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The Pageant Politic: Race and Representation in American Beauty Contests and
Culture

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An abstract of
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Abstract

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The beauty pageant stage has been considered an insignificant space, void of any real or considerable meaning. From the bathing beauty contests of the 1920's, to the most recognized and consistent American beauty ritual—the *Miss America Pageant*—most critical thought has assailed the triviality of beauty pageants. Burgeoning critical treatments of beauty pageants have emerged in an attempt by scholars to more carefully consider the cultural production of these performative spaces and to illuminate the ways in which meaning is produced through the presentation of “ideal” bodies. This study focuses on the precarious position that sociologist Maxine Leeds Craig believes bodies of difference occupy—as objects of both ridicule and celebration—and considers what happens when marginalized bodies enter traditional pageant spaces as well as the ways in which the pageant model has been subverted in particular instances to challenge exclusionary representations of feminine ideals. This study works to suggest an understanding of the pageant model as an active space for the production of cultural meaning, and illuminates its use as a tool to dismantle exclusionary definitions of true womanhood while remaining critical of the ability of such models to be completely and universally subversive or transformative. This project does not argue against the inherent racism and sexism of beauty pageants, but complicates the matter in ways that encourage scholars of beauty, the body, and popular culture to reconceptualize the pageant stage and consider how the model has, at times, been turned on its head by marginalized communities in order to challenge and redefine notions of the body beautiful.

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CONTENTS

Introduction.....	1
Chapter 1.....	15
Chapter 2.....	48
Chapter 3.....	84
Chapter 4.....	116
Works Cited.....	154

TABLES

Table 1.1.....	42
Table 1.2.....	42
Table 1.3.....	42

INTRODUCTION

In 2004, I had the honor of becoming the first African American woman to win the title of “Miss Georgia.” In the pageant’s sixty-year history, few Black women had ever come close to winning the crown. I distinctly remember understanding that that moment would be life changing for me; what I failed to consider was how this instance would be read and interpreted by those around me. A few days after the pageant, my first scheduled appearance as Miss Georgia was Atlanta’s annual Fourth of July parade. Not only was I asked to participate, but I was also delighted to share the spotlight with Ericka Dunlap, the fifth African American woman to become Miss America. Before becoming Miss America, Ericka also had the distinction of becoming the first African American woman to win the Miss Florida pageant.

When talking with Ericka for the first time, we both acknowledged the significance of our accomplishments, and also realized the challenges of being African American “firsts” in a system with a history of excluding women of color. Dunlap, a dark-skinned woman with a curvaceous frame, expressed her disappointment in having been ridiculed by the hosts of the *Tom Joyner Morning Show*—a popular nationally syndicated radio program that airs on stations with predominantly African American audiences—for having what they described as “nappy edges” when she was crowned Miss America. Though she appeared thick-skinned enough to take this ribbing with a grain of salt, Ericka warned me in a “sisterly” way, “if nothing else, make sure your edges are straight or you *will* be talked about.” Though she feigned indifference, it was clear to me that the popular

African American radio hosts had both embarrassed and wounded her in a way that she had not anticipated. (It is worth noting that the runner up, Miss Hawaii, a woman of Pacific Islander descent, had very straight hair).

Later, as we both joined the parade route, I nervously sat atop the convertible that was assigned to drive me and thought about Ericka's warning and the implications that these kinds of aesthetic criticisms had on her and, by association, on me. As we slowly progressed through the streets of Atlanta, I was pleasantly surprised by the reaction of the crowds—dare I say, humbled. Though my conversation with Ericka made me worry how I might be received, at every turn, African American men and women called out to me in proud voices that they had read about me in the newspaper or seen the news story about my win. The faces of the young girls along the parade route, coupled with the energy of the men and women who had expressed their excitement at my accomplishment confirmed that my being Miss Georgia was a significant moment that deserved serious reflection. Moreover, having been told by my grandmother, a retired farmer, domestic and midwife from rural Williamsburg County, South Carolina, that I'd taken her to places she'd never dreamed she'd be—particularly the Miss Georgia and *Miss America Pageant*—pushed me to consider the meaning of the space which I'd conquered and the collective sense of achievement that another glass ceiling had been shattered.

Concurrently, I was also forced to reconcile what I knew to be a complicated moment of very inter and intra racial complexity apparent in Ericka Dunlap's suggestion that I "keep my edges straight,"—a reminder of the ever-present social, political, and economic complexities of Black beauty culture. This convoluted

mixture of pride and prejudice, pomp and circumstance led me to this investigation of the pageant stage as a space that produces significant cultural meaning about ideal feminine beauty and to the questions of what it means for someone like Ericka Dunlap or me to enter those spaces.

The beauty pageant stage has been considered an insignificant space, void of any real or considerable meaning. From the bathing beauty contests of the 1920's, to the most recognized and consistent American beauty ritual- the Miss America Pageant- most critical thought has assailed the triviality of beauty pageants. Most commonly, beauty pageants have been regarded as part of commoditization, power, and control that reinforces narrow cultural expectations and understandings of women, gender, and sexuality.¹ Burgeoning critical treatments of beauty pageants have emerged in an attempt by scholars to more carefully consider the cultural production of these performative spaces and to illuminate the ways in which meaning is produced through the presentation of "ideal" bodies. As such, beauty pageants must be read "as elements of mass consumer culture, [and as] a kind of entertainment that subtly influences the ways we see ourselves and our communities" (Cohen, et. al. 10).

Throughout American history, images of ideal beauty have emerged in

¹ Cohen, Wilk, and Stoeltje make this claim in the Introduction of their text *Beauty Queens on the Global Stage*.

various forms. From the “Gibson Girl”² of the late nineteenth/early twentieth centuries, to the pin-up girls of the World War II era, to Miss America, representations of feminine ideals are very much embedded in myths of American cultural supremacy. These exclusive ideals of American beauty have a long history, deeply rooted in their ability to juxtapose white bodies against a black background. In other words, white feminine beauty has often been defined against, and in polar opposition to, black women’s bodies. In *Ain’t I a Beauty Queen: Black Women, Beauty, and the Politics of Race*, author Maxine Leeds Craig asserts that “African Americans have ceaselessly reinterpreted dominant culture [and have] contested and revised the social meanings of black racial identity through spectacles, protests, and daily acts of self-presentation” (Leeds Craig 14). It is not surprising that the traditional beauty pageant model becomes, for African American communities, a space that labors to challenge racist hierarchies and present affirmative, self-determined images of Black womanhood and ideal beauty.

As manufactured and manipulated images of the black Mammy, Sapphire, Jezebel, and the female pickaninny were repeated until they became indelible racialized representations of the Black female body, new movements for reclamation and self-definition from within the Black community became important social and political projects. Performances like those that took place on Historically Black College campuses and in the NAACP-sponsored Miss Black America pageant represent instances of a revisionist politic mapped onto the bodies of black women.

² The “Gibson Girl” was the personification of the feminine ideal. Illustrated by Charles Dana Gibson, the “Gibson Girl” appeared in print during the late nineteenth/early twentieth century. Gibson’s “Gibson Girl” is said to have contributed to the national standard for beauty- that standard being tall, statuesque, buxom, youthful, and ephemeral.

In the contemporary moment, we have seen this same kind of project at work in reality television shows, like *Mo'Nique's F.A.T. Chance*, that present narratives of transformation and self-reclamation in order to assert spaces of power that celebrate and defend marginal bodies.

This investigation of American beauty contests is grounded in a black feminist framework and connects the personal narrative of my childhood interest in viewing beauty pageants on television, (in particular the *Miss America Pageant*), with my experience as a woman who competed on the *Miss America Pageant* stage. These experiences have motivated my intellectual curiosities about how these performances work to influence popular culture and shape our ideals about “true” womanhood. Further, I believe that my position as both interrogator and participant provide a unique and complicated lens through which to critically engage this subject.

What began as a bathing beauty contest in 1921 to boost Atlantic City tourism, the *Miss America Pageant* blossomed to become a significant cultural ceremony through which feminine standards were reified and constructed, and extraordinary women were celebrated as “America’s ideal.”³ In its heyday, the Miss America pageant was the highest rated television program in America, embedding within the minds of its viewing audience images of young women who were beautiful, physically fit, chaste, demure, intellectually competent, exceptionally

³ Bernie Wayne penned the theme song for Miss America in 1954 which proclaims, “There she is, Miss America; there she is, *your* ideal”

talented, and, almost exclusively, white.⁴ From its earliest days, minority contestants were excluded from participation in local, state, and national competitions for Miss America. Long after this period of regulated exclusion, minority contestants were continually deterred from participation for many years. Though a small group of Black women won local competitions through the 1950s and 1960s, it would take nearly fifty years from the birth the of the pageant for a woman of color to capture a state crown, and another fourteen years for Vanessa Williams to become the first African-American Miss America.⁵

In 1968, as feminist protestors rallied on the boardwalk of Atlantic City against the inherent sexism of the *Miss America Pageant*, the NAACP reproduced the traditional pageant model in what they deemed a “positive protest” against the pageant’s inherent racism. Maxine Leeds Craig suggests that this symbolic moment, the birth of the NAACP-sponsored Miss Black America pageant, marked a significant shift that encourages us to “[take] into account the ways in which African-American women have been depicted in dominant culture, [and] consider the divergent ways African-American women have been depicted in African American cultural representations” (6). Further, Leeds-Craig suggests deliberation of “the ways African Americans have used images of African American women to challenge cultural domination [and counter] the subjective experiences of black women whose bodies were the objects of ridicule and celebration” (6). It is at this juncture, and with Leeds Craig’s analysis in mind, that this project, *“The Pageant Politic”: Race and*

⁴ The Miss America Pageant was televised for the first time in 1954 and crowned Lee Meriwhether “Miss America.” The pageant had its largest viewing audiences in the 1960’s.

⁵ Cheryl Brown became Miss Iowa in 1970 and Vanessa Williams was crowned “Miss America 1984.”

Representation in American Beauty Contests and Culture, finds its place among a diverse cadre of scholarly examinations of the pageant stage and situates itself within a feminist tradition of building upon and advancing the projects of feminist and womanist theorists whose works inform my own.

Reading the Pageant as Text

This study focuses specifically on the precarious position that Maxine Leeds Craig believes bodies of difference occupy – as objects of both ridicule and celebration, and considers the ways in which the pageant model has been subverted in particular instances to challenge exclusionary representations of feminine ideals. This dissertation argues that alternative projects like the NAACP’s Miss Black America pageant, historically Black college queen competitions, and contemporary models like “Monique’s F.A.T. Chance” work against hegemonic ideals of true womanhood in interesting ways.⁶ I submit that these transgressive performances employ the traditional pageant model in order to:

1. Critique the pageant model and its inherent racism and sexism;
2. Confront the physical, psychological, and historical traumas of the slave past;
3. Subvert historical claims about ideal bodies, womanhood, and citizenship;
4. Expose the ways in which bodies of difference have been used historically

⁶ The acronym “F.A.T.” stands for “Fabulous and Thick.” This play on words subverts conventional thinking about the bodies represented in this performance as “fat,” and rather presents them as “thick”- a culturally acceptable and idealized body type in African American communities.

to construct and stabilize categories of deviant and normal bodies, as well as, categories of whiteness and blackness;⁷

5. Challenge white supremacy through the declaration of the Black body as beautiful; and,

6. Construct newer, more inclusive corporeal and ideological paradigms.

Acknowledging the ways that the aforementioned objectives work together as an organized political project, I argue that the pageant stage serves as a space through which marginal identities are presented in ways that shift existing paradigms and encourage alternative narratives that challenge prevailing mythologies and present revised narratives of ideal womanhood.

This argument begs the consideration of several questions in order to fully understand the cultural and political work of these kinds of alternative projects and to determine their “success.” The first series of questions deals specifically with content, asking: How are these alternative models in conversation with historical claims about African-American and other bodies considered “deviant”? What is at stake when the traditional pageant model serves as the structural base for new design? Moreover, is it possible for these (re) constructed models to offer anything “new,” or do they simply develop (re)constructed exclusionary paradigms? In other words, “can you use the master’s tools to dismantle the master’s house?”⁸

⁷ In an essay entitled “ ‘Some Could Suckle over Their Shoulder’: Male Travelers, Female Bodies, and the Gendering of Racial Ideology” Jennifer L. Morgan makes the compelling claim that the subjective experiences of African American women have long histories, deeply rooted in the slave experience and in an era that pre-dates this peculiar period of American history. Morgan argues that early 16th century travel narratives by European explorers marked bodies of difference in order to protect racial hierarchies, construct, and stabilize categories of whiteness and blackness.

⁸ Audre Lorde asks this very important question in the seminal text *Sister Outsider*.

Complicating these questions, I offer Vanessa Williams' experience as the only Miss America to relinquish the title in order to question the ability or inability of the pageant stage to be truly transcendental. Williams' story not only provides greater perspective, but also demands that we remain suspicious of the beauty contest model as a space for restorative justice.

The second series of questions encourages contextual readings of these alternative projects. For instance, does a close reading of these alternative models reveal them as feminist projects; and, if so, how can we reconcile the tension between the inherent exclusionary practices of the traditional pageant model with the anti-racist and possibly feminist practices of these alternative models? As an example, I submit the reality television program "Monique's F.A.T. Chance" in order to question how the pageant model might be used to present a kind of performance that offers progressive imaginings of a new feminist/feminine ideal. Though these questions yield complicated answers, my research suggests an interesting dichotomy at play – one that acknowledges the boundaries of subversion, while realizing the possibilities for transgression.

Theoretical Disruptions of the Pageant Stage

As disruptive examinations continue to break ground, varying theoretical and methodological approaches to considering beauty pageants have pushed me to think beyond a simplistic reading. Scholars like Sarah Banet-Weiser and Maxine Leeds Craig have employed a feminist framework in order to appropriately analyze the ways in which inter-constitutive categories like race, gender, and nation

converge upon a particular space and create both deliberate and unintended meanings. Others, like Judith Butler and Susan Bordo engage feminist, queer, and Foucauldian theories as a means of exploiting the construction of subversive identities through performative spaces. Contemporary social anthropological treatments, like Cohen, Wilk, and Stoeltje's *Beauty Queens on the Global Stage*, endeavor to connect beauty pageantry with histories of ritual performance and commodification of the body from an international perspective. Despite varying theoretical approaches, narratives around issues of citizenship and nationhood remain central to most examinations of content and context. In addition to a reading of the pageant stage as "text" and historical contextualization, this dissertation integrates a very interdisciplinary body of critical theories of performance, race, gender, sexuality, and nationhood, to comprehensively recognize the full complexity of the cultural work of beauty contests.

Overview of Chapters

Chapter One, entitled "There She Is...Whose Ideal: Discipline and Disruption on the Pageant Stage," investigates the ways in which the infrastructure of pageant performances produces meaning and creates, through carefully constructed conventions, very disciplined spaces. It is my belief that the process of pageantry is as important as the images that are produced and reproduced on the pageant stage. As such, this critical examination interprets these spaces as grounded within a particular infrastructure that is fundamental to their cultural work. Concurrently, this chapter questions how alternative models use these disciplined spaces to

critique and disrupt traditional feminine ideals. Drawing specifically upon Judith Butler's conceptualizations of the disruptive possibilities for subversive bodies and performances, my analysis looks critically at the ways in which pageant organizers and participants use the traditional pageant infrastructure to produce alternative performances that expose the signification of *Other-ness* and modify historical imaginings of bodies that remain in the margins. As such, queries emerge that deal specifically with the legitimacy and limitations of subversion in these instances, and with what remains at stake when oppressive models are appropriated in order to encourage disruption and revision.

Chapter Two, entitled "'Pressing a Crusade': *Ebony* Magazine and the Crafting of a 'New Black Woman,'" recognizes John H. and Eunice Johnson's use of print media to articulate new ideals of Black womanhood and present images of Black woman that stand in opposition to historically racist imagery of the Black female body. In particular, this study examines the presentation of African American beauty contest winners in national and international pageant systems and on college campuses across the country and highlights the work of the Johnson's—particularly Eunice Walker Johnson—in crafting models of the "New Black Woman." In particular, this chapter recognizes the progressive images of campus royalty from Historically Black Colleges and Universities that have appeared as an annual feature in *Ebony* magazine since the mid-1970s.

This chapter asserts that the editorials around Black beauty contests winners and Black college queens in *Ebony* magazine provide provocative narratives that prove the pageant stage as a useful space for cultural productivity. Further, the

images presented in the magazine tell an incredible story of the ways in which movements for social justice within Black communities have often been inscribed on the bodies of Black women. This dissertation not only considers these historical records between the years 1954 and 1979 as a critical part of much larger narratives of the Black female body, but also moves them forward as rich sites for scholarly investigation in the areas of beauty, the body, performance and popular culture. Further, this chapter weaves a complicated tale that highlights the historical significance of Black beauty pageant winners and Black college campus queens as producers of new cultural knowledge about the black female body and as representative symbols of a particular kind of political project for social justice.

Chapter Three, entitled “Triumph and Tragedy: Race, Representation and the Dethroning of an American Beauty Queen,” looks critically at the controversy over the nude pictures published in *Penthouse* magazine (1984) that abruptly ended Vanessa Williams’ reign as the first African American Miss America. The “dethroning” of Williams as “America’s ideal” offered a critical moment of pause for theorists whose work on representations of beauty and the black female body might have offered nuanced interrogations of the intersections of race, gender, and sexuality in this particular instance. Unfortunately, aside from the outcries against the pageant’s inherent racism and sexism, very few Black feminist critiques engage this moment in ways that align this significant trauma in the life of *one* black woman with the historical traumas of countless Black women whose bodies have been viewed as “spectacle” and positioned in opposition to traditional white beauty, femininity, and chastity. This chapter historicizes Williams’ experience within the

context of the black body as “spectacle”; explores the ways in which her dethroning busts open the myth of the pageant⁹ itself; and illuminates her position as a critical bridge between historical and contemporary instances of exploitation.

In a historical moment that many feminists consider “post-feminist,” it is increasingly important to consider the ways in which new conceptualizations of feminine ideals have developed around beauty and the body.¹⁰ In *Chapter Four*, titled “‘You Can’t Keep Big Girls Down’: Mo’Nique and the Politics of F.A.T.ness,” this study thinks critically about how the traditional pageant model has, under the influence of a highly visual, media-driven culture, transformed in ways that present them as provocative sites of investigation. Thus, this chapter examines the contemporary critique of and answer to the *Miss America Pageant*, Oxygen Network’s *Mo’Nique’s F.A.T. Chance*, hosted by plus-sized comedian and television personality Mo’Nique Imes. In this chapter, I argue that *Mo’Nique’s F.A.T. Chance* uses the traditional pageant infrastructure to define beauty through a new cultural lens and provides its audience with alternative conceptualizations of more progressive feminine ideals. Central to my examination of this contemporary pageant model are following queries: How might we consider the significance of the narrative of transformation that occurs in reality television programs like

⁹ By the “myth of the pageant” I mean those ideals of the pageant and its participants that the viewing audience must buy in to in order for culturally produced representations of womanhood to take hold.

¹⁰ Sarah Banet-Weiser writes that “post-feminism has become a dominant form of mainstream feminism in the United States, where a media creation and legitimation of post-feminist ‘power,’ combined with the increasing cultural recognition of adolescent girls and women as both powerful citizens and consumers, offers what at times looks like a radical gesture in terms of disrupting dominant gender relation.” Banet-Weiser suggests that this disillusioned view of power is deeply rooted in consumerism and is often constructed as individual choice. Thus, post-feminism “is figured quite differently from a historical feminist emphasis on social change and liberation” (Banet-Weiser, *I just want to be me again*, 257).

“Mo’Nique’s F.A.T. Chance” in light of the ways in which traditional pageant models attempt to conceal such narratives? How does “fatness” embody a very powerful politic of disobedience? How might we consider comedy as a subversive space for cultural commentary and what is the significance of Mo’Nique’s role as comedian/social commentator of the body? And finally, how is the discourse altered when the person who appears to be “in charge” of constructing revisionist ideologies of beauty and the body is an African American woman?

Read together, the chapters of *The Pageant Politic: Race and Representation in American Beauty Contests and Culture* work to suggest an understanding of the pageant model as an active space for the production of cultural meaning, and expose its ability to dismantle exclusionary definitions of true womanhood while remaining critical of the ability of such models to be completely and universally subversive or transformative. In establishing the parameters of my scholarship, this project does not argue against the inherent racism and sexism of beauty pageants, but complicates the subject in ways that help scholars of beauty, the body, and popular culture re-conceptualize the pageant stage and re-consider the ways that this model has been turned on its head, at times, to challenge and redefine notions of the body beautiful. Further, this project engages in conversation with scholars who have worked to redeem the pageant stage as an important site of inquiry and pushes for continued thinking about the ways in which this particularly American model has informed pageant performance in transnational contexts.

CHAPTER 1

“There She Is...Whose Ideal?: Discipline and Disruption on the Pageant Stage”

You were the apple of the public's eye
A mirage for both you and us
How can it be real?

We loved your body in that photograph
Your home state sure must be proud
The queen of the United States
Have you lost your crown?

Well aren't you, Miss America
Don't you, Miss America
Won't you, Miss America our love?

Lyrics from “Miss America” by Styx

In 2010, the *Miss America Pageant* returned to network television after spending seven years buried on cable television.¹¹ In 2012, the Miss America Organization issued a press release that boasted the fact that the pageant, broadcast on the ABC network, was viewed by an audience of nearly 8 million people—the highest ratings the pageant had seen in nearly eight years. This feat was particularly exciting to the organization given that the pageant was competing in the same time slot with the highly anticipated NFL playoff matchup between Tom Brady’s New England Patriots and Tim Tebow’s Denver Broncos. In September 2011, *The Miss America Pageant*, which was once one of the most-watched televised programs in America, turned 90 years old. In the last two decades, however, the pageant has

¹¹ In 2004, the Miss America Pageant lost its contract with ABC as a result of poor ratings. In 2005, the pageant signed a two-year contract with MTV Networks’ Country Music, and in 2006 with the TLC channel. Though the latter two contracts were short-lived, the pageant avoided certain death by moving its program to cable stations.

become a relic of a time-gone-by as viewership and interest in the program has rapidly declined. The pageant, which boasted a viewing audience of 33 million in 1988, has experienced a significant decrease in attention since the mid 1980's when Vanessa Williams was crowned the first African American "Miss America." Williams would go on to become the most embattled—and, arguably, the most successful—woman to ever grace the *Miss America* stage. Her story alone, which I closely examine in Chapter 3, speaks to the cultural significance of the pageant and its historical and socio-political impact on American culture.

Though the pageant has not continued to enjoy the success that it experienced at its height, the program has remained committed to its perceived necessity—particularly as it fights to remain germane in the midst of more popular reality television programs that often present young women as vapid, vicious, and hypersexual. It has been the desire of the Miss America Organization to hold firmly to a traditionalist foundation that not only sets it apart from television programs that feature promiscuity, violence, and anti-intellectualism, but what has also contributed to the decrease in its popularity. To say that the American audience's appetite for wholesome television programming has changed is indeed an understatement. Today's audiences have an insatiable desire for representations of women that could not be further from the stoic and chaste image of Miss America. Considering that until 1997, the *Miss America Pageant* forbade its contestant from competing in two-piece bathing suits, it is safe to say that for several decades the Miss America Organization not only refused to embrace contemporary cultural representations, but that it did so at an incredible cost.

In an article entitled “‘I just want to be me again!’: Beauty pageants, reality television and post-feminism,” authors Sarah Banet-Weiser and Laura Portwood-Stacer argue that “one of the problems [...] that the Miss America pageant has been facing [...] concerns this process of reinvention—the pageant cannot seem to create and sustain an ideal definition of femininity for the contemporary US. This is not because in 1960 there was a more coherent ideal definition of femininity for the nation, but instead simply because the relationship between contemporary Miss America contestants and feminine national identity is situated within a different media environment” (259). They go on to suggest that this shift in the media environment “[has] forced the Miss America Organization to consider particular kinds of changes to the pageant, so that the event would seem more ‘relevant’ to a contemporary audience” (Banet-Weiser and Portwood-Stacer 259).

Indeed, in the last twenty years as the television climate has changed and the appetite for reality television has increased, the Miss America Organization has worked to incorporate sensational elements to attract younger, more diverse audiences and to compete with a menu of choices presented to audiences through cable television. The pageant has even moved from its historical base—Boardwalk Hall in Atlantic City, New Jersey—to “Sin City,” Las Vegas, Nevada. Cultural critic Linda Holmes suggests in “The State of the Tiara: Whatever Happened to Miss America,” that “in a world where 10.3 million people watched the *Victoria’s Secret Fashion Show* [...] and where *Jersey Shore* is a hit, *Miss America* certainly isn’t losing viewers because the viewing public is standing there with its collective arms crossed saying, ‘WELL I NEVER’” (2). Further, Holmes argues:

Miss America used to be an opportunity to admire pretty girls that came with a certain veneer of dignity. If you want to pick sides in a group of pretty young women who look eerily similar to each other, you can watch *The Bachelor*. And if you want to watch entertaining television about smart and talented women, then you can watch them do something smart that requires talent—watch the women of *Project Runway* or *Top Chef*. (Holmes 2)

Holmes' argument suggests that, unlike first wave feminist critiques of the pageant, audiences are less turned off by the inherent sexism and exhibitionism of the pageant than they are by the inability of the pageant to compete with contemporary performances that cast women as irrational, emotional, over-sexed, and in some cases, just plain desperate. In a society where pseudo-housewives and basketball groupies command the attention of millions by figuratively and literally fighting their way to the top of the Nielson ratings chart, the wholesome image of Miss America doesn't seem to ring "true" in the eyes of American audiences. The pervasive images that have been introduced via popular reality shows like Bravo's *The Real Housewives* franchise and VH1's *Basketball and Wives* and *Love and Hip Hop*, present new images of womanhood that are direct challenges to the perceived identity of Miss America—the wholesome, and quite frankly boring, girl next door. These reality shows feature vicious verbal and physical fights and entice audiences with spectacularized performances that are not only cringe-worthy, but also dangerous.

