While those types of pageants certainly produce, reward, and reinforce ideals of femininity that are particular to the nation in which the contests are held, pageants for little girls are very seldom expressions of collective national identity. Nor do I investigate pageants for gay or straight men in this project. Instead, I focus on women because, as physical and cultural reproducers of the nation, women are particularly apt candidates to stand in for national identity. According to communications scholar Sarah Banet-Weiser, “[T]here are usually two dominant tropes for figuring women as nationalist bodies: first, women are positioned according to the logics of heterosexuality, as the literal ‘bearers’ of the nation, who, through their reproductive capacities, continue the national lineage. . . . A second major trope is women as iconic figures, feminine bodies that are memorialized in their representation of the nation”²⁴

Insofar as a pageant is reminiscent of a debutante ball, contestants, like debutantes coming of age for marriage and motherhood, embody heterosexual availability that metaphorically speaks to their “reproductive capacities.” Even more clearly, the pageant winner is an “iconic figure” that represents the nation. As Miss America, Miss USA, Miss Asian America, or Miss Black USA, the beauty queen bears the nation’s name. Her body and behaviors describe an ideal of who “belongs” in that nation, building national identity around race, gender, and heterosexual desire.

Beauty queens may be the most visible element of a pageant, but winners are by no means the only participants in the performance. At any given pageant, judges vote to determine which contestant will be the winner. Pageant hosts or emcees introduce contestants and judges to the audience. Emcees hand their microphones over to

²⁴ Sarah Banet-Weiser, *The Most Beautiful Girl in the World: Beauty Pageants and National Identity* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1999), 158.

organizers, who appear briefly onstage at some point in the evening to thank sponsors. Sponsors' names appear in the program books that members of the audience flip through as they cheer raucously for their favorite contestant to win. More than any individual's performance of the nation, the beauty pageant is a complex, choreographed production. Contestants, judges, emcees, audiences, sponsors, and organizers all participate in representing the nation.

Out of the various types of pageant participants, my analysis in this project focuses on contestants, winners, and especially organizers. Organizers include pageant founders, presidents, and staff. They are the ones who draft eligibility rules, solicit sponsors, select judges and give them instructions, choose pageant locations, hire volunteers, determine the contestant pool, and write or approve press releases and program books. As a result, organizers have the most profound effect on how pageants look to those outside the pageant, and play the greatest role in articulating the parameters of the community that the pageant is supposed to represent. My project is primarily about how pageant organizers' rhetoric contributes to narratives of national identity. However, in establishing such a focus, I do not mean to suggest that contestants and winners are merely objects, acted upon rhetorically without agency. Therefore, in addition to considering how ideals of femininity and national identity get mapped onto the bodies of beauty queens, each chapter of this text also begins with a story of a contestant or winner who implicitly or explicitly challenged pageant norms. By centering on women of color and focusing on organizers' rhetoric in both mainstream and of-color pageantry, this project demonstrates that when the boundaries of the nation are drawn to center the marginalized rather than the mainstream, the whole idea of what a nation is looks

different than dominant narratives about what is enclosed within the geopolitical nation-state.

“The Opportunity to Achieve Recognition”: Theoretical Framework and Literature Review

Theoretically, this project draws upon and contributes to three main bodies of scholarly literature. The first is a body of literature within American Studies that deals with racial formations and culture. I intervene in that field by bringing it into conversation with a second body of literature: feminist theories of intersectionality. Because intersectional theories tend to focus on the interconstitutive nature of gender, race, class, and sexuality, my intervention in that literature is to use pageantry to demonstrate how nation is not just a geopolitical space but also an identity category. I do so by illustrating how the bodies of women, and the rhetorics applied to those bodies in pageants, produce national identity in and through race, class, gender, and sexuality. Finally, I bring those theories to bear on my own analyses and observations, which contribute most directly to a third area: a growing body of academic literature on pageantry.

My engagement with existing literatures relevant to my work departs from what other scholars have written about race and racial formation. I take the phrase “racial formation” from Omi and Winant, who use it to indicate how race, as a system of representation, varies through time and place. They define racial formation as “the sociohistorical process by which racial categories are created, inhabited, transformed, and

destroyed.”²⁵ Omi and Winant’s analysis demonstrates that the process of racial formation is not dependent just on the whims of individuals but rather is mediated through various institutions. For instance, they refer to “the deep involvement of the state in the organization and interpretation of race.”²⁶ Critical race legal scholar Ian Haney López, even goes so far as to argue that law, a tool of the state, “is one of the most powerful mechanisms by which any society creates, defines, and regulates itself. . . . It follows, then, that to say race is socially constructed is to conclude that . . . law constructs race. Of course, it does so within the larger context of society, and so law is only one of many institutions and forces implicated in the formation of races.”²⁷ I am convinced by Haney López’s assertion, and that of various other critical race theorists, about the importance of law to racial formation. Therefore, I include in this project some examination of notable legal happenings that coincided with notable happenings in pageantry, in order to get a broader understanding of what was working to produce race at given moments in U.S. history. However, my focus is not primarily on the law but rather on another of what Haney López calls the “forces implicated in the formation of races”: culture.

Taking inspiration from historian Vijay Prashad, I understand culture to be a process. Prashad takes issue with ideologies that “see ‘culture’ as a thing rather than as a process.”²⁸ In such misguided interpretations of culture, “‘culture,’ is not treated as a living set of social relations but as a timeless trait.”²⁹ Prashad offers, as a corrective, a

²⁵ Omi and Winant, 55.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 53.

²⁷ Ian F. Haney López, *White By Law: The Legal Construction of Race* (New York: New York University Press, 1996), 9-10.

²⁸ Vijay Prashad, *The Karma of Brown Folk* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), 113.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 112.

theory that posits culture as a process, not as a static product. That is to say that “culture” is not something to be maintained or lost as people move through time and space. Instead, culture is always happening, as “[p]eople adapt and incorporate artifacts from the past in the context of their own particular historical conjuncture, fighting their own battles and struggling with their own contradictions.”³⁰

A pageant is just such an artifact, a cultural practice in existence for the past hundred years that has been adapted to suit the needs and realities of various communities at various historical moments. As a contest involving parties who may disagree about who is best suited to represent the community, a pageant is an enactment of struggles and contradictions. As an annually repeated, live, cultural performance, a pageant is an illustration of how culture is a process, something that happens a bit differently every time. As a representation of a racialized community, a pageant manifests racial formation through culture. As Miss America changes from year to year, we can see in her body, and in people’s reactions to it, how racial categories and their relationship to the nation are “created, inhabited, transformed, and destroyed.”

Prashad’s explication of culture works as a powerful companion piece to feminist philosopher Judith Butler’s theory of performative gender. In her well-known theory, Butler states that “acts, gestures, and desire produce the effect of an internal core or substance, but produce this *on the surface* of the body Such acts, gestures, enactments, generally construed, are *performative* in the sense that the essence or identity that they otherwise purport to express are *fabrications* manufactured and sustained through corporeal signs and other discursive means. That the gendered body is performative suggests that it has no ontological status apart from the various acts which

³⁰ Ibid., 113.

constitute its reality.”³¹ In other words, gender—femininity or masculinity—is not naturally inherent or fixed to bodies. It is created through the repetitive performances. The acts performed create gendered subjectivity in the moment of their performance. Within any given historical moment, some of those acts become “sedimented”, or repeated with such unquestioned regularity that they obscure their own genesis and are understood to be just the way things are. The fact that they are performed at all becomes imperceptible.

Butler’s theory and Prashad’s point out how two things, gender and culture, which popular discourses typically present as fixed are actually processes, like racial formation. Prashad’s work, like Omi and Winant’s, focuses on how culture is a process that changes through history, while Butler’s work illuminates how the sedimentation of things like normative gender actually does the work of hiding the fact that gender has to be produced at all. Taking those theories as a framework, I read pageants as performative sites of culture that produce gender. Pageant judges do not simply choose the one contestant best at being a woman based on some generally understood criteria natural to womanhood. Rather, together with organizers and audiences and sponsors, pageant judges reward certain “acts, gestures, and desire.” Contestants then repeat those acts and gestures, like the stereotypical beauty queen’s smile and wave, and express those desires, like the desire for “world peace.” After enough repetition, the acts, gestures, and desires become codified as normative, and even ideal, femininity. The fact that the winner changes, though, and that different acts, gestures, and desires are rewarded as ideal at different

³¹ Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1999), 173.

times, highlights the reality that gender is fabricated and that particular fabrications are specific to particular historical moments as well.

The work of black feminist theorists like Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw or Patricia Hill Collins demands that any analyses of gender take into account race and class as well. First termed “intersectionality” by Crenshaw, such theories “view race, class, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, and age, among others, as mutually constructing systems of power.”³² The assertion that the systems are “mutually constructing” is the most crucial contribution of intersectionality to feminist theory. In their most sophisticated form, theories about intersectionality are not about how race and gender, for instance, exist separately and then join together like two, distinct lines intersecting at a single point. As feminist literary critic Anne McClintock argues, “race, gender and class are not distinct realms of experience, existing in splendid isolation from each other; nor can they be simply yoked together retrospectively like armatures of Lego. Rather, they come into existence *in and through* relation to each other—if in contradictory and conflictual ways.”³³ The idea of “com[ing] into existence” calls to mind the creation element of Butler’s arguments in *Gender Trouble* and links the intersectional framework back to Butler’s theory of gender performativity. If gender is produced through the repetition of performative acts, as Butler’s fundamental argument suggests, then it is not just an exclusive or isolable gender that is created. Gender, race, class, sexuality, ethnicity, and age are all constituted through those acts, not as distinct entities but rather as a unified subject. That subject is, for the purposes of this project, the beauty queen.

³² Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Sexual Politics: African Americans, Gender, and the New Racism* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 11.

³³ Anne McClintock, *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender and Sexuality in the Colonial Contest* (New York: Routledge, 1995), 5.

I use the idea of national identity, and the figure of the national beauty queen, to demonstrate that nation is an identity category like race and gender. Therefore nation, race, and gender all “come into existence *in and through* relation to each other.” This is true not only in culture but also in geographical space. Katherine McKittrick, in her book *Demonic Grounds: Black Women and the Cartographies of Struggle*, makes arguments about geography that echo Omi and Winant’s conceptualization of racial formation and Butler’s theory about gender. McKittrick states, “Geography is not...secure and unwavering; we produce space, we produce its meanings, and we work very hard to make geography what it is.”³⁴ Geography, like race and gender, only exists, as we understand it, because people attach meanings to it. In other words, “If *who* we see is tied up with *where* we see...some bodies belong, some bodies do not belong, and some bodies are out of place.”³⁵ Out of McKittrick’s analysis of bodies and space together comes the concept of “lived geographies,” because, she argues, “if we pursue the links between practices of domination and...experiences in place, we see that...geographies are lived.”³⁶ This is perhaps nowhere more obvious than in pageantry, where geographies—the meanings of nation and the relationships of different spaces to each other—are actually acted out in the performance, and women’s bodies stand in for the places they represent.

