



Figure 5.1. **Pageant Week.** Miss Asian America Pageant staff and onlookers photograph contestants, who are dressed all in white, as they pose with a sponsor in San Francisco Chinatown during Pageant Week. Photograph by author.



Figure 5.2. **Poise and Personality.** The scene depicted here shows some of the many participants involved in the Miss Asian America Pageant. The contestant in an evening gown selects a final question from the hands of a man in full military dress. The soldier appears only briefly onstage during the performance and with no other task but to hand question cards to contestants. The two individuals holding microphones are hosts who will read the question on the card out loud to the contestant before she delivers her extemporaneous response. All the while, a titleholder from another pageant looks on from a special section in the front row of the audience reserved for “former queens.”

Photograph by author.

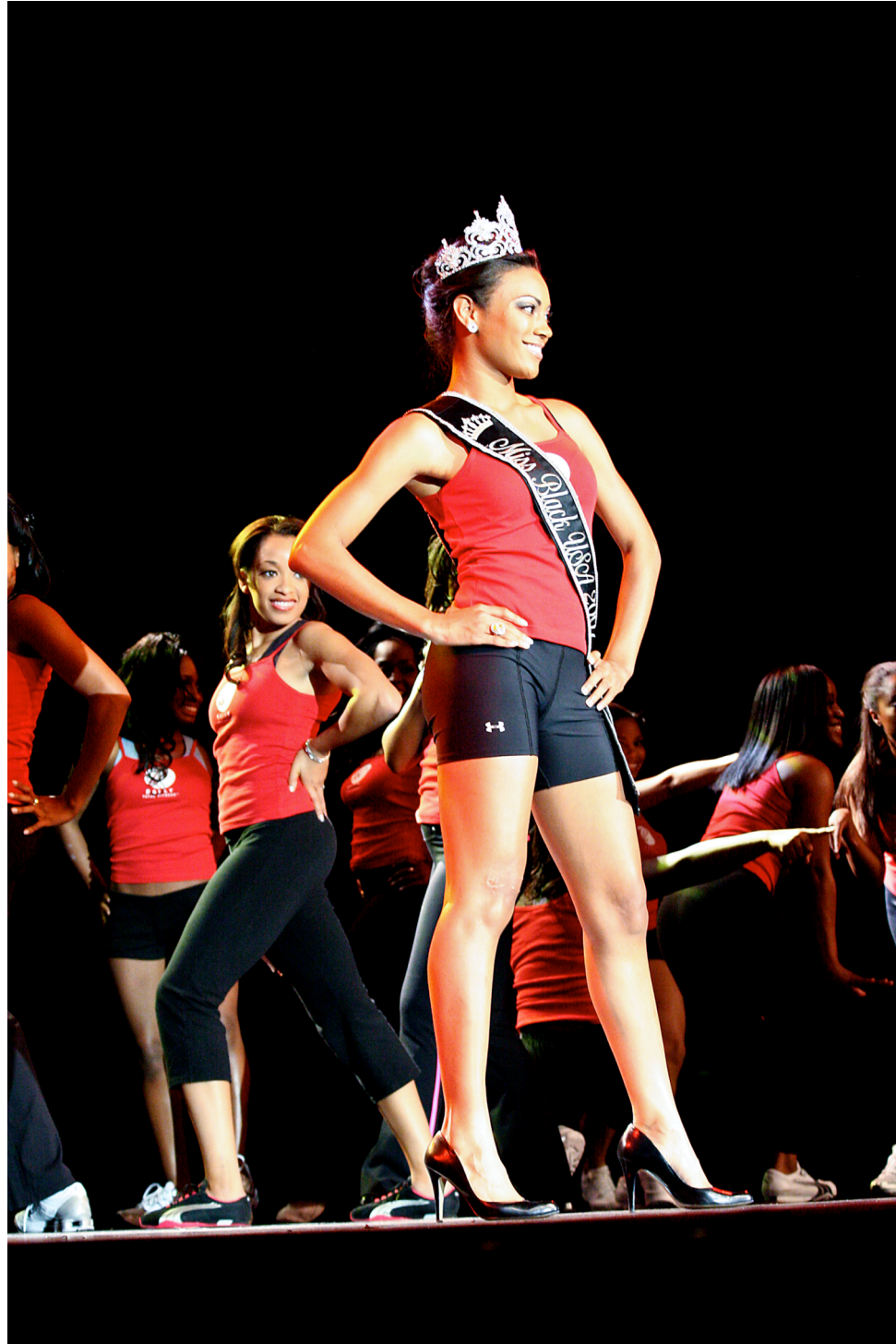


Figure 5.3. **Physical Fitness.** Miss Black USA 2007, Kalilah Allen-Harris, poses onstage during the Physical Fitness competition on the final night of the 2008 pageant. The contestants behind her wear matching outfits as they perform a choreographed group routine. Whereas they actually appear gym-ready, Allen-Harris seems less so. She has accessorized her physical fitness outfit with a pair of black high-heeled pumps.

Photograph by author.



Figure 5.4. **Evening Gown.** A contestant walks the runway in the Miss Black USA preliminary Evening Gown competition.
Photograph by author.



Figure 5.5. **Ethnic Local.** A contestant in the Miss Asian America Pageant introduces herself to the audience for the first time during the pageant’s Ethnic Costume competition. The remaining contestants stand arrayed behind her, wearing traditional garb to represent various Asian nations. Together, the contestants create an embodied “map” of Asian America based on Asian ethnicities rather than on American geography. Photograph by author.



Figure 5.6. “**Ethnic Mix!**” The same contestant appears here, alone at the microphone. Although she is identified in the Miss Asian America Pageant program book as “Thai and Chinese,” the nature of the Ethnic Costume competition requires that she wear only one outfit and therefore that she represent only one nation on the “map” of ethnicities performed in this portion of the pageant.

Photograph by author.



Figure 5.7. “**Here...**” A Miss Asian America Pageant contestant plays a classic rock solo on the electric guitar during the pageant’s Talent Showcase.
Photograph by author.