In its heyday, the Miss America Organization prided itself on its ability to cultivate a group of at least fifty young, beautiful, and talented women who could

grace the cover of any popular magazine or perform on stages from Broadway to Hollywood. Women such as Miss America 1955 Lee Meriwether and Miss America 1971 Phyllis George became household names in an era when competing on the pageant stage was one of few viable options for young women interested in pursuing a career in the entertainment industry.¹² On local, state, and national stages, participants in the Miss America system from across the country were given unprecedented access to industry insiders and several lesser-known state and local titleholders' careers were bolstered by their affiliation with the Miss America Organization. In a contemporary context, any affiliation with beauty pageants, particularly *Miss America*, is looked down upon and even mocked—particularly in entertainment industry circles. *Miss America* no longer enjoys the cultural cache and prominence of the pre-Vanessa Williams era, nor do audiences seem to care a great deal about celebrating women who appear beyond reproach. In fact, the only time American audiences seem to pay any particular attention to beauty pageant contestants and winners is when one is “unmasked” by some scandalous endeavor and yanked off her pedestal. In these instances, relatively unknown women have been catapulted into the national spotlight and ridiculed for their complicity in promoting a standard that even they were unable to uphold.

Certainly, for the *Miss America Pageant*, the contemporary challenge of capturing the audience's attention has resulted in the re-invention of the pageant

¹² Lee Meriwether was the first Miss America to be crowned before national television audience. Meriwether is best known for her role as Betty Jones in the long-running 1970's series “Barnaby Jones” and for her portrayal of “Catwoman” in the 1966 film version of *Batman*. Phyllis George became one of the first women to have a prominent role in television sports broadcasting. George appeared on *The NFL Today* in 1974 and later worked as an anchor for the *CBS Early Show*.

model in order to compete with reality television programs that offer viable alternatives to watch women on display. For several years, pageant organizers and producers of the televised competition have attempted to integrate conventions of reality programming to introduce an image of Miss America and the pageant that is younger, fresher, more relevant, and can compete with a variety of popular reality television programs. For instance, in the 2002 and 2003 telecasts, the *Miss America Pageant* featured a quiz-show-like section that mimicked the popular television series *Who Wants to Be a Millionaire*; and as recently as the 2012 pageant, contestants were eliminated from phases of competition in a fashion very similar to elimination rounds on popular reality television shows like *Survivor* and *The Bachelor*. Thus, it is certainly no coincidence that the host of ABC's *The Bachelor* has secured a position as the pageant's host for the past few years.

In the few years that the pageant aired on the cable network TLC, producers of the pageant sought to capitalize on the reality television phenomenon as contestants appeared in a multi-episode challenge series called "Countdown to the Crown." The pre-pageant program followed contestants as they competed in a variety of obstacles meant to emulate popular television competitions like *Fear Factor* and *The Amazing Race* where contestants are rewarded for successfully completing difficult, and mostly physical, challenges. Though the reality competition "Countdown to the Crown" was short lived, this radical overhaul of the pageant process was not as well-received as pageant officials had hoped, and the project to present more relevant images of the pageant and its contestants was not

only unsuccessful, but unrecognizable to most who remembered Miss America as a particularly stoic and irreproachable public figure.

Since the pageant's return to network television, pageant organizers and producers of the telecast have continued to search for innovative ways to engage new audiences and re-capture those who'd given up on the contest to choose "America's Next Top Beauty Queen."¹³ For its 2012 telecast, *Miss America Pageant* organizers promised an edgier and more appealing pageant performance that would attract younger viewers, but still remain loyal to its deeply rooted traditions. In the fall of 2011, it was announced that Kris Kardashian, mother of the controversial Kardashian clan and its most infamous member—socialite Kim Kardashian—and Mark Ballas, a popular dance instructor on the hit television series *Dancing with the Stars*, would be judges. It was clear that organizers and network executives were working to introduce the one-time American ritual to new audiences and recapture those who'd chosen to tune out by enticing them with recognizable and controversial personalities on the judging panel. Further, it seemed as if the Miss America Organization was ready to combat the public perception of the pageant as outdated, uninteresting, and irrelevant—even as it continued to hold tightly to traditional images that do not seem to connect with the coveted 18-34 year old demographic. The contradiction between how the *Miss America Pageant* is performed contemporarily and what the Miss America Organization believes it still represents is, in my opinion, a rich cultural space for investigation around issues of performance and the construction of identity. That the very institution that helped

¹³ This is reference to supermodel Tyra Banks' wildly popular and successful television reality competition "America's Next Top Model."

originate ideals of feminine beauty and womanhood now struggles to define itself against a myriad of popular signifiers that qualify ideal womanhood in very different ways is a most compelling reality facing *Miss America* and its declining base of pageant loyalists.

Frank DeFord, Miss America historian and author of the tome *There She Is: the Life and Times of Miss America*, could read the writing on the wall nearly forty years ago, suggesting in his 1971 text that “Miss America is [...] a bathing beauty show embarrassed to death about sex, bathing suits, and possibly even girls. It manages to become more Victorian as the country grows more permissive and tolerant” (17). DeFord was among the first to critically interrogate the pageant stage as a culturally complex space full of contradictions and insincerities. DeFord believed the *Miss America Pageant* was and is “maligned by one segment of America, adored by another, [and] misunderstood by all of it” (15). Further, DeFord offers, “there are two kinds of people deceived by Miss America [...] those who criticize it the most, and those who praise it the most. Part of the problem for both these groups is that Miss America is confusing—and it is either purposely confusing or congenitally so. Surely, no U.S. institution could be riddled with so many contradictions by accident” (17).

In his critical assessment, DeFord not only calls the pageant and its organizers to the carpet—no pun intended—for their inherent and apparent hypocrisies, but he also pulls forth a more nuanced critique that encourages the reader/viewer to critically interrogate the way the pageant is read and experienced—both positively and negatively—by audiences who’ve simultaneously

bought into and reject the myths produced through pageant performances. That *Miss America* is, as DeFord lambasts, “no more than the choice of a group of inexperienced [...] judges who are required to arrive at their decision with an eccentric system that is intentionally constructed so that the most important factors in determining a queen are never officially considered” (18), urges us to think carefully about the infrastructure of the pageant as a complex space for the construction of feminine identity that is at once deliberate and unintentional. Because the pageant model, in this particular instance, has been so successful at producing mythologies of the feminine ideal, the beauty pageant stage has proven a practical model to confront these very limited constructions and present new imaginings.

The fact that a set of seemingly arbitrary and subjective rules and codes govern the winner of any given contest, make a study of the pageant model very complicated; however, it provides us with a viable example of the ways in which ideals of the body beautiful, as feminist scholar Judith Butler suggests, “[have] no ontological status apart from the various acts which constitute its reality [and that] if that reality is fabricated as an interior essence, that very interiority is an effect and function of a decidedly public and social discourse” (Butler 173). The questions “What is the infrastructure of the pageant?” and “How does this this type of public and social discourse, if you will, work to maintain myths of a feminine ideal?” are at the crux of this examination of why the pageant stage has been and remains an important space for cultural production. These questions become even more salient when, in the face of new popular cultural imaginings of womanhood, the pageant

model is used as an effectual tool to challenge traditional conventions and reproduce new images of the feminine ideal.

This chapter sets out to examine these and other similar questions and argues for readings of the pageant stage that not only recognize this space as culturally productive in constructing feminine standards, but as a practical model for appropriation, confrontation, and re-construction of corporeal ideals. Because of its legacy of exclusivity, both in historical and contemporary contexts, the *Miss America Pageant* provides us with one of the best examples to investigate alternative responses that use this pageant model to confront damaging stereotypes and interject new images of beauty and womanhood into the American popular conscience. Further, this chapter pushes for a consideration of how cross cultural examinations of the pageant stage might encourage new queries that trouble these performances in new and interesting ways.

Though most are aware of the historical feminist critiques of beauty pageantry—particularly the infamous 1968 “bra burning” feminist protest of the pageant in which no bras were actually burned—there are important “counter-protests” that have been considered by scholars for the way they have used the very model that marginalized bodies to directly challenge claims about women produced on the *Miss America Pageant* stage. The cultural work of disrupting the *Miss America Pageant* and those exclusive ideals of womanhood that are produced through pageant performances is a tradition deeply rooted in civil rights and Black power

struggles of the 1960s and 70s. In Chapters 2 and 3 of this study, I think critically about the meanings of these symbolic gestures that, in many ways, were influenced by the clarion call to declare “Black [as] beautiful.” Pageant models like those that have taken place on historically black college campuses, and more contemporary performances that are rooted in the reality television genre, are intimately connected to movements for social justice.

According to Sociologist Maxine Leeds Craig, “the staging of the Miss Black America contest was one act of intervention in a long struggle over the representation of the race in which the image of the black woman was a focal point. Through the years, as black spokesmen transformed the rhetoric of black racial pride, the black woman was in turn represented as the irreproachable symbol of successful assimilation, the beautiful face of defiant revolution, or the contemporary descendent of lost African empires” (6). The idea of a reclaimed royal identity for black women is very much tied up in myths of a collective African past that often embellish historical truths; and history has revealed these projects for assimilation as imperfect, at best. However, revising historical narratives about Black women is, as Leeds-Craig suggests, a much more sustained and deliberate exercise that “is a continual interplay of individual practice and collective action” (Leeds-Craig 9). These kinds of performances employ the *Miss America Pageant* model in part to directly confront histories of exclusion and provide context for new constructions. In this way, it is not only important to understand the pageant infrastructure as a powerful model for interpretation and re-interpretation, but it is essential to investigate the ways that it has been used to deconstruct historical narratives that

exclude women of color and other bodies of difference from cultural ideals of “true womanhood.”

Though I speak here of the exclusion of Black women from the *Miss America Pageant*, it is important to acknowledge the few Black women who were able to break through the pageant’s racial barriers, particularly during periods of social and civil unrest.¹⁴ These women have not only helped shift the paradigm, but have also emphasized the power of this kind of disruption on the pageant stage. Though we must be careful not to over-determine the meaning of black visibility in these spaces or the motive behind a contestant’s desire to participate, a careful investigation reveals that this psychic, social, and physical disruption does present a critically important fissure for consideration. Cheryl Brown, who was crowned Miss Iowa, became the first Black woman to compete on the Miss America stage in 1970. In a 2000 interview with the *Quad City Times*, Brown said of her historic win, “I don’t feel I personally changed the pageant, [...] but I do feel my presence expanded people’s minds and their acceptance. And, in subsequent years, they were much more open to African American candidates” (*Quad City Times* 9). In this passage, Brown is cautious of over-determining her role, but is clear about the ways that her presence influenced the pageant system and shifted ideals of who might be fit for the pageant stage.

Sarah Banet Weiser argues, “the mere visibility of black contestants does not erase the ideology of whiteness that defines the pageant [but] foregrounds

¹⁴ Though historical records show black winners of local Miss America competitions as early as the late 1950s (see examples in Chapter 2); however a Black woman would not appear on the stage of the Miss America pageant until 1970.

whiteness as the only appropriate field of representational power. In this regard, the beauty pageant shares political space with progressive cultural activists, who work to increase the visibility of racial, ethnic, and sexual ‘others’” (Banet-Weiser 138). Considering the pageant stage as a politically charged platform is an exciting possibility for scholarship on beauty and the body in popular culture—particularly in relation to race—and it begs us to consider what it means in historical and contemporary contexts for women of color like Cheryl Brown to participate/have participated in performances that, from the very outset, were designed to negate their womanhood.

Scholars who focus on the pageant stage as a meaningful cultural space have often argued that historical critiques of beauty contests have either failed to properly interrogate the importance of the pageant stage in American popular culture or have completely obfuscated the very real influence that institutions like the *Miss America Pageant* have had on American popular culture. In the text *Beauty Queens on the Global Stage: Gender, Contests, and Power*, editors Coleen Ballerino Cohen, Richard Wilk, and Beverly Stoeltje warn that by treating popular culture as trivial, “we risk obscuring the operation of structures of power that are masked by the seemingly frivolous nature of events and images” (7). For these anthropologists, a central matter for consideration remains “the degree to which [beauty contests] impose control, mapping power onto the bodies of their participants by forcing beauty into a narrow and arbitrary mold” (Cohen et. al. 7).

This chapter moves one step further to assert that the beauty pageant infrastructure, particularly the *Miss America Pageant*, not only produces meaning

and creates, through carefully constructed conventions, very disciplined spaces in relation to beauty, but also imposes control in its cultural work to develop and maintain very rigid ideals of true womanhood. It is my belief that the *process* of pageantry is as important as the images that are produced and reproduced on the pageant stage. As such, a critical examination must first acknowledge that these particular kinds of ritual performance are grounded within an infrastructure that is fundamental and integral to the cultural “work” of these spaces.

Drawing specifically upon Judith Butler’s conceptualizations of the disruptive possibilities for subversive bodies and performances, my analysis dismantles the ways in which pageant organizers and participants use these alternative performances to challenge historically exclusive spaces that have marginalized bodies that fail to embody an established ideal. As such, queries emerge that deal specifically with the legitimacy and limitations of subversion in these instances, and with what remains at stake when oppressive models are appropriated for disruptive and revisionist purposes.

The Form and Function of the Miss America Pageant

Sarah Banet-Weiser provides particularly important and useful analysis of the function of the pageant stage as it relates to the production of cultural meaning. Banet-Weiser argues that the pageant stage can work as a “kind of feminist space where female identity is constructed by negotiating the contradictions of being socially constituted as ‘just’ a body while simultaneously producing oneself as an active thinking subject, indeed, a decidedly ‘liberal’ subject” (Banet-Weiser 24). In

her study of the *Miss America Pageant* and its contestants, Banet-Weiser pushes the reader to consider the real possibilities for the construction of identity apparent on the pageant stage and provides illustration of the ways that pageant participants—particularly in the *Miss America Pageant*—develop narratives of the self and of the body that negate traditional criticisms of the pageant as a wholly oppressive space. Further, though Banet-Weiser acknowledges the importance of feminist criticism on these kinds of subjective performances, she also troubles historical critiques of the pageant stage that, in her estimation, have been “formulated in simplistic terms and [focus] primarily on the relationship between women and commodities, in particular the way in which pageants and other such displays of women construct women as commodities” (Banet-Weiser 11). Banet-Weiser urges feminist criticism to move beyond simplistic readings to “complicate the picture by exploring precisely what kinds of subjects are produced within beauty pageants and what practices and institutions not only sustain but work continuously to revise this production” (Banet-Weiser 11).

Though Banet-Weiser’s study, titled *The Most Beautiful Girl in the World: Beauty Pageants and National Identity*, places a great deal of focus on contestants within the Miss America Organization and the mis-reading of these women as victims of a “false consciousness,” my critical lens follows Banet-Weiser’s lead in complicating this space, turning toward the *Miss America Pageant* model itself as an active and complicated site to construct gender ideals.¹⁵ I would argue that because this model has been successful in its ability to define and sustain ideals, the *Miss*

¹⁵ By “model,” I mean the infrastructure of the pageant and those phases of competition, rules, guidelines, and metrics that work together to determine the winner of a pageant.

America Pageant has served as a valuable model for duplication, revision, and parody, and thus it functions as a useful tool to dismantle the very ideals that it has worked to produce.

I believe the *Miss America Pageant* is a compelling subject for study because of its own penchant for reinvention and revision in its desire to remain relevant to audiences that consider beauty pageants passé. Throughout its history, the pageant has imagined itself as meeting the challenge of the changing times and has been forced to confront new media atmospheres and changing televisual palates. These moments are always marked in distinct ways and provide opportunities to reflect on how what happens on the pageant stage is influenced by American culture and vice versa. Since the early nineties, the Miss America Organization has steadily distanced itself from historical representations of beauty pageantry and has crafted its rhetoric to reflect this difference. The Miss America Organization prides itself on being “the largest provider of scholarships for women in the world,” making more than 80 million dollars in scholarships available to young women who compete on the local, state, and national levels each year. More explicitly, the Organization contends that the program exists “to provide personal and professional opportunities for young women, [to] promote their voices in culture, politics, and the community, [and to] provide a young women a forum to express their viewpoints, talents accomplishments” (www.missamerica.org). Further, since the mid nineties, the organization has required each contestant to dedicate herself to a service platform of her choosing as well as to the Children’s Miracle Network, Miss America’s national platform and benefactor of over 6 million dollars raised by Miss

America Pageant contestants at the local and state levels. Unlike their competitor and contemporary—the Donald Trump owned Miss Universe Organization that produces the *Miss USA Pageant*—the Miss America Organization has set itself apart, for better or worse, as more than just a typical beauty pageant. In many ways, participating in the *Miss America Pageant* is as much about what happens off the pageant stage as it is what happens on it. As such, pageant contestants in this system seem to put as much work into their community service projects and academic achievements as they do in preparing their bodies for the ever-controversial swimsuit competition. What is understood and shared by the young women who participate is a standard of self-discipline that is unique to the Miss America Organization and a prerequisite for success at all levels.

Within the pageant model itself, the Miss America Organization has rejected traditional pageant rhetoric and adopted language that works to place the performance of the pageant in less objectionable terms and in opposition to pageant models that remain focused on the facial and physical beauty of a contestant. For instance, instead of the “swimsuit competition,” Miss America organizers have opted for a less controversial moniker, calling this phase of competition “lifestyle and fitness.” Instead of the conventional “evening wear competition,” contestants are judged instead on “poise and presence.” What has always set the pageant apart from its contemporaries is the insistence that the competition, in the words of the Miss America theme song, is about providing opportunities to young women “who are more than pretty.” This characteristic has been both a testimony to the Organization’s desire to move beyond beauty, and what many believe may also be

the cause of its waning popularity in a medium saturated with more titillating images of women. As a result of this shifting rhetoric, the *Miss America Pageant* has presented itself as a liberated space where diversity and difference are appreciated and understood as what sets it apart from others. I would argue, however, that although this conventional understanding of the *Miss America Pageant* has attracted a very diverse body of women to the stage and encouraged new readings within feminist scholarship of participants as 'liberal subjects,' we must still be careful to consider that regardless of the diversity represented on the stage, the winners of these competitions at every level continue to be determined by a very strict body of rules and guidelines that dilute what may appear to be a very objective and liberal space.

Contestant Eligibility—Coding Ideal Womanhood

In order to understand the function of the pageant in American culture—and in particular the *Miss America Pageant*—it is imperative to understand the form. What makes the pageant stage so significant, in the case of the Miss America Organization, is that there are clearly defined processes that work together to qualify contestants, certify judges, and govern the selection of the women who are crowned at the local, state, and national levels. Since the pageant's inception, the rules for participation and selection have continually shifted. However, what remains are intentional processes through which women's bodies are qualified and judged individually and against one another. What began as a simple bathing beauty contest in the 1920's to attract tourists to the New Jersey shore has

developed into a complicated matrix of subjective metrics that are weighed precisely to determine a winner and her runners up. In this way, pageantry would appear, on the surface, to be a precise and unquestionable science that endeavors to subvert individual biases, administrative error, and corruption. However, what we know is that these kinds of judged performances are always subjective, never precise, and far from scientific.

The *2010 Quick Reference Guide for the Miss America Organization* provides the most current accounting of the rules that govern the procedures of the pageant. More than a rulebook for participation and selection, the *Reference Guide* lays out those qualifications that render a contestant physically, academically, and morally “fit” for completion. The guide states that contestants must be no older than 17 years of age to compete and no more than 24 by December 31st of the year she is chosen to represent her state in the national pageant. Contestants must be citizens of the United States to seek entry into a pageant, and they must prove that they are full-time residents of the geographic area in which the local or state pageant is located for at least six months. This qualification includes contestants who are attending college or working in the areas in which they choose to compete. Further, the organization requires that contestants must be either high school graduates, completed the GED, or successfully completed the academic requirements for entry into an undergraduate degree program by a date designated by the national governing body. Most revealing, however, are the “Additional Requirements” that contestants must meet for participation, and ultimately success, within the system. The Miss Organizations requires that contestants:

- Must have never been married, nor had a marriage annulled
- Must have never been pregnant;
- Must not be the adoptive parent of any child;
- Must have never been convicted of a criminal offense, nor have any criminal charges pending;
- Must be of good moral character and not have been involved in any act of moral turpitude;
- Must be in good health and can participate fully without limitation in all program activities;
- Must not use or consume any illegal controlled dangerous substances or abuse the use of alcohol or other dangerous substance.

In order to compete at the local, state, or national levels, contestants must sign contracts that bind them to these guidelines and require that they uphold the standards of the Miss America Organization. With consideration for new media, the Miss America Organization has even instituted rules and guidelines that govern contestants' use of social media. Though not restricted, contestants are encouraged to use security measures to protect their image and that of the Miss America Organization—undoubtedly, a nod to safety and privacy concerns in the age of social media.

The above listed requirements for contestants not only highlight the exclusivity of the Miss America Organization, but also brings forth the very real ways that involvement demands a particular kind of disciplined performance that cannot be superficial, but verifiable. Most compelling and elusive is the line the specifies a contestant “must be of good moral character and not have been involved in any act of moral turpitude.” Because of its ambiguity, one is left only to imagine

the kinds of charges that can and most certainly have been levied against contestants whose characters have been called into question.

As recently as the 2002 *Miss America Pageant*, Rebekah Revels, a striking, dark-haired woman of Lumbee Indian heritage who'd won the title of Miss North Carolina, was forced to resign her position when pictures of the bare-chested young woman were shopped around to media outlets. The source, later discovered to be a vindictive ex-boyfriend, had tormented Revels with the promise of ruining her chances of becoming Miss America by emailed the photos of her, naked from the waist up, to pageant officials. As a result of this revelation, questions were evoked about Revels' character and the decision to allow her to continue as Miss North Carolina was weighed heavily by pageant officials, media representatives, and the public. Though Revels later engaged in a legal battle with the Miss North Carolina and Miss America organizations, giving testimony that the photos had been taken unknowingly as she undressed, a defeated Revels was denied reinstatement and replaced by another more "appropriate" representative, first-runner up to Revels in the state pageant, a blonde-haired, blue-eyed co-ed named Misty Clymer.

Even though the pictures were not provocatively posed, and Revels' story that they had been taken without permission was corroborated by those who had viewed the shocked expression evident on her face, the very idea that Revels would be in any state of undress in front of her then-boyfriend was enough for pageant officials to condemn the then 23 year old. Revels later won a civil suit against the former boyfriend, but the victory provided little solace to a woman who'd not only been emotionally and physically distressed by this assault on her character, but

doubly traumatized by the backlash and stigma associated with contestants who've failed to follow "the rules." Though not explicit, the racial undertones of this particular example are not only troubling, but also quite revealing. That this young woman would be exposed under the glare of national media spotlight not only speaks to the complicated history of the *Miss America Pageant* in relation to race, but also to histories of the exploitation of women of color. The fact that pageant officials refused to exonerate and reinstate Revels, who was most certainly the victim of harassment, at least, is neither surprising nor out of character for the Miss America Organization. This particular precedent had been set almost twenty years earlier when Vanessa Williams, "Miss America 1984," was forced to resign over nude and sexually suggestive photographs published without her consent in *Penthouse* magazine. In 2002, as it was in 1984, the Miss America Organization's primary concern remained keeping Miss America on her pedestal, beyond reproach and above any associative moral turpitude.

Dissecting the "Distinguished" Panel of Judges

While judging a beauty contest might appear to be an uncomplicated task, for the *Miss America Pageant*, the process is a highly prescriptive job that requires tedious training and preparation. At the local and state levels, panels of between 5 to 7 judges are chosen that consist of individuals who are familiar with the Miss America system (usually volunteers from other local pageants) and persons referred to as "novice" judges. The novice judge is usually a well-respected member of the community at large with little or no experience judging pageants in the Miss

America system. The *Miss America Judging Manual* provides judging panels with detailed information and direction for selecting the winner. Within the manual is a list of contestant qualities and attributes that the Organization suggests each judge consider when weighing their scores. This list of qualities and attributes assert that a titleholder should be: beautiful, well spoken, intelligent, talented, able to relate to young people, charismatic, mature, punctual and flexible.

In addition, the list includes three characteristics that address the much larger purpose of the pageant and the desire to select bodies that reflect particular images of the ideal pageant queen. Judges are directed to select a contestant who is “reflective of her age (she should not be a 35 year-old trapped inside of a 20 year-old body)”, comfortable in her own skin, and manageable. These three characteristics are most interesting in this instance because they necessitate the kind of mastery of performance and disciplining of the body that Judith Butler examines in her work. Influenced by Foucauldian theory, Butler connects these kinds of historical and contemporary performances with much larger narratives of gender and performance. The very idea that a woman who is performing a particular kind of feminine embodiment can be authentic and “comfortable in her own skin” is quite the conundrum—particularly in light of the fact that contestants are not performing as their most authentic selves. These identities are, in fact, always mediated on the pageant stage by sets of rules, standards, and procedures that make any possibility of authentic presentation improbable and impossible.