In national pageantry, “lived geographies” means that the winner is selected in a high-stakes situation. The beauty queen, whoever she is and whatever she does, is supposed to stand in for an entire nation during the period of time when she bears the title. Commenting on the syntax of pageant titles like “Miss America”, Banet-Weiser

³⁴ Katherine McKittrick, *Demonic Grounds: Black Women and the Cartographies of Struggle* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006), xi.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, xv.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, xii.

asserts, “[I]t quite clearly calls up a relationship between discourses of nation and discourses of femininity, ultimately formulating the equation, ‘woman=nation.’”³⁷ The woman=nation equation summarizes the cultural work of pageants, which is to choose one woman to represent an entire group of people, based on her embodiment of particular attributes that are imagined as authentic qualities of the nation.

To balance the equation, it is important that the woman representative have particular racialized features. Banet-Weiser argues, “Pageants are not only about gender and nation, they are also always (and increasingly visibly) about race and nation; more specifically, they are about gender and nation as racialized categories. When we take into account these facets of the specific cultural work that is performed and actualized within beauty pageants, we automatically disrupt the simple equation of woman=nation.”³⁸ In fact, what pageantry reveals is that woman=nation is a deceptively simple rendering of very complex identities on both sides of the equation. Also, because it is an equation, a change on one side automatically produces a change on the other. When the woman in question is Miss Asian America or Miss Black America rather than Miss America, that necessarily means that the nation the woman represents—Asian America or Black America rather than just America—must also be different for the equation to balance again.

Scholarly examinations of pageants in communities of color have focused on that relationship between race and gender on one hand and nation and authenticity on the other. Most scholars of of-color pageants, though, restrict their explorations to single-race or single-ethnicity pageants. My work draws on those studies but also crosses boundaries

³⁷ Sarah Banet-Weiser, *The Most Beautiful Girl in the World: Beauty Pageants and National Identity* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1999), 6.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 8.

of race and ethnicity. I do so in order to tell a more complex story about various marginalized groups and how they posit ideals of femininity in the context of ideals of nationhood. It is also a story about how those ideals shift depending on the historical realities of each community's relationship to the U.S. state and to dominant cultural notions of Americanness. In her history of the Miss Chinatown USA Pageant, Judy Tzu-Chun Wu suggests one reason that of-color pageants are important to consider in the broader field of U.S. pageantry: "Because of the racial discrimination against minorities in mainstream pageants such as the Miss America contest, the Miss Chinatown U.S.A. and other ethnic pageants gave women of those backgrounds the opportunity to achieve recognition."³⁹ However, the implications of of-color pageantry go well beyond individual achievement or recognition.

Instead, Maxine Leeds Craig's work on black pageants in the U.S. enumerates the various types of cultural work that of-color pageants do: "The first Miss Black America pageant challenged racial conventions, reinforced gender norms, and celebrated middle-class aspirations all at the same moment."⁴⁰ Agreeing on the point about "middle-class aspirations" in particular, Nhi T. Lieu makes a similar observation about Vietnamese American *ao dai* pageants, which she calls "one of the most visible examples of Vietnamese immigrants trying to negotiate the process of assimilating into bourgeois American culture while remaining ethnically Vietnamese."⁴¹ What Craig and Lieu suggest about these of-color pageants is that even while they represent attempts to

³⁹ 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): 19.

⁴⁰ Maxine Leeds Craig, *Ain't I a Beauty Queen: Black Women, Beauty, and the Politics of Race* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 14.

⁴¹ Nhi T. Lieu, "Remembering 'the Nation' Through Pageantry: Femininity and the Politics of Vietnamese Womanhood in the *Hoa Hau Ao Dai* Contest," *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies* 21, no. 1/2 (Spring 2000): 129.

maintain a racial or ethnic separation from mainstream pageants, their tendencies nonetheless reinforce and reproduce U.S. bourgeois ideals.

Thus, of-color beauty pageants may be read as slight revisions of mainstream pageants. For instance, in the case of the Miss Navajo Nation Pageant, Jennifer Nez Denetdale writes, “Although Miss Navajo Nation embodies Navajo cultural values associated with ideal womanhood, we must also acknowledge that beauty pageants are rooted in white middle-class values that present femininity as values of chastity, morality, and virtue. The criteria for Miss Navajo are influenced and shaped by colonialist beliefs about the place of women and their symbolic value as representatives of the Nation.”⁴² Because the contemporary beauty pageant is inherently a bourgeois performance, that means that no matter which community is holding the pageant, there are limits to what it can express. Of-color pageants are locations where women of color achieve recognition both as beautiful and as authentic members of communities that construct and are constructed by the pageants. However, they are also locations where those communities assert their belonging in the American nation—by way of white, bourgeois class—through the feminine bodies of the contestants, which remain all the while ethnically “authentic.”

Despite the fact that pageants are “rooted in white middle-class values” and “shaped by colonialist beliefs,” communities of color hold pageants anyway. And one fundamental question to ask in the study of of-color pageants is why that is the case. Shirley Jennifer Lim’s explanation is that “[p]ageants are compelling to racial minority communities because they allow them to enact revised histories and to imagine

⁴² Jennifer Nez Denetdale, “Chairmen, Presidents, and Princesses: The Navajo Nation, Gender, and the Politics of Tradition,” *Wicazo Sa Review* 21, no. 1 (Spring 2006): 20.

alternative futures.”⁴³ My intervention is to argue that rearticulating the nation is the form those revisions take. For communities of color in the United States, national pageantry is a means of producing alternative national spaces through cultural representations of the nation. After all, a national Miss Latina US Pageant presupposes, and participates in the formation of, the actual existence of a “Latina US.” In this way, national of-color pageantry not only performs alternatives to the U.S. nation-state; of-color pageantry also performs alternatives to the very idea of nation. If the “Latina US,” for instance, exists either as a nation-within-the-nation or as a transnational collection of various Latino ethnicities, then nation can be understood as a panethnic or diasporic cultural formulation, not just a fixed geopolitical entity. And the national beauty queen can be understood as the ideal national subject, a living, changing marker of historical shifts in national identity.

In order to provide a broad description of relationships between race and U.S. national identity in pageantry, this project expands upon the existing scholarly literature on beauty pageants. To date, there have been a number of texts written about the Miss America Pageant,⁴⁴ and in the past ten years various authors mentioned above have added complexity to the study of pageantry by focusing on pageants in communities of color. However, no monograph yet exists that analyzes pageants like Miss Asian America, Miss Black USA, and Miss Latina US, which have not yet received any scholarly attention at

⁴³ Shirley Jennifer Lim, *A Feeling of Belonging: Asian American Women's Public Culture, 1930-1960* (New York: New York University Press, 2006), 147.

⁴⁴ These include Banet-Weiser; 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); 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); Frank Deford, *There She Is: The Life and Times of Miss America* (New York: The Viking Press, 1971); Michelle Ferrari, *American Experience: Miss America*, DVD, directed by Lisa Ades (New York: Clio, Inc. and Orchard Films, 2002).

all. In addition, while the work of other scholars tends to examine pageants in only one racialized or ethnic community at a time, this project explores black, Asian American, white, Native, and Latina pageants side by side. By doing so, my aim is to demonstrate how the issues typically associated with each of those communities emerge in the other communities' pageants as well. In other words, the logics of ethnic studies typically align race and diaspora with black communities, immigration and panethnicity with Asian American and Latino communities, and colonialism and indigeneity with Native communities. Yet the complex cultural work of pageantry demonstrates how each issue is relevant to the other communities as well.

“I, Too, Am Beautiful”: Methodology and Chapter Descriptions

As a means of accessing the complexities of pageantry and shifts in national identity over time, my project utilizes an intersectional, feminist methodology wherein I apply the literary technique of close reading to historical documents—specifically pageant program books and newspaper articles—and to data collected via ethnographic fieldwork. My project is an intersectional feminist project because it foregrounds gender and race, in particular racialized normative femininity, as a way of investigating relationships of power in the context of the nation. Furthermore, I consider the lived, personal experiences of individuals to be politically meaningful and to be viable sites of academic inquiry. I began this work by surveying secondary materials written by other scholars of pageantry, in order to gain an understanding of conversations taking place in that field. I then sought out archival sources to get a sense of how pageant organizers and contestants, who most often speak to newspaper reporters, present their pageants to a

national reading public. The primary texts I analyzed included newspaper articles from major news outlets like *The New York Times* and the *Los Angeles Times*, as well as press releases from pageant organizers themselves. I also examined original pageant program books to see what pageant organizers, who edit those programs, present to a public more internal to the pageants: the audience. Because of my background and training as a student of literature, I employed close reading as a necessary method for revealing patterns and contradictions in the rhetoric of pageant organizers.

In a project that is not just about representation and rhetoric but also about lived geographies, it was important for me to go beyond what I could learn from texts. Therefore, I conducted multi-site, event-based photoethnography at the Miss Asian America, Miss Black USA, and Miss Latina US Pageants. I originally chose those three contests because they are panethnic, of-color pageants that all began at the same time—in the mid 1980s, contemporaneous with Vanessa Williams’s Miss America win—and have continued to the present day. I first attended the Miss Asian America Pageant with a VIP ticket, which gave me access to the VIP reception the night before the pageant as well as to seats at the pageant itself that would facilitate photographing the public performance. I attended the Miss Asian America Pageant a total of four times and on the last two occasions conducted participant-observations at public events during all of Pageant Week, the entire week leading up to the final pageant night. I conducted participant-observations and took photographs during one Miss Black USA Pageant Week. That is because there was one year in which the Miss Black USA Pageant was not held, one year in which it was held outside the country and therefore cost-prohibitive, and a third year in which it was held at the same time that I was conducting fieldwork at the Miss Asian

America Pageant. For similar reasons—because it took place outside the country one year and not at all another—my Miss Latina US fieldwork is limited to one pageant night.