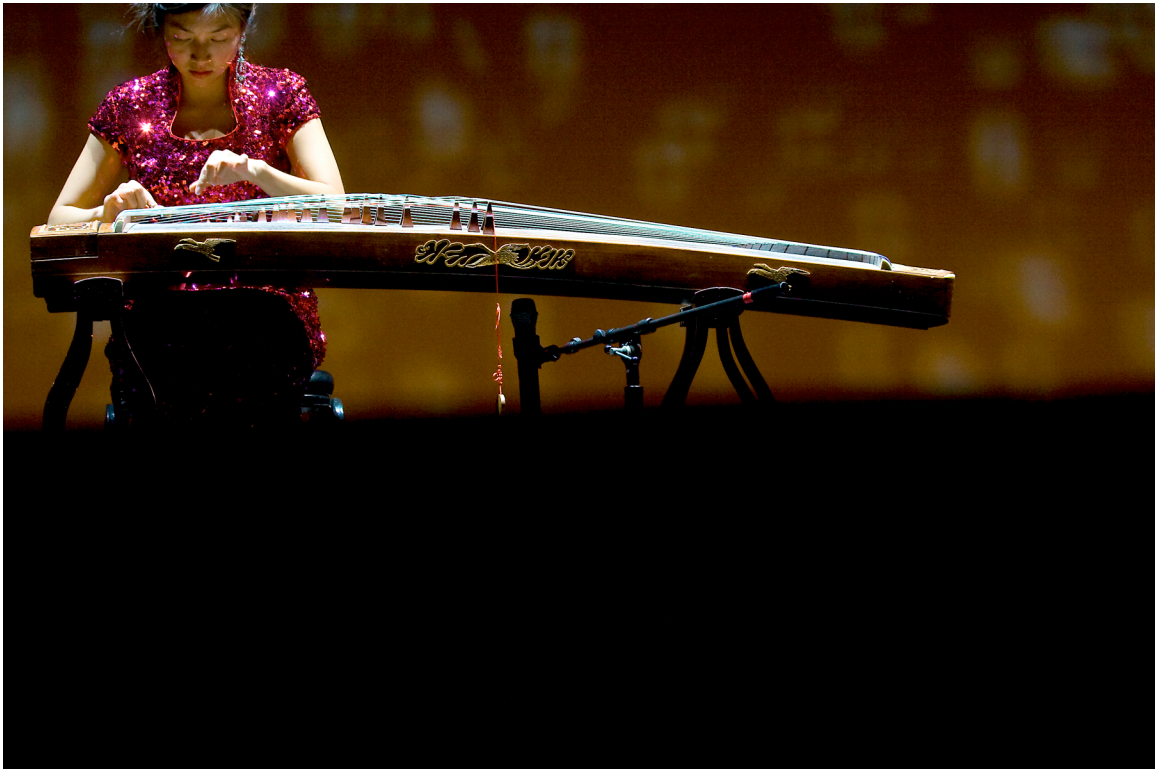


Figure 5.8. “...and There.” Another contestant plays a solo on the *ghuzeng*, a Chinese string instrument, during the Miss Asian America Pageant Talent Showcase. Photograph by author.



Figure 5.9. **“Here and There.”** A Miss Black USA contestant wears an African-inspired costume while performing a dramatic monologue for the preliminary Talent competition. The monologue is a poem by Philadelphia native RuNett Nia Ebo entitled “Lord, Why Did You Make Me Black?” The poem, which depicts a conversation with God, begins with the speaker asking, “Why did you make me black?” and God ultimately responds, “Get off your knees and look around. / Tell me, what do you see? / I didn’t make you in the image of darkness / I made you in the likeness of me.”

Photograph by author.



Figure 5.10. **“The Whole Woman.”** Miss Black USA 2008, Kristen Elizabeth White, appears here shortly after being crowned. She takes her triumphant first walk as titleholder in front of a backdrop of a large American flag. Photograph by author.

CONCLUSION

In the days after Miss Michigan USA Rima Fakhri won the 2010 Miss USA Pageant, a number of conservative bloggers like Debbie Schluskel complained about a Lebanese immigrant holding the title. “It’s a sad day in America,” Schluskel’s blog post began, before she went on to lament that, “Clearly, there is affirmative action for Muslim women in beauty pageants and other such ‘contests.’” Gesturing toward the import of the Miss USA results and what she perceived to be the “dangerous” impact they could have, Schluskel warned readers, “No, it’s not ‘just another beauty pageant.’” And echoing the concerns of Miss Italy Giovanna Mazzotti after the 1952 Miss Universe Pageant, Schluskel concluded, “I don’t just wonder if this whole contest is rigged. I have a feeling that it is.”¹

Schluskel’s insistence that Miss USA is “not ‘just another beauty pageant’” is, in some ways, true. The Miss USA Pageant is a national pageant, a mainstream contest broadcast throughout and outside the United States by NBC and funded by the corporate capital of billionaire Donald Trump. While Schluskel’s blog post combined conservative extremism with racism, xenophobia, and hateful anti-Muslim rhetoric, the one thing she did get right was the sentiment that the beauty pageant mattered. If, as I have argued

¹ Debbie Schluskel, “Donald Trump, Dhimmi: Miss Hezbollah Rima Fakhri Wins Miss USA; Rigged for Muslima? Miss Oklahoma’s Arizona Immigration Answer,” *Debbie Schluskel*, May 16, 2010, <http://www.debbieschluskel.com/22000/donald-trump-dhimmi-miss-hezbollah-wins-miss-usa-was-contest-rigged-for-muslima-hezbollah-supporter-miss-oklahomas-great-arizona-immigration-answer/>, Accessed June 25, 2010.

throughout this text, the body and behaviors of a national beauty queen describe who belongs in the nation, then a contradiction can arise when an immigrant woman represents an ideal of belonging at a historical moment characterized by anti-immigrant sentiments in the nation.