That pageant contestants must be “manageable” requires a kind of disciplining of the self that troubles the notion of liberal presentation. Further, that

pageant contestants are fully aware of the performative expectations before competing, and that many are even coached to deliver convincingly suggests that contestants, pageant producers and supports are all invested in maintaining a particular ideal that is proscriptively mythical and simultaneously unattainable. I would agree that pageant contestants are certainly not “cultural dupes,” a label Sarah Banet-Weiser warns against, but are instead conscious and complicit participants who help construct and fortify “corporeal fantasies” that, as Judith Butler writes, “create the illusion of an interior and organizing gender core” (Butler 173). I would argue that most women who participate in beauty pageants are very aware of these enacted fantasies and understand that in order to win the game, one must play by the rules. The rules in this case are intricately bound to disciplined and calculated conformities akin to the maneuvers of pieces on a chessboard.

Butler interrogates the significance of gendered performance and encourages us to consider the performance of gender as an “enacted fantasy” where “words, acts, gestures, and desires produce the effect of an internal core or substance [...] on the surface of the body” (173). Butler asserts, “Such acts, gestures, enactments, generally constructed, 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” (173). Further, Butler asserts, “gender is an identity tenuously constituted in time, instituted in an exterior space through a *stylized repetition of acts*. The effect of gender is produced through the way in which bodily gestures, movements, and styles of various kinds constitute the illusion of an abiding gendered self” (179). Significantly, Butler explains, “if gender

is instituted through acts which are internally discontinuous, then the *appearance of substance* is precisely that, a constructed identity, a performative accomplishment which the mundane social audience, including the actors themselves, come to believe and perform in the mode of belief” (179). That the *Miss America Pageant* has survived over ninety years as an important social determinate for ideal womanhood, implores us to consider the ways in which this “stylized repetition of acts” has helped create and sustain gendered ideals, and speaks to the pageant’s “performative accomplishment” in crafting myths of womanhood that both public audiences and contestants participate in knowingly, and I would argue, willingly. Moreover, if we understand that contestants on the pageant stage are consciously invested in these performance, then we can conclude that contestants within these pageants are not only believable actors within them, but are quite aware of the dichotomous relationship between what happens in front of and behind the curtained stage.

As state earlier, pageant historian Frank DeFord submits that the pageant “presented as representative of American youth, [...] is instead no more than the choice of a group of inexperienced middle-aged judges, who are required to arrive at their decision with an eccentric system that is intentionally constructed so that the most important factors in determining a queen are never officially considered” (DeFord 18). Though DeFord does not elaborate on what those “important factors” may be, he is correct in his assertion that the Miss America Organization has

developed a complicated set of seemingly arbitrary judging criteria and metrics that govern the judging panel. I would argue that since DeFord's assessment in 1971, the process of judging has become much more complex, and the selection of judges, much more deliberate. There is a kind of shrewdness on the part of the Miss America Organization that has undoubtedly developed out a desire for pageant officials to guide the selection of local, state, and national titleholders in order to maintain control over what women are chosen to represent the Organization. What is most evident in this process, as Cohen, Wilk, and Stoeltje assert, is this division between what they refer to as "frontstage and backstage"—that is, the "rupture between the objective selection of a winner in the main event, and all the other interests that both contestants and viewers know are influencing the outcome" (7). These interests, which the Organization does so well to bring forth in the judging manual, have everything to do with preserving a well-performed image of the feminine ideal and eliminating threats to the coveted title.

Unlike the earlier decades of the pageant when contestants were simply ranked by judges in each category, the following tables from the *2010 Quick Reference Guide* provide a great example of just how complex the metrics are and how precise the process has endeavored to become. The tables presented below represent the breakdown of percentages for single night pageants, which would include all local Miss America-affiliated contests; competition percentages for state contests that have multiple nights of competition; and percentages to be used to determine the winner and her runners up on the final night of a multi-night state pageant. These sets of percentages do not simply provide context for DeFord's

claim in regards to the eccentricities of the judging system, but they also help us understand what the Miss America Organization has determined most important in the search for young women who can fill the large “heels” of Miss America.

Figure 1.1

Single Night Pageants	
Interview	25%
Evening Wear	20%
On Stage Question	5%
Talent	35%
Swimsuit	15%

Figure 1.2

Preliminary Nights of Multi-Night State Pageants	
Interview	25%
Evening Wear	20%
On Stage Question	5%
Talent	35%
Swimsuit	15%

Figure 1.3

Final Night of Multi-Night State Pageants	
Composite ¹⁶	30%
Swimsuit	20%
Evening Wear	20%
Talent	30%

In most of its written material, the Miss America Organization makes it quite clear that the role of a local, state, or national titleholder is not just as a symbolic figurehead, but that these position should be considered important jobs. As such, the instruction to the judging panel to consider candidates who will “fit the bill,” is fortified by the percentage system in place. For example, though the percentage for the talent competition reflects the historic importance of this phase of competition,

¹⁶ The composite score represents the total from all nights of preliminary competition combined. Those scores are “carried over” to the final night and determine the finalists for competition at multi-night state pageants.

the private interview with the judging panel also plays a very important part in measured determinations. This phase of competition—which happens prior to the onstage competition—should, as the *2011 Miss America Judging Manual* suggests, “assess how natural [the contestant] is and whether or not she will be able to relate to her peers and the audiences and groups she will serve” (30). Further, the manual instructs the judges to consider a contestant’s ability to communicate opinions and to “examine her personality, personal appearance, attractiveness, and physical beauty [and] determine whether or not she is a leader [...] has a sense of accomplishment and has a knowledge and commitment to her community that is needed in this job” (30). Remarkably, the judging panel is expected to deliberate over these criteria within ten minutes of meeting a contestant—an impossible feat when considering the import placed on a contestant’s communication ability.

More than just its eccentricities, the criteria for the selection of a titleholder reveals what I believe the most significant reading of these performances—that they are always mediated by a set of guidelines that have little, if anything, to do with who might be the “best” in any given competition. Thus, it can be understood that pageant winners at every level of the Miss America Organization do not have to be the *most* beautiful, intelligent, talented, or even the most undisputed. Nowhere is this better stated than in the *Miss America Judging Manual* where the directives encourage the panel to be mindful that the winner “may not be the best-spoken, the most talented, the most beautiful, the most charismatic, or the contestant with the greatest ability to represent her generation, but [...] must possess ALL of those qualities and abilities, because all of those qualities are required to do the job” (32).

In sum, women who are most successful within this particular system are, in essence, the ones who not only understand the criteria for selection, but who can perform this very prescriptive brand of ideal womanhood with the most certainty, consistency, and believability. Because the image of Miss America has, for so many decades, influenced American popular understandings of this particular ideal, this imagery has not merely remained in the realm of the symbolic, but has very directly and distinctly influenced behavior within the social domain (Reischer and Koo 301). Moreover, the fact that those who watch the pageant are not completely privy to the judging criteria and mostly unaware of the “backstage” processes at hand in the selection of this perceived feminine ideal, makes unveiling these contrived myths of true womanhood created on the pageant an important endeavor for scholars concerned with how culture is influence by these pervasive paradigms.

Toward New Models and Understandings

Though the popularity of the *Miss America Pageant* has waned, the pageant stage has remained an important cultural space upon which corporeal understandings of beauty and the body continue to be fashioned. Particularly, as an appropriated model, the pageant stage has, through varied mutations, continued to be a useful platform for producers of new cultural knowledge to identify and project divergent images of ideal womanhood. Certainly, in the face of diverse televisual representations of women, the pageant stage continues to produce cultural ideals that not only mark this platform as a significant space for the production of meaning, but also as an important arena to challenge traditional ideals that have

been produced and reproduced through more traditional and historical performances.

Imagining the pageant stage as a space for a transformational politic may, at first, seem implausible and certainly points us to Judith Butler's warning that "parody by itself is not subversive, and [that] there must be a way to understand what makes certain kinds of parodic repetitions effectively disruptive, truly troubling, and which repetitions become domesticated and recirculated as instruments of cultural hegemony" (Butler 177).

It is clear, however, that there are viable instances when the pageant stage has not only been appropriated to confront historically exclusive narratives and images, but to revise those narratives and images in ways that don't just put bodies of difference in conversation with historical ideals of beauty and the body, but cast them as distinctly self-determinate. Anthropologists Erica Reischer and Katherine S. Koo have argued, "because cultural meanings and values reside in and on the material body, the body not only reflects these contradictions but also has the capacity to challenge them. The body thus serves as a vehicle for social action even as it signifies social realities: Bodily (reform) both reflects and motivates processes of social reform" (315). Further, Reischer and Koo contend, "given its agency, the body necessarily plays a significant role in times of social, cultural, and political crisis. In a revolution, the established body ideal is one of the first things to be overturned or redefined in favor of a more ideologically appropriate replacement" (308).

In this dissertation, several important examples emerge as representative of this kind of political work. Pageant models like the *Miss Black America Pageant*, and even those that have taken place on historically Black college campuses and universities, encourage a more nuanced reading of this cultural space and make it impossible to regard the pageant stage as apolitical or immaterial. Moreover, in Chapter 2, I specifically turn to historically popular African American periodicals *Ebony* and *JET* whose distinct political projects centered on providing audiences with images of Black women that challenged stereotypical representations, and aligned their presentation with rhetorical strategies that helped reconstruct ideal womanhood and claim racial pride. In similar fashion, we have witnessed new kinds of pageant performances emerge that confront marginalization beyond categories of race. For instance, in Chapter 4, I look critically at the cultural work of a performance like *Mo'Nique's F.A.T. Chance* that moves fat bodies from the margins to the center in a project to dismantle notions of the "established body" as ideal. Though not without critique, I think it fair to submit that these particular pageant performances and presentations have been influential in their efforts to present and validate diverse corporealities. They have taken the *Miss America Pageant* model, flipped it on its head, and attempted to make room for the kinds of liberal representation that *Miss America* imagines it provides.

Looking at contests on the global stage, we witness the impact of the beauty pageant model on communities across the globe. For instance, in 2011, the *Miss*

Universe Pageant was viewed by over one billion people worldwide.¹⁷ This number is staggering in an era when many have predicted the demise of the beauty contest. What these numbers reveal, however, is that in a global context, beauty contests are cultural spaces that connect transnational communities around diverse understandings of beauty. These contests have not only claimed a significant position on the global stage as locations where ideals of feminine beauty are espoused, but have complicated the pageant stage as a space where ideals of nationalism, ethnocentrism, citizenship, and economy converge. In the past two decades, a body of transnational literature has emerged that examines the expediency of pageant performance within a global context. Studies of pageant performances from the Caribbean to Asia and South Africa provide valuable critical analysis about the ways these performances are influenced by Western culture, and speak directly to political, social, and economic milieus across the globe. Though American beauty pageants have certainly been sites of critique for many years—particularly at the height of movements for women’s and civil rights—new and exciting scholarship has emerged from global perspectives that push us to reconsider the pageant model’s work as a productive cultural platform, particularly as we are challenged to consider the efficacy of these spaces outside of the Western context.

I believe the next frontier of this scholarship urges a comparative analysis of how these pageants are cross culturally “speaking” to each other, and an in-depth assessment of how a traditional model like the *Miss America Pageant* has been read

¹⁷ This figure appears in a September 12, 2011 article from ABCnews.com titled “Miss Universe Leila Lopes Pledges to Combat HIV, Emphasizes Natural Beauty.”

and translated by global audiences. Certainly, the *Miss America Pageant*, as one of the most recognizable and emulated brands has directly impacted international contests that determine ideal womanhood, but what that looks like and how Miss America is “present” in these contexts is still to be determined. In sum, I believe scholars have only really scratched the surface in determining the import of this particular long-standing cultural ritual and that there are new cultural understandings just below the surface that must be excavated for investigation. My hope is that this study, in conversation with those upon which it builds, encourages new questions that will broaden the cultural lens and expand critical thinking about the role the pageant model plays in national and transnational contexts.

CHAPTER 2

'Pressing a Crusade': *Ebony* Magazine and the Crafting of a 'New Black Woman'

I grew up on Black colleges campuses and have always been intrigued by the cultural performances that are unique to these spaces. More so, as a child, I found myself in awe of the women who were chosen each year to represent the campuses as their queen. These women were beautiful, well dressed, intelligent, sophisticated, poised, and most importantly, Black. Unlike the images that emerged from traditional beauty pageants, I could look at these women and see a reflection of who I thought myself to be and who I thought I wanted to become. As a college junior, I competed for the title of Miss Spelman College and placed as first runner-up. I was devastated at the realization that I would not be one of the women featured in that April's edition of *Ebony* magazine. Years later, I still believe that not winning the *Miss America Pageant* pales in comparison to the disappointment of not becoming Miss Spelman College.

Each year, the young women chosen to represent their respective colleges would take their place within a rich tradition that crowned Black women as ideal representations of womanhood and femininity. From elaborate coronation celebrations with themes and images that evoked imaginings of African and European royalty, to elegant, fur-adorned marches down the fifty-yard line at the Homecoming football games, these women were, in the colloquial sense, "bad." They were formally presenting new ideals of womanhood that embraced an ethos of ethnic pride and sought to make bold claims against Eurocentric definitions that excluded women of darker hues. Even Director Spike Lee pays homage to these

rituals in the 1988 film *School Daze* in a scene that both mocks and shows reverence for these significant performances. Anyone who's ever viewed the film—which famously parodies the color and class war between the “Jigaboos” and the “Wanna-be’s”—will recount the crowning of “Miss Mission College” at the end of one of the film’s most vibrant musical numbers.¹⁸

What intrigued me most about these women and the competitions in which they competed was that they were about more than just the prettiest face or the slimmest waistline. In fact, many women who competed in these pageants would not be considered “beautiful” by Eurocentric standards and would not have been ideal candidates for the title of “Miss America.” As the images and accompanying narratives in *Ebony* suggest, Black feminine beauty was as much about appearance and carriage as it was about being intelligent, goal and career oriented, and culturally connected to the communities from which one came. Moreover, what many of these women presented were performances deeply rooted in the Civil Rights and Black Power rhetoric of racial uplift. Often, they embodied an Afrocentric aesthetic—particularly during periods of widespread civil and social unrest in the United States. There have been few investigations of these cultural spaces as sites wrought with significant meaning, but I believe the pages of *Ebony* magazine provide some of the most provocative narratives around their cultural productivity. Further, the images presented in the magazine tell an incredible story

¹⁸ Named after a derogatory racial epithet, the “Jigaboos” were a sorority-like group of dark-skinned, mostly natural-haired women while the “Wanabees” were a rival group of lighter-skinned women who were taunted by the Jigaboos for upholding Eurocentric beauty standards. At one point in the film, the two groups break into a musical battle song titled “Good or Bad Hair” which provided dramatic social commentary on the ever-present the problem of the color line in the late twentieth century.

of the ways in which movements for social justice within Black communities have often been inscribed on the bodies of Black women. Aside from college yearbooks and Black newspapers that record the images and narratives of Black college campus queens, *Ebony* magazine remains the only other viable record where these images appear in thoughtful presentation. Not only is it important to consider these historical records as a critical part of much larger narratives of the Black female body, but it is also important to move them forward as rich sites for scholarly investigation in the areas of beauty, the Black female body, and performance culture.

My interest in *Ebony* magazine stems from its position of prominence on the coffee tables of most Black families I knew—including my own. I grew up, as did many other African Americans, with an understanding that *Ebony* and its sister publications were “our” magazines. With a few rare exceptions, positive representations of African-American life and culture were, and in many cases still are, a novelty. Not only was I aware that these publications sought to represent the best of African America, but I also understood that the Founder and Chief Executive Officer of Johnson Publications, Mr. John H. Johnson, was a man who was very concerned with building a brand that would transform the cultural landscape of print media. I believe it fair to describe the Johnson Publishing Company empire as one of the most successful and renowned corporations in America—Black or white—and the legacy of Johnson’s work to raise awareness of Black issues through the lens of social justice is undoubtedly the company’s greatest legacy. To this day, *JET* magazine, *Ebony*’s sister publication, remains the only weekly circular to report Black issues, and *Ebony*, though faced with the challenge of what some are calling an

era of demise for magazine publishing, has continued to reach hundreds of thousands of Black readers throughout the world.

For Black America, the Johnson Publication Company, and the products and enterprises that have emerged under its umbrella, provide example and inspiration that perhaps the long, sought-after meritocracy that this country promised might be more than just a myth. The way John H. Johnson and his wife Eunice Walker Johnson presented and influenced Black culture and Black life are worthy of great consideration though very few critical treatments of the couple and their empire exist. Certainly, the Johnsons and their magazines have been critiqued for participating in complicated narratives of capitalism and consumption; however, I believe an investigation of the Johnson's cultural work reveals their contributions to the American cultural landscape to be much richer and far more complex. In particular, as it relates to articulations of African American female beauty, a simplistic and unsophisticated reading cannot reveal the very deliberate political project in which the Johnson's were engaged.

Black, Brainy, and Beautiful: Toward a New Aesthetic

In the December 1983 issue of *Ebony*, a nineteen-year old woman crowned the first African-American "Miss America" graced the cover with bejeweled crown and scepter. The headline, which read " 'Miss America': Vanessa Williams is Black, Brainy and Beautiful," epitomized the very essence of Black womanhood that the Johnson Publication Company's Founder and CEO John Johnson had endeavored to articulate, capture, construct, and defend through the hundreds of carefully crafted

issues of both *Ebony* and *JET* magazines. Vanessa Williams was not the first woman to appear on the cover of either magazine as a Black American ideal, but she was the first to break through the glass ceiling of one of America's most sacred, beloved and exclusive institutions—the *Miss America Pageant*.

Since the magazine's launch, Johnson worked to establish the critical role that the publishing house would play in presenting revised images of African American beauty and womanhood. In its June 1946 issue, *Ebony* published an article entitled "Glamour Is Global: Negro pulchritude ranks high despite U.S. lily white standards." The article not only featured the "beautiful and scholastically brilliant" first Black woman graduate of Sarah Lawrence College—Barbara Gonzales—but it also provided a platform to present the argument that despite prevailing images of beauty and exclusive institutions like the Miss America Organization that, as the magazine noted, "[hung] out 'for whites only' signs," "there were thousands of [Black women] lovely enough to compete with the best of white pulchritude" ("Glamour is Global"). One might argue that the Johnson Publication Company's defense of Black beauty not only helped shift cultural attitudes, but also provoked African American participation in institutions with exclusionary histories. It might also be contended that were it not for the work of the Johnson Publication Company to publish and promote Black beauty, the crowning of a Black Miss America may not have seemed plausible to the women who competed for the title at the height of social segregation. Certainly, those women paved the way for Vanessa Williams to be crowned "Miss America," and the Johnson Publication Company's

influence on this particular kind of interracial achievement must not be underemphasized.

In *Ain't I a Beauty Queen: Black Women, Beauty, and the Politics of Race*, sociologist Maxine Leeds Craig writes:

African Americans have ceaselessly reinterpreted dominant culture. They have contested and revised the social meanings of black racial identity through spectacles, protests, and daily acts of self-presentation. Since race is constructed as an embodied identity, challenges to racist hierarchies are often expressed as contests over the representation of racialized bodies. Though both black men and women live in 'marked' bodies, many African American efforts to reclaim the honor due to the race have particularly focused on celebrating and defending the beauty and dignity of black women. (Craig 14)

Indeed, the Johnson Publication Company was—and continues to be—committed to this kind of campaign. In this chapter, I argue that through various mediums throughout its history, the Johnson Publication Company has challenged cultural narratives through very deliberate presentations of Black beauty in print and in performance. In particular, this chapter highlights the role of *Ebony* magazine in presenting a new Black feminine ideal by way of its features of Black women in traditionally exclusive beauty pageants and through carefully constructed images and narratives of Black college queens chosen to represent historically black colleges. This chapter also seeks to bring forward the very important contributions

of Eunice Johnson, wife of John Johnson, as an unrecognized force and agent provocateur in defining new ideals and promoting black beauty.

Against All Odds: The Making of an Empire

John H. Johnson has been described by many as a man ahead of his time. Johnson and wife, Eunice Walker Johnson, concerned themselves with providing Black Americans with news and information on local, state, national and world issues that directly affected Black communities. In spite of widely-held beliefs that Blacks would not support such an effort, Johnson understood from the outset the importance of presenting “Black truths” in order to challenge historical notions of a dispassionate and apathetic Black monolith. For John and Eunice Johnson, articulating cultural authority and power through the defense of Black womanhood emerged as a significant social and political project through the pages of *Ebony* magazine. As publisher of *Ebony* and several other influential publications, including *JET* and *Negro Digest*, John Johnson imagined his magazines as important cultural productions that would, as he wrote in his 1989 autobiography *Succeeding Against the Odds*, “emphasize the positive aspects of Black life, highlight achievements, and make Blacks proud of themselves” (Johnson 156-7). Modeled after the popular *Life* and *Look* picture magazines, Johnson believed *Ebony* would serve as a window into Black communities rich with cultural tradition, beauty, and accomplishment. Focusing on what he believed the “total Black experience,” Johnson understood the power of the media and its influence on society, writing:

[T]he picture magazines of the 1940s did for the public what television did for the audiences of the fifties: they opened new windows in the mind and brought us face to face with the multicolored possibilities of man and woman. The more I dealt with photographs, the more I understood their importance. I didn't see it in the beginning- I don't think anyone is that clairvoyant. But as I went from one small success to another, step by step, I began to understand the importance of the new journalism." (Johnson 156)

Johnson began his magazine publishing career in 1942 with the introduction of *Negro Digest*. In an era that saw a marked surge in Black newspaper and print publications, Johnson became inspired to lend his unique voice to the political and social conversations of the time. Created in the likeness of popular magazine *Reader's Digest*, Johnson's mother mortgaged her furniture to provide her son the initial capital to publish *Negro Digest* and fulfill the dream of providing African American communities with relevant and timely information in the midst of the Second World War. Like Black newspapers, *Negro Digest* was a resource to engage Black America in critical conversations about issues of race and class, particularly as they became more pronounced near the end of the war. Johnson understood that the world for Black people, and particularly for Black men returning from the front lines, would begin to look very different, and the expectations of Black communities would necessarily shift in remarkable ways. Johnson envisioned *Negro Digest* as a tool to prepare for the harsh realities that Black soldiers would encounter as they returned from abroad, and he projected the need for Black communities to be

encouraged by new images of Black achievement and possibility in the face of racial discrimination.

Johnson believed, however, that “when the war was over, [Black people] would want something that would be more entertaining than *Negro Digest*.” He expressed that he “wanted Black people to feel good about themselves [and] know that there are people in America and in the world with their color [that] were doing well (*The John H. Johnson Story*) Conscious of the power and purpose of narratives of self-determination and achievement, *Ebony* magazine was designed, as former editor of the magazine and renown scholar Lerone Bennett, Jr. submits, “not to bring someone down, but to lift them up.” Bennett believed in Johnson’s vision, and argued that “[*Ebony*] gave us a new sense of our beauty, our potentiality” (*The John H. Johnson Story*). Images of successful and educated Black people joined by articles of Black achievement despite racial barriers were, as Bennett describes, “revolutionary” for both Black and white Americans. By its second year of publication, *Ebony* magazine was selling over 300,000 issues a month, and John Johnson was able to secure the magazine’s first major advertising partnership with Zenith radios—a major coup for a black-owned publishing house. As such, Johnson’s business acumen not only ensured the perpetuity of the magazine, but established black communities as untapped, yet economically viable, consumer markets for advertisers. According to Johnson, what made *Ebony* so interesting and important to its audience was that “[p]eople wanted to see themselves in photographs [...] we were dressing up for our society balls, and we wanted to see that. We were going places we had never been before and doing things we’d never

done before and we wanted to see that” (Johnson 156). Mindful of the significance of presenting these images to audiences that were hungry for new or alternative depictions of African America, Johnson believed that while Black newspapers were successful at reporting the discrimination happening in Black communities, what these communities desired was “a medium to make Blacks believe in themselves, in their skin color, in their noses, in their lips, so they could hang on and fight for another day” (Johnson 157). Johnson argued, “we needed a medium—bright, sparkling, readable—that would let Black America know they were part of a great heritage” (Johnson 159).

As Black communities throughout the country began to organize around issues of race, Johnson sought to capitalize on emerging movements for social change—particularly in the American South. In his memoir, Johnson writes, “We believed in 1945 that Black Americans needed positive images to fulfill their potential. We believed then—and we believe now—that you have to change images before you can change acts and institutions” (159). Thus, *Ebony* magazine was purposefully designed as more than just a picture magazine to entertain and amuse; it was designed as a weapon to inspire and encourage new thinking about Black potentiality and provoke questions about institutions that were historically and inherently racist. Johnson boldly proclaimed, “We weren’t editing a magazine, we were pressing a crusade” (Johnson 165).

Throughout their histories, *Ebony* magazine and the Johnson Publishing Company have enjoyed and endured widespread praise and criticism. Despite being the leading African American magazine for over five decades, *Ebony* has continued

to confront critical interrogation of its seemingly exclusive appeal to the Black middle class and for “stressing consumption over and above any other strategy” of achieving social equality (Chambers 55). Accusations of engagement in conspicuous consumption have often obstructed investigations of the magazine’s cultural capital. According to historian Jason Chambers, “the consumer lifestyle of African Americans, specifically the black middle class, cannot be read in the traditional manner. Instead, through critical examination of the leading periodical of the post-war black middle class, *Ebony*, reveals a more complex purpose at work” (Chambers 55).