I refer to my fieldwork not just as ethnographic but also as photoethnographic, because of the importance of photography to the participant-observations I conducted at Miss Asian America and Miss Black USA. As a result of my limited fieldwork at the Miss Latina US Pageant, and the fact that I was not permitted to take photographs as a member of the audience, I do not include photographs from that pageant in this project. However, photographing the Miss Black USA and Miss Asian America Pageants was central to my ethnographic methodology, as was including those photographs in Chapter Five of this text. Pageantry is visual, and therefore analyses of pageantry are best captured in images as well as in text. I utilized photoethnographic methods in this project because they were crucial for accessing the lived, personal experiences of pageant participants.

My narrative about pageant participants begins with the first pageant to select Miss America in Atlantic City in 1921 and ends with panethnic, of-color pageants in the first decade of the twenty-first century. Because much has already been written about Vanessa Williams, the most famous beauty queen in the history of U.S. pageantry, I do not address Williams in this project.⁴⁵ Instead, I tell a story of U.S. pageantry leading up to and following Williams's reign as Miss America. In my story, each chapter is a snapshot of one decade when an important "first" took place in U.S. pageantry.

Altogether, this project examines why the popularity of pageantry has waxed and waned at particular moments; how the meanings of race, gender, and nation expressed through

⁴⁵ See, among others, Early; Banet-Weiser, 123-152; and K. Sue Jewell, *From Mammy to Miss America and Beyond: Cultural Images and the Shaping of U.S. Social Policy* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 36, 52-54, 182, and 188.

different pageants have changed over time; and how pageants have been part of a much larger field of social, political, and cultural change at times of international conflict and major shifts in power within the nation.

The second chapter of this text is a history of the Miss America Pageant in the 1920s, when that pageant began. The chapter examines key legal and political happenings in the 1920s U.S., including the ratification of the Women's Suffrage Amendment to the U.S. Constitution, the anti-miscegenation case *Kirby v. Kirby*, the landmark naturalization cases *Takao Ozawa vs. United States* and *United States vs. Bhagat Singh Thind*, the Cable Act, the Immigration and Nationality Act, and the Indian Citizenship Act of 1924. Taking those events as background, I read the inception of the Miss America Pageant as a conservative backlash against major shifts in racialized and gendered power taking place in the 1920s United States. Ultimately, I conclude that the reason the Miss America Pageant was able to take hold in its hometown of Atlantic City, New Jersey, and grow in popularity with entrants from across the country, was because women of color were excluded from competing in the pageant. As a result, the pageant and the winner it produced each year were representatives of bourgeois, white femininity that served as a repository for racist, nativist, and isolationist anxieties in the United States. Childlike, innocent, virginal, and respectable, Miss America's need for protection was an allegory for a vulnerable, postwar U.S., and that allegory linked whiteness to national identity.

My third chapter is about the Miss Universe Pageant in the 1950s. Through close readings of Miss Universe Pageant program books from that decade, I argue that the preoccupation that Miss Universe Pageant organizers had with "world peace" was an

expression of U.S. imperialism, modernity, and global capitalism in the period following World War II. As a pageant that included contestants from only select nations around the world—including women of color from Asian nations that had recently been colonized by or enemies of the United States—Miss Universe served as a platform to educate the American public about peer nations outside the U.S. More importantly, though, within the Miss Universe Pageant, politics were presented as culture. Contestants, labeled with the names of the nations their bodies represented, performed a sisterhood of women who represented a brotherhood of nations, at the head of which was the United States of America, the new capitalist world superpower.

Chapter Four investigates the Miss Indian America, Miss Chinatown USA, and Miss Black America Pageants in the 1960s. This chapter examines how the culture of protest, popularized by the Civil Rights and anti-Vietnam War movements, provided a vocabulary with which marginalized groups of color could talk back against a racist U.S. state. In addition, criticisms from the Soviet Union in the early Cold-War period insisted that U.S. racism was evidence that capitalism could not work. Such criticisms offered people of color a unique opportunity to demand civil rights and protest racism within a framework of fair treatment under capitalism. During this same period of time, pageantry enjoyed a peak of popularity in the United States. Therefore, pageants became a powerful, publicly visible tool for communities of color to assert their belonging in the U.S. In this era they did so by representing nations-within-the-nation through national pageantry and thus produced new kinds of national spaces—Indian America, Black America, and the Chinatown USA—where people of color were not marginalized but rather central, and even ideal, national subjects.

Finally, in the fifth chapter, I examine the Miss Asian America, Miss Black USA, and Miss Latina US Pageants in the period from 2000 through 2009. In this chapter, I pair close readings of program books, contestant applications, and press materials from the three pageants with analyses of ethnographic field data I collected by conducting participant-observations in the weeks leading up to the pageants. I demonstrate that the focus on panethnicity in Asian American and Latino Studies, and in the Miss Asian America and Miss Latina US Pageants, can be applied to the Miss Black America Pageant to understand Black America as not only a diasporic space but as a panethnic one as well. Conversely, the focus on race in African American Studies and in the Miss Black USA Pageant exposes the fact that discourses of race about Latinos and Asian Americans are so often submerged to discourses of ethnicity. Placing more attention on race reveals that Latino and Asian American communities are not only panethnic but also racially diverse spaces. Ultimately, I argue that Miss Black USA, Miss Asian America, and Miss Latina US perform and produce new kinds of national spaces, just as was the case in pageants in the 1960s. The difference, though, is that these newer, diasporic articulations of nation are not framed only within the confines of the nation-state, but rather in a way that makes national identity transnational.

This story of race, gender, nation, and pageantry begins with an exploration of whiteness and U.S. national identity but ends with the understanding that “one way to contend with unjust and uneven human/inhuman categorizations is to think about, and perhaps employ, the alternative geographic formulations that subaltern communities advance.”⁴⁶ In this story, of-color beauty pageants are those alternative geographic formulations, and beauty itself is not about looks, per se. Instead, for my purposes, beauty

⁴⁶ McKittrick, xix.

is a metaphor for humanity. As J. Morris Anderson, the founder of the Miss Black America Pageant, said in 1968, ““What’s important is that a . . . woman can look in the mirror and say I too, am beautiful. Then she’ll feel like a person. Once you feel like a person, you start acting like a person.””⁴⁷ Likewise, in the context of national identity, beauty is a metaphor for belonging. If a woman of color can win a national pageant and say, I, too, am beautiful, then she’ll feel like she belongs in the nation. Once you feel like you belong, you start acting like you belong. And that puts beauty at the very center of what it means to be an American.

⁴⁷ John Katz, “Pageant Director Seeks to Instill Black Pride,” *Atlantic City Press*, September 7, 1968.



<http://www.bensonblake.com/blog/>

Figures 1.1 and 1.2. **OMG!** For the first time in the history of the United States of America and of the historically black Hampton University, Miss America (below) is black, but Miss Hampton University (above) is not. They are shown here assuming nearly identical, classic beauty queen stances.



<http://www.celebrityviolence.com/caressa-cameron-wins-miss-america-photos>



Figure 1.3. **Vanessa Williams.** Williams appears here during her onstage victory walk, moments after being crowned the first Miss America of African descent. Many, like Gerald Early, watching the pageant at home on black and white televisions in 1983, “had no idea...that our new Miss America...was black.”

<http://www2.tbo.com/content/2009/feb/03/celebrities-not-immune-embarrassing-photos/entertainment/>



Figure 1.4. **Miss Asian America.** Louise Wu, Miss Asian America 2007, waves at the audience during her final walk onstage before crowning her successor at the 2008 Miss Asian America Pageant. Photograph by author.

CHAPTER TWO

Stage, Shore, and Suffrage Race and Respectability in the 1920s United States

Within a mere two days of winning the 1926 Miss America title, Norma Smallwood, an eighteen year old from Oklahoma, received a marriage proposal from a stranger—a professor at a New England college. The proposal was quoted in part in the September 13, 1926 *New York Times*. It offered, in addition to the husband himself, “a nice little green roof bungalow in the suburbs, a grassy lawn, a coupe with yellow wheels, and the quiet life of an academic man’s family.” Rejecting the offer of marriage, Smallwood accepted instead another prize that had been offered to her: a cook stove. In explaining her choice of a kitchen appliance over a marriage partner, Smallwood was quoted by the *Times* as saying, “Cook stoves are sometimes essential, and husbands—well, at least they are not absolutely essential just now.”¹

The use of the plural “husbands” is telling. Rather than making the personal claim that Smallwood herself—a young woman in her late teens and early years of college—was not, at the moment, in need of a husband, the quotation seemed to be making a much

¹ Special to the *New York Times*, “Prefers Stove to Husband,” *New York Times*, September 13, 1926, 10.

larger-scale assertion. For a woman in the 1926 United States, husbands, in general, were “not absolutely essential.” This Miss America was speaking from an era in U.S. history characterized by the convergence of women’s suffrage and postwar consumerism. The 19th Amendment marked a gendered revolution of sorts in the U.S., and its effects reached further than allowing women political office and the ballot. Before, when women married, they gave up rights like property ownership, which accrued only to the single amongst them, in exchange for political access by proxy through their husbands.² When the constitutional amendment granting women that access directly was ratified, it relegated marriage to a lesser status, from the political and legal perspectives of U.S. women. It was out of that context that Miss America first emerged. Her moniker was specific: she was a woman, named after the nation, whose title—conspicuously “Miss” and not “Mrs.”—suggested that she could be the nation’s sister, or its daughter, but not its wife.

The complement to the ideology that “husbands...[were] not absolutely essential” would seem to be that wives, in the early 1920s, were not essential either. Yet in the dominant discourses of U.S. popular media, government, and advertising coming out of the Great War the opposite was apparent. Historian Kimberly Hamlin explains, “Indeed, consuming goods and purchasing new, time-saving appliances was one of the primary ways in which advertisers attempted to convince women, who often controlled the family’s purse strings, that their place was in the home. ... Advertising doubled in volume in the 1920s and glamorized household appliances, cleaning products, and cosmetics, telling readers that these were the most important things with which a woman could be

² I am indebted to my colleague, Sam Erman, for pointing me in the direction of this legal analysis.

concerned."³ As part of an effort to consolidate national identity and “return to normalcy”⁴ after the Great War, government and media peddled a combination of femininity and compulsory heterosexuality. That combination focused on women as housewives, and on housewives as financial managers who could encourage their families to consume and, by consuming, invest in the postwar economy. This effect could best be achieved not only by manipulating those women who were already housewives to spend in a particular way, but also by manipulating the image of the U.S. woman herself.