Just weeks before the pageant, legislators in the state of Arizona had passed a xenophobic immigration law allowing law enforcement officials to seek proof of citizenship from any person they might suspect, for any reason, to be an illegal immigrant. The echoes of the Arizona legislation had rung nationwide as those in the U.S. debated racism in the law and the place of immigrants in the nation. The Arizona statute had such resonance, in fact, that in the onstage question portion of the Miss USA broadcast, minutes before Fakih was crowned, celebrity judge Oscar Nuñez had asked Miss Oklahoma USA, “Arizona’s new immigration statute authorizes law enforcement authorities to check the citizenship of anyone they think may be in the country illegally. Critics say this may amount to racial profiling. Do you think that this should be mandated by the state or by the federal government.” And she had answered, “I’m a huge believer in state’s rights; I think that’s what’s so wonderful about America. So I think it’s perfectly fine for Arizona to create that law. I am against illegal immigration, but I’m also against racial profiling, so I see both sides of this issue.”² Miss Oklahoma USA was first runner up. And while Fakih, the winner, was not an illegal immigrant, she was a Lebanese Muslim immigrant. In her capacity as Miss USA, Fakih was supposed to function as a symbol of an imagined national community. That function was dependent on the ability of people in the nation to imagine themselves similar to each other because

² Miss USA 2010, Broadcast 16 May 2010.

they could imagine themselves similar to her. And therein lay the “problem” as expressed in the conservative blogosphere: Schlüssel and others could not.

Yet the year prior, when Kristen Dalton, a young blonde woman from North Carolina, had been crowned Miss USA, there was no comparable outcry from Lebanese immigrant or any other of-color bloggers asserting that Dalton could not represent them. In fact, Dalton’s win had been totally overshadowed by news about Miss California USA Carrie Prejean’s negative response to an onstage question about gay marriage. Prejean, who did not win the Miss USA title, remained in the news for months. Meanwhile, Dalton carried out her reign in such relative media obscurity that, by the time she crowned Fakhri as her successor, even I, as a scholar of pageantry, had no memory of her name.

The very different reactions to the two Miss USAs are evidence not only of the impossibility of representing a multiracial, multiethnic nation in one woman, but also of the privileging of whiteness with respect to U.S. national identity. Privilege works by making the privileged category, in this case whiteness, neutral and universal. Under U.S. racism and white privilege, it would be as absurd for anyone to question whether Dalton’s whiteness made her the appropriate choice to represent the nation, as it would have been for conservative bloggers in a post-9/11 U.S. to have had no reaction to Fakhri at all.

By the morning after Fakhri’s win, a search had begun for any past indiscretions whereby she might be discredited or dethroned. The only thing that surfaced was a minor scandal about the fact that, three years prior, Fakhri had won “Stripper 101,” a pole-dancing contest hosted by a local Detroit radio station’s “Mojo in the Morning” show.

Trump said he was not going to fire Fakhri from the Miss USA position on the basis of that alone, especially given that, as radio host Mojo pointed out, Fakhri was more fully clothed during the pole-dancing contest than she had been in parts of the pageant.³

In reality, while objections to Prejean were based on her response to her onstage question—and subsequent information that emerged about her having posed for nude photographs years prior—Fakhri did not have to say or do anything. The fact that she was Lebanese, Muslim, and an immigrant was enough to draw conservative disdain. Nonetheless, Fakhri did win. Nine years after 9/11 and fifty-eight years after the Miss Universe Organization had started its pageants in Long Beach, Fakhri could become the first Lebanese Muslim Miss USA. And that she could win the pageant was as important a detail in the story as the fact that she could be criticized for winning.

Therein lies the complexity of national pageantry: the fact that Fakhri won the pageant and the fact that people cared. Both the win and the response to it emerge from the reality that the cultural work pageants purport to do, to name a single woman as the representative body of a heterogeneous nation, is impossible. One person simply cannot look like everybody in the nation. And one person certainly cannot *be* like everybody, in all the complex ways that constitute being. However, the work done in pageantry is not just done by an individual. There are many more people involved in producing a pageant than just the beauty queen, and the discourses in which those people participate—discourses about culture, race, gender, class, sexuality, and nation—extend far beyond the pageant itself.