Indeed, *Ebony*’s purpose was and is quite complex in its concurrent reification and negation of American cultural standards and norms. One of the ways we can explore this complexity is by looking at the magazine’s conscientious crafting of ideal Black womanhood through the imagery of African American pageant titleholders from the late 1950s through the late 1970s. Describing the decades of the 60’s and 70’s, in particular, as a time of Black reinvention, Johnson recalls a “quantum jump in Black consciousness” (Johnson 287). Heavily influenced by the converging Civil Rights, Black Power and Women’s Liberation movements, Johnson writes, “For this first time Blacks came into their own. They respected themselves as Black people whether they were very dark or very light or in between. Color, in fact, lost its importance” (Johnson 287). Though I believe Johnson largely underestimates the very real problem of the “color line” in this passage, he does recognize a change in what was considered attractive and acceptable within Black communities. Consequently, many of the articles and pictorials that appear in the

magazine during that time reflect conversations happening within Black communities in regards to changing cultural aesthetics that were heavily influenced by the rhetoric of liberation movements—particularly as they related to beauty. In his autobiography, Johnson asserts, “we [were] among the earliest and most passionate defenders of Black beauty. We were fascinated by the different hues (smoke, cinnamon, chocolate, cream, golden, pecan, coffee) in the Black rainbow, and we were astonished by the inability of White Americans to appreciate that beauty” (Johnson 169). Along with wife Eunice, who for many years served as director and producer the world’s first traveling fashion show featuring an ensemble of all Black models, the *Ebony Fashion Fair*, Johnson envisioned his company as a leading voice in conversations about this new Black aesthetic.

Crafting a National Type

In the late 1960’s, the slogan “Black is Beautiful” was not only a very powerful expression of cultural pride, but a battle cry for women of color whose “otherness” to a white aesthetic rendered them outside the boundaries of what mainstream America considered attractive. Moreover, new articulations of womanhood debunked and exploded the myths of “true womanhood” and worked to create new cultural ideals that liberated Black women from very narrowly defined gender roles.¹⁹ An investigation of the editorials that surround the images of Black college queens reveals that these women were not merely symbolic representations, but active participants in this cultural project. In particular, the

¹⁹ The virtues of “true womanhood” are defined by historian Barbara Welter as purity, piety, submissiveness and domesticity.

narratives pronounce these young black women as business-minded, community oriented, and intellectually gifted leaders of new movements for social justice that were working to define the “New Black Woman.” As I have argued, the Johnson Publications Company has been engaged in the very calculated project to present and define Black beauty since the days of the publishing house’s inception. From the colorful pictorials of Black starlets, to their groundbreaking presentations of Black models in both their magazines and in the *Ebony Fashion Fair*, John H. Johnson and his wife Eunice very thoughtfully took to task the pervasive exclusion of positive images of Black women in the media. Concurrently, the Johnsons imagined representations of Black women on the pages of their magazine, in particular, as combating destructive constructions of Black women that were deeply rooted in the slave past.

Paramount to any discussion, however, of the ways in which Black beauty is brought to the forefront in terms of a racially conscious project must be John H. Johnson’s wife, Mrs. Eunice Walker Johnson. Eunice Johnson’s commitment to re-defining Black beauty and womanhood moves beyond the pages of the company’s publications, as she helped revolutionize the beauty and fashion industries. Though never given much critical treatment, I believe it can be argued that Eunice was the silent (or perhaps not so silent) driving force behind the Johnson Publication Company’s organized efforts to claim, define, and present Black beauty. Mrs. Johnson was not only the mainspring behind most of the magazine’s beauty editorials, but she was also the creator of a virtual fashion empire complete with the first national traveling fashion show to feature Black models known as the *Ebony*

Fashion Fair. Moreover, Eunice Johnson developed and helped sustain the most recognized international cosmetic brand for African American women of the same name—"Fashion Fair Cosmetics." At its peak, the Johnson Publishing Company's Fashion Fair Cosmetics introduced 180 products for black women to the market, and was carried in more than 2,000 retail outlets across the United States, Europe, Canada, Africa, and the Caribbean (*Black Enterprise* 50). Mrs. Johnson, a marketing phenom, invited major celebrities like Leontyne Price, Diahann Carroll, and Aretha Franklin to appear as spokesmodels for the company's products. These women, all international celebrities, drew women of color to the beauty counter who rarely, if ever, saw Black women representing major cosmetics brands. According to a 2010 *New York Times* editorial about Mrs. Johnson's legacy, Fashion Fair Cosmetics not only introduced a line of cosmetics for women of color, but inspired companies like Avon, Revlon, and Max Factor to follow suit. Thus, Mrs. Johnson helped establish women of color in the beauty industry as a viable and untapped consumer base.

Despite decades of work in the beauty and fashion industries, it is curious that Mrs. Johnson's cultural legacy has not been considered beyond the pages of *Ebony* and its sister publications. Certainly, Mrs. Johnson embodied the kind of middle class ethos and personal politic of respectability that has provided critical context for so many studies of race, class, and gender. I believe, however, she is not only an interesting subject for intellectual investigation, but also an example of the kind of Black womanhood that the magazine sought to endorse. One might conclude that Eunice Johnson was the ultimate Black beauty queen as defined by Johnson's publications—intelligent, educated, business-oriented, independent, influential, and

unconventionally beautiful. It might even be suggested that Mrs. Johnson herself served as the model for how women within the pages of both *Ebony* and magazines were presented. Because of this, I believe it is fair to consider Mrs. Johnson the prototype and progenitor of *Ebony's* “New Black Woman”

To many generations of African Americans, Eunice Johnson was not only the “grand dame” of Black America, she was a bona fide international celebrity. As legend goes, Eunice and John Johnson fought for years to be taken seriously by American and international designers who were concerned that white women would not purchase designs worn by black women. The Johnson’s persistence paid off, and eventually, Eunice’s relationships with many of Europe’s most well-known designers helped secure her place as a fashion maven and icon for most of her professional life. According to one *Ebony* staffer, “[Eunice Johnson] was eventually known in fashion circles as the largest buyer of haute couture,” and “as time progressed she would spend a million dollars each year on 200 complete ensembles featured in the [Ebony Fashion Fair] presentation” (*Jack and Jill Politics*). In fact, Eunice Johnson has been credited for taking a chance on young designers who would go on to great success—Valentino, Roberto Cavalli, Pierre Cardin, and Yves Saint Laurent—to name a few (*Jack and Jill Politics*).

In reference to her role as agent provocateur, Mrs. Johnson revealed to a *New York Times* editor, “We were the ones who convinced Valentino to use black models in his shows back in the ‘60’s.” She warned the then novice designer, “If you can’t find any black models, we’ll get some for you [...] And if you can’t use them, we’re not going to buy from you anymore” (Hevesi A30). Though criticized in later

years for not showcasing the work of Black designers, a September 1961 article in *Ebony* entitled “Young Negro Designers Join *Ebony*’s Fashion Fair” challenges this claim and provides context for Eunice Johnson’s project to make possible a platform for Black models *and* Black designers. In fact, Mrs. Johnson and the *Ebony Fashion Fair* are credited for launching the careers of legendary Black models Pat Cleveland, Judy Pace, and Terri Springer, and for helping to put Black designers including Lenora Levon, Quinton de’Alexander, and L’Amour on the fashion map.

Though John Johnson remains the most prominent figure when one thinks of the Johnson Publishing Company empire, Eunice Johnson was the proverbial “woman beside the man.” It was Mrs. Johnson who not only suggested the company’s flagship publication be named “*Ebony*,” but it was she who single-handedly stood at the helm of a multi-million dollar movement around Black aesthetics that forever changed the fashion and beauty industries. Before the phrase “Black is beautiful” was coined, Mrs. Johnson shared a vision with her husband to present American audiences with images that reflected what she believed the very best of Black womanhood. Described by those who knew her as “fiercely independent, Mrs. Johnson was renown for her impeccable wardrobe and the two-toned Rolls Royce she was often spotted driving through the streets of Chicago. A proud woman, Johnson never appeared apologetic or embarrassed by her station, but used her position and power to influence the ways Black women viewed themselves and the way the world viewed Black women. Because of this, Mrs. Johnson was a trendsetter in every sense of the word.

Born into a prominent Black family in Selma, Alabama, it is certain that a young Eunice Walker was very much influenced by a particular ethos of Black exceptionalism that greatly informed the story she would tell about Black womanhood through print and performance.²⁰ She was educated at what was considered one of the finest institutions of higher education for African Americans in the first half of twentieth century—Talladega College—and was undoubtedly groomed in the tradition of racial and social uplift. Mrs. Johnson studied Sociology and art as an undergraduate, and later earned a Master of Arts degree in Sociology from Loyola University Chicago. She furthered her education by attending courses in journalism at Northwestern University, and studying interior design at the Ray Vogue School of Interior Design. Without question, Mrs. Johnson was an incredibly intelligent and talented woman who valued education and, in partnership with her husband, used the *Ebony Fashion Fair* as a tool to marry her passions for education, fashion, and social justice.²¹

In a posthumous tribute to Mrs. Johnson in the *Washington Post*, journalist Robin Givhan writes, “the Ebony Fashion Fair wasn’t merely focused on fancy clothes and pretty models. It was an audience participation event [where] guests felt compelled to dress in their most flamboyant finery because a ticket to Ebony Fashion Fair was an invitation to flaunt one’s success, one’s self-confidence, and one’s self worth. Black women and men—average folks, not just the rarified few—

²⁰ Mrs. Johnson’s father, Dr. Nathaniel Walker, was a medical doctor who practiced for five decades; her mother, Ethel McAlpine Walker, was a university art teacher at Selma University. Johnson’s maternal grandfather, Dr. William H. McAlpine was a personal friend of Booker T. Washington and founder of both Selma University and the National Baptist Convention U.S.A., Inc.

²¹ Since the first fashion show in 1958 the *Ebony Fashion Fair* has raised over \$55 million for civil rights groups, hospitals, community centers, and scholarships.

could define themselves as glamorous and elegant. They could be stars on their own stage.” Further, Givhan explains, “Ebony Fashion Fair wasn’t a shopping show. Audience members weren’t taking notes about which looks they would buy. Johnson was giving people information, fantasy, and the reassurance that, yes, this world belongs to you, too” (“Robin Givhan on Eunice Johnson”).

Pictures and Politics: Black College Campus Queens in Ebony

In a chapter from *Ain’t I a Beauty Queen* entitled “Standing (In Heels) for My People,” author Maxine Leeds Craig writes:

Just as African Americans organized to fight racial exclusion at lunch counters, on public transportation, and in workplaces, African American women began to challenge the color line in beauty contests. Black beauty contests and moderate civil rights organizations viewed efforts to integrate contests as politically significant. When African American women challenged segregation in beauty contests, they rarely did so as individuals. Black women who risked entering white beauty contests usually acted with the encouragement and support of the NAACP or other black community organizations. When they won or placed, black press treated their personal victories, no matter how small the title, as accomplishment for the race.

(Leeds Craig 67)

Ebony magazine led the charge for Black press outlets to celebrate the accomplishments of Black women in beauty pageants—particularly in the face of discriminatory policies that worked to deter, and in most cases exclude, Black

women from participating. Undoubtedly, the Johnson Publications Company read these performances as politically significant and found the images useful in their crusade against widely held beliefs about Black women, in particular, and Black people, in general. Sarah Banet-Weiser explains, “the mere visibility of black contestants does not erase the ideology of whiteness that defines the pageant [but] foregrounds whiteness as the only appropriate field of representational power. In this regard, the beauty pageant shares political space with progressive cultural activists, who work to increase the visibility of racial, ethnic, and sexual ‘others’ (Banet-Weiser 138). The imagining of Black women’s’ participation within traditional beauty pageants as “progressive cultural activism,” may, at first, seem implausible. However, cultural conversations around the participation of Black contestants within the black press—and in particular in *Ebony* magazine—is almost always positioned within movements for social and political change. Moreover, the very intentional reporting of these “Black firsts” was about much more than presenting Black achievement. In the case of Black beauty queens, the placement of their images and the carefully crafted narratives of ideal womanhood that accompanied them were most certainly an affront to historical narratives that cast Black women within a spectrum that ranged from the asexual Black mammy to the hypersexual Jezebel.

In the years before the Johnson Publication Company placed its emphasis on Black college queens, they focused much of their attention on Black women who had broken barriers by competing in and winning beauty pageants within traditionally and exclusively white pageant systems. Black women who won local and state level

titles within the Miss America system were of particular interest to the publishing house. Not only was the *Miss America Pageant* the most recognizable beauty contest for women in the United States, but it was widely known to exclude women of color from participating for much of its history. The pageant was also a site that prescriptive ideals of feminine beauty and womanhood would define a very particular brand of ideal American womanhood. Banet-Weiser instructs “beauty pageants construct a specific imagined community [that] create a national field of shared symbols and practices that define both ethnicity and femininity in terms of national identity” (Banet-Weiser 6-7). As such, “the ‘America’ in Miss America signals not only nation, but citizenship, and the ‘Miss’ in the title calls attention to a particular representative of the nation, a specific kind of ideal, universal citizen” (Banet-Weiser 8). Given Black women’s exclusion from the pageant for over sixty years, it can only be understood that the black body in American culture was imagined in opposition to notions of ideal citizenship. As both Banet-Weiser and Leeds Craig have argued, when Black bodies enter these spaces, dominant cultural constructions of citizenship and nationhood are not only disrupted but completely transformed.

In 1959, *Ebony* and its sister publication *JET* celebrated the crowning of three women who had won historically white beauty pageants, both in the United States and abroad. Co-eds Patricia Williams and Nancy Streets were crowned “Miss Sacramento” and “Miss Indiana University,” respectively; and a twenty year-old beauty named Cecilia Cooper won international acclaim as “Miss Cannes Film Festival. Each of these women represented the potential of Blacks just on the cusp

of Civil Rights and Black Power movements to break through racial barriers at both the national and international levels. Though the achievements of these women may seem unremarkable in a contemporary context, *Ebony's* presentation of these African-American “firsts” not only worked to revise destructive narratives of Black womanhood, but also presented these women as symbols of racial progress.

In the cases of Patricia Williams and Nancy Streets, the very idea that Black women could compete against white women for the chance to become Miss America and win proved important illustrations of advancement in the struggle for social justice. Nancy Streets became a favorite of the publishing house and was featured twice in *Ebony* and once on the cover of *JET* magazine in the years following her historic crowning.²² Years before the black college queen feature became a fixture for the magazine, images of the Black beauty queen appeared in both *Ebony* and *JET* as contemporaries to and in competition with their white counterparts. Many of these women are very diverse in complexion; however, almost all appear to embody a traditional Eurocentric aesthetic. Although the accomplishments of these women certainly mark a dramatic shift in American ideals of beauty, it must be noted that most of the beauty queens who appear in *Ebony* and *JET* from the 1940s to the early 1960s are non-threatening and non-controversial in presence and appearance—some might argue that the women in these early images were conservative models of racial progress. Though the very presence of these women as symbols of ideal

²² Nancy Streets would go on to work as a model for the *Ebony Fashion Fair* traveling fashion show with other Black beauty queens including Lajeune Hundley, the second Black “Miss Cannes Film Festival,” and Corrine Huff, Miss Ohio 1960, and the first Black woman to compete in the Miss USA pageant. Subsequently, Huff was the first Black woman to win a state title and compete in a major national pageant competition. Huff placed as semi-finalist in the Miss USA pageant.

femininity challenged mainstream notions that beauty “belonged” to white bodies, the physical appearance of most of these early winners of historically white pageants did not present radical opposition to Eurocentric standards that determined American beauty and fashion cultures.

Eight years after *Ebony* celebrated the victories of Street, Williams and Cooper, however, the cover story of the December 1967 *Ebony* entitled “Natural Hair: New Symbol of Racial Pride” set the tone for an issue that offered its audience critical perspectives on diverse aesthetic ideals emerging at the height of the Civil Rights and Black Power movements. For what may be the first time, we see a radical departure from traditional ideals in the magazine as the incontrovertible paradigm shifts taking place within Black communities ignite new conversations and questions for the editors. In an article entitled “New Trend Toward Black Beauties: Darker girls are winning in bids for titles,” the magazine attempts to intimate the ways in which Black beauty had begun to diversify on the pageant stage—a certain reflection of changing attitudes inside and outside of Black enclaves. The author submits:

For the Negro woman, who has been as much a captive of the white man’s beauty standards as his economy, the very idea of competing for a national beauty crown has placed her in a touch position. No matter how magnificent the face or form, could she possibly fare well when evaluated by judges who would measure her by a yardstick not applicable to her particular type of comeliness? In early years, the question was not even raised, for the door to competition was not open and few would have dared knock. Too often black

beauty, or even the 'yellow' one had to resign herself to the attitude of self-deprecation expressed in the old saying 'If you're white you're right; if you're brown, stick around; but if you're black, get *way* back!'" [...] Yet, in recent years, a few Negro beauties have managed to penetrate the color curtain. As is usually the case in racial matters, progress has been gradual, but in this instance it can be measured by the extent to which successful entrants have looked Negroid instead of merely resembling sun-tanned white girls. ("New Trend Toward" 164).

Interestingly, the author's evocation of the slave past through the connection to slave economies creates a powerful entrée for a critique of the ways in which Black women have been held "captive" by ideals that actively work to deny their humanity.

In some regards, the article is not simply celebrating the fact that Black women are receiving recognition in traditionally all-white institutions, but applauding the fact that Black women were claiming their own space and creating opportunities for divergent ideals of beauty to be acknowledged and considered. This particular story, which features Dorothy Johnson, Miss Idaho 1964; Sonja Dunson, Miss Michigan 1967; Corinne Huff, Miss Ohio 1960; LaJeune Hundley, Miss Cannes Film Festival 1960; Patricia Williams, Miss Sacramento 1959; Sara Pender, Miss Rochester 1965; and Gail Hamilton, Miss Georgia World, is a veritable "who's who" of Black women in American beauty pageantry. These women, many of whom were Black "firsts," were revered by the magazine for "penetra[ting] the color curtain" and for debunking destructive myths about Black women.

The article that follows in the same issue, entitled “Campus contests echo trends,” is one of the first instances where Black college representatives receive critical attention in the pages of *Ebony*. This article not only highlights the changing politics on Black colleges campuses in regards to who was chosen to represent the student body, but also of predominantly white colleges that, for the first time in their histories, were crowning Black women as campus queens. The article reads:

Signs of the times are evident on college campuses throughout the country. This fall there was a virtual epidemic of Negro homecoming queens at large schools with proportionately small Negro enrollment. Some of the largest, like the University of Illinois, awarded crowns to Negro girls. One of the most unexpected triumphs was that of Daphne Maxwell, a 19 year old New Yorker who became the first Negro homecoming queen at traditionally staid Northwestern University in Evanston, Ill. “I just couldn’t believe that it had happened,” was the reaction of the coed who is majoring in interior design and already has appeared as a model in a national magazine. She credits her victory to the recent influx of socially aware students who are intent on “accepting people as people.” (“Big Contests Draw” 170)

Northwestern’s homecoming queen Daphne Maxwell would later go on to portray the character “Vivian Banks” on the popular 1990’s television show “Fresh Prince of Bel Air.” It is no surprise that a young woman with Maxwell’s undeniable talent would be recognized by her peers; however, the rhetoric of social change and acceptance is a clear indicator of the ways in which movements for social justice permeated college campuses and were reflected in the shifting attitudes of students

in regards to race and representation. Indeed, the shift was evident on the campus of Howard University as the article notes, “even ‘naturals’ now proudly strut before judges and students” (Big Contests Draw 170). The author goes on to suggest the significance of a “a brown- skinned girl with a ‘natural,’ “ was an important departure from an ideal on a campus that the author describes as a “long stronghold for the ‘cream’ of the racial crop” (170). This unconcealed nod to troubling racial paradigms within Black institutions is not only a reminder of the legacy of slavery, but an unsettling truth about the way histories of racism are both inter and intra-racial.

In the 1970s, images of Black beauty queens shift more radically as Black power rhetoric demands that the nation accept Black as beautiful and that Black communities and institutions collectively embrace and reflect Afrocentric values and ideals. Though the Johnson Publication Company had established its magazines as arbiters of new black beauty ideals, the bylines and text that surround the pictures of Black college campus queens reveal complicated negotiations from more conservative social movements to a more radical philosophy that presented its ideology on the bodies of those participating. The Johnson’s, considered leaders in the civil rights movement, had clearly been committed to a particularly conservative ethos that very much characterized the movement and its leaders. The new rhetoric and radical cultural aesthetic that emerged as a result of the influence of Black Power movements presented a challenge to the publishing house to remain current and relevant in the face of a changing political and social climate. The narrative of these features provide us with keen insight into those negotiations as the slogan

“Black is beautiful” commanded new imaginings and understandings of the Black body. *Ebony*’s deliberate presentations of Black college campus queens as a type of feminine ideal help provide content and context for what can be considered a movement in itself to claim and diversify Black aesthetics.

In an article entitled “Queens of Academe: Campus Pageantry and Student Life,” author Karen W. Tice writes:

College pageants and their contestants represent a multitude of personal and political agendas. Vast differences and contradictions exist within and among them. As a result, these pageants are rich cultural sites for exploring configurations of race, class, region, nationalism, sexuality, and gender, as well as the display of both normative and, even occasionally, transgressive selves and projects on college campuses. Although primarily designed to showcase beauty, femininity, and middle-class conduct as well as to contain difference and division, beauty pageants have also been sites of struggle over representation and cultural identity.” (Tice 251)

The publishers of *Ebony* magazine were keenly aware of the cultural capital of this particular space for collegiate Black women. As such, the magazine began to dedicate a significant section to Black college campus queens that not only showcased the range of Black beauty, but worked to articulate an ideal Black womanhood. *Ebony* was not only celebrating Black women by highlighting a space that often negated Black beauty and womanhood—the pageant stage—but it was engaged in what they believed an important political project to affirm Black womanhood and push beyond the very limited definitions of ideal womanhood

made explicit in popular culture, on television, and in mainstream print media.

Karen Tice notes:

African American women faced different expectations for managing their student bodies. Primarily attending segregated black colleges, African American women had the burden of rewriting the powerful text of their presumed immorality and inferiority. Already stereotyped as being physically robust and fertile but sexually available and therefore poor models for wholesome family life, African American women had to prove that their education would result not only in dignified middle-class morals and manners, virtues historically coded and reserved for white women, but that they would play significant roles in racial uplift by helping to combat racism and train future leaders. Prestige and acceptance for women students thus rested not just on intellectual achievement but also on how they disciplined their bodies and selves. (Tice 252)

Articulations of Black beauty remain central to any investigation of pageantry within Black communities; however, it can be argued, as Tice suggests, that Black pageantry was more circumstance than pomp. In other words, holding a particular title as a Black college queen had less to do with the splendor of rhinestone tiaras and more to do with providing context for revisionist narratives. What becomes evident through close reading of the editorials that surround the images of these elected representatives are the ways in which the narratives are constructed from a particular political viewpoint that seeks to acknowledge Black women's humanity and make the case for what they describe as the "New Black

Woman.” Not only were these women “beautiful,” as the narratives articulate, but they were presented as leaders of movements for political, social, and economic change. Further, the very fact that these women were students at historically black colleges seems to suggest an argument in defense of Black colleges as cultivators and celebrators of Black womanhood—another political project in which the founders of the magazine were and remain passionately engaged.

Though college queens made periodic appearances in *Ebony* throughout the magazine’s history, 1975 marked an historic turn in the relationship between collegiate queens and the magazine. For the first time, *Ebony* featured campus queens in a full editorial spread, and several women appeared on the magazine’s cover surrounded by the byline “Selections at Black Colleges Reflect the Changing Times.” The young women chosen for the 1975 cover exemplified the divergent interests of black college students of that time, and presented new imaginings of beauty and ideal womanhood for Black women. The narrative about the women inside the magazine offers explanation and praise for these young women’s desire to “[defy] any stereotyping.” The author of the editorial writes, “Back in the ‘50s when most blacks were deep into integration, most queens on black college campuses had straight hair, light skin and near Caucasian features” (“Selections at Black Colleges” 79). In stark contrast to representations of Black queens in previous issues, these women embraced diverse ideals of beauty that ranged from natural to straightened hair and encompassed all hues of the Black spectrum. The author further submits:

The requirements haven’t changed much; charm, poise, good looks, good grades and popularity are still the winning combination for becoming a black

college queen. What has changed in recent years are the values of students and with that have evolved different standards of 'pretty,' 'good looking' and 'beautiful.' This uncharted course of beauty is more than the coming and going of different styles and fashions. It is a reflection of the times and student sentiment. What does it mean? It means that the students' yearly choice of campus beauty queens tells us something about the changing attitudes of the students. ("Selections at Black Colleges" 79)

As the writer points out, this changing aesthetic and ideology was often played out in the crowing ceremonies or coronations that once "invariably resembled a cotillion with all the pomp of European aristocracy;" however, in this new era of great socio-political influence, the coronation ceremonies of many campus queens evoked African symbolism in an attempt to create experiences that were simultaneously African *and* American ("Selections at Black Colleges" 79).

Not only were these "changing attitudes" informed by Afrocentric and Black Power ideologies, but they were also most certainly influenced by the 1970's women's liberation movement. Indeed, second wave feminist politics and the response from Black feminists concerned with their exclusion from traditional feminist political conversations can be read in the ways that these women present and are presented. Not even a decade after the infamous 1968 feminist protests of the *Miss America Pageant*, these depictions of Black women as feminine ideals cannot be more removed from feminist rhetoric that castigates these particular kinds of performances. Instead, many Black feminists concerned with the exclusion of Black women from American institutions like the *Miss America Pageant* that

defined ideals of womanhood against Black women's bodies often suspended critique of the pageant's inherent sexism in favor of arguments for its inherent racism. Just as the NAACP created the Miss Black America pageant in 1968 to decry the exclusion of Black women in *Miss America*, so too did Black college pageants begin to take on new meaning. A suspension of the critique of pageantry was not only important, but an essential part of this revisionist work. The April 1976 issue of the magazine expands on its theme of crafting a new image of Black womanhood as the women represented are framed as "[shapers] of tomorrow's world" ("Campus Queens for 1975-76" 177). According to the narrative, these women "[talk] very little of getting married or raising a family. Instead, she speaks of going to graduate school and pursuing a professional career; or becoming a doctor of lawyer or prison psychologist, for instance; of becoming involved in community affairs or organizing to achieve specific goals" ("Campus Queens for 1975-76" 177). The editorial goes on to acknowledge that "She is beautiful as she has always been but more than often, she was selected, or so it seems, for other reasons: academic achievement, social involvement, what she believe in et cetera. It no longer seems to matter if she is Afroed, dark or light complexioned [...] this year's queen can't be called a beauty queen in the traditional sense. She is, instead, quite often an outstanding student who happens to be beautiful" ("Campus Queens for 1975-76" 177).