The U.S. woman was to be white, heterosexual, and middle-class. She was, I argue, a woman whose race and nationality together differentiated her from the outside world with which the nation had recently been at war, whose sexuality could be domesticated through marriage, and whose class position would allow her, once married, to spend the money needed to reinvigorate the economy. In summary, the dominant discourse was that the U.S. woman should be a housewife, that the housewife unlike her husband *was* essential, and that the housewife’s primary role should be to influence her family to spend money on domestic products. Wedged between the competing discourses of the housewife and the suffragette, the apparent paradox in Smallwood’s choice of a cook stove, but not a husband for whom to cook, actually makes historical sense.

Smallwood as Miss America, an embodiment of ideals of U.S. womanhood, demonstrated the contradictions that would define the beauty queen through the century:

³ Kimberly A. Hamlin, “Bathing Suits and Backlash: The First Miss America Pageants, 1921-1927,” in *There She Is, Miss America: The Politics of Sex, Beauty, and Race in America’s Most Famous Pageant*, ed. Elwood Watson and Darcy Martin (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2004), 32.

⁴ I borrow this phrase from Mary Anne Schofield, who applies it to the role of the Miss America Pageant immediately following the Second World War. See Mary Anne Schofield, “Miss America, Rosie the Riveter, and World War II,” in *There She Is, Miss America*, 53-66.

virginally “pure” but sexually available, unmarried—and, in Smallwood’s case, even uninterested in marriage—but domestic nonetheless.

Rather than puzzle over how the suffragette and the housewife could somehow coexist in statements like Smallwood’s, a number of feminist theorists have argued that it was precisely a backlash against the former that created the imagined need for the latter. In fact, the coexistence of the two provides a model of how beauty has operated historically. Feminist philosopher Susan Bordo explains, “[T]he discipline and normalization of the female body—perhaps the only gender oppression that exercises itself, although to different degrees and in different forms, across age, race, class, and sexual orientation—has to be acknowledged as an amazingly durable and flexible strategy of social control. ... [P]reoccupation with appearance...may function as a ‘backlash’ phenomenon, reasserting existing gender configurations *against* any attempts to shift or transform power-relations.”⁵ Perhaps nowhere was this borne out more in U.S. history than with the first Miss America pageant in 1921. Only months after women gained the right to full political participation as citizens through the 19th Amendment, a new, ideal, female “citizen” emerged: a woman who bore the surname of the nation, who was chosen as its representative for how well she performed as an image, not in suffrage.

In its parody of what had come before it, the contest to select Miss America even borrowed heavily from the imagery of suffrage pageantry, reformulating what it meant for women to be in public, keeping the satin sashes that suffragists had once worn with political slogans printed on them, but replacing words of principle with the name, not even of the beauty contestant herself, but rather of the region she was supposed to

⁵ Susan R. Bordo, “The Body and the Reproduction of Femininity: A Feminist Appropriation of Foucault,” in *Gender/Body/Knowledge*, ed. Alison M. Jaggar and Susan R. Bordo (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1989), 14.

represent.⁶ This new form, the beauty pageant, required women to work against one another to achieve an ideal of cultural citizenship, rather than working together as many had for decades prior to achieve first-class political citizenship. Beauty acted as feminist theorist Naomi Wolf argues it always has, “actually prescribing behavior and not appearance.”⁷

That competitive behavior, though it stipulated a particular kind of politically non-engaged, primarily marriageable femininity, was not merely about gender. As Anne McClintock has argued, “[R]ace, gender and class are not distinct realms of experience.... Rather, they come into existence *in and through* relation to each other.”⁸ Taking McClintock’s and Bordo’s theories together, I argue that a gendered backlash is never merely a gendered backlash. Instead, because gender, race, and class and also sexuality and nation are always constituted “*in and through* relation to each other,” gendered backlashes in history are moments of reactionary response, set in the terms of race, class, sexuality, and nation as well.

In the case of the Miss America contest, I argue in this chapter that the ideal of womanhood was, at the same time, an ideal of national identity, made corporeal in the beauty queen. Miss America, as a symbolic and physical figure, became a clear and convenient model for all that constituted U.S. national belonging. She was a physically visible and culturally legible example of what an “American” was. That early 1920s ideal was specific in a number of ways. Throughout the decade, judges selected and newspapers depicted Miss Americas who were young, virginal, heterosexual,

⁶ Hamlin, 28.

⁷ Naomi Wolf, *The Beauty Myth: How Images of Beauty Are Used Against Women* (New York: William Morrow and Company, Inc., 1991), 14.

⁸ Anne McClintock, *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender and Sexuality in the Colonial Contest* (New York: Routledge, 1995), 5.

marriageable, middle-class, native-born, and above all white. Those in the U.S. who were not all those things needed to claim that they were at least some of them. Only then could such people access belonging as Americans and thus access the social, cultural, and civil rights that accrued to those who belonged.

Efforts to make such claims were played out, not only on the pageant stage, but also again and again in the postwar U.S. courtroom. Critical race scholar Ian F. Haney López argues that, “The United States is ideologically a White country not by accident, but by design at least in part affected through naturalization and immigration laws.”⁹ Legal discourses around naturalization illustrated the struggles of a nation and its states to define a “pure” national body, at the same time that the marginalized within the nation fought to debunk the very tenets of that “purity.” Scholars of racial formations and Asian American Studies have for many years focused on two landmark Supreme Court cases, *Takao Ozawa v. United States* (1922) and *United States v. Bhagat Singh Thind* (1923),¹⁰ which demonstrate particularly well that the courts found race slippery, but that legal discourses sought to depict race as fixed nonetheless. Delivered by Chief Justice George Sutherland a short three months apart, the *Ozawa* and *Thind* decisions seemed to contradict one another. In the former, the court declared that a Japanese immigrant was ineligible for citizenship because, though he may have had white skin, he was not Caucasian. The latter decision appeared to close down the boundaries of whiteness

⁹ Ian F. Haney López, *White By Law: The Legal Construction of Race* (New York: New York University Press, 1996), 117.

¹⁰ In racial formations literature, see, for example, Haney López, 79-110; and Matthew Frye Jacobson, *Whiteness of a Different Color: European Immigrants and the Alchemy of Race* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), 234-6. In Asian American Studies, see, among various others, Ronald Takaki, *Strangers from a Different Shore: A History of Asian Americans* (Boston: Back Bay Books, 1998), 208-11, 298-9, 307, 367-8, 419; Min Song, “Pakhar Singh’s Argument with Asian America,” in *A Part, Yet Apart: South Asians in Asian America*, ed. Lavina Dhingra Shankar and Rajini Srikanth (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1998), 94-95; and David Palumbo-Liu, *Asian/American: Historical Crossings of a Racial Frontier* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1999), 39, 220.

entirely, arguing that a Punjabi man may have been Caucasian, but he was clearly not white.¹¹ Naturalization law was a national phenomenon, with suits beginning before 1920 focusing on men, who had the most to gain by becoming U.S. citizens. After the 19th Amendment, though, Congress turned its attention to women in the 1922 Cable Act, which monitored the naturalization of American women through the race of their husbands.¹²

Even before ratification of the Cable Act, though, state-level, miscegenation law policed racial purity through heteronormativity. Thus, miscegenation law affected women directly, along with men with whom they were having sex or to whom they were married.¹³ Haney López suggests that miscegenation laws might have had even more impact than naturalization laws on linking whiteness to U.S. national identity. Miscegenation law “appeared in the statutes of almost every state in the union until they were struck down by the Supreme Court in 1967. These laws...acted to prevent intermixture between people of diverse origins so that morphological differences that could as race might be more neatly maintained.”¹⁴ It was in that vein that Joe Kirby, a Mexican American man, sought an annulment on the grounds that he was white, his wife Mayellen was not, and therefore, according to miscegenation laws in the state of Arizona, their marriage had never been legal in the first place. In fact, though, the only thing *Kirby v. Kirby* really did prove was the same as what Sutherland’s decisions had demonstrated: whiteness was not natural. It was not intuitively, visually, or even scientifically obvious.

¹¹ *Takao Ozawa v. United States*, 260 U.S. 178 (1922); and *United States v. Bhagat Singh Thind*, 261 U.S. 204 (1923).

¹² An Act: Relative to the naturalization and citizenship of married women. Pub. L. 67-346. 22 Sept. 1922. 42 Stat. 1021.

¹³ See Peggy Pascoe, *What Comes Naturally: Miscegenation Law and the Making of Race in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009).

¹⁴ Haney López, 117.

It was constructed in spoken and written discourse, it was perceived unevenly, and it was unstable.

Much of what Americans thought about whiteness in the 1920s actually turned on notions of middle-class respectability. Respectability, though, was not just a class notion. It had specific implications for gender, sexuality, race, and ethnicity as well. Respectability as an intersectional category in the 1920s United States is the topic of this chapter. I explore respectability by tracing the early history of the Miss America Pageant. There is a wealth of scholarly and popular texts written about Miss America. I synthesize and analyze this literature to demonstrate that, in various contexts, respectability was an idea applied particularly to women, one that called for young, heterosexual, virginal, marriageable femininity. I also intervene in that body of literature by juxtaposing histories of the Miss America Pageant in the 1920s with histories of naturalization and miscegenation law, an equally complex site of race, gender, class, sexuality, and nation all produced in and through each other. By way of that juxtaposition, I argue that “respectable” in the 1920s was a category that separated the middle classes and above from those socioeconomically below them, that separated white women from those who were not white, that separated long-haired “natural beauties” from flappers, that separated the careerist “new woman” from those ultimately interested only in being housewives, that separated those persons in the nation who could be considered Americans from those who ostensibly could not.

Respectability, then, is a key concept in describing the moment into which Miss America was born, the conditions that gave rise to the national need for her, and the cultural discourse of which that pageant was a part. The purpose of this chapter is to

demonstrate how that national discourse—of which pageantry, law, and numerous other cultural institutions were a part—did not just reflect racial ideas of the day. Instead, it was part of a process that constituted race in terms of gender, class, sexuality, and nation as well. That process created what whiteness meant at the moment and posited a particular brand of whiteness, modeled throughout the decade by Miss America herself, as U.S. national racial identity.