³ Cristina Everett, “Photos of Miss USA Rima Fakhri in pole dancing contest surface -- could she be stripped of her crown?” *Daily News*, May 20, 2010, http://www.nydailynews.com/gossip/2010/05/17/2010-05-17_miss_usa_rima_fakhri_pole_dancing_photos_of_pageant_winner_may_strip_her_of_her_c.html#ixzz0rxnP5VB9, Accessed June 26, 2010.

In the 1920s, those discourses likened a nascent Miss America to a U.S. nation in a period of political upheaval. The pageant was part of a conservative backlash against shifts in power represented by Women's Suffrage and the aftermath of the Great War. The young, virginal, white bodies of the women who won the Miss America contest in that decade represented an American nation in need of protection from penetration by a world recently at war. At the same time, discourses of whiteness, in which persons of color engaged as well as white persons, demonstrated that whiteness was not only penetrable, but in fact unstable and constantly being reinvented and redefined through culture. Thirty years later, the advent of the Miss Universe Pageant was a cultural product of larger discourses about the place of the United States as a new world superpower in an era characterized by the Cold War and global capitalism. The logics of the Miss Universe Pageant mapped modernity and global anxieties about war and "world peace" onto the bodies of contestants, who stood in for only certain nations in the capitalist world of which U.S. government, military, and industry were the new leaders.

Even as women of color from outside the U.S. competed in the international Miss Universe Pageant, national pageants like Miss America and Miss USA remained entirely white into the 1960s. As that decade saw a rise in popularity of both pageantry and protest, communities of color began national pageants, like Miss Indian America, Miss Chinatown USA, and Miss Black America, to negotiate and perform their own versions of national identity through cultural productions that could be visible to others in the nation. Organizers and winners of these of-color pageants did not only express the importance of people of color in the Cold-War U.S., they in fact produced nations-within-nations—after which the pageants were named—wherein people of color were central

rather than marginalized. Forty years later, in the early twenty-first-century era of xenophobia and racial profiling that followed 9/11, communities of color continued to stage pageants in order to do the cultural work of re-centering the nation on the margins. The difference was that pageants like Miss Asian America, Miss Black USA, and Miss Latina US were panethnic and diasporic, producing understandings of nation in which the “local” was ethnic rather than geographical, and the nation itself stretched beyond the boundaries of the nation-state.

In that history of race, gender, representation, and nation in the United States, there are, of course, stories that complicate the narrative. Updated information on the Miss America Pageant website now indicates that Norma Smallwood, the 1926 Miss America who chose a cook stove over a husband, was Native American (Cherokee), not white.⁴ The first Miss USA of color was not Mai Shanley in 1984 but rather Macel Wilson, a woman from Hawai‘i who won the pageant in 1962.⁵ Also, the Miss Black America Pageant, which started as “positive protest” against Miss America, was not the first national black pageant; a Miss Sepia America contest predated the Miss Black America Pageant by over twenty years.⁶ In addition the fact that the Miss Black USA, Miss Asian America, and Miss Latina US Pageants began almost in the same years that a black, an Asian American, and a Latina woman won Miss America and Miss USA, respectively, suggests that there are still questions to answer about why the founders of those of-color pageants would start separate contests just as more women of color were

⁴ “Our Miss Americas: 1926,” *Miss America*, <http://www.missamerica.org/our-miss-americas/1920/1926.aspx>, Accessed June 25, 2010.

⁵ “About Us: Past Titleholders,” *Miss USA*, http://www.missuniverse.com/missusa/contestant_profiles/past, Accessed June 25, 2010.

⁶ See “Lovely Lassies in the Sepia Miss America Contest,” *The Crisis* (July 1944): 221; “Miss Sepia Contest Starts Philly Sifting,” *Washington Afro-American*, March 23, 1971.

beginning to win the pageants of the mainstream. Those stories told through pageantry are important to histories of race and representation, because they belie false narratives of linear progress in popular understandings of race in the United States.