What is important to the editors and to the women on the magazine's pages, is that they be defined beyond the stereotypical definition of a "beauty queen." Any evocation of a vapid vixen is negated and, instead, replaced with criteria that reward those who are not only self-aware, but socially and politically engaged. She does not

simply represent the best of African American womanhood, but she defines that model in terms that deem her prepared to lead new movements for social justice—proving that these women were more than just billboards for new cultural aesthetics. In the April 1978 issue of *Ebony*, the title “Forward thinking young ladies embody the New Black Woman” begs its readers to consider the important role that these women play and have played in crafting a new ideal. In fact, the magazine goes so far to declare the 1970’s “the decade of the new Black woman” (64). The article reads:

Keenly aware of her responsibilities, she knows the familial concerns remain important, but careers and self-development are paramount. Realizing educational imperative, she will continue her studies toward advanced degrees to secure her role in a future that will belong to the educated. But this is not say that she has forsaken her roots or her community. Most noticeable is her willingness to devote her energies to sisterhood through affiliation with sororities or other women’s organizations. Church and community service play a large role in her life, and she accepts the challenge. (“Forward thinking young ladies” 64).

Here again, it is made clear that the “new Black womanhood” is imagined as a complex and thoughtful negotiation of intersecting identities of race, class, and gender. Encouraged to be upwardly mobile and career-oriented, these Black college queens also represent a concerted desire to remain connected to the communities from which they came in ways that also called them to ensure their economic viability. The article submits, “[...] while concerns for social equality was the call of

conscientious young Black during the late 1960s and early 1970s, the current thrust among the new collegians is that of practical survival. This year, probably more so than any year before, business majors account for more of the concentration of these very aware young women" ("Forward Thinking" 64). It is clear the editors of the magazine not only recognized a shift in the times around issues of civil rights, but changing economic climates emerging at the cusp of the 1980's also marked a shift in the way that many of these queens were preparing to position themselves in a new decade with newer, more compounded socio-political and economic concerns. Moreover, the call for a "new Black womanhood" was steeped in Black feminist rhetoric that sought to declare the visibility of black women; acknowledge the negotiation of intersecting identities; assert self determination as essential; challenge the interstructure of multiple oppressions; and presume an image of black women as powerful, independent subjects (King 312).

The End of an Era

Because of the palpable absence of women of color from traditional American pageant systems like the *Miss America* and *Miss USA* pageants, the Johnson's endeavored to present Black college campus queens as contemporaries to the women in these mainstream systems while providing alternative images of feminine beauty and ideal womanhood. Although criticisms of beauty pageantry throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries have considered these performances sexist, racist, outdated, and irrelevant; thoughtful analysis of their

purpose and influence on popular culture and gender performativity provoke new understandings of these important cultural sites.

With this in mind, it is imperative to consider that John and Eunice Johnson understood that the positioning of Black winners of traditional pageants and of Black college campus queens in an affirmative light was part of a much larger intellectual project for civil and social justice. The critique that beauty pageants are inherently sexist and racist, for the Johnson's and other African Americans, was outweighed by the fact that these competitions excluded Black women as viable candidates. In the face of disparaging historical stereotypes, the Johnson's created a space in which to shift popularly held beliefs about Black women that were not only untruthful, but wounding. Through the pages of their magazine, the Johnson's elevated Black beauty pageant winners in ways that had never been done before, presenting young Black women as symbolic representations of Black possibility.

This new ideal of Black womanhood moved beyond aesthetic conceptualizations of beauty as the magazine constructed Black womanhood around ideals that mirrored the rhetoric of racial uplift in both the Civil Rights and Black Power movements. Being educated, socially and politically aware, and intimately connected to larger movements for social justice were imperatives for Black progress. Through images of Black women who were lifted up by their peers, *Ebony* magazine helped craft a new "national type" that signified a significant shift in the way Black women were presented in print. Unlike *JET* magazine's "Beauty of the Week" which features Black women in the "pin-up" tradition, the images of young Black co-eds throughout the pages of *Ebony* are very purposefully compelling

because of the way that attention is drawn away from the body. Most of the photographs feature cropped shots that very prominently focus on the diversity of Black beauty and the evolving trends in hair styling. *Ebony* was particularly interested in highlighting the ways that the social and political movements were tied up in corporeal demonstrations of racial pride.

Since the passing of John and Eunice Johnson, *Ebony* has endeavored to maintain its position as a relevant news and entertainment source for Black America in a field of new media sources that range from Internet entertainment blogs to web-based news outlets. However, the fact that the magazine has endured almost seventy years in competitive media markets speaks to the fact that *Ebony* remains a valued source of information on Black America for a consistent and loyal audience. Remarkably, *Ebony* has outlasted several of its Black media counterparts and remains one of a small handful of Black publications available nationwide. Though the magazine has evolved at the hands of the Johnson's daughter Linda Johnson Rice, it remains committed to an image-building campaign that showcases Black people and communities in ways that challenge disparaging and pervasive representations. Moreover, the *Ebony Fashion Fair* and the Fashion Fair cosmetics line remain staples within the Johnson Publications repertoire. Their contributions to the beauty and fashion industries continue to be witnessed in the proliferation of beauty products designed for women of color, and in the international successes of Black supermodels.

The September 2011 issues of *Ebony* marks the 37th year that Black college campus queens have been featured in the magazine. Although the format has

changed (only 10 queens are chosen from an internet voting poll), the goals, ambitions, and desire to present images that affirm black women remain the same. De'Jonique Garrison, Miss Clark Atlanta University, remarks that being a campus queen "was one of the best experiences of my life. To be able to be role model and have so many people look up to you and aspire to be like you, and you don't even know them [...] was a great position to have. It gave me the opportunity to do so much on my campus and in the community" ("Queens Run" 131). Though the times may be different, it can be argued that the media environment toward black women remains incredibly hostile.

As part of its cultural legacy, *Ebony* magazine remains vigilant in its desire to present alternative images and confront erroneous stereotypes. When they began this work in 1945, the Johnson's were certainly aware of the influence they could have on popular culture, and were alerted to the urgent need to present something different to an audience that was starved of positive and promising images of Black America. Because of this, the Johnson's not only changed the beauty and fashion landscape, but they played a critical role as part of much larger campaigns for civil, social, and human rights.

In a tribute to Eunice Johnson after her death at New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art, Harold Koda, curator of the Costume Institute at the Met, conceded the "embarrassment" that Mrs. Johnson's work not been acknowledged by the fashion industry while she was alive. The event, which was attended by former president and longtime friend of the Johnson's Bill Clinton, and fashion heavyweights Andre Leon Talley and Anna Wintour of *Vogue* magazine, marked the

life and career of a woman whose tremendous contributions on behalf of black women have been obscured. The Met tribute was also the first and only time that she'd be recognized by the community that she not only helped to transform, but create. Her omission from this history is certainly a very troubling and heartbreaking reminder of the kind of racism, and certainly sexism, that Mrs. Johnson faced throughout her career. Though troubling, I believe this juncture presents scholars with an exciting opportunity to bring forth new questions and concerns about beauty and the Black body as they relate to the work of John and Eunice Johnson. This chapter represents the beginning of what must be a thorough investigation to emphasize their contributions and place them within correct historical measure as principle torchbearers for newer, more diverse imaginings of Black beauty and womanhood.

CHAPTER 3

“Triumph and Tragedy: Race, Representation and the Dethroning of an American Beauty Queen”

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

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

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

-- “There She Is,” by Bernie Wayne

On September 18, 1983, the headline of *The New York Times* read in bold, “Miss New York Takes Title; Is First Black Miss America.” At the age of twenty-two, Millwood, New York native Vanessa Williams became the first woman of color in the sixty-two year history of the Miss America pageant to win the coveted crown. Long considered an annual cultural reminder of the exclusion of women of color from national narratives of beauty and femininity, Williams’ win offered, as pageant organizers argued, proof that winners were selected solely on their merit, and that, as the Miss America Organization’s board chairman Albert Marks proclaimed, “you can be tops in America without regard to color” (“Miss America Wants” 13). When asked by reporters about the significance of her selection as Miss America, Williams responded, “I was chosen because I was qualified for the position [...] the fact that I

was black was not a factor.” She goes on to proclaim, “I’ve always had to try harder in my life to achieve things, so this is regular” (“Quotation” B4:3). From this statement alone, it is evident that Williams’ words speak directly to histories of racial and gender discrimination; however, she seemed both unaware of those histories and unable to imagine herself as an unfortunate inheritor of a contentious past. Bolstered by the great American myth of meritocracy—a belief that through hard work and perseverance, one can surmount even the most impossible odds—it is evident that pageant enthusiasts, organizers, and even Williams herself considered this historic moment evidence of a significant paradigm shift in American thinking around issues of race—particularly as it related to beauty. Nearly two decades after the height of the American Civil Rights movement, and only a few years removed from organized Black Power movements, the crowning of Vanessa Williams seemed to suggest a new, post-racial promise of equality and inclusion.

For almost a year, Williams enjoyed the celebrity of the title and the prestige of being an African American “first.” However, as with many stories of triumph and tragedy, Williams’ almost predictable “fall from grace” uncovered and revealed some very ugly “home truths” about race, gender, and sexuality that boiled to the surface amidst public scandal. Ten months into her reign as Miss America, Williams was forced to resign from the position when it was revealed that nude and sexually suggestive photographs taken of her when she was nineteen were to be published in *Penthouse* magazine. In the wake of a humiliating and, at times, vitriolic public rebuke of Williams’ character and credibility, remained provocative questions about

American attitudes towards issues of race and sexuality that had been obfuscated by illusions of post-racial promise. Williams' resignation from her position (or her "dethroning" as some would call it) as "America's ideal" and the "reigning queen of femininity" revealed her as part of a much larger historical narrative that not only reflects upon a particular American history, but spans several hundred years and crosses several continents. As feminist theorist Janell Hobson asserts, "the historic crowning and dethroning of a black Miss America presents a complicated reception of a black woman, who might 'prove' that the presence of blackness is enough to tarnish the image of the pure and wholesome Miss America" (Hobson 122). However trite and insignificant the pageant stage may appear, it can not be denied that Williams' win of the Miss America title encourages conversations that remain urgent as they relate to the very complicated experiences of black women in America vis-à-vis histories of psychic trauma, sexual exploitation, and cultural misrepresentation.

Through a more critical lens, investigations and discussions of what Williams' selection and dethroning actually signified took place from the church house to the neighborhood beauty salon, revealing the matter as more convoluted than most were willing or even able to acknowledge. In an essay entitled "The Rhetoric of Black Bodies: Race, Beauty, and Representation, Valerie Felita Kinloch asserts that "the decrowning of Vanessa Williams [...] should be conceptualized as a moment in American history where dominant social narratives of black women as sexual beings resurfaced" (Kinloch 102). While Williams' forced resignation offered a critical moment of pause for theorists whose work on representations of race,

sexuality and the black female body that might have brought forth more nuanced and challenging interrogations of intersectional experience, very few scholarly investigations have engaged this moment in ways that align the significant trauma in the life of this one black woman, Vanessa Williams, with the historical traumas of Black women across the Diaspora whose bodies have been viewed as “spectacle” and positioned in opposition to traditional ideals of true womanhood. This chapter seeks to fill this void by exploring the ways in which Williams’ “dethroning” busts open the myths of the *Miss America Pageant*. In addition, it historicizes Williams’ experience within the context of the black body as “spectacle,” and illuminates her position as a critical bridge between historical and contemporary instances of psychic, social, and sexual trauma associated with the black female experience in America.

“The Dream of a Million Girls...”

I was very young in September 1983, but I remember with great clarity the young woman from New York State who graced the stage of Boardwalk Hall in Atlantic City. It’s one of my earliest and most endearing memories. There was something vibrant and captivating about this young woman that had me, and my mother, transfixed. My mother, who had been watching intently, looked at me and said, “that could be you someday.” I don’t know if I believed her, but it was as if something special had been offered to me that hadn’t been available to her. Thinking back on that moment, there must have been great exhilaration in the acknowledgment that, for one of the first times in my mother’s life, a black woman

had been validated as beautiful, intelligent, talented, and essentially, America's ideal, in a very public way. Unaware of the history of the pageant, I knew that this woman and this moment were important. As she was called out the winner, I watched Vanessa Williams walk regally down the runway while the words, "There she is, Miss America, there she is your ideal," rang out amidst the applause of the crowd. I overheard my mother on the phone that evening with a friend exclaim, "Can you believe a black girl won Miss America?" It didn't matter that Vanessa Williams didn't look like me or my mother, or any other black woman that I knew, for that matter (Williams' light complexion, hazel eyes and sandy blonde hair were both points of both curiosity and contention). What was significant was that "We," as my mother proclaimed, "did it." "We" had broken down a seemingly impenetrable barrier that, for at least sixty-two years, had declared white women as "queens of femininity."

Contrarily, I can also remember my grandmother's hands covering my eyes as blurred images of a nude Vanessa Williams, posed in various positions by herself and with another women, appeared on the television set as we sat around the dinner table. What had once seemed a triumph for black womanhood, to some degree, became instantly shameful and embarrassing. Though they never expressed this openly to me, I now understand this moment as very painful for both my mother and grandmother, for they, like countless Black women who had also shared in the glory of Vanessa Williams' crowning, could surely connect with this kind of racially charged instance of exploitation and misrepresentation.

The history of the *Miss America Pageant* not only reveals its exclusionary standards, but reflects a much more significant historical and cultural project at work against “othered” bodies. As such, the beauty pageant stage, which has most often been considered an insignificant space, void of any real or considerable meaning, must be read as “a kind of entertainment that subtly influences the ways we see ourselves and our communities” (Cohen et al 10). If this is true, the *Miss America Pageant* provides us with one of the preeminent historical and contemporary examples of the ways in which our ideals about beauty and womanhood are shaped by performative experience. Judith Butler provides a framework through which to think about the role of performance in producing ideals of gender. *In Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, Butler asserts:

According to the understanding of identification as an enacted fantasy or incorporation [...] it is clear that coherence is desired, wished for, idealized, and that this idealization is an effect of a corporeal signification. In other words, acts, gestures, and desires produce the effect of an internal core or substance [...] such acts, gestures, enactments, generally constructed, 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 discursive means. (Butler 173)

In as much as beauty pageants use corporeal signs and discursive means to define standards of feminine beauty, so too do they inadvertently work, as feminist theorist and cultural critic Sarah Banet-Weiser suggests, to illuminate the contradictions of

the feminine ideal. Banet-Weiser believes these contradictions are even more complicated “by the newly visible presence of non-white contestants” (Banet-Weiser 9). In her argument, Banet-Weiser goes on to suggest that “the nonwhite body functions as a specter—the marked other—against which the feminine ideal is defined. And the pageant’s history of celebrating whiteness [becomes] increasingly obvious as pageants are forced to confront contemporary demands that they reflect racial and ethnic diversity” (Banet-Weiser 9). In 1984, the public demand for a woman of color to become Miss America may not have been great, but, in many ways, the fact that five Black women were competing in the same year for the coveted title, (the highest number ever in the history of the pageant), speaks to the changing socio-political and racial climate of not only the pageant, but the nation.

In 1921, the *Miss America Pageant* was created by members of the Atlantic City Convention and Tourism Bureau to boost the local economy and attract new visitors to the city. What began simply as a bathing beauty contest along New Jersey’s shoreline would blossom to become a significant cultural ceremony through which feminine standards were constructed and reified, and seemingly extraordinary women were celebrated as feminine ideals. According to pageant historian Frank DeFord, bathing beauty contests were not a phenomenon unique to Atlantic City, but took place in burgeoning beach communities across the United States—particularly on the West Coast. However, unlike other community organized beach beauty competitions, the *Miss America Pageant* grew to be an

enduring cultural phenomenon, becoming one of the most-watched American programs from the 1950's through the 1980's. In its heyday, the mid-1960's, the live program commanded a television viewing audience of nearly 60 million, solidifying its position as an important cultural and national ritual and embedding in the minds of its viewers images of young women who were beautiful, physically fit, chaste, demure, intellectually competent, exceptionally talented, and almost exclusively, white.²³

From its earliest days, minority contestants were excluded from participation in local, state, and national competitions for Miss America as a storied rule against African Americans women, in particular, barred women of color from competing until the mid 1950's.²⁴ Though it is not known when the first Black women began to compete at the local levels for Miss America state competitions, what is clear is the noticeable absence of Black contestants long after this period of regulated exclusion. It would take nearly fifty years for a woman of color to compete on the *Miss America Pageant* stage²⁵, and another fourteen years for Vanessa Williams to win the crown. The contradictions of the pageant encouraged a critical lens that, in 1968, drew the ire of second wave feminists and civil rights groups who decried the inherent sexism and racism of the pageant. As feminist protestors rallied on the boardwalk of Atlantic City against sexism, commodification and victimization of the female body, the NAACP engaged in what they considered a

²³ The first live telecast of the Miss America Pageant was in 1954.

²⁴In the book *There She Is: The Life and Times of Miss America*, Frank DeFord writes of the famously unwritten rule that is attributed to pageant coordinator Leonora Slaughter. Once referred to "rule 7, it was specified that only members of the white race could enter and compete in Miss America system pageants.

²⁵ Cheryl Brown represented the state of Iowa in 1970, making her the first Black woman to compete in the *Miss America Pageant*.

“positive protest,” using the pageant model to assert a new paradigm that would define beauty and womanhood beyond Eurocentric standards. In *Ain't I a Beauty Queen: Black Women, Beauty, and the Politics of Race*, sociologist Maxine Leeds Craig asserts that this divergence is indicative of “the gulf that existed by 1968 between the largely white Left (including the burgeoning women’s movement) and even the more integrationist segments of the black movements” (Leeds Craig 4).

This historical “gulf” that Leeds Craig illuminates also brings to bear realities of the critical divide faced between white and black feminists whose political and social agendas revealed white privilege as the specter often unacknowledged by traditional feminist movements. For white women, whose bodies had never been under “investigation” and whose femaleness remained unquestioned, the pageant model seemed to serve no useful purpose and, in fact, worked in direct opposition to the fight for social, political, and economic justice. For the organizers of *Miss Black America*, the pageant stage served, as Leeds Craig writes, as an “act of intervention in a long struggle over the representation of the race in which the image of the black woman was the focal point” (Leeds Craig 6). Positioned as conduits through which black respectability could be re-claimed, black women were, in many instances, the physical manifestations of Civil Rights and Black power rhetoric around successful assimilation and defiant revolution.

Pride and Prejudice

After her selection in September 1983, many Black leaders from across the country spoke out in praise of the choice of Vanessa Williams as the first African

American Miss America. In a September 19, 1983 article in the *New York Times*, Congresswoman Shirley Chisholm pronounced, “My first reaction is that the inherent racism in America must be diluting itself [...] I would say, thank God I have lived long enough that this nation has been able to select the beautiful black young woman of color to be Miss America” (“Black Leaders Praise” B4:3). Moreover, Dorothy Height, president of the National Council of Negro Women shared, “I think this is a very proud moment to witness. It’s among the doors that have been opened. It shows that once the doors are opened, people of all backgrounds feel free to enter. To know that they will be given equal opportunity, that has meaning to everyone” (“Black Leaders Praise” B4:3). Echoing Chisholm’s and Height’s sentiments, the Rev. Joseph Lowery, President of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, suggested that America should “blame the pageant, not black women, for taking fifty-seven years to recognize that intelligence, talent, and beauty are not exclusive property rights of any racial or ethnic group” (“Black Leaders Praise” B4:3).

Though others were prepared to anoint Williams the “poster child” for a progressive social justice movement, Williams, seemed uneasy in the role and, in many ways, rejected this positioning. Acknowledging its importance, but unwilling to focus exclusively on the symbolic nature of her win, Williams admitted that she’d only sought to use the pageant for national exposure to the entertainment industry and for the opportunity to earn scholarship money to complete her education at Syracuse University. Soon after her win, NBC’s *The Today Show* host Jane Pauley sat down with the newly crowned Miss America, and questioned Williams’ intentions to

work on behalf of issues directly affecting the Black community. Pauley asked, “Don’t you consider yourself, too, a de-facto spokesman for Black America now?” Williams replied, “I think so, but *that* I knew was going to happen, and I was prepared for it.” Though she acknowledged that her selection might make it easier for minority contestants to compete and win in the future, Williams cast herself as a neutral figure in racial and social politics. Throughout the interview, Williams remained very cautious in her answers to Pauley’s racially charged line of questioning, unwittingly aligning herself with the archetypical and stereotypical vapid, programmed, beauty queen.

In a separate interview with Susan Chira of *The New York Times*, Williams appeared more determined to challenge suggestions that as Miss America she might perform as figurehead for a new kind of post-racial civil rights movement. Williams lamented, “It was like being in a political position overnight. People would say, ‘What about black causes?’ and I would say, ‘What black causes? Be specific?’.” Williams admonished, “I’m twenty years old. What qualifies me to answer?” Pageant officials recognized that Williams had to “learn to be a role model,” and that the glare of the media spotlight and the pressure of public expectations had overwhelmed the college sophomore. Foreshadowing her not so distant future, Williams herself bemoaned, “being first is a pleasure [...] but controversy gets a little strained at times” (Chira B1:1). Even in her youthful naiveté, Williams seemed keenly aware of the limitations of speaking on behalf of a monolithic black community. Unfortunately, in the end, her unwillingness to participate in conversations about racial and social politics cast her as an indifferent and

dispassionate post-racial figure—one who could acknowledge her difference without engaging in any real or meaningful recognition and interrogation of the racial past.

Black and White and “Read” All Over

Facing the pressures associated with being thrust into the public eye; the challenges of being an African American “first;” the scorn from some within both white and Black communities who considered her either “too black” or “not black enough;” and ridicule from divergent feminist communities that lamented her complicity with patriarchal systems of oppression, Vanessa Williams was wholly unprepared for the devastating blow that would be dealt her within only weeks of the end of her reign as “Miss America 1984.” On July 20, 1984, the *New York Times* reported that *Penthouse* magazine was prepared to publish nude photos of Williams in its September 1985 edition. The magazine’s publisher, Robert Guccione, argued, “these pictures were taken at her insistence [...] at a time when she wanted to go into modeling” (Kerr A18:1). The magazine had purchased a series of photographs of Williams from photographer Tom Chiapel with whom Williams had worked as a receptionist at the age of nineteen. Guccione, whose bottom line was tied up in the economics of publishing and pornography, was unremorseful and unapologetic about the sale and publication of the photos, blasting any suggestion of wrongdoing and stating quite plainly, “my first obligation is to my readers [...] [a]nyone who seeks the limelight must realize they are newsworthy” (Fein B1:1). Ironically, Guccione was among the first to present any sophisticated criticism of the beauty pageant model or challenge the myths of the pageant, pointing to the inherent

hypocrisy of the Miss America Pageant and calling the contest and its organizers, “out of step with reality” (Kerr A18:1)

Interviews conducted at the time reveal a more complicated history than Guccione presented in his defense. It was believed that although Williams posed for the series of nude and lesbian-themed photos, she did so with the understanding that her face would not be recognizable in the photographs. Williams maintained that she had denied consent to publish the photographs, a claim supported by Chiapel’s one-time assistant, Norman Sacks. Sacks went on record to say that the provocative pictures, were “not supposed to get out the studio” (Fein 1:1). Guccione, however, argued that he was in possession of a release form signed by Williams—a fact that she and her lawyer vehemently denied. Featured on the cover of the magazine with legendary comedian George Burns, the headline reading “*Oh My God, She’s Naked!*” echoed the shock and outrage of many across the country while it satirically poked fun at the hypocrisy of the pageant. Further exploiting the situation, print and television media outlets ran the sensational story, often showing censored images of Williams in the most sexually suggestive and provocative images of the series.

For the Miss America Organization, the realization that their image and reputation might be sullied by the misdeeds of their reigning queen was frightening, at best. On July 20, 1985, the Miss America Organization voted unanimously to seek Williams’ resignation in an attempt to preserve the reputation of the pageant. Albert Marks argued that Williams simply could not continue to serve as Miss America since, he explained, “the pageant celebrates the whole woman, and its spirit

is intrinsically inconsistent with calculated sexual exploitation” (Janson 1:1). According to Marks, Williams was in violation of the contract she’d signed that bound her to model “good moral character,” and forbade any act of “moral turpitude.” Emphasizing Miss America’s image as the wholesome girl-next-door, Marks extolled that “the Miss America pageant has been built on traditional American virtues [that] [...] created wholesome role models for young girls and women throughout the country” (Janson 1:1). Benjamin Hooks, then executive director of the N.A.A.C.P. criticized the pageant’s decision to force Williams’ resignation arguing that “the lifting of the crown not only penalized the young woman for a past error in judgment, [...] but by inference [would] be used to reflect upon her race” (Janson 1:1)—a sentiment shared and feared by many in the black community. Ultimately, just as the economics of the pornography industry played a key role in Guccione’s decision to publish Williams’ photos in *Penthouse*, the economics of the pageant played a seminal role in the call for Williams’ resignation as pageant organizers feared the loss of nearly three million dollars in sponsorship from companies whose brands were linked to the wholesome image of Miss America.