Stage, Shore, and Suffrage

In 1854, showman P.T. Barnum had an idea. The human “curiosities” that appeared in his side show were useful not only for display, but also for competition. By that year, Barnum had already tried his hand at putting dogs, flowers, babies, and birds in competition with one another; but in 1854, he took a more radical step, suggesting that young, white, middle-class women stand in public to be judged as well. Just as vegetables and farm animals were evaluated to determine the best and most beautiful at local fairs, so too could these women parade for the evaluation of a panel of judges and the entertainment of an onlooking audience of their peers.¹⁵

It was on that last point, though, that Barnum’s new contest failed. The only white women who would submit to having their faces and figures judged in public in 1854 were women considered to be of ill repute. It is unclear whether it was only such “public women” who would agree to appear in a public competition, or whether the respectability of the women came into question merely because the appearance of women in public was

¹⁵ A.R. Riverol, *Live from Atlantic City: The History of the Miss America Pageant Before, After, and In Spite of Television* (Bowling Green, OH: Bowling Green State University Popular Press, 1992), 7; Colleen Ballerino Cohen, Richard Wilk, and Beverly Stoeltje, eds., *Beauty Queens on the Global Stage: Gender, Contests, and Power* (New York: Routledge, 1996), 3-4.

associated with low-class work and prostitution. In other words, no scholar who has written about Barnum's failure has explained whether the women who entered were actually prostitutes or whether they were just assumed to be. The effect, however, was nonetheless the same. Audiences who attended Barnum's sideshow did not see as their peers women whom they considered to be of questionable reputation. Thus, Barnum's public would not attend the beauty contest, and a gimmick designed to draw "respectable" paying audiences succeeded in repelling them instead.¹⁶

Barnum was not the first in history to suggest that beauty was something that could be judged and won, to liken women to objects to be superficially evaluated, to tie idealized femininity to visual beauty, or to create a link between feminine beauty and spectacle. According to Colleen Ballerino Cohen, Richard Wilk, and Beverly Stoeltje, the editors of the collection *Beauty Queens on the Global Stage*, "Historically, beauty contests have deep roots extending back into Greek mythology when Eris began the Trojan War with a prize 'For the Fairest.' In medieval Europe 'Queens of the May' and other festivities chose men and women to represent royalty, bringing together elements of both high and low culture."¹⁷ A.R. Riverol, the author of *Live from Atlantic City: The History of the Miss America Pageant Before, After, and In Spite of Television*, takes a different angle on pageant pre-histories, linking the beauty contest to the Cinderella fairy tale, to the biblical story of Esther, and to Scheherazade and her *1001 Arabian Nights*. Riverol claims that the themes of those three myths—physical beauty as a key to social mobility, men grooming women to compete for the favor of other men, women trading on their sexual wiles to save them from death and other negative fates—provide the

¹⁶ See Riverol, 7-8.

¹⁷ Cohen, Wilk, and Stoeltje, 3.

underpinnings both for modern beauty pageants and for the criticisms of those who oppose them.¹⁸

At the same time, though, Riverol's argument is that the modern beauty pageant is a new institution of popular culture, a form fundamentally unlike any other that preceded it, which could only have arisen because of the social and cultural factors that marked a particular place (the United States of America) at a particular time (the early twentieth century).¹⁹ Riverol defines beauty pageants, specifically, as events that “base the selection of winners on the decision of judges who must operate under formal rules and criteria as well as on the basis of informal traditions and standards.”²⁰ Barnum, then—as Riverol and Cohen, Wilk, and Stoeltje seem to agree—is the first point in a timeline that describes the beauty pageant, as we are familiar with it today.

Timing was the greatest shortcoming of Barnum's new idea. Seven years before the onset of the U.S. Civil War, the ownership of enslaved persons as chattel was still a legalized element of the social, cultural, and political landscape of parts of the U.S. The sale of human bodies was part of that culture of ownership. At the center of those transactions was the slave auction block, a public platform upon which a person stood to be presented, evaluated, and then sold. Describing one such scene, the formerly enslaved man James Martin narrated, “[T]hey pull the curtain up and the bidders crowd around. The overseer tells the age of the slaves and what they can do. . . . Then the overseer makes him walk across the platform. . . .”²¹ For any contemporary reader who has ever viewed a

¹⁸ Riverol, 2-3.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 7.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 6.

²¹ James Martin, “Interview with James Martin,” *Born in Slavery: Slave Narratives from the Federal Writers Project, 1936-1938*, 3, quoted in Katherine McKittrick, *Demonic Grounds: Black Women and the Cartographies of Struggle* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006) 72.

beauty pageant, what Martin described sounds perhaps disturbingly familiar. If the word “bidders” were replaced with the word “audience”, the word “overseer” with “host”, the word “slaves” with “contestants”, and the word “him” with “her”, the scene above would be typical to pageantry: the curtain that signals a staged performance, the announcement of contestants’ ages and skills, the presentational pageant walk.

For any mid-nineteenth-century viewer, more familiar with a slave auction than with a beauty pageant, a public diversion that called to mind the auction block would have been repulsive if the participants were free, white adults. This would have been especially true for “respectable” white women, whose very subjectivity as white, feminine, and bourgeois depended on distancing themselves from blackness and from the masculine labor of the enslaved. As Katherine McKittrick argues in her book *Demonic Grounds: Black Women and the Cartographies of Race*, “[W]hile the auction block sites the objectification of black femininity through sale, the bodily consequences of this transaction invoke spatial processes that organize the places of womanhood across and beyond transatlantic slavery.”²² In other words, the transactions of the auction block had the power to make people think in certain ways about spaces outside of the auction block itself. The realities of chattel slavery codified a space where a woman’s body was put on display to be evaluated by others, as a space of blackness. At the time of Barnum’s failed beauty contest, the public stage of pageantry implied an auction block, an auction block implied black femininity, and black femininity implied vulnerability to economic objectification and sexual violence. Thus, for a “respectable” white woman in the mid-nineteenth-century United States to volunteer to participate in Barnum’s contest would have brought her figuratively too close to an enslaved black woman. In 1854 and for

²² McKittrick, 80.

decades after, the institution of chattel slavery and the recent memory of that institution overshadowed the imagery of U.S. women appearing in public to be evaluated.

“Respectability” was not just a notion that separated reputable middle-class women from their socioeconomic “inferiors” of ill repute. It also separated free, white women from their enslaved black counterparts.

The specter of the slave auction block, and Barnum’s resulting inability to recruit “respectable” women participants, were sidestepped for many years via the substitution of daguerreotypes (early photographs) in place of women’s physical bodies in beauty contests. Barnum himself was finally able to attract participants by modifying his original vision for the competition, switching from a physical to a photographic contest after his 1854 misstep. The success of Barnum’s substitution inspired copycat beauty contests in popular exhibitions and dime museums in years to follow. By the end of the nineteenth century, the photographic beauty contest had also become a recurring practice of newspapers across the nation, which often encouraged readers both to submit and to vote on photographs, in order to boost circulation.²³

The ability of the photograph to separate the idea of women on public display from the historical reality of the slave auction block was so powerful that, by the 1890s, even black American newspapers had enthusiastically adopted the format of the photographic beauty contest. As sociologist Maxine Leeds Craig recounts, “From the 1890s to the early decades of the twentieth century, reader participation beauty contests were extremely popular, circulation-boosting features for newspapers throughout the country. Photography studios and the Eastman company’s new portable ‘Kodak’ camera

²³ Riverol, 8; Cohen, Wilk, and Stoeltje, 4; Maxine Leeds Craig, *Ain’t I a Beauty Queen: Black Women, Beauty, and the Politics of Race* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 46-48.

made it possible for members of the middle class to capture their own images in photographs.”²⁴ Far from equating black, female [voluntary] participants of beauty contests with black, female [forced] participants of slave auctions, the newspaper beauty contest acted as a social elevator. The newspaper contest, and the portable camera that supported it, were markers of conspicuous consumption that “proved” contestants’ membership in the middle class and the overall beauty of black women.

For white women, efforts had to be made to tie respectability to a contest about beauty. For black women it was different. Inherent in a beauty contest was an assertion that the women competing were beautiful. Inherent in a photographic contest was an assertion that the women who appeared in the photographs were able to access a camera at will, a reality that was, at the time, exclusive to those in the middle and higher classes. For black women, who had been marginalized from historical and contemporary notions of beauty, femininity, and the middle class, merely being able to compete in a photographic beauty contest for a newspaper readership was itself an assertion that those women were beautiful, feminine, and respectable. From their inception in the late nineteenth century, black beauty contests were at once claims on beauty, claims on middle-class respectability, and arguments that those things were not the sole purview of whiteness.

Preoccupation with contestants’ respectability and the fact that those contestants participated voluntarily were what set the beauty contest apart from the slave auction most definitively. Ultimately, it was the marriage of the beauty contest with notions of middle-class respectability that needed to happen in order for the new kind of pageantry to meet the success it did. Beauty contests needed to be put to use in the service of

²⁴ Craig, 48.

“respectability”, for white contestants as well as contestants of color, rather than seen as acting against it. In fact, it was the transition into “respectability” that helped solidify the place of beauty pageants in modern American culture. Since the time it moved from two dimensions to three, the institution of the beauty contest has relied on an association with bourgeois class positioning, even while the organizers of beauty contests have relied on the baser associations between sex and capitalism, to be successful.

By 1920, there were various prevailing models of women appearing in U.S. public life. Suffragists, with their pageants and parades, had been pivotal in making the woman-in-public a more common figure since the late part of the previous century.²⁵ Actresses and dancers appearing in films and chorus lines had had a similar effect in a different vein, and a general rise in the popularity of public bathing meant that the American public, especially those who lived or vacationed near large bodies of water, had started to become more accustomed to seeing body parts exposed in public that could not be covered by bathing suits. Though dominant, those models for public women remained transgressive precisely because they were public. This was particularly true in the wake of the ratification of women’s suffrage, at a time when women could begin to appear in the public arenas of mainstream politics, where their very presence would threaten the traditional, gendered balance of power. In the early 1920s, the U.S. public might have been more accustomed to seeing white, middle-class women outside the home, but mainstream government, media, and even law enforcement were communicating a reactionary response that insisted the home was precisely where women should return.

²⁵ See Hamlin, 28.

Entering into this arena, the first contest to select Miss America—not yet officially called the Miss America Pageant—was not just a way for Atlantic City businessmen to extend their tourist season and make more money, though the pageant did serve that purpose. It was, more importantly, an exercise in defining “respectability” in terms most expedient for a nation still recovering from a period of unprecedented immigration at the turn of the century, from the Great War which had come to a close just two years prior, and from the 19th Amendment, which had been ratified only a year after that conflict ceased. This was a nation whose privileged classes—white, Anglo-Saxon, American-born, heterosexual, middle-class men—were deeply invested in constricting and consolidating national identity to include only those they considered to be most like themselves. Any successful woman representative had to emerge from an institution that participated in the equation of “respectability” with white, Anglo-Saxon, American-born, heterosexual, middle-class identity. It was in the face of these stakes that “[a] ‘proper’ image of a beautiful woman was newly considered a symbol of ‘national pride, power, and modernity,’ and beauty pageants found their niche as legitimate public events.”²⁶

Enacting the transition from newspaper to stage, the first pageant to select Miss America began as a photographic beauty contest, with a number of newspapers along the East Coast submitting entrants. Each participating newspaper awarded its winner an all-expenses-paid trip to Atlantic City for the 1921 Fall Frolic. Once there, the winners competed against one another in what was called the Inter-City Beauty Contest. Later in the festival, they competed again in a festival-wide competition called the bathers revue, where a total of 200 women—the Inter-City Beauties, professional models and stage

²⁶ Sarah Banet-Weiser, *The Most Beautiful Girl in the World: Beauty Pageants and National Identity* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1999), 35.

performers, and “amateurs”—paraded in bathing suits in front of judges.²⁷ While contestants came from various East Coast locales, there was nothing of the strict, one-per-state structure so familiar today, and so Miss New York City competed side-by-side with Miss New York. Appropriately, it was the representative from the nation’s capital, D.C. native Margaret Gorman, who won the first title.