Nikole Churchill, the mixed-race woman whose crowning as homecoming queen recently caused a stir at Hampton University, is one such story that complicates histories of race, gender, and the U.S. nation. A woman who was perceived to be white by many on the campus of her Historically Black University was awarded a title that made her the first nonblack woman to represent that campus. The history of the institution itself was grounded in creating spaces for black achievement, which raises questions about what it means for a nonblack person instead of a black person to achieve such a visible representative position at that institution. What it meant to Churchill, when she faced opposition in the days after her win, was that she was being discriminated against. That is what she believed when she called upon Obama to help her by coming to her campus to speak about “the changes our nation is making toward accepting diversity.”

The response of many on campus to Churchill’s decision to write directly to the President of the United States of America was not positive. The response from the President himself, though, was. Obama did go to Hampton University, to speak to the Class of 2010 at their commencement exercises just seven months after Churchill had written to invite him there. In his speech to Hampton graduates, Churchill included, Obama said that the founders of Hampton University had known “that inequality would persist long into the future.” He also talked about change, just as Churchill had done in her letter to him months before. “This is a period of breathtaking change,” he said, and he spoke of “the challenges of a changing world.” To face those challenges successfully as a

nation, Obama concluded, would require “[t]he participation of all those who have ever sought to perfect our union.”⁷

In the changing world of which Obama spoke, inequalities do persist, many of them created or exacerbated in the context of nationhood. The nation is a category that relies on the kinds of exclusions enacted by the Arizona immigration law and Debbie Schlusel’s intolerant comments about Rima Fasih, for its continued existence. The act of perfecting a union always means joining some and not others. It means that some will belong and others will not. It means some are privileged while many others continue to be oppressed. Whether national identity is produced by the mainstream or by marginalized communities, what national pageants and other cultural productions demonstrate is the reality that articulating national spaces and national identities is always an exclusionary practice.

In the complex arithmetic of “woman=nation”, the aggressive policing of national boundaries, which simultaneously include and exclude, manifests as the aggressive policing of women’s bodies. Physical and rhetorical violence committed in order to define and protect the boundaries of nations is also physical and rhetorical violence against women. Therefore, what is visible in the everyday practices of national pageantry are not only the limits of nation as a vehicle for inclusion, but also the danger that even alternative nation-building projects reproduce the rhetorical and physical domination of marginalized women’s bodies.

⁷ Barack Obama, “Remarks by the President at Hampton University Commencement,” *WhiteHouse.gov*, May 9, 2010, <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/remarks-president-hampton-university-commencement>, Accessed June 25, 2010.



<http://mojo.channel955.com/pages/photos.html?feed=185661&article=7123180>

Figures 6.1 and 6.2. **Rima Fakih**. Miss USA 2010 participated in a local Detroit radio station's pole dancing contest (above) three years before winning the national beauty title. Not only is Fakih more clothed than the majority of the women who appear at the right side of the image, she was also more clothed while pole dancing than at various points in the Miss USA Pageant (below). Pageant owner Donald Trump was unimpressed when some suggested that Fakih ought to lose her crown because of this "sordid" moment in her personal history. Trump did not fire her.



http://www.nydailynews.com/entertainment/galleries/miss_michigan_rima_fakih_is_crowned_miss_usa_2010/miss_michigan_rima_fakih_is_crowned_miss_usa_2010.html



Figure 6.3. **Norma Des Cygne Smallwood.** The Miss America Pageant website now identifies Norma Smallwood as a Cherokee woman. This makes Smallwood, who was crowned in 1926, the first Miss America of color. It also brings to light a gap of over fifty-five years before another woman of color, Vanessa Williams, won the pageant in 1983.

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



Figure 6.4. **Miss Hampton University 2009.** Nikole Churchill, the first nonblack Miss Hampton University, poses here in October 2009 with three black runners-up. <http://blackoncampus.com/2009/10/13/nearly-wordless-wednesday-miss-hampton-university-2009/>



Figure 6.5. **“A Period of Breathtaking Change.”** Many in the Hampton University community thought it was inappropriate when Nikole Churchill wrote to President Barack Obama to ask him to come to the campus and speak to its population about diversity. Obama himself, apparently, did not think the request was inappropriate at all. He went to Hampton to speak at the 2010 commencement exercises seven months later. http://216.97.229.165/diverse/img/photos/biz/051010_Obama_Hampton.jpg

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