Though many spoke out on Williams’ behalf, particularly black leaders, and even encouraged the young woman to fight the *Miss America Pageant* for her right to keep the crown, the court of public opinion weighed in with conflicting views on what some believed to be her resignation, and others her dethroning. Letters to the editor that appeared in the *New York Times* reveal this chasm as some readers agreed with pageant officials, referring to Miss America as the “last bastion of

traditional values,” while others illuminated the hypocrisy of an institution that criticized nude pictures of its queen in *Penthouse* magazine while it simultaneously paraded young women on the pageant stage in revealing bathing suits. Pageant historian Frank DeFord offers a compelling argument, suggesting “no U.S. institution could be riddled with so many contradictions” (17). Although the pageant has always located itself at the moral center, DeFord asserts that “Miss America is [...] a bathing beauty show embarrassed to death by sex, bathing suits, and possibly even girls. It manages to become more Victorian as the country grows more permissive and tolerant” (17). Though written in 1971, DeFord’s monograph imagines the Miss America pageant as a glaring contradiction—clutching tightly to its pearls and puritanical ideals while laboring to remain culturally relevant in a society moving further to the left—especially on issues of sexuality and gender. These contradictions provide interesting points-of-entry for an interrogation of the obvious way in which the exploitation of women’s bodies remains the thread that ironically and inextricably connects the *Miss America Pageant* with the images of their embattled queen that appeared in *Penthouse*.

Williams was given seventy-two hours to resign, and on July 23, 1984, a press conference was held in which the beleaguered beauty queen relinquished her title. Just a few hours later, Williams’ first runner-up, also a Black woman, Suzette Charles of New Jersey, was crowned her successor and eagerly accepted the responsibility of representing “the wholesome American image” (Fein B1:1). Reluctantly, Williams stood before a crowd of eager journalists and acknowledged the difficulties of battling the *Miss America Pageant* for the right to remain Miss

America. Williams explained to those gathered that she'd come to her decision to resign after realizing "the potential harm to the pageant and the deep division that a bitter fight might cause" ("Potential Harm" A3:1). Appearing poised and confident at the press conference, a more reflective and concerned Williams revealed in an interview with the *New York Times*, "This is the worst thing that has ever happened to me [...] [f]or a 21 year old person to go through such national attention, such a catharsis in public, is really awful (Fein A1:5). Further, Williams expressed disappointment in the way she was "handled" by all parties involved, lamenting, "I feel personally violated by *Penthouse*, by the photographer, and by pageant officials" (Fein A1:5). The experience of violation of which Williams speaks brings to mind incidences of sexual and physical violence and encourages an investigation of the ways in which this particular instance of exploitation and psychic and sexual trauma links Vanessa Williams to a much more complicated narrative of Diasporic experiences of women of color. This very racialized and sexualized moment in America's social memory reveals itself as an important caveat to new ways of understanding intersectional experience.

The Issue of the Color Line: Vanessa Williams and the Trope of the Tragic Mulatto

Although many praised Williams as a symbol of a post-racial America, there were others who remained suspicious of what the moment really meant in terms of social justice for people of color, and more specifically, Black women. In particular, some Black feminists were wary of embracing the idea of a Black Miss America as indicative of any real change in the lived experiences of Black women. Though there

appears to be very little commentary by Black feminists on her selection, what is most interesting is the seeming indifference surrounding her win, and much later, her dethroning. Others, like Darcy Martin and Elwood Watson recall the considerable controversy within divergent Black communities that questioned whether Williams' hazel eyes and golden hair made her 'sufficiently' black enough. For many, Williams' phenotype disallowed the belief that anything truly significant had been accomplished by her selection. During her reign, Williams expressed disappointment and disbelief at the many articles and letters she received and read that questioned her "authenticity," many which also criticized her choice to date a white man whom she'd met while in enrolled at Syracuse University. Groups like the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) declared Williams as not "in essence Black," and refused to acknowledge her win as anything more than tokenism and yet another racially divisive moment that aggravated tensions within Black communities around issues of class and color. Martin and Watson identify historian and cultural critic Gerald Early among the harshest critics of Williams' symbolism, positioning her in both likeness and opposition to the "tragic mulatto" archetype. Early writes:

[...] our new Miss America is as sweet as any of her sisters before her, so she will not, in the end, bring to mind those great images of the mulatto personality like Holiday, Baker, and Dandridge. Her reign will help us forget them; for while our culture can tolerate desperate black women who want success and love, it cannot tolerate bitter black women who have been denied success and love. Our current Miss America will always bring to mind

Eliza and she will clutch her crown and roses in much the same way that Stowe's character clutched her son. She will personify strength, courage, and culture of Black, middle class womanhood, and all its Philistine mediocrity as well. (Watson 292)

Early's argument not only joins Williams with very compelling historical iconography, but also aligns her with archetypal images of triumph and tragedy. Evoking the complicated historical narratives of Billie Holiday, Josephine Baker and Dorothy Dandridge, as well as literary figures like Harriet Beecher Stowe's Eliza, Early positions Williams at the center of two crossroads that connect African American personalities in popular culture with the familiar trope of the tragic mulatto in American literature. Though Early implores that Williams will make us forget images of tragedy, he could not have been more erroneous in his assessment. Had Early been clairvoyant, he would have been able to predict the ways in which the beauty queen would be vilified, hyper-sexualized, and exploited in ways that intimately connect her to these kindred sisters. Moreover, Early asserts that our culture can tolerate bitter black women who have been denied success, it would also seem, as this instance proves, that our culture simply has difficulty tolerating black women, in general. Though I disagree with Early's analysis of Vanessa Williams as "desperate," and am further distanced by an evaluation that fails to really complicate the matter, I do believe he provides a useful perspective through which to critically engage Vanessa Williams' story. Aligning Williams with the narrative tradition of the mulatto experience in American is a very useful prism of analysis that not only places Vanessa Williams' experience in historical context, but provides

us with a new lens to investigate the ways in which her very personal and public trauma are linked to narratives of historical and contemporary trauma.

Most narratives of the tragic mulatto figure are ones of hopeful desire and heartbreaking disappointment. For these figures, positioned between two worlds—one white and one black—the struggle for social location and identity is often wrought with emotional, physical, and psychological trauma. In most of these tales, the story unfolds as a figure of mixed race finds him or herself in the midst of a paralyzing socio-political and psychological quagmire. The promise of post-racial “invisibility” not only becomes a means for a better life, but most often a measure of survival. Within many of these texts, the reader is introduced to a figure whose decision to pass (or attempts at passing) are met with some success; however, as the plot develops, the protagonist is unmasked and revealed, usually by some tragic twist of fate, as black. In this way, notions and ideals about race and identity are both reified and questioned, and the inherent “blackness” marks the unfortunate figure, making visible the “stain” which their phenotype disguises.

Though most of these protagonists are emotionally and physically invested in their particular abilities to pass successfully into white society, the same cannot and should not be said about Williams. Any conjecture about Williams’ intentions to “pass” is, I believe, unfair and even dangerous. Even still, there are remarkable associations that can be made in the way that both the figure of the tragic mulatto in American literary histories and this tragic incident in the life of Vanessa Williams come together to illuminate startling truths about race and racism in America—both in historical and contemporary contexts. In the instance of Vanessa Williams, the

promise of a post-racial figure works in ways that effectively bring to bear the practice of passing as a function of this promise. Though Vanessa Williams is clearly marked as black, an identification that aligns her with the figure of the “other,” Williams’ light skin and hazel eyes position her, in some ways, as the “model minority”—one who represents difference in ways that are non-threatening to American racial and social hierarchies.²⁶ Fascinatingly, in this case, two historical narratives converge on the body of one black woman—that of the promise of the post-racial, model minority, and the narrative of the tragic mulatto.

What differentiates William’s story from traditional narratives of the tragic mulatto is that, unlike the characters within literature that represent this historical conundrum, Williams does not seem particularly invested in a performance of race that might legitimize her as America’s ideal; rather, Williams seemed to be primarily interested in her own professional advancement in the entertainment industry. Williams expressed discomfort in claiming the position of “race woman” which I believe had less to do with any inability on her part to connect with a monolithic black community and more to do with her youth and naiveté. I believe Williams’ reluctance at that time to locate herself as a racial figure placed her in a vulnerable position to be criticized, however unfair this criticism may be. In my assessment, I don’t believe that Williams imagined herself as “un-raced;” Instead, I believe she was wholly unaware of the ways in which her body was marked in the moments of performance on the pageant stage and further in *Penthouse* magazine, as black. Williams located herself outside traditional narratives of race that might have

²⁶ The model minority refers to refers to a minority ethnic, racial, or religious group whose members achieve a higher degree of success than the population average.

aligned her with a particular kind of reading of who she is and what she represented. Unfortunately, though Williams may have believed herself as operating in a post-racial American society that would accept her beyond the boxes that some might want to place her in, that myth is busted wide open as her very public scandal reminds us, and made Williams aware, that no matter how “white” you may appear, your “essential blackness” is still a cross to bear.

For the tragic mulatto figure in literature, the idea that one could operate outside of the boundaries of race is indeed unimaginable. For these historical figures, their survival in the world and their abilities to lead productive lives, as they saw fit, often relied upon the ability to master the performance of race and negotiate between two conflicting worlds. Having thought critically about the ways in which this literary trope might be useful in thinking critically about Williams’ experience, I read this unfortunate instance as what literary theorist Judith Berzon calls the “crisis experience.” According to Berzon, this very particular kind of tragic experience is “soul shaking.” She goes on to suggest that before this crisis experience, the protagonist “is unaware, or is dimly cognizant, of [her] own difference from the dominant white caste. At a critical moment in [her] life, however, an event occurs that shows him conclusively that he can no longer think of himself as belonging to the ‘superior’ majority” (120). Berzon posits that “the crisis experience as depicted in the American novel, is usually single shattering experience that irrevocably transforms the mixed-blood—always with respect to his psychological well-being, and also often in respect to his social standing. He is faced with the existential crisis of redefining himself in terms of his social and

psychological environment. How he meets this challenge is the subject of mulatto fiction” (Berzon 120).

It is not my desire to suggest that Vanessa Williams, the private individual, represents this kind of tragic characterization or that she can be read literally as a “tragic mulatta.” Surviving nearly three decades in the entertainment industry, she has risen triumphantly, yet, remained virtually silent about her traumatic experiences as Miss America. As such, it is futile to attempt to know her personal state of being/mind in this instance. However, as Vanessa Williams the public figure, I believe we can certainly understand the usefulness of reading this historical example through the lens of this particular trope. I submit that reading Vanessa Williams, Miss America 1984, through the prism of the crisis experience helps us reveal the “soul-shaking” ways in which racist ideologies continue to “mark” the black body, even in an instance where transcendence seems apparent. The question remains, however, how does a person or community work to “redefine” oneself/itself in terms of its social and psychological environment? And further, how does this redefinition work to challenge or transform the dominant discourse? These questions will be addressed further in a separate chapter of this dissertation as I explore political projects that emerge from marginal communities and imagine themselves as engaged in this kind of transformative work.

Specter and Spectacle: From Saartje Baartman to Vanessa Williams

Narratives of the mulatto experience in America are useful in a contemporary moment as they often provide context for the complex lived experiences of people of

color in American society and beyond. For Black women, in particular, these stories often connect historical and contemporary instances of exploitation and victimization that occur across the Diaspora. As early as the sixteenth century, travel narratives were used to justify the slave trade as they “simultaneously grappled with the character of the female African body—a body both desirable and repulsive, available and untouchable, productive and reproductive, beautiful and Black” (Morgan 39). Historian Jennifer Morgan writes, “on the West African coast, women’s bodies [...] symbolized the shifting parameter of the colonizing venture. English writers regularly directed readers’ attention to the sexually titillating topic of African women’s physiognomy and reproductive experience” (39).

By the nineteenth century, the invention of photography and the expanding fields of anthropology and ethnography redefined the visual world” (Willis and Williams 2), and provided evidence of the divergent lived experiences of people outside of the Western world. In their groundbreaking text, *The Black Female Body: A Photographic History*, Deborah Willis and Carla Williams argue that the invention of photography signaled the birth of popular culture. According to Willis and Williams, technological, social, and cultural advancements saw the photographic images of black women develop from phrenological and physiognomical representations of difference to the symbolic embodiment of three themes—colonialism, scientific evolution, and sexuality (2). As entertainment centered on spectacle became a popular form of activity, the perfect platform upon which to

display bodies of difference was born.²⁷ Popular centers for the display of cultural, scientific, and industrial achievement also presented living and/or photographic displays of non-European peoples (Willis and Williams 2). In particular, black female bodies, which had historically been of great interest to the Western world, were presented in ways that would provide visual evidence of the “primitive” native.

In an essay entitled *The Body Politic: Black Female Sexuality and the Nineteenth-Century Euro-American Imagination*, author Beverly Guy-Sheftall explains:

Being black and female is characterized by the private being made public, which subverts conventional notions about the need to hide and render invisible women’s sexuality and private parts. There is nothing sacred about Black women’s bodies, in other words. They are not off-limits, untouchable, or unseeable. (Guy-Sheftall 18)

In Guy-Sheftall’s estimation, the Black female body was intimately connected to spectacularization and economy in ways that have provided dominant cultures with important iconographic means to dehumanize Black people and validate fictitious dichotomies between white and Black women. In particular, during the nineteenth century, the fetishized ‘Other’ becomes a thing to be observed, investigated, quantified, and commodified. In no other recorded instance can we see this more explicitly than in the case of Saartje Baartman, or as she became known throughout Europe, the “Hottentot Venus.” Baartman, a South African woman, who in the early

²⁷ Willis and Williams explain “human display for entertainment [...] reached its zenith in the international expositions or world’s fairs that began in 1851 in London” and flourished until the mid-1960’s. The expositions and fairs were “celebrations of cultural, industrial, scientific, and imperial achievements” (2).

1800's was "exhibited" throughout Europe, drew fascination for her large posterior and African features. Presented as public spectacle, Baartman's body and image were observed by audiences curious to examine the primitive black body. Baartman was the object of a critical gaze that "heckled, objectified, caricatured, and dehumanized her in life and even after her death" (Guy-Sheftall 18). The exploitative nature in which Baartman was put on display during her life and then dissected and investigated after her death implores us to think about economies of the black body, in terms of its public consumption, in provocative ways.²⁸ Further, as scholar Anne Fausto-Sterling suggests, Baartman's body provided an important linkage "of the wild or savage female with one of dangerous or uncontrollable sexuality" (Fausto-Sterling 78). This connection, cultural historian Sander Gilman argues, not only worked to dichotomize white and black bodies, but also helped pathologize black bodies as anomalous in the medical model (Gilman 212).

In their text, Willis and Williams recount that the exploitative nature of photography as it relates to the nude black female body is complicated and disturbing. With no moral regard for the "display of the naked colored body" (Willis and Williams 3), photographers sought to "capture" the black nude in the interest of science, education, and finally, in its most revolting manifestation, visual pornography. Ultimately, as Willis and Williams posit, "the image of the black woman was associated with prostitution, pornography, and deviant sexual behavior." Willis and Williams go on to submit, "above all else, her image, and

²⁸ Anatomist Georges Cuvier not only placed Baartman on exhibit throughout her life, but also commissioned artists to draw her figure. After Baartman's death, Cuvier dissected her and preserved her genitalia in a jar for scientific research.

particularly her body, was understood to represent that which could be dominated and that which could be possessed, especially sexually” (Willis and Williams 3).

Against this backdrop, we can understand the history of the black female nude in visual culture as contentious, at best. Though more contemporary imagery claims agency as the definitive difference from those portrayals throughout the nineteenth century, when asked about her work with the black female nude, twentieth century African-American visual artist Emma Amos responds, “I did not want to see black women with no clothes on. It means something else when a black woman has no clothes on...it means she’s for sale” (Collins 113). Amos’ very poignant observation reminds us of a difficult history, yet directs us toward a more nuanced understanding of the nude photographs that appear of Vanessa Williams in *Penthouse* magazine. It should also be noted that the *Penthouse* magazine issue featuring Vanessa Williams remains the highest selling issue in its history.²⁹ Connecting this history of exploitation of the black female body in photography with Williams’ experience of exploitation at the hands of not one, but essentially three white men, Tom Chiapel, Rob Guccione, and even a seemingly guiltless Albert Marks, provides a valuable perspective from which to “see” these photographs.

The series of photographs, which depict a nude Williams posed alone and with a white women, appear in color and in black and white. Out of the context of *Penthouse* magazine, one might believe the shots where Williams is posed alone to be beautiful nude stills that capture her playful essence and youthful innocence. The photos in which she is posed with another woman are unquestionably intended to

²⁹ *Penthouse* sold a record-breaking 5.3 million copies of its issues featuring Williams.

suggest sexual play; however, these particular shots, done in black and white, are quite tastefully presented. Nevertheless, in the context of *Penthouse*, a magazine known for sexually explicit and sometimes sexually violent imagery of women, these photographs are read quite differently. The photographs literally transform between the pages of the magazine from innocuous images to graphic depictions of the sexually deviant and promiscuous black body—representations that are completely antithetical to the wholesome imagery of Miss America.

Most interesting are the pictures in which Williams is posed in lesbian-themed photographs with a white female model. These images, which appear in black and white, are often referenced by investigators of this incident. Consequently, the fact that Vanessa Williams' complexion is as fair in these photographs as her white counterpart is a point, in my opinion, for critical attention. On the one hand, it suggests that no matter how "white" Vanessa may look, her "essential blackness" is still somehow marked beneath the skin; on the other hand, her appearance, and the way in which she is positioned with the white model in at least two of the frames, works to reflectively validate white beauty. The idea that Williams' black body serves to not only provide opposition but reflection is a fascinating realization that speaks to a complicated American racial past—a history that, since the eighteenth century, has paired the black figure with a white figure in order to represent and emphasize black sexual pathology.³⁰

³⁰ It is at this critical juncture that Sander Gilman believes "the relationship between the sexuality of the black woman and that of the sexualized white woman enters a new dimension when contemporary scientific discourse concerning the nature of black female sexuality is examined" (Gilman 212). Thus, Saartje Baartman serves as the quintessential medical model for scientific hypothesis about the primitive black body.

Though Williams might have been able to avert the marking of race on her body in her performance on the pageant stage as the virtuous American ideal, her blackness is never more apparent to the public eye than when she is presented as sexually deviant. No longer is Williams representative of post-racial promise, but she becomes an embodiment of all that is stereotypically “black.” In other words, Williams becomes cast as the quintessential black Jezebel figure in American racial folklore. Like her kindred sister Saartje Baartman, Williams was, as Gilman emphasizes, “reduced to her sexual parts,” as images of Williams’ body become a “hot” commodity for voyeuristic consumption by audiences interested in seeing and knowing the clandestine and illicit mysteries of the black female body.³¹ Moreover, the juxtaposition of Williams’ nude body positioned alone and against that of the white woman with whom she is posed links the exploitation of Williams to a long and complicated history of the black female body as an object of display for a critical and subjective male gaze.

There She Is...Still Ideal

Nearly twenty-seven years after winning and relinquishing the title of Miss America, Vanessa Williams still cannot escape the collective American memory of her public scandal. Interestingly, scandals involving pageant contestants in compromising positions continue to attract great media attention as women and sometimes girls, much like a young Vanessa Williams, are judged harshly for their

³¹ This is, in part, the reason that I have decided it unnecessary to include the *Penthouse* photographs here. This conscious decision is motivated by a desire to avoid the kind of voyeuristic exploitation that reproduction of the images inevitably produces.

inability to adhere to strict codes of moral conduct sanctioned not only by the pageant systems, but also by the American public. Though she's become a critically acclaimed actress, singer, and dancer—a true “triple-threat” by industry standards, Williams has refused to give the Miss America Organization or the subsequent media blitz around her scandal any credit for her success in the entertainment industry. Williams speaks to this point in a June 2009 interview with the women of popular television daytime talk show “The View.” When Barbara Walters, principal member of the cast and renowned journalist, attempts to draw a connection between Williams' tumultuous reign and her current success, Williams very sternly responds, “I don't think it helped my career, but it absolutely made me the person that I am.” She then goes on in that interview to discuss the fact that it would take her nearly ten years to debut on Broadway and speaks of the very painful rejection experienced after auditioning to replace former model Twiggy in the show “My One and Only” owned by Lee Gershwin, widow of Ira Gershwin. Though she'd made an impression on the show's director, Mike Nichols, Lee Gershwin was quoted as saying to Nichols that she'd cast Williams for the production “over my dead body.” It is evident while watching Williams retell this story, that the specter of violation continues to haunt and disturb her—even though she's become one of the most influential and well-respected entertainers—white or black—in the world.

Though she may not agree, it is evident that much of Williams' early success must not only be attributed to the spectacularization she endured, but also to the fact that, as they say, “all press is good press.” I believe Williams' negation of the pageant's influence on her career speaks not only to her desire to distance herself

from a system that turned its back on her, but is a powerful indictment against the inherent hypocrisy of the system and its leaders. I've argued in this chapter that a young Vanessa Williams was unsure of the role race played in her selection as the first African American Miss America, and later perplexed by its function in her very public violation. However, as witnessed in interviews and public statements since that time, Vanessa Williams has certainly developed a rather sophisticated lens as she thinks back on her reign. Though she rarely speaks of her experience as Miss America, when she has, her words, at times, remind us the ways in which race played prominently in her violation. Accepting an award at the 1989 NAACP Image Awards, a very emotional Williams announced, "I want to thank the Black community because when I needed you, you were there for me...I thank you for giving me the opportunity and encouragement, for showing me how to spread my wings and fly, because I'm flying now!" Without having to speak to her traumatic history, the mostly black audience rose to its feet in a standing ovation for Williams, symbolizing a collective understanding of psychic, social, physical, and emotional trauma. In this instance, there seems no question about Williams' authentic 'blackness,' and no misunderstanding of to whom she belonged.

On January 30, 2010, Caressa Cameron, a twenty year-old African American woman from Virginia was crowned Miss America 2010. Though she was born three years after Vanessa Williams was crowned, Cameron undoubtedly looks to Williams as a kindred sister, of sorts. As only the eighth black woman to hold the title, echoes

of racial pride coupled with criticisms that Cameron is yet another “cultural dupe” remain consistent with those conversations about Williams so many years before. Gerald Early, an outspoken critic of the pageantry and its participants writes, “[...] any black woman who would want to become Miss America or, for that matter, the first black woman to do just about anything in our country (where such firsts signify so much while they mean so little) has to be a bit desperate” (Early 172). I reject this rather simplistic characterization and turn instead to Shirley Chisholm who, in 1984, cautioned us against trivializing Vanessa Williams’ win and what it would mean in the context of American culture writ large (“Black Leaders Praise” B4:3). In this vein, I too believe that scholars must be cautious of overlooking or prohibiting nuanced readings of what this historic moment in our national history meant in 1984, and most importantly, what it helps us understand today.

I imagine that somewhere in America on January 30, 2010, a Black mother turned to her daughter as my mother had to me and said to her in earnest, “someday, you could be Miss America.” I also imagine and fear that any suggestion of moral impropriety on the part of Ms. Cameron makes her vulnerable to institutional violence—both literally and figuratively. Further, I imagine that if I were a mother, in spite of what my feminist consciousness might direct, I too would want my daughter to believe herself worthy of such celebration. Because of this, evaluating Vanessa Williams, “Miss America 1984,” and the scandal that followed in the wake of her historic win through a more complicated lens is not only interesting, but imperative. Connecting Williams to histories of black women’s exploitation reminds us of how far we *haven’t* come and encourages us to investigate more fully

the ways in which this incident teaches something very valuable about how far we still have to go.

CHAPTER 4

“You Can’t Keep Big Girls Down!”: Mo’Nique and the Politics of ‘F.A.T.ness’

Beauty
 is a fat black woman
 walking in the fields
 pressing a breezed
 hibiscus
 to her cheek
 while the sun lights up her feet

Beauty
 is a fat black woman
 riding the waves
 drifting into happy oblivion
 while the sea turns back
 to hug her shape

-- “Beauty” by Grace Nichols, *The Fat Black Woman’s Poems*

Mo’Nique Imes is an African-American comedian, television personality, Oscar-winning actress, and self-described “F.A.T. girl.” She is best known for her work with the popular Black women’s comedy collective, “The Queens of Comedy;” her role as “Mo’Nique Parker” on the syndicated television sitcom *The Parkers*; and most recently for her stirring portrayal of abusive single mother “Mary Jones” in the critically acclaimed motion picture *Precious*. In addition to this wide-ranging body of work, Mo’Nique joins a very small cadre of women comedians—black, white, or otherwise—to host a late-night television talk show. It is safe to say that Mo’Nique is quite possibly the most celebrated Black female comedian of our time, and her ability to work across mediums is undoubtedly one of her most valuable professional qualities. Throughout her career, Mo’Nique has been the subject of consistent critical attention. She has been praised for her ability to play “against

type” as much as she’s been criticized for reinforcing dangerous stereotypes about women; Blacks; fat people; and, in combination, fat/black/women.³²

Some critics have argued that, at best, Mo’Nique’s body of work as an actress and comedian reflects the precarious position of minority actors in Hollywood. Legendary African-American actress Hattie McDaniel’s sentiment that she’d rather “play a maid than be one,” speaks to the historical and contemporary challenges faced by Black actors with limited options for roles in television and film. Mo’Nique, like Ms. McDaniel, has been criticized for choosing parts that many consider demeaning and degrading to Black people, in general, and Black women in particular. This was the case for many years when Mo’Nique’s portrayal of the high-spirited, affable, yet dim-witted “Nikki Parker” in the top-rated sitcom *The Parkers* was criticized for being a one-dimensional and stereotypical representation of fat/black women. Though *The Parkers* became the number one rated television show for Black audiences during its network run, the program could never escape the critique that it was another in a long list of modern-day minstrel shows. In an October 2000 *Jet* magazine article about *The Parkers*, Mo’Nique reveals, “Our show is so real to many people. Everybody has a Nikki or Kim in their family [...] the show deals with real reactions and real situations. It’s also very funny” (“Why TV’s ‘The Parkers’ “ 60). As a fat/black/woman, Mo’Nique’s sensibilities and sensitivities about her professional persona are made quite clear in her stand-up comedy, television appearances, and in text. Moreover, Mo’Nique makes no apologies to

³² I use this syntax “fat/black/woman” as a way to represent the multiple identities that mark Mo’Nique physically, and also as a way of demonstrating the inextricable linkage of these categories. I use this syntax throughout this chapter in conversation about Mo’Nique and other black women who identify as fat.

critics for what she believes are authentic representations of her personal experiences and those of other women she's encountered in her life. The actress and comedian quips, "I live by my own rules. I'm going to ride my bus until the wheels fall off. I've no regrets and make no apologies for being Mo'Nique" (Shuler). Though *The Parkers* is not without critique, in reading her responses to critics, it is clear that Mo'Nique is keenly aware that part of the public discomfort with her representation on television has to do with the pervasive dis-ease with her fat, Black body.