Commonly framed as Atlantic City businessmen’s attempts to lengthen their tourist season into early September, the Fall Frolic out of which the Miss America Pageant was born quickly extended beyond the bounds of a local marketing phenomenon. In its form and execution, the pageant took images from stage, shore, and suffrage. The revealing wardrobe of the chorus line and the public bather was mixed with the satin sashes that were the trademarks of suffrage pageantry. The new form of beauty pageantry condensed the most recognizable artifacts of the suffragist and the chorus girl, yoked them to the new activity of public bathing, and paired all of that with an ultra-domesticated ideal—a young, white, long-haired, virginal woman whose apolitical, public appearance offset what had been transgressive in those who came before her. The early Miss America was decidedly not politically motivated and, as Kimberly Hamlin argues, did not want to profit from her talents as a dancer or actress.²⁸ Instead, she appeared publicly only long enough to be debuted, judged, chosen, and then returned to the domestic world of the housewife-to-be. The pageant worked precisely by trading on the visual vocabulary of suffragists and entertainers, ultimately to reformulate those

²⁷ See Riverol. See also Frank Deford, *“There She Is”*: *The Life and Times of Miss America* (New York: The Viking Press, 1971); and Miss America::History - 1920’s Decade in Review, Miss America, <http://www.missamerica.org/our-miss-americas/1920/review.asp>.

²⁸ See Hamlin.

images in the service of containing, controlling, and policing the image of the “public woman.”

In order to differentiate pageantry socially from what it was at the same time emulating visually, pageant organizers had to make claims on respectability. Respectability was a complex notion, both in definition and in function. It served to validate the act of women appearing in public for judgment. It also connected the pageant to ideals of gender and race that, in the post-Great War period, was considered most thoroughly American. At the time, those ideals were expressed in terms of a particular kind of whiteness and feminine respectability that reflected the various anxieties of the moment. For instance, in his comprehensive history of the Miss America Pageant from its inception through 1970, journalist Frank Deford relates, “In 1923, Mary Katherine Campbell’s credentials for Miss America were outlined by Joseph Cummings, one of the judges who selected her. ‘She is typically American, an altogether ideal type. Her forebears for ten generations have been American born.’ Two years later Fay Lamphier’s [*sic*] victory was attributed blandly to ‘the difference that comes with generations of American-born ancestry behind a girl.’”²⁹ The comments Deford describes come out of a moment of U.S. history characterized by conservative backlash, not only against women appearing in public, but also against unprecedented levels of immigration at the turn of the century and the nation’s recent emergence from a European war. At such a moment, Miss America worked because she could be used as a representative of the kind of youthful, virginal, white, American-born femininity that needed to be protected from external penetration.

²⁹ Deford, 248.

To play up that need for protection, newspapers in the 1920s tended to represent Miss America winners as innocent to the point of being childlike. When *Washington Herald* representatives went to Margaret Gorman's home to tell her she would be their entry into the Inter-City Beauty Contest, they reported that they found her "at a nearby playground shooting marbles in the dirt."³⁰ When fifteen-year-old Mary Katherine Campbell became Miss Columbus before winning the second Miss America title in 1922, the story goes that she went home to her mother and asked, "'They said it's because of my figure. Mother, what's a figure?'" to which her mother replied indignantly, "'It's none of your business!'"³¹ Not only were these first Miss Americas of the 1920s some of the youngest in history to wear that crown, they were also intentionally infantilized in the media, their childishness standing in for virginity, their virginity for marriageability, and their marriageability for middle-class respectability.

Miss America was not the first example of a beauty pageant that idealized virginity, marriageability, and respectability. Those associations had been made many years earlier in a bathing beauty contest that never saw the same success as the Atlantic City Fall Frolics. It is a common assertion that Miss United States, held in Rehoboth Beach, Delaware in 1880, was the first beauty pageant of national scale on record.³² In that pageant, the first-place prize was a bridal trousseau, a reward that represented organizers' assertion that neither women already married nor women uninterested in marriage were welcome to participate. Heterosexual availability seemed as important here as virginity. To win Miss United States, a woman should be interested in men but could not yet have a husband, a status that suggested that she was as yet sexually

³⁰ See Hamlin.

³¹ See Deford, 116.

³² Deford, 108-110; Riverol, 9-10; Cohen, Wilk, and Stoeltje, 4; and Hamlin, 30.

“unspoiled” by one and therefore in a perfect position to be “spoiled” later. That pageant, like others that would follow it, conflated respectability with compulsory heterosexuality and marriageability. After all, the trousseau would not have been awarded had those who funded it believed it would either be re-gifted or go entirely to waste.

Over forty years before Miss America, Miss United States was already resting on notions of “respectable” femininity as heterosexual, marriageable virginity. Still, the earlier pageant did not last beyond its first year. No currently available scholarship would seem to suggest that any particular scandals shut the event down. Like Barnum’s 1854 contest, Miss United States appears to have suffered from poor timing. What makes Miss America to this day notable both as a cultural institution and as an object of study is not only its format but also, as importantly, its national reach and its staying power. When the Fall Frolic and its female beauty contest emerged three generations after Miss United States disappeared, Miss America could have met the same end. Alternatively, it could have remained a local festival, largely unavailable as a cultural symbol except to those from the New York/New Jersey/Pennsylvania tri-state area who vacationed on the Jersey Shore. Instead, Miss America benefited from a concurrence of events to which Miss United States had not had access forty years prior. The new leisure of black and white middle classes,³³ the rise in popularity of public bathing, the invention of the daguerrotype and the portable camera, and the increasing presence of white middle-class women in public, met post-war consumerism and anti-immigrant nativism.

Just as Miss America, the prototype of the modern beauty queen, depended on the specificities of a historical moment to begin, she was likewise born at a time when the U.S. nation, just emerging from one of its first major international conflicts, needed *her*.

³³ Riverol, 7.

The Miss America Pageant and the ideals it rested on and reproduced, linked Americanness with consumerism, consumerism with bourgeois class standing, bourgeois class standing with respectability, respectability with femininity, and femininity with whiteness. The modern beauty pageant is a tool of essentialism. It produces, nurtures, and solidifies what it means “to be.” By its format and syntax (i.e., “Miss America”) the beauty pageant claims to have the mechanisms to determine what it is to be a woman, to be beautiful, to be American. By a short chain, then, Miss America connected Americanness to whiteness, complementing the work of the law and other cultural institutions of the moment, to validate and recreate the racist and nativist norms that defined the time and place of her birth.

Still, more than anything else, the earliest contests to select Miss America considered themselves to be just bathing beauty shows. The requirement that contestants appear in bathing attire was not only one of the few rules of the competition, it was also a key element that set apart the new beauty pageantry from other types of beauty contests that had preceded it. Accordingly, the first Atlantic City Fall Frolics featured elaborate parades and stage shows in which Neptune, mythical king of the sea, was a central character. In the 1922 show, the Inter-City Beauty contestants served as members of his entourage, and the entire group traveled on a parade float borne by black participants who were playing the parts of slaves in Neptune’s court.³⁴

Four years later, the pageant introduced a new kind of nonwhite participant: “[A]s early as 1926...the Pageant would welcome an American Indian queen. First known as Princess America, then later as Miss Indian America, these girls were never permitted to

³⁴ Deford, 249; Riverol, 14.

compete, but only to be on hand ‘representing the first American beauty.’”³⁵

Marginalized in those ways, these participants of color served primarily to highlight, visually and symbolically, the whiteness of those women actually competing for the title of beauty queen of America. As communications scholar Sarah Banet-Weiser argues, “Within beauty pageants...[t]he nonwhite body functions as a specter—the marked other—against which the ideal female citizen is defined.”³⁶ In the 1920s U.S., a black slave and an antiquated image of a Native woman both functioned as starkly racialized foils to the young, white, virginal, idealized femininity that Miss America represented, with Princess America acting as a particularly heavy symbolic character. Unlike the black slave, Princess America was herself a beauty queen, but in a segregated realm.

Nonetheless, in one photographic image from 1926, Princess America appears side-by-side with Norma Smallwood, the newly crowned Miss America herself.³⁷ This kind of visual proximity was necessary, as the presence of the unnamed Princess America’s indigenous body was used symbolically to validate Miss America’s connection to the place where the American nation had been built.

At the same time nonwhite characters were used to underscore and authenticate the relationship Miss America created between whiteness and Americanness, though, the very participation of actual persons of color in the Miss America shows challenged that direct relationship as well. While Neptune’s “slaves” and Princess America represented a nonwhite presence in the United States’ past, the persons of color who played them were proof that even in the present, not all the people in the American nation were white.

³⁵ Deford, 250.

³⁶ Banet-Weiser, 9.

³⁷ Deford, image 50.

Bobs and Black Beauties

Mainstream media of the time, however, seemed uninterested in conceding that reality. Instead, when the *New York Times* reported on the image of Norma Smallwood as the new Miss America, it focused not on likening her to the native woman in her immediate visual presence, but rather on distinguishing her from a vexing image of white womanhood at the time: the flapper. Two days before Smallwood was reported to have refused marriage in favor of a kitchen appliance, the *New York Times* first covered her triumph in winning the 1926 Miss America pageant: “Western Girl Wins Miss America Title,” proclaimed the *Times*, with a subtitle informing readers, “Miss Norma Smallwood of Tulsa is Crowned at Atlantic City Pageant.” On the next line, before the article itself began, an additional subtitle appeared in bold, capitalized letters, announcing, “**WINNER’S HAIR IS UNBOBBED.**” Five paragraphs in, the Special to the *New York Times* elaborated, “The new American beauty queen exemplifies the movement away from bobbed hair. Miss Smallwood’s hair is unbobbed and it is brown. She is eighteen years old, and petite, with a height of five feet four inches and a weight of 118 pounds. She has blue eyes and a fair skin.”³⁸

Notable among the typical specs about height, weight, and eye color is the description of Smallwood’s hairstyle, a detail considered so important that it was worthy of mention before the article itself even began. Unusual as this reference to hair might seem to a contemporary audience, Hamlin explains that hairstyles were actually a common focus of press coverage of Miss America winners in the 1920s. In particular, the

³⁸ Special to the *New York Times*, “Western Girl Wins Miss America Title,” *New York Times*, September 11, 1926, 15.

proclamation that a winner wore her hair “long” or “unbobbed” served as an assertion of Miss America’s traditionalism in opposition to the popular style of flappers.