Not only does Mo'Nique imagine herself as representing the "real," but she also envisions herself as a kind of moderator for difficult dialogues around issues of fatness. Speaking to the work of women like Mo'Nique, activist and fat studies scholar Charlotte Cooper suggests:

Coming out as fat means we no longer want to accept the general belief that there is something wrong with us. By coming out we begin to acknowledge our bodies as normal, acceptable, even worth celebrating, instead of hiding and denying ourselves. Coming out makes us visible; it shows that we are fine as we are. It is a personal step that has wider social and political consequences, such as the promotion of diversity. (Cooper 47)

For Mo'Nique, "coming out" as "fabulous and thick," a phrase she often uses to characterize herself, is not only about promoting a positive-self image for fat women, but it is also about encouraging them to claim their metaphorical and physical "space" in the world.³³ Moreover, "coming out" as fat, for Mo'Nique, is about combating racially and socially charged stereotypes about fat bodies—

³³ "Fabulous and Thick" is also the acronymic definition of "F.A.T."

fat/black/women's bodies in particular—that might associate her with demeaning and caricatured racial iconography. As Mo'Nique describes in her 2003 memoir/self-help book *Skinny Women are Evil: Notes of a Big Girl in a Small-Minded World*, the fight for social justice around fatness is not just a fight for good versus evil, but ultimately a war against the physical, spiritual, and emotional annihilation of fat women. In the text, Mo'Nique laments:

You probably think I'm just paranoid. And saying to yourself, Mo'Nique, girl, stop trippin'. But I've seen the enemy, even witnessed their schemes firsthand, and I'm convinced that the troops on this mission have one goal in mind—TOTAL DOMINATION. That's why fighting them will be tough. The enemy is on a seek-and-destroy assignment for total destruction—and BIG girls are the targets. (Mo'Nique 2)

Underneath this comedic attack of the presumed enemy—"skinny women"—is a very sophisticated and ominous critique of patriarchal systems of oppression that pose a very real and imminent threat to fat women's bodies. Moreover, Mo'Nique's words illustrate the violent and virulent cultural climates in which fat bodies are forced to exist. Nowhere do we see this more chillingly illustrated than in the novel *Push* by Sapphire and its critically acclaimed screen adaptation *Precious*. In this film, and through the brilliant performances of Mo'Nique and talented newcomer Gabourey "Gabby" Sidibe, intersectional experience is thrust into the face of the viewing audience and, for one of the first times, fatness became visible through a more complicated lens.

Though she is likely unaware of her location within feminist discourses of intersectional experience, I believe Mo’Nique is engaged in very important, thought-provoking conversations that challenge social and cultural notions of fatness—most notably in *Skinny Women are Evil*. At the same time, her work as creator, producer, and host of the top-rated beauty pageant for fat women, *Mo’Nique’s F.A.T. Chance*, sets out to encourage a paradigmatic shift in the way fat women see themselves and the way the world sees fat women. Thus, Mo’Nique’s unique comedic method, coupled with her affront to patriarchal discourses of fatness and blackness, makes this an intellectually complex and rich cultural study of intersectional and corporeal experience.

In this chapter, I will examine what I believe is a complex, multi-layered activist project that is traditional in its method, yet non-traditional in its message. In particular, I will look closely at the first season of *Mo’Nique’s F.A.T. Chance* as a kind of positive protest that emerges from a powerful politic of civil disobedience employed by the American Civil Rights and Black Power movements.³⁴ I also argue that this contest employs the traditional pageant model to confront existing paradigms of ideal womanhood that exclude fat bodies. I begin this chapter with a literature review of current conversations in fat activism and Fat Studies in order to locate Mo’Nique as an important interlocutor who is encouraging new critical conversations about fatness and providing us with the language to speak about fat bodies. Second, I demonstrate how Mo’Nique’s position in this movement presents

³⁴ In 1968, the N.A.A.C.P. produced the first “Miss Black America Pageant” that took place a few blocks from the “Miss America Pageant. In response to the Miss America Organization’s discriminatory practices, the N.A.A.C.P. waged what they considered a “positive protest” to use the pageant model as a way to present Black women as the feminine ideal.

a direct challenge to patriarchal discourses of fatness and historical iconography that have erroneously identified and marked fat/black/women bodies. Third, I examine Mo’Nique’s non-traditional comedic method which positions the fat body as “off limits” for ridicule and question what happens to the discourse about fatness when the person who is “in charge” of constructing revisionist ideologies is a fat/black/woman. Finally, I end with a conversation about the film *Precious* as a critical moment of reflection that forces us to “push” ourselves beyond any simple reading of Mo’Nique’s life work on behalf of fat women.

(Un) Disciplined Bodies

If my fat
 was too much for me
 I would have told you
 I would have lost a stone
 or two

--from “Invitation” by Grace Nichols, *The Fat Black Woman’s Poems*

In the seminal text *Unbearable Weight*, Susan Bordo writes:

[T]he representation of unrestrained appetite for women, the depiction of female eating as a private, transgressive act, make restriction and denial of hunger central features of the construction of femininity and set up the compensatory binge as a virtual inevitability. Such restrictions on appetite, moreover, are not merely about food intake. Rather, the social control of female hunger operates as a practical ‘discipline’ (to use Foucault’s term) that trains female bodies in the knowledge of their limits and possibilities.

Denying oneself food becomes the central micro-practice in the education of feminine self-restraint and containment of impulse. (Bordo 130)

Thus, the ideal feminine body is not just one that is slender, but one that denies itself pleasure and satisfaction through acts of perpetual self-discipline. In Bordo's assessment, "more often than not [...] women are not even permitted, even in private, indulgences so extravagant in scope as the full satisfaction of their hungers" (Bordo 129). The omnipresent Victorian ideology that encourages women to minimize their presence and suppress their desires, is not only dangerous in the way that it has encouraged compulsive relationships with food, but also in the way that it has effectively "estranged" those so-called "undisciplined" women. For Black women, and fat/black/women in particular, these antiquated and ubiquitous notions of "true womanhood" have and continue to be powerful social constructs that position Black women's bodies against ideal femininity and whiteness.

According to cultural and literary historian Sander Gilman, "the moral panic about obesity is not only a reaction to waist size, it is a part of a discourse on race that surfaced in the nineteenth century, shaping the very manner by which obesity is understood today. Race and obesity have a long and fraught history" (Gilman 102). Though Gilman is speaking here of the relationship between Jewish communities and obesity, it can certainly be argued that the black female body has endured a very complicated history of representation and mis-representation that is inextricably linked to the American racial past that stretches well before the 19th century. Black feminist scholar Kimberly Wallace-Sanders posits that because "Black women stand at the center of the discussion about the female body, their

bodies tell profoundly different stories about historic and contemporary American culture” (Wallace-Sanders 5). If this reading of the Black female body in American culture is true, then a conversation about what it means for Mo’Nique Imes, a fat/black/woman, to serve as liaison for and provocateur of a new critical movement for social justice is essential.

Mo’Nique’s F.A.T. Chance, as well as a myriad of other film and television projects produced by Mo’Nique, do not represent the beginning of such a movement for social justice around the fat body, but they do provide us with tangible evidence of the ways in which critical thinking around these issues has developed through time and permeated the collective American cultural consciousness. Fat activists and Fat Studies scholars have demanded that fatness be considered a viable category for political and social analysis in the same way that feminist movements have argued for race, class, gender, and sexuality. Charlotte Cooper, author of the book *Fat and Proud: The Politics of Size*, acknowledges the influence of feminist activism and theory, writing, “feminist discourses around beauty and appearance are relevant to fat women. Fat, like beauty and appearance, can be read in a political context; the stigma attached to being fat is a control mechanism which supports a power structure of one group of people over another, and fat politics is a way of challenging the status quo” (Cooper 6). Cooper suggests that feminist theory provides a useful paradigm through which to think about and discuss constructions of beauty and their relevance to fatness, but she remains critical of the ability of feminist theories to comprehensively address issues of fatness. Reminiscent of Black feminist criticisms of the mainstream feminist movement, Cooper’s approach

underlines the critical need for fat women scholars and activists to create original scholarship and engage in projects that give voice to fat women's experiences as the proverbial "Other." A fat activist who embraces the word "fat" and its embodiment as a means of reclamation and self-actualization, Cooper insists that the primary work of fat activists and scholars is to "seek to encourage people to bring fat issues out into the open instead of veiling them with shame, [and further] to change the prevailing cultural values which regard thin women as better than being fat (Cooper 7).

Copper, like Gilman, recognizes the ways that race "colors," if you will, any conversation about our understanding of fatness in American society and beyond. Cooper suggests, " Black cultures in Anglo-American society sometimes do not suffer as virulent and institutionalized a form of hatred as white cultures; [...] Many black women reject Barbie-like standards of white beauty, which also entails rejecting slenderness as the epitome of attractiveness (Cooper 27-28). Though research suggests that Black women and girls tend to have more affirming relationships with their fuller bodies, and that popular cultural representations of "ideal thickness" permeate visual culture in everything from music videos to entertainment magazines, I diverge from Cooper's suggestion that Black cultures in Anglo-American society do not suffer from the virulent, institutionalized hatred of Black bodies. Contrarily, I join a considerable body of scholarship that argues that the Black female body is perhaps the most historically reviled and spectacalized human form, and that institutionalized racism has long been part of Black women's corporeal experience in America. I would argue further that because conceptions of

Black women's bodies are so tied up in the racial past, one can never separate contemporary attitudes from historical truths about the pervasive culture of contempt for black women. I believe this pervasive culture is what motivates Mo'Nique, a woman who projects a very positive self-image, to feel compelled to fight against hostile attitudes towards fatness for all fat/black/women.

Cooper does acknowledge, however, that "fat hatred combines with racism and as a result fat black women suffer different stereotypes from their white counterparts" (Cooper 29). Though I believe she only scratches the surface of what is a very complicated conversation about the historical mis-representation of Black women, Cooper's analysis encourages a critical lens that must be focused on how blackness, compounded by fatness, creates newer, more difficult challenges. It is at this juncture that I believe considering Mo'Nique's work as a fat activist and producer of new critical knowledge about fatness emerges as integral for fat activism and scholarship.

Staetopygous sky
 Staetopygous sea
 Staetopygous wave
 Staetopygous me

O how I long to place my foot
 on the head of anthropology

-- from "Thoughts drifting through the fat black
 woman's head while having a
 full bubble bath" by Grace Nichols, *The Fat
 Black Woman's Poems*

Images of the Black mammy, the jezebel, and the pickaninny, are just a few historical misrepresentations that have haunted Black women for centuries. These stereotypes are further complicated by the historical spectacularization of the Black female body. Nowhere has this example been more evident than in the documented life of Saartje Baartman, also known as “The Hottentot Venus.” Baartman’s body, as Black feminist scholar Beverly Guy-Sheftall writes, “was gazed at, heckled, objectified, caricatured, and dehumanized” by European audiences that “consumed” her image publicly and used her figure for scientific and comparative analysis (18).

In the contemporary context, these historical misrepresentations have been compounded by images of the “welfare queen,” the backside-bearing “video vixen” and the “chickenhead.” These newer, more complicated stereotypes have not only broadened the spectrum of dangerous and damaging constructs, but have added yet another layer of “skin” for Black women to shed. In the Introduction to the anthology *Skin Deep, Spirit Strong: The Black Female Body in American Culture*, feminist scholar Kimberly Wallace-Sanders asserts:

One of the most devastating results of this aggressively consistent mythology is that contemporary Black women are trapped by this externally imposed second skin of misconception and misrepresentation. The shell is both *skin deep*, as it emphasizes the most superficial versions of Black women, and *skin tight*, as it has proved to be nearly inescapable, even in Black women’s self-conception and self-presentation. Shedding this elusive layer is a daunting task, yet it is an imperative one if Black women are ever to be seen and to see themselves in a more humane light. (Wallace-Sanders 4)

For Mo’Nique, the challenge to redress these mythologies begins with an acknowledgment of the ways in which race, class, sexuality, and gender converge at once on fat bodies. In other words, Mo’Nique’s life-work as a fat activist, particularly her commitment to producing *Mo’Nique’s F.A.T. Chance*, is not only about shedding the layers of misrepresentation, but also about recognizing the ways in which intersecting experiences influence how bodies are “read.”

A seminal part of Mo’Nique’s activism remains a subversive sexual politic that works against historical notions of both the fat body and the Black female body. As evident in her stand-up and television work, Mo’Nique embraces a progressive sexual identity that encourages ownership over one’s body and sexual desires. Unlike Black mammy iconography, Mo’Nique does not embody asexuality, but rather boldly proclaims the fat body as sexually desirable. Mo’Nique has carefully crafted her image in a way that not only rejects any historical linkage to the mammy figure, but also detangles her corporeality from any familiar representations of the fat/black/woman’s body. As such, Mo’Nique’s ability to complicate what audiences “know” about fat/black/women is a critical part of her work as a fat activist and change agent.

In *Erotic Revolutionaries: Black Women, Sexuality, and Popular Culture*, sociologist Shayne Lee offers useful analysis of the way that Mo’Nique and other Black women comedians have revolutionized conversations about sex and sexuality in Black communities through performance. In particular, Lee suggests that Mo’Nique engages erotic topics with mannerisms that “defy the boundaries of what

society constructs as a well behaved woman” (Lee 105). Describing Mo’Nique’s position as a transgressive figure, Lee posits:

Mo’Nique [...] has black women talking and laughing about sex in a context that men can’t dominate. Her comic sets and talk show dialogues often include frank talk about divorce, bodily functions, and sexual needs and desires. [...] Mo’Nique spends an equal amount of time balancing her sexy persona with a message of self-actualization and transcendence while exhibiting a full range of human emotions, drives, and passions. Mo’Nique’s imposing physicality, brash pronouncements about sexual pleasure, and aggressive sexual imagery wield a tremendous impact on black sexual politics. (Lee 106)

Further in this chapter, I explore this subversive politic as a core component of her television reality show *Mo’Nique’s F.A.T. Chance*. I believe it to be a significant example of Mo’Nique’s very complex and calculated identity politic. What remains disconcerting is the fact that critics have often dismissed Mo’Nique’s cultural work as crude and anti-intellectual. I would argue, however, that this misreading has prevented scholars of the body in popular culture from acknowledging, understanding, and analyzing the role Mo’Nique has played as a significant contributor to more progressive black sexual politics.

In the past decade, Mo’Nique has become one of Hollywood’s most celebrated Black actresses; however, the fact that much of Mo’Nique’s professional success

derives from her work as a stand-up comedian deserves significant attention. As a fat/black/woman, the chances that Mo’Nique might be the “butt” of a comedian’s jokes seems more likely than a fat/black/woman finding success in this genre. It might also be argued that Mo’Nique could even have been successful as a kind of self-deprecating humorist who regurgitates destructive and humiliating discourses about fat bodies—fat/black/women’s bodies in particular. This tradition has worked well for many comedians who seek to create community with their audiences by presenting familiar archetypes that are consistently spectacularized. That Mo’Nique consciously and persistently chooses to work “against type” and refuses to participate in self-deprecation, in this case, reveals her ability to use comedy as a disruptive force for critical cultural work.

In a chapter entitled “ ‘It’s not over until the fat lady sings’: Comedy, the Carnavalesque, and Body Politics,” author Angela Stukator discusses the ways in which the fat body, particularly, the fat woman’s body, has been viewed as “comedic spectacle.” Stukator writes:

[R]endering the unruly fat woman as comic spectacle is one common strategy for designating her doubly marginal status—as woman and as fat woman—and ridiculing her aberrant body. As a genre, comedy is progressive, for it has the capacity to demystify the world, to expose oppressive hierarchies, and to express utopian desires. Yet comedy is also inherently conservative, for it involves the use of cultural stereotypes and archetypes. (Stukator 200)

Moreover, Stukator suggests:

[I]n contemporary mainstream comedy, the spectacle of the fat woman epitomizes Bakhtin's grotesque body, and its function as a symbol of ambivalence. She is constructed as delightful, attractive, and repulsive, normal and deviant. Yet the initial ambivalence is invariably replaced and resolved by hegemonic certainties. Her power is aborted or neutralized by privileging the pervasive (patriarchal) discourse of female denial: of hunger, desire, indeed of a socially sanctioned subjectivity. (Stukator 202)

Given Stukator's assessment of the ways that mainstream comedy has used the fat body as a means of asserting and privileging patriarchal discourses, we must then consider how Mo'Nique, as a successful contemporary comedian, has managed to evade this cultural trap and worked against this paradigm. Moreover, we must also consider Mo'Nique's ability to claim agency over cultural conversations of the fat body through a rhetorical strategy that uses comedy as a tool for liberation. In assuming this subjective posture, Mo'Nique claims a very powerful position, thus rendering her body "off-limits" for ridicule and comedic consumption.

In addition to this work, Mo'Nique confronts patriarchal discourses of denial head-on as much of her comedic and social discourse embodies a politic of indulgence. Acknowledging pleasure as a principle part of self-acceptance, Mo'Nique makes clear in *Skinny Women are Evil* and in *Mo'Nique's F.A.T. Chance* that as a fat/black/woman, her relationship with food and her indulgent eating habits have more to do with a progressive politic to reclaim power over discourses of denial and patriarchal restraints that are determined to minimize women's presence than any gluttonous desire. This point is made explicit by the fact that

Mo’Nique’s rhetoric around being “fabulous and thick” maintains, at its core, the critically essential promotion of healthy living. In her text, Mo’Nique asserts:

Sure, I encourage BIG girls to eat what pleases them, but please, be sensible about it, too. Listen to well-intentioned advice from loved ones when they tell you that your wheezing and labored breaths are worrisome, or that your unhealthy eating habits may be causing your body to break. Eat to live, don’t just live to eat. Pay attention to your body, because nothing is more important than your health. I know it’s hard, but some of you must begin to enjoy your favorite foods in moderation. Go slow. Pace yourself. Cut calories when and wherever possible. (Mo’Nique 84)

Mo’Nique continues this advisory by providing a list of healthy food selections from popular restaurants and fast food and warning other fat women that “you can’t get your blessings if you aren’t healthy” (Mo’Nique 84). The idea that fat women can be healthy or that a fat/black/woman who claims a politic of indulgence might also be concerned about the health of all fat women suggests that this politic is not just progressive in its capacity to push audiences to consider new possibilities for fat bodes, but transgressive in its ability to transcend the boundaries set for marginalized bodies. Mo’Nique’s ability to challenge stereotypes about the fat body, and validate one that appears oxymoronic—namely the healthy/fat body—speaks to the transformative possibilities of her cultural work.

‘Skinny Women’ are Evil

In *Skinny Women are Evil*, Mo’Nique remarks:

Skinny women are the most intolerant, competitive, judgmental, shallow, sharp-tongued creatures to walk the face of the earth. They play too many damn games and put the PORTLY down in the process. Just because we like to get our eat on doesn't mean there shouldn't be room in the spotlight for us to shine, too. I guess nibbling lettuce cups and tofu salads makes folks do some hateful shit. (Mo'Nique 3)

In much of Mo'Nique's comedy, a common thread can be recognized throughout—a fervent dislike of 'skinny women.' Though her strong rhetoric is cloaked in comedy, Mo'Nique's reasons for writing *Skinny Women* could not be more serious. It is clear from the first few pages of the book that her purpose for writing *Skinny Women are Evil* was to encourage 'F.A.T.' women to embrace their bodies and reclaim language in ways that work to neutralize harmful discourses that threaten to demean fat women. In this way, Mo'Nique imagines herself as "arming" other fat women with positive weapons to use for what she describes as the "fat fight."

Mo'Nique writes:

[...]FAT is only a bad word if you allow it be. What it really stands for is FABULOUS AND THICK.³⁵ So, the next time someone calls you FAT, you just say thank you and keep those pounds moving. Shoot, girl, don't worry about them words. Because we're taking them back and slapping our BIG-ass seal of approval on them. [...] They can't hurt us with our own shit. (Mo'Nique 6)

³⁵ Mo'Nique chooses to capitalize adjectives as a way to emphasize, what she refers to as, "LARGE and LOVELY" words. As such, Mo'Nique not only provides the reader with new ways to speak about fatness, but to write about it as well.

Skinny Women are Evil is not just a funny little book about a fat/black/woman's journey through a "skinny world," it's an unapologetic manifesto that forces other fat women to claim their space, literally and figuratively, in a world that demands that women minimize their presence. Mo'Nique asserts:

I wear a size twenty-two. And I'm proud, because I wear it extremely well. I've never had a problem with my doubles—double chin and double belly. I've also never had a battle with the bulge. Oh, we may have a few choice words every now and then, but it was always after some stupid he say/she say bullshit. What I've enjoyed is a lifelong love affair with every roll, every lump, and every curve. And because I love me, I've never felt the need to apologize for being my BIG, BEAUTIFUL self. (Mo'Nique 1)

I've argued that Mo'Nique's use of humor to speak candidly about fatness is both progressive and transgressive; however, I would further assert that Mo'Nique's projects around self-love of the fat body are perhaps her greatest contributions to the struggle against patriarchal oppressions. In "Letting Ourselves Go: Making Room for the Fat Body in Feminist Scholarship," Jana Evans Braziel and Kathleen LaBesco write:

[Society] [...] subtly undermines any sense of self-love a woman might have for her body—even those bodies that meet the ideal. The body is suspect, needy, always in danger of erupting into something that will grasp more than is allowed. The end result is that women, fat or thin, often develop an antagonistic relationship with their bodies. The size and shape those bodies

take on become directly connected to a woman's self esteem. (Braziel and LaBesco 66)

Not one to shy away from taboo discussion of weight, a signature of Mo'Nique's comedic style has been to destabilize audiences by very candidly speaking about fatness in language that is affirming and commands respect. In doing so, Mo'Nique claims power over language, and deconstructs patriarchal discourses that deny fat women's humanity. Mo'Nique's political work on behalf of fat bodies encourages a paradigmatic shift towards size-acceptance and self-actualization that speaks to both the fat and skinny body. Moreover, Mo'Nique's ability to "grasp more than is allowed," as a fat/black/woman proves a very provocative and powerful politic that is influenced by and emerges from black feminist activist traditions.

Though Mo'Nique's vitriol for skinny women can be criticized as a kind of reverse discrimination, I would implore a reviewer to consider a more nuanced reading of Mo'Nique's discursive stratagem. While it is uncomplicated to argue that Mo'Nique's intolerance for 'skinny women' may rival societal intolerance of fatness, a more prudent investigation begs us to deliberate what Mo'Nique stands to gain by calling out 'skinny women?' Further, we are pressed to consider what 'skinny women' really represent? I would argue that an unsophisticated reading of Mo'Nique's performance provides an uncomplicated understanding of a raw, but relevant, politic. I believe the phrase 'skinny women,' though written and spoken about quite literally in Mo'Nique's text and in her comedic performance, should be understood metaphorically as a pseudonym for those systems of oppression that work simultaneously to negate fat women's bodies and experiences. Comedy, in this

case, is used as both a defense mechanism and a combat weapon. Mo’Nique’s comedic presentation, in the tradition of Black comedy, uses this very literal construction to overtly and covertly explore the ways that patriarchy not only pits her body against those of other women, but privileges particular standards that she has no desire to attain. Ultimately, though ‘skinny women’ remain targeted members of Mo’Nique’s audience, the real truth of the matter is that ‘skinny women’ are not forced to confront pervasive cultural attitudes that seek to annihilate their existence and cure their “diseased” and aberrant bodies on an almost daily basis.³⁶

Perhaps most interesting in this discussion of the fat body versus the skinny body is the fact that Mo’Nique is a woman “settled” in her identity as a fat/black/woman. She is very clear about the importance of self-identifying as fat and takes great pride in being able to represent as such. Charlotte Cooper regards this as a progressive stance for fat women that, in many ways, pushes beyond traditional feminist theorizing and activism. Cooper argues that “feminist theory around fatness and eating disorders makes many troublesome references to fat women ‘making themselves fat,’ particularly as a kind of subconscious gesture against patriarchy. Being fat is initially perceived as an act of feminist heroism, but the implication remains that if we can choose to be fat we can choose to be thin” (Cooper 91). Mo’Nique’s discourse makes it clear to her audience that being ‘skinny’

³⁶ Charlotte Cooper suggests that “defining fatness in terms of disease promotes the idea that slenderness represent stability” (72), a belief that Mo’Nique endeavors to defeat in her stand up comedy, Mo’Nique’s *F.A.T. Chance*, and *Skinny Women*.

has never been and will never be a goal or a desired categorical identity.

Throughout *Skinny Women* and the production of *Mo'Nique's F.A.T. Chance*, there are very complicated messages that reflect Cooper's call for this kind of progressive fat politic. Cooper points out:

[f]at activism is an individually defined expression. [It is] the directed behavior of someone who has reached a certain accommodation of their own fatness, or of other fat people, someone who has a certain consciousness of what being fat might mean, who wants to change the status quo, and someone who speaks out to effect social change. Becoming a fat rights activist entails taking some responsibility to create change" (Cooper 49).

Though Mo'Nique has not explicitly named herself a fat rights activist, her production on behalf of cultural change has certainly earned her a prominent position within this movement. *Skinny Women are Evil* is not just a text about self-empowerment and self-acceptance, it is also an attempt to reclaim language in a way that gives society new ways to speak of, think of, and write about fat women. Much of this text is about Mo'Nique's own self-realization that fatness is about more than just the body, but the lens through which one views the world. Moreover, *Mo'Nique's F.A.T. Chance* is not only about presenting the fat body as a feminine ideal, but it is also about changing the lens through which the world sees fat women by shattering old mythologies around what fat bodies can and can not do. Both, however, are about rejecting the very dangerous notion of fatness as "an abnormal and temporary state," and represent an evolving campaign for size acceptance (Cooper 60).

Mo'Nique's F.A.T. Chance

Tonight the fat black woman
 is all agaze
 will some Miss (plump at least
 if not fat and black) uphold her name
 The fat black woman awaits in vain
 slim after slim aspirant appears
 bearing her treasures in hopeful despair
 this the fat black woman can hardly bear
 And as the beauties yearn
 and the beauties yearn
 the fat black woman wonders
 when will the beauties
 ever really burn

O the night wears on
 the night wears on
 judges mingling with chiffons

The fat black woman gets up
 and pours some gin
 toasting herself as the likely win

-- "Looking at Miss World" by Grace Nichols, *The Fat Black Woman's Poems*

In 2004, Mo'Nique approached executives at the Oxygen Network with an idea to develop and host a beauty pageant for plus-sized women. The comedian had watched beauty pageants like "Miss America" her entire life and had often wondered why being 'skinny' was the standard for those competitions. Though supporters of traditional beauty pageants have argued that the swimsuit portion of the competition is the only way to measure a contestant's physical fitness, an understanding that one could be physically fit and not "rail thin" has always seemed beyond belief. A champion for new images of physical fitness, Mo'Nique imagined a beauty pageant featuring plus-sized women that would challenge commonly held

ideas about the kinds of bodies that are considered “fit” and “healthy.” Moreover, Mo’Nique believed this pageant would serve as an opportunity to craft new images of fatness by presenting contestants as beautiful, feminine, fashionable, and sexy—adjectives rarely attributed to plus-sized women. In her words, she was tired of skinny women “[getting] all the glory, and [...] fat girls being denied the spotlight” (*Mo’Nique’s F.A.T. Chance*, Oxygen, 2004).

Mo’Nique’s dream became a reality when “Mo’Nique’s F.A.T. Chance” premiered on Oxygen Network as “America’s first full-figured, reality TV beauty pageant” (*Mo’Nique’s F.A.T. Chance*, Oxygen, 2004). Mo’Nique envisioned a televised revolution that would “show America that thin is no longer in” and present “a beauty pageant for the rest of America, the *real* America” (*Mo’Nique’s F.A.T. Chance*, Oxygen, 2004). Deliberately choosing the name “F.A.T. Chance” as a way to reclaim a word that had been used as a weapon against plus sized women, what Mo’Nique brought to the small screen was an extension of the work she had been doing on stage and on-screen to dismantle cultural stereotypes about fat bodies. The pageant, which was filmed in Hollywood, could not have been more different from what audiences were used to seeing on television—particularly on the beauty pageant stage. Comparisons with traditional pageants can most certainly be made, and it is obvious that Mo’Nique employs the pageant model to present new images through a format that is most readily available and understood by audiences; however, what she presents is a different kind of pageant that not only endeavors to embrace bodies of difference, but works to produce new images of female beauty.

As the pageant begins, a troupe of plus-sized dancers hit the stage, gyrating in rhythm to the popular R&B tune “One Thing” by recording artist Ameriie. Not only is the agility and precision of the group awe-inspiring, but the very image of plus-sized women moving with such ease is an immediate signal to the audience that “BIG” girls can work the dance floor as well as the diminutive dancers who appear in the music video that accompanies the song. Immediately, the “stage is set” for the viewing audience to suspend what it has believed about fat women as lazy, sedentary, unfit, and incapable. This very calculated move on the part of Mo’Nique and producers of the pageant prepares and encourages the audience to engage in an atypical reading of fat bodies.

Mo’Nique, pregnant with twins during the taping of the inaugural pageant, entered the stage to a standing ovation from an audience that appeared very aware of the significance of this performance. Overwhelmed with emotion, she exclaimed, “I was getting tired of representing for all the big and sexy women in America [...] there’s a lot of pressure, do you hear me? I’m ready to share” (*Mo’Nique’s F.A.T. Chance*, Oxygen, 2004)! Mo’Nique’s words not only signify a lack of diversity in Hollywood, but also demonstrate the need for community building among fat women in Hollywood and beyond. Sharing her vision with the audience, Mo’Nique explained that *F.A.T. Chance* was developed in response to discriminatory patterns in the beauty and entertainment industries that have excluded fat women from narratives of ideal womanhood. Thus, *F.A.T. Chance* would not just be another beauty pageant, but would represent “a new day, a new time, and [a chance] to change the world” (*Mo’Nique’s F.A.T. Chance*, Oxygen, 2004).

It is revealed that women from across the United States attended auditions in New York, Atlanta, and Los Angeles, while others flooded producers with home-shot video messages. Clips of the interview process provide a glimpse into the personal lives of women who have been categorically marginalized and denied their time, as Mo’Nique surmises, to “shine.” From as far away as Anchorage, Alaska, prospective candidates submitted applications for what quickly became a pseudo-sorority for women whose strongest bond remained the desire to be culturally visible. It is evident that the prospective contestants for “F.A.T. Chance” were drawn to this opportunity for reasons other than the chance to become a “personality;” instead, most of the women saw themselves as a part of project for liberation much larger than themselves. They were the brave ones who answered Mo’Nique’s clarion call for revolution and to “come out” as fat in a skinny world. This brand of “positive protest” through pageantry is not new—the NAACP engaged in a similar project in 1968 as members organized the first Miss Black America pageant in protest of the exclusion of Black women from the *Miss America Pageant*. Most certainly influenced by Civil Rights work around bodies of difference, “F.A.T. Chance” represented a new movement for social justice. As I’ve argued before, using the beauty pageant model, in these cases, presents a viable way to challenge traditional ideals through a framework that is an understood and familiar platform for identifying ideals of beauty and true womanhood. For both the Miss Black America pageant and *Mo’Nique’s F.A.T. Chance*, using the pageant model provides a construct through which to re-define true womanhood, and “bust open” prevailing myths about Blackness and fatness.

In a familiar pageant construct, the top ten finalists were revealed to the audience, and on-stage competition began. What we learn is that each woman represented on stage was handpicked by Mo’Nique for their compelling stories. These women are a diverse group, providing evidence that fatness, as a category of identification and analysis, crosses racial, social, and economic boundaries. As each woman is introduced, a pre-recorded video runs in the background that reveals why each has chosen to participate and what they hope to get out of this experience. Krystal Morris, a 24-year-old mother of two from Old Hickory, Tennessee explained that she “[hoped] to show her children that size shouldn’t effect your confidence” (*Mo’Nique’s F.A.T. Chance*, Oxygen, 2004). Chelsea Burrell, a 24 year old athlete from Aurora, Colorado, wanted to debunk myths that fat women are sedentary and unfit. And Monique Manning, 26, of Los Angeles, California desired to instill ethnic pride as a representative and role model for Latina women.

Though each is enticed by a grand prize package that includes \$50,000 cash; a new wardrobe; and a layout in a major fashion magazine; it’s clear that the true grand prize, for most, has already been won. The fact that they shed the cloak of invisibility and became visible in such an extraordinary way was, in itself, a major victory. The judging panel for the competition represented another familiar component of the pageant model. Representing divergent areas of the entertainment industry, the panel included Kevin Lennox, Associate Editor of *Glamour Magazine*; Linda Stokes, Fashion Designer; Mia Tyler, full-figured supermodel; Shaquille O’Neal, NBA Player; and Mikki Taylor, former model and Beauty Director of *Essence Magazine*. Charged with judging the contestants’ inner

and outer beauty, spirit, and confidence, *Mo'Nique's F.A.T. Chance* departs from the judging criteria of traditional beauty pageants. Interestingly, these areas of evaluation, not unlike swimsuit and talent competitions in traditional pageants, also require intense training and discipline. Through glimpses of the participants' preparation for the pageant, we learn that the presentations we see on stage are the culmination of years of self-evaluation and confidence building. Further, Mo'Nique's work with the contestants before the pageant prepares them to "come out" as fat.

In anticipation of the on-stage competition, Mo'Nique offered a "bootcamp" for contestants to prepare mentally, physically, and emotionally for the production. Under the direction of world-renowned fashion show producer Harvey Star Washington, the women set out on a weeklong journey of self-discovery and reinvention. Serving as a pseudo life coach, Washington, a heavysset, flamboyant gay man is, as one contestant points out, to *Mo'Nique's F.A.T. Chance* as "Miss Jay" is to supermodel Tyra Banks' wildly popular television show *America's Next Top Model*. Harvey Star Washington and "Miss Jay" have both mastered the art of performing femininity and have made careers of teaching women how to be women.³⁷ This irony is not lost on the audience as Washington takes the runway in an effort to teach the contestants how to "runway walk" in heels. The idea that femininity and essential woman-ness can be learned and performed not only works to challenge the idea that plus sized woman are inherently unfeminine and asexual, but also

³⁷ "Miss Jay" Alexander is a gay man who has been recognized as one of the most influential people in the fashion industry, particularly as a "runway coach" and fashion advisor.

reminds us why the pageant model has been an effective platform for the validation of feminine performance and the construction of identity.³⁸

The week proved an intense experience for many of the women in the group, but for Mo'Nique, bootcamp was a necessary component of the contestants' training as leaders of a revolutionary movement to shift public perceptions of fatness. As a crucial component of this myth-busting work, Mo'Nique breaks from traditional pageant models by including a lingerie competition. As evidence of her deliberate and subversive sexual politic, Mo'Nique laments, "sexy is not a word often associated with big girls, and I don't know why [...] there's definitely more of us to love and nothing's sexier than a sister who knows how to turn it on" (*Mo'Nique's F.A.T. Chance*, Oxygen, 2004). In order to boost their confidence in this phase of competition, the women were taken to the S Factor studio in Los Angeles. This popular pole-dancing studio, once featured on the *Oprah Winfrey Show*, offered a class to the women in an effort to help them connect with their sensuality and break them from limited imaginings of their own desirability. As Mo'Nique explained, "the confidence and attitude [the contestants] develop here will help them with any challenge they might face...like being in your lingerie in front of millions of people on TV" (*Mo'Nique's F.A.T. Chance*, Oxygen, 2004). For Mo'Nique, the lingerie competition has as much to do with busting the myths about fat women as it has to do with breaking down walls in the minds of the contestants and fat women across the country who've been disallowed this kind of sexual knowledge about their own

³⁸ Here, as in Chapters 1 and 3, Judith Butler's analysis of the ways that subversive performances challenge traditional notions that suggest gender is inherent as opposed to constructed informs my analysis.

bodies. Beyond the myth lies the reality that fat/women have been excluded from ideals of sexuality in ways that have been stigmatizing and traumatizing. The pole dancing class was not only about showing the world that fat women can physically do the same things that skinny women can do, but it was also about building community with other women in a space where their sexuality was confirmed and affirmed.

As the telecast continues, the audience is privileged with a behind-the-scenes glimpse of conversations the women share with Mo'Nique at her private home in Hollywood. What is significant in this moment is that the women acknowledge how being in the company of other fat women has provided a safe space to just "be." Moreover, the women express how integral this kind of community building has been for their confidence and self-esteem. Contestant Chelsea Burrell explains, "it feels like we've deserved this type of love from other women for a long, long, time; but we've never received it. And if we did, we never acknowledged it" (*Mo'Nique's F.A.T. Chance*, Oxygen, 2004). Mo'Nique, who believed in the potential for *Mo'Nique's F.A.T. Chance* to revolutionize the way the world views fat/women expressed confidence in the ability of fat women to build a strong community that is united against discrimination and committed to shifting destructive paradigms. Speaking to a captive audience, Mo'Nique exclaims, "Imagine what we'll do to our society when you go back home and you grab another fat girl by the hand and say 'let me tell you what I know;' [...] imagine what the eleven of us done [sic] to the world; that is something so unimaginable and so unforgettable and so full of love

that can't no one ever take that away from us" (*Mo'Nique's F.A.T. Chance*, Oxygen, 2004).

When the top five finalists are called, Mo'Nique shares the emotional stories of each woman's journey to the *F.A.T. Chance* stage. Fighting back tears, Mo'Nique proclaims each of the finalists a winner for simply having the courage to make themselves and their fatness visible for the television audience. At this moment, it is very clear that the pageant is less about pomp and more about circumstance.³⁹ Mo'Nique is earnestly aware of the risk involved in presenting fat/women "against type" before a potentially hostile American audience; however, she is also keenly aware that within this performance of fatness lays the revolutionary potential to educate audiences about the limitless possibilities of and for fat bodies.

At the conclusion of the casual wear competition, the final two women were selected and Mo'Nique asked both the same final question: "If you could say one thing to skinny America, what would it be?" This question, though quite predictable, seemed deliberately planted to provide an opportunity to give these fat women a platform upon which their voices could be heard. Joanne Borgella, 22, from Long Island, New York, answers that she would tell America "just love me [...] who I am, how I look, my personality, everything about me." Sharon Quinn, a crowd favorite whose shaved head reveals a strikingly beautiful face, breaks the solemnity of the moment by declaring that she'd encourage skinny America to "eat a cheeseburger or two; you'll be a lot happier." After the laughter and applause die down, she turns to the audience and very seriously encourages skinny America to understand that "[fat

³⁹ I use "circumstance" here as defined by the *Merriam-Webster Dictionary* as "a condition, fact, or event accompanying, conditioning, or determining another: an essential or inevitable concomitant."

people] are the majority and it's time for y'all to realize that there are more of me than there are of y'all [...] we're human beings just like you, and we deserve everything that you have and y'all need to let it up and let us have it" (*Mo'Nique's F.A.T. Chance*, Oxygen, 2004). Sharon's words are reminiscent of Civil Rights and Black power rhetoric of the 1960's and 70's. This kind of revolutionary "body language" emerges from the mouth of a woman who, at 44, is a direct beneficiary of those movements and a torchbearer for a new movement for social justice. At the close of the show, Joanne Borgella is crowned "Miss F.A.T. Chance," and the young woman who'd once told the heartbreaking story of being rejected by record labels because of her size, would eventually go on to compete as a "Top 24" finalist for Season 7 of *American Idol*. Additionally, Joanne has become a recognizable face in the fashion industry and is represented by the legendary Wilhelmina Models Agency. Sharon Quinn made such an impression Mo'Nique and the show's producers that she appears in Season 2 of *Mo'Nique's F.A.T. Chance* as a Casting Director and "house mother" to the contestants. The self-proclaimed "Original Diva of the Runway," Sharon has continued a career as a model and television personality. Both women have carved out a niche for themselves and have proved, as Mo'Nique had hoped, that there is room for big women in skinny America.

Though *Mo'Nique's F.A.T. Chance* only enjoyed a short-lived run, the three seasons that this program was aired were among the highest-rated programming in Oxygen network history. Their collective success, however, must not be measured in viewing numbers, but in the ways that perceptions of the fat body in American popular culture have been shifted and transformed. To her credit, Mo'Nique's

ability to engage, challenge, and entertain audiences is a remarkable talent; her ability to brazenly challenge mythologies of the fat body and present alternative images of beauty is an unexpected yet unmistakable gift to her audiences.

Precious Bodies

*IT'S BETTER TO DIE IN THE FLESH OF HOPE
THAN TO LIVE IN THE SLIMNESS OF DESPAIR*

-- "The Fat Black Woman's Motto on Her
Bedroom Door" by Grace Nichols, *The Fat
Black Women's Poems*

In 2009, Mo'Nique starred in the Lee Daniels directed independent film *Precious*, based on the novel *Push* by Sapphire. Mo'Nique's gut-wrenching performance opposite Gabourey Sidibe as the tortured and torturous "Mary Jones" was a dramatic turn for the comedian-turned-actor. Never before had audiences witnessed Mo'Nique portray such a dark character or participate in such an ominous narrative. Through this character, Mo'Nique's ability as an actress to show intersectional complexity was applauded, and her work won her a coveted Oscar award in the category of "Best Supporting Actress." Audiences were not only moved by the riveting performance of the movie's cast, but also paralyzed by the grim realities of urban blight. The film became a critical success, and encouraged new conversations, both inside and outside of the academy, about race, class, gender, sexuality, and a host of other identifying categories.

After watching and reading several of her interviews surrounding the film, it is certainly no surprise that Mo’Nique connected with the iniquitous Mary Jones. We learned after the release of the film that Mo’Nique was familiar with this kind of “monster” for much of her life. To perfect this role, Mo’Nique drew upon her experiences as a child who was sexually molested by her older brother Gerald—a closely guarded family secret that the actress felt liberated to intimate only after working on this film. Moreover, Mo’Nique spoke in interviews of the empathy she felt for a woman whose dismal past continued to haunt her present. Perhaps Mo’Nique’s empathy for Mary Jones emerges from her own conflicting familial relationships, but most certainly, much of this compassion comes from an understanding of how intersecting experiences converge on the body and influence how we feel about ourselves and how others, in turn, feel about us. As a fat/black/woman whose intersecting identities are compounded by economic disparity, educational inadequacy, and systemic disregard, Mary Jones is a woman Mo’Nique could understand—not for her malevolence, but for her imperfect humanity.

What remains most striking about the film is the role that fatness played in the stories of both Clarisse “Precious” Jones and her mother “Mary.” Though not explicit, Daniels’ subtlety in speaking about fatness is evident in camera angles that reveal boiling pots of greasy, unhealthy foods, bubbling over on an old, weathered stove. Clarisse’s fat, black body remains at the center of our attention; however, the compounded-ness of those things that literally and figuratively weigh her down (i.e.

sexual, physical, and emotional abuse; illiteracy; poverty) forces us to consider intersectional experience in ways many had not before.

In an interview with journalist Lynn Hirschberg for the *New York Times*, Lee Daniels reveals that he was quite aware of the reactions that Mo’Nique would face from audiences to make sense of what they’d see of her and Gabourey on screen. Daniels warned Mo’Nique that *Precious* was going to “mess up [her] career” (Hirschberg). He also advised that she might “lose [her] work, [her] audience, and [her] standing in the BET community” (Hirschberg). Throwing caution to the wind, Mo’Nique welcomed the challenge and recognized this role as an opportunity to “speak” to her audiences in a voice that many may not recognize or appreciate. Some critics attacked the movie for re-inscribing troublesome stereotypes about poor, Black people. *Times* journalist Felicia R. Lee pulls forward the particularly harsh criticism of Armond White, chief film critic of the New York Press and chairman of the New York Film Festival who lambasted the film as “a sociological horror [that] demeans black, women, and poor people” (Lee). White, and others like poet and novelist Ishmael Reed, ripped the film apart for what they considered the fetishization of black pathology (Reed).

In a separate interview at the Cannes Film Festival, Daniels admits, “To be honest, I was embarrassed to show this movie at Cannes. I didn’t want to exploit black people. And I wasn’t sure I wanted white French people to see our world” (Hirschberg). Daniels submits, however, that in the moment of post-Obama euphoria and audacity, “I can share my voice. I don’t have to lie. I’m proud of where I come from. And I wear it like a shield. ‘Precious’ is part of that” (Hirschberg).

Though Daniels's response might illicit a post-racial reading, it is clear that the director's discomfort with diverse audiences screening his film speaks to the complicated ways in which this film is bound up in a web of intersecting experiences that can not be unraveled from each other. Daniels concedes, "People read so much into 'Precious.' But at the end, it's just this girl and she's trying to live. I know this chick. You knew her. But we choose not to know her" (Hirschberg). Daniels's words remind us that even as glowing images of Sasha and Malia Obama permeate our television screens, there must always be a careful knowing and a conscious acknowledgement that girls like Precious exist.

As harsh as some criticism of the film has been, I also believe that readings that endeavor to universalize the character Precious and her experiences in an effort to make her more palatable and familiar to audiences are just as destructive. In the same article in which he interviews Daniels, Hirschberg makes this attempt in her assessment of the film writing the character Precious, "is a stand-in for anyone—black, white, male, female—who has ever been devalued or underestimated." Though Hirschberg does suggest, "the movie is not neutral on the subject of race and the prejudices that swirl around it, even in the supposedly post racial age of Obama," she virtually nullifies this statement by suggesting that anybody can stand in Precious' shoes. In my estimation, the novel *Push* and the movie *Precious* cannot be disjoined from those intersecting identities that inform the narrative and motivate the actions of its characters. That Hirschberg doesn't get that this movie is exactly about the experiences of a fat/black/illiterate/poor/woman is unfortunate, at best. Precious, the character,

cannot be a “stand-in for anyone;” for if she is, then the story loses all its meaning and our appreciation for and understanding of Sapphire’s sophisticated narrative and Daniels’ adaptation is compromised.

Though *Precious* does urge us to consider the value placed on the bodies of subjugated people, what makes this story so poignant are the following seminal questions that I believe the film asks its audiences to consider: What value is there in the bodies of fat/black/women?; Who is determining that value?; and, How have those values been articulated through popular cultural mediums like television, film, print, and even music? The fact that Mo’Nique has dedicated much of her life to thinking critically about and addressing these very questions makes her casting as “Mary Jones” even more complex. Moreover, the fact that both Mo’Nique and Gabourey Sidibe are two fat/black/women who proudly embody an affirmative and transgressive fat activist politic complicates any overarching narratives that may threaten to further subjugate fat/black/women. In other words, the mere casting of Mo’Nique in the role of “Mary Jones” lends itself to a particular kind reading of the fat body that resists corporeal stereotypes and rejects ridicule. Further, the distinction that Gabby Sidibe insists be drawn between her and *Precious* offers a complex dichotomy for consideration. “I’m not like her,” Sidibe tells the *New York Times*, “but when I was 14 or 15 I saw myself in a different ways. [...] I broke free of that that unhappiness and I decided to change—I was going to be happy with myself. No matter what I look like, no matter what people think” (Hirschberg). Sidibe, like Mo’Nique offers a new imagining of the fat/black/woman and demands

that viewers—both inside and outside of theaters—acknowledge her humanity and work to recognize that ways it has been denied.

'Beauty is a Fat Black Woman'

*I have crossed an ocean
I have lost my tongue
from the root of the old one
a new one has sprung*

-- "Epilogue" by Grace Nichols, *The Fat Black Woman's Poems*

Grace Nichols is a Guyanese poet whose poems from the collection entitled *The Fat Black Woman's Poems* appear throughout this chapter. I chose to weave her voice through my analysis in order to bring forward the powerful ways that self-acknowledging fat/black/women are capturing, creating, and transforming language in order to challenge patriarchal discourses around their, and other, fat bodies. Nichols' poems about fat/black women "[resists] the repressive regulations of beauty," and "[disrupts] [...] oppressive structures that tend towards a homogenised view of the female body" (Atayart). Nichols' collection "counterpoints the oppressive antifat rhetoric in current Western popular culture and attempts to undo the repressive stereotypes ascribed to the fat black woman" (Atayart).

This movement, as Nichols' poem "Epilogue" suggests, is not simply about reconstruction, but about regeneration. In other words, this particular kind of social justice movement is as much about tearing away at the "skin" that Kimberly Wallace-Sanders suggests is a multi-layered burden to be seasonally shed as it is about a renewal of the body that lies beneath the weighty dermis. This particularly

interesting work “[presents] the notion of fatness as a cultural, social and feminist issue [while] challenging the repressive meanings inscribed upon the fat black woman” (Atayart). Like Mo’Nique, Nichols’ poems move the fat/black/woman’s body from margin to center and strategically push audiences beyond the cultural boundaries set for fat/black/women, and refuses to cast fat/black/women in the role of victim (Atayart). This kind of cultural work has not only been important for the ways in which it has transformed the discourse about marginalized bodies, but also for the ways that it beginning to chip away at widely-held mythologies about the fat/black/women’s bodies.

Acknowledging Mo’Nique Imes as a leader of a movement for this type of political work is essential for fat activists and scholars who are working to understand the ways that intersectional experiences manifest on the body. Thus, Mo’Nique is not just an interesting persona who’s doing something “different” on TV, or projecting provocative images on the big screen, she’s a complicated public figure who’s courage to talk openly about the complexities of fat/black/womanhood has inspired women of all sizes, and racial and ethnic backgrounds to claim subjective knowledge and “conquer small minds that attempt to limit our abilities” (Mo’Nique 7).

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