A mainstay of 1920s U.S. fashion, the flapper was a kind of cultural manifestation of the political agency women had recently gained through the 19th Amendment. She was a “sexually liberated” woman with a non-curvaceous, gender-neutral body and a short haircut referred to as a bob. The flappers’ version of femininity, though fashionable, was nonetheless non-normative and at odds with the traditionalism of more antiquated notions of middle-class “respectability.” What made the flapper a particular threat to the Miss America Pageant were two defining elements of her image: she was a woman, and she was white. The flapper therefore stood to encroach upon the narrative of white femininity that the pageant organizers worked so hard to create in order to keep their pageant in business. For the Miss America contest to hold tightly to its claims on “respectability,” it had to separate its contestants from any similarity to flappers. And so year after year, the pageant, and the press coverage surrounding it, proudly touted the long locks of 1920s Miss America contestants and winners, as evidence of those women’s sexual innocence and “respectable,” bourgeois femininity.³⁹

That the flapper was primarily a symbol of white American fashion and culture worked to the advantage of the black bourgeoisie at the same time it posed a challenge to the Miss America contest. In the presence of the flapper image, black newspapers could and did conflate the flapper with all white, American womanhood, asserting the superior respectability of middle- and upper-class black women in contrast: “In 1923, G.W. Rigler, the president of Hartshorn (a black women’s college in Virginia), hailed the mission of educated black women: ‘The salvation and uplift of the Negro race, as of any

³⁹ See Hamlin.

other, and of the nation and civilization of which they are a part, will be found dependent largely upon the character of the women.’ ... In 1927, proclaiming the virtues of African women, the *Baltimore Afro-American* reported that ‘African Girls Wear More Clothes than U.S. Flappers.’”⁴⁰ Rigler’s comments here are especially fertile for interpretation. They make the claim that the esteem of any given “race” depends on the “character” of its women—ascribing to women the very kind of symbolic importance that pageants did in making each year’s representative of America a “Miss” and not a “Mr.” But also, there is a powerful suggestion embedded in Rigler’s statement. His syntax would seem to assert that black women held an especially key role, as they represented both the American nation, of which he insisted they were a part, and “Negro...civilization,” which would have extended to Africa as well as to the “American Negro.” The headline from the 1927 *Baltimore Afro-American* furthered these claims, flipping the script of Americans’ stereotypes about immodest and scantily clad African women; arguing that African women were actually more modest in their clothing than white, U.S. flappers; and asserting the superior respectability of African *American* women via a racial association with their African counterparts.

In the campaign to prove the respectability of middle- and upper-class black women, pageants played an important role as well:

Throughout the 1920s...black newspapers continued to boost their sales by combining themes of racial pride with photographs of beauties. “Ladies, Girls Rescued at Last by Alluring Offer,” proclaimed the *Oakland (Calif.) Western American* in 1927. The paper purported to “save” the colored women of California by giving them the chance to be beauties in its Miss Golden State beauty and popularity contest. Each year, “seventy-five girls are chosen and sped to Atlantic City for the title of Miss America. Girls from hill and dale are entered...but what about the poor colored girl?”⁴¹

⁴⁰ Craig, 33.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 53.

Because black newspapers, unlike mainstream white ones, took as given the beauty and respectability of their female reading audiences, it was marginalization, if anything, that the *Oakland Western American* was “saving” its “colored girl[s]” from. The tool of rescue was pageantry, a cultural institution in which, for black Americans in the 1920s, beauty was equated with respectability, respectability with bourgeois class positioning, and bourgeois class positioning with national belonging. The very act of holding their own beauty pageants was a black American exercise in denaturalizing the connections among whiteness, beauty, respectability, and U.S. national identity.

From Neptune’s Court to the Courtroom

That conflict between the articulation of a white nation and the actual presence of people of color in it was part of a larger discourse of race making taking place in many other realms within the nation apart from pageantry. In 1920s miscegenation and naturalization law, for example, lawmakers were grappling with the same issues of race, gender, class, sexuality, and nation that emerged in pageantry. Miscegenation and naturalization laws that dealt with marriage in particular were equally rich sites that not only reflected ideals of femininity, heteronormativity, and national identity, but in fact discursively *created* those ideals as well. An examination of some legal examples, therefore, serves both to demonstrate what was taking place in another arena of race making and to illuminate further the issues of race, gender, and nation that arose in pageantry. At the state and federal levels, in statutes and case law, the legal issues of race-mixing and naturalized citizenship reached historical high points, serving as centerpieces for complicated discourses about the constitution of whiteness, the reality of

race, the changing place of women in the American family, and the gendered and racialized character of the American nation.

On August 8, 1921, almost a month to the day before the first Fall Frolic began in Atlantic City, a civil court in Arizona heard witness testimony in a trial that centered on a husband trying to end his marriage to his wife. Notably, *Kirby v. Kirby* was not tried in divorce court.⁴² Instead, Joe Kirby, in an attempt to separate legally from his wife without putting himself in a position to owe her alimony, had brought suit for annulment. His argument was that he and his wife had married illegally in the first place. Because he claimed to be white, and all in the courtroom agreed that his wife Mayellen was “of negro blood,” Joe argued that their marriage of seven years had broken Arizona’s miscegenation laws, which, at that point, “prohibited marriages between ‘persons of Caucasian blood, or their descendants’ and ‘negroes, Mongolians or Indians, and their descendants.’”⁴³

The lawyer for the plaintiff called both Joe himself and his mother, Tula Kirby, as witnesses. Joe’s mother testified first, offering evidence as to her son’s ancestry. When asked by Joe’s lawyer in direct examination what race she belonged to, Tula Kirby replied succinctly, “Mexican.” When asked the predictable follow-up question of what race Mayellen Kirby belonged to, Tula Kirby replied again in one word: “Negro.”⁴⁴ The cross-examination, however, was not so simple. Mayellen Kirby’s lawyer was building his case on a refutation of one of the main details of the suit: that Joe Kirby was white. If

⁴² I chose *Kirby v. Kirby* as an example of miscegenation law because it is a fascinating case about discourses of race in marriage. I also chose it because historian Peggy Pascoe has written a great deal about the case in ways that make it accessible to those who are not legal scholars. I draw extensively from Pascoe’s analyses in my discussion of the case here.

⁴³ Peggy Pascoe, “Miscegenation Law, Court Cases, and Ideologies of ‘Race’ in Twentieth-Century America,” *The Journal of American History* 83, no. 1 (June 1996): 44.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 44-45.

Mayellen's lawyer could prove that Joe was a descendant of "Indians," then the marriage would be valid. Miscegenation laws, after all, had been designed to protect the "purity" of whiteness, and therefore they did not concern themselves with those who chose to marry across of-color color lines.

Attempting thus to poke holes in Joe Kirby's narrative of his racial self, Mayellen Kirby's lawyer asked Joe's mother, "Was [your mother] a Spaniard?" Tula Kirby's response was, "She was on her father's side." Mayellen's lawyer followed up: "And what on her mother's side?" and Joe's mother replied, as she had before in direct examination, "Mexican." Not as satisfied with this one-word descriptor as Joe's lawyer had been, Mayellen's lawyer prodded, with a leading question designed to seal up his case, "What do you mean by Mexican, Indian, a native [?]" but either out of genuine confusion or because she had been well prepared as a witness, Tula Kirby would not walk into the trap. "I don't know what is meant by Mexican," she said.⁴⁵

Next it was Joe Kirby's turn on the witness stand, and his testimony suggested a similar confusion about racial terminologies. When his own lawyer asked Joe, "What race do *you* belong to?" Joe responded hesitantly, "I belong to the white race I suppose."⁴⁶ The only thing everyone seemed to be sure about was Mayellen's racial background. After admitting that she did not know "what is meant by Mexican," Tula Kirby spoke of her daughter-in-law Mayellen with much more certainty. When Mayellen's lawyer asked Tula how she knew Mayellen was black, Tula responded firmly, "I distinguish her by her color and the hair; that is all I do know." The judge, likewise,

⁴⁵ Ibid., 45.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

felt able merely to look at Mayellen Kirby and determine her race immediately. Mayellen never testified. Joe won the case.⁴⁷

Concerned as it has always been with “white purity” by way of *marriage* specifically, miscegenation law, even though it varied from state to state, nonetheless illustrates particularly aptly the kind of moment in which the entire U.S. nation found itself in the early 1920s. As historian Peggy Pascoe points out, “Although many historians assume that miscegenation laws enforced American taboos against interracial sex, marriage, more than sex, was the legal focus. ... Because marriage carried with it social respectability and economic benefits that were routinely denied to couples engaged in illicit sex, appeals courts adjudicated the legal issue of miscegenation at least as frequently in civil cases about marriage and divorce, inheritance, or child legitimacy as in criminal cases about sexual misconduct.”⁴⁸ Certainly, *Kirby v. Kirby* was remarkable in its enactment of early twentieth-century ideas about race. Joe Kirby’s racialization required as much testimony and explanation as Mayellen Kirby’s did not. Still, “Mexican,” a national designation, was unquestionably accepted in Arizona as a racial classification—and more than that as equivalent in some way to “Caucasian”—when it came time for the judge to decide in Joe Kirby’s favor.

In addition to that, though, *Kirby v. Kirby*, as an example of miscegenation law more generally, is a narrative about the uncertainties of race in a time when the place of marriage in U.S. society was equally uncertain. In fact, it is a narrative about definitions of race constituted in terms of marriage, just as definitions of marriage were being legally constructed in terms of race. By the time Norma Smallwood made her choice of a cook

⁴⁷ Ibid., 45, 51.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 50.

stove over a husband in 1926, her comment that “husbands...are not absolutely essential just now” was astute and timely. The 19th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution, ratified in 1920, had granted women who were citizens of the United States the right to vote directly, without any longer requiring the husband conduits they had needed in the past. Far from settling questions of women in the citizenry, the Women’s Suffrage Amendment instead marked a moment in U.S. history characterized by an increased preoccupation with the definition of female citizenship and women’s role as wives. Just when Mayellen Kirby was losing her husband, other women, like Smallwood, were finding husbands unnecessary altogether.

One year after Joe Kirby won his annulment in an Arizona civil court, the United States Congress passed a federal law that likewise made the status of interracial marriages tenuous, at the same time that it redefined the political work marriage could do for women in the U.S. The 1922 “Act: relative to the naturalization and citizenship of married women,” commonly termed the Cable Act, stipulated that a non-citizen woman could no longer become naturalized automatically through a citizen husband. Instead, she could—and had to—go through the process of naturalization herself, thus accessing the U.S. political system via her own eligibility for citizenship and not her husband’s.⁴⁹

For an act that seemed to be moving in such a tolerant direction in terms of gender—insofar as gendered notions of citizenship affected white women—the Cable Act had only intolerant things to say about race. Nonwhite, non-citizen women who could not naturalize before through their husbands still could not do so on their own. Not only that, but the act also reaffirmed earlier racist tendencies in naturalization law by including a provision “[t]hat any woman citizen who marries an alien ineligible to citizenship shall

⁴⁹ “An Act: Relative to the naturalization and citizenship of married women.”

cease to be a citizen of the United States,” for as long as she remained in that marriage.⁵⁰ Working, as state miscegenation law was at the same time, to protect both white racial “purity” and the relationship between whiteness and the American citizenry, the Cable Act insisted that a woman who married outside the acceptable races of that citizenry was “unfit” to be a citizen herself and thus legally “deserved” to be treated, as critical race theorist Ian Haney López points out, worse than a traitor.⁵¹

Coming as it did at a point in U.S. history characterized by 131 years of modifications to racial and gendered requirements for naturalized citizenship, the Cable Act was clearly targeted toward Asian immigrants and those women who might think to marry them, in such states as miscegenation law did not already deem such marriages illegal. In 1790, the U.S. Congress, in one of its first legislative acts, had ratified the first Naturalization Act of the young nation, limiting eligibility for naturalization to “any alien, being a free, white person.”⁵² Through those words, Congress took an early and lasting stand on the race of those who could officially “belong” by refusing to recognize as citizens of the United States persons who would otherwise meet the requirements of two years residency and “good character.”⁵³

Eighty years later, a post-Civil War Congress passed an amendment that stated succinctly, “*And be it further enacted*, That the naturalization laws are hereby extended to aliens of African nativity and to persons of African descent.”⁵⁴ This provision extending the eligibility for naturalization explicitly “to aliens of African nativity and persons of

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Haney López elaborates, “Indeed, a woman’s marriage to a non-White foreigner was perhaps a worse crime [than treason], for while a traitor lost his citizenship only after trial, the woman lost hers automatically.” See Haney López, 47.

⁵² An Act: To establish an uniform Rule of Naturalization. 26 March 1790. 1 Stat. 103.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ An Act: To amend the Naturalization Laws, and to punish Crimes against the same, and for other Purposes. 14 July 1870. 16 Stat. 254.

African descent,” came out of heated debates in Congress. On one side of the debates were those who, like Senator Charles Sumner, wanted to strike the language of race from U.S. naturalization law entirely. On the other side were those who refused to do so, specifically because they wanted to continue to exclude Chinese immigrants from the rights of full citizenship.⁵⁵

This congressional era—which included, twelve years later, the infamous Chinese Exclusion Acts, eventually barring Chinese immigration to the United States indefinitely—put African inclusion and Asian exclusion at the heart of naturalization laws that still had not given up the unquestionable eligibility of “free, white persons.” As a result, by the 1920s, emigrants from various parts of Asia, struggling to be recognized as citizens by their adopted home, were figuring prominently in U.S. naturalization law, appearing more often than other immigrants as petitioners in case law and objects of statutes. When the Cable Act was ratified, therefore, Asian immigrants were the primary group targeted as “alien[s] ineligible to citizenship.” And within five months after the Cable Act put into peril the citizenship of women who would “deign” to marry such “aliens,” the United States Supreme Court tried both *Takao Ozawa v. United States* and *United States v. Bhagat Singh Thind*, the two most infamous naturalization cases in American legal history, both featuring Asian petitioners ultimately denied citizenship by the state.

While the *Ozawa* and *Thind* cases illustrated the aggressiveness with which the U.S. legal system would act to keep certain persons of color outside the citizenry, *Kirby v. Kirby* and the Cable Act were clear in their insistence that, even when people of color

⁵⁵ See Haney López, 43. Haney López explains that Native American exclusion was also a key factor in the Congress’s ultimate decision to add black persons to the list of those eligible for citizenship, rather than striking racial eligibility language entirely.

were citizens, the privileges that accrued to white citizenship were greater. This was a time when the very nature of race, as it played into immigration and citizenship, was a preoccupation of U.S. lawmakers. Two years after the ratification of the Cable Act, the United States Congress passed the Immigration Act of 1924, a set of three acts created as a revision to the Emergency Quota Act, which had passed in the same year Joe Kirby sought his annulment. In addition, the 1924 U.S. Congress also passed the Indian Citizenship Act, a law that granted federal citizenship to all Native Americans born in the United States. These acts, like the Miss Americas who were their contemporaries, contributed to a collective cultural vision of who “belonged” in the American nation. That vision was complex, as it juggled white supremacy with Asian exclusion and black and Native American inclusions that were limited by racism.⁵⁶ In fact, the one thing the legislative debates of the period, and the laws that came out of them, agreed upon was a cultural reality that did not need to be debated: they reinforced links between whiteness and Americanness, a racialized definition of U.S. national identity.

What was going on throughout the decade—that miscegenation was thought to be “unnatural,” that white husbands might have been non-essential but that husbands racially “ineligible to citizenship” were legally dangerous—is evidence of how race is constituted differently at different places and in different times. In the 1920s U.S., race was about regulating marriage in order to buttress notions of white, middle-class respectability as a prerequisite for national belonging. Race was about whiteness as U.S. national racial identity and about the “purity” of whiteness itself. Both ideas were demonstrated to be fictitious by the very force of the cultural efforts designed to prove their truth.

⁵⁶ Haney López, 43.

Conclusion

The segregation of Princess America and the silence of Mayellen Kirby at her own annulment trial would seem to suggest that people of color did not have power over their marginalization from national identity in the 1920s U.S. However, the cultural processes of racialization did not work in such a way that the privileged produced race and the marginalized responded. The marginalized were also involved in that process, constantly providing their own narratives of race and nation. This was true in Joe Kirby's legal claims on whiteness in the state of Arizona. It was true in Takao Ozawa and Bhagat Singh Thind's federal assertions of the same. It was true nationwide in the insistence of the black bourgeoisie that, insofar as whiteness was associated with beauty and middle-class respectability, there were "Negroes" who could attain whiteness as well. People of color troubled definitions of whiteness itself, refuted the relationship between whiteness and U.S. national identity, and asserted in law and popular culture that they were in the nation to stay.

By 1928, it was Miss America instead who was on her way out. Under the weight of oppositional pressure from religious women's groups and negative publicity about careerist winners, the pageant temporarily lost its fight to associate with middle-class "respectability" and shut down for five years.⁵⁷ It only steadily resurfaced beginning in 1935, as the U.S. economy started to recover from the Great Depression. Then it grew to its peak of popularity in the 1950s and 60s, a time, like the 1920s, of gendered and racialized political upheaval and postwar consolidation of U.S. national identity.

⁵⁷ See *Miss America: History - 1920's Decade in Review*. See also Deford, 128-130; Riverol, 23-24; and Hamlin, 46.

She would not be needed again for some twenty years as much as she had been when she was first created. However, the figure of the early Miss America, and the era she represents, remain important reminders about the nature of racialization, gender, and national identity. Whiteness and womanhood, and their positions with respect to U.S. national identity, have not always been as those of us in the U.S. experience them today. Instead, they grow and change constantly out of cultural conversations. These discourses do not merely reflect ideas about gender and racialization; they also do the very work of gendering and race making. The United States of America was not considered a white nation, in the 1920s or now, simply because it was founded by white men or because the majority of the population was white. Instead, it was because those in positions of power and privilege who were white created laws to continue to adhere power and privilege to whiteness and formulated popular cultural institutions to reinforce those relationships between race and power via systems of representation.

The result is that there are always people who are marginalized, pushed outside the boundaries of national belonging, and more aggressively so at times when the nation has just emerged from either internal or international conflicts that challenge existing arrays of power. What is important to realize is that what are thought of as margins are actually central to the discourse. It is the marginalized who trouble the narratives of the mainstream, peeling away surfaces to reveal the artificial ways in which structures like race, gender, and nation have been created in the first place. In the 1920s, this meant that middle-class black women could use pageantry in the service of respectability, even while middle-class white women—who claimed a monopoly on respectability—struggled to prove their pageants could be respectable. Mexican American Joe Kirby could argue in

a court of law that he was white, and that argument alone could serve as enough of a legal justification to annul his union with an “unquestionably” black wife. And while they made perfect sense some eighty years ago, neither the argument nor its outcome would be conceivable in the U.S. of today. So whiteness proved to be a fiction, a concept constructed and reconstructed constantly in cultural discourse, and a status that, ironically, has not belonged only to those that Americans in the U.S. now so instinctively think of as white.



Figure 2.1. **Norma Smallwood.** Upon rejecting the offer of a comfortable life as the wife of a New England professor, Smallwood went on to begin building a comfortable life of her own. In addition to the cook stove, Smallwood added \$100,000 in appearance fees and product endorsements to her spoils as Miss America. From September 1926 to September 1927, the year she held the title, Smallwood was reported to have out-earned both Babe Ruth and President Herbert Hoover.

<http://title3.sde.state.ok.us/famousoklahoma/miss.htm>



<http://memory.loc.gov/>

Figure 2.2 and Figure 2.3. **Sashes.** In photographs like these, the legacy of suffrage pageantry in the imagery of beauty pageantry is obvious. Note, however, that the suffragette sashes (above) demand "Votes for Women," while the beauty pageant sashes proclaim only geographical, rather than political, affinities. For instance, "Miss Philadelphia" (who is Ruth Malcomson, Miss America 1924) appears in the lower right hand corner (below). Note also the prominent presence of black women in the 1912 suffrage parade (above), and their clear absence (below) in the Miss America lineup a decade later.



<http://www.columbia.edu/itc/barnard/theater/kirkland/3136/1920sgallery/pages/A1924.1.htm>