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## MISS AMERICA CONTESTERS AND CONTESTANTS: DISCOURSE ABOUT SOCIAL “ALSO-RANS”

MARI BOOR TONN

In introducing my remarks on Bonnie J. Dow’s essay, I, as a card-carrying feminist, begin with a confession of sorts. Miss America 1968 was my personal hero. When Debra Barnes from Kansas was crowned in the fall of 1967, I was 13. I had lived all my life on a small struggling farm near McCune, Kansas, population of around 400, and I was poised to follow the four older of my several siblings to become a first-generation high school student. Barnes had been reared by her father and blind mother in the only slightly larger Moran, Kansas, about 40 miles away, and although I had never traveled there, I had heard rumors it boasted a nearby spotlight and more than one gas station.

Over 30 years later, I still recall certain details surrounding this particular Miss America contest, due, in part, to the intense regional media attention showered on this national event featuring a homegrown girl enrolled at the local college. Indeed, excepting talk of Jacqueline Kennedy’s regal bearing at her husband’s funeral, I had never before witnessed a person of my gender at any level generate such heightened regional media interest or community conversation. But my enduring memory also results from various meanings I invested in this talented young woman with a past not so dissimilar from mine. In my socially conservative world in which female inferiority was literally an article of religious faith, female aspirations were hardly encouraged. And I had watched my bright and gifted oldest sister who, when forbidden to apply to college or even to take purportedly “impractical” high school courses no woman would ever need, decide to marry at 17, take up years of factory work, and embark on a long struggle to keep a corrosive mix of disappointments and sense of inadequacy at bay. Thus, odd as it may now seem, through Barnes I entertained the subversive possibility of female mobility—higher education, travel, perhaps professional opportunity, and exposure to diverse intriguing people—that had appeared beyond my reach. Moreover, as a female adolescent struggling to locate an identity in a conservative religious household heavily influenced by the principle of coverture—the submersion of female identity into a husband or father—I also recall being captivated by Barnes’s articulation of self and her disarming self-assurance. I remember, for example, being struck by her calm demeanor when winning the title, as if she considered herself worthy of it. Barnes had qualified for the finalist interview round, I recall, by winning both the swimsuit

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and talent competitions, the latter of which entailed her piano rendition of a popular film score I would later come to view through feminist eyes with some irony given the cultural context. Its title: "Born Free."

Contrary to most of my adolescent romantic fantasies, Miss America 1968—upon ending her reign at that fateful Miss America pageant Dow details—soon became a fundamentalist minister's wife, replaced her famous name with her husband's, and settled back into the traditional rhythms of small-town Midwestern life. During high school, I caught occasional glimpses of this former national beauty queen when she officially appeared at county fairs, parades, and half-time ceremonies of sporting events where, as we know, males heroically performed, and females dutifully spectated, applauded, did cartwheels, and adorned decorated floats.

In subsequent years, I worked my way through two degrees at the nearby college that proudly marketed itself as the alma mater of Miss America 1968. As an undergraduate, I played for a time on the first women's intercollegiate basketball team, compliments of Title IX, saw the historic *Roe v. Wade* decision handed down, watched ratification efforts for the Equal Rights Amendment, and took courses from a male professor who held annual gatherings with the heretical theme of "Let's All Miss the Miss America Pageant Together." In the midst of what seemed to be a tectonic shift in the social status of females, the Miss America pageant, I predicted then, was destined for a rapid demise, soon to be relegated to the cultural dustbin along with other relics such as whalebone corsets and blackface minstrel shows. For her part, Miss America 1968 later became an active volunteer court advocate for female victims of domestic violence, a cause pointing to the complexities and even dangers surrounding issues of female agency, mobility, and assertion of female identity. However, such work that I, at least, would term feminist failed to generate the flurry of headlines as when this former national symbol of idealized womanhood had crowned local homecoming and rodeo queens.

I tell this admittedly personal story for multiple reasons. First, I do so to underscore arguments by scholars ranging from Susanne K. Langer to Clifford Geertz to Richard Bauman concerning cultural rituals and public performances as potent sites where social identities take partial form; cultural values, meanings, and rules of conduct may be collectively and individually interpreted, embraced, or resisted; and contours of social hierarchy and differentiation become visibly revealed.<sup>1</sup> Such rituals may be religious ceremonies, inaugurations, watermelon festivals, guerilla theater, funerals, beauty pageants, or parades and sporting events as evident in recent intense controversies surrounding the inclusion of gays and lesbians in St. Patrick's Day celebrations or demands by Native Americans to change the mascot of the Washington Redskins. The potential power of public spectacle as socially constitutive is, of course, the primary reason radical feminists targeted the Miss America pageant in 1968 to launch publicly their critique of patriarchy and precisely why

their irreverent affront to this purportedly trivial tradition occasioned political ripples of such great consequence.

Secondly, I share this personal account to reiterate arguments that concepts such as identity, mobility, and agency are influenced not merely by a larger historic milieu but are always situated in, understood through, and partly defined by lived circumstances such as economic class, gender, race, sexual orientation, religion, local social norms, or the dynamics of immediate family culture—particulars Gloria Anzaldúa and Cherríe Morago and others term “theories of the flesh”<sup>2</sup> and bell hooks condenses as “the homeplace.”<sup>3</sup> Such contextual, or what Kenneth Burke would describe to be “scenic,”<sup>4</sup> factors speak to Dow’s acknowledgment of feminist theory’s persistent difficulty in wrestling with the complex meaning of agency—whether to consider it as the more generally understood free will exercised by fully constituted social agents (those “Born Free,” so to speak) or more in the Burkeian sense of agency,<sup>5</sup> a pragmatic, means-to-an-end strategic response to social surroundings in which certain individuals hold status as what Burke has termed “agent-minuses.”<sup>6</sup> Persons living on a culture’s edges, Anzaldúa and Morago write, often theorize from circumstances of the flesh to “bridge the contradictions of [life] experience[s],”<sup>7</sup> lived constraints that D. Soyini Madison argues sometimes lead them to reconstruct events to claim some dignity in pragmatic behaviors marked by personal dishonor or shame—black deference to condescending or hostile white authority figures,<sup>8</sup> for example, sexual or racial “passing,” or female complicity with patriarchy for advancement or even survival. Illustrative is the pragmatic inconsistency voiced by the 1974 Miss America, my generational contemporary, whom Dow quotes as emphasizing scholarship money to finance a law degree, claiming pride in her womanliness, openly denying feelings of personal exploitation, but yet remarking, “after Atlantic City, you never again have to appear in a swimsuit.” The rationalizing of contradictory behavior as a utilitarian response to structural barriers, however, predated second-wave feminist challenges to the pageant. Miss Americas of 1943 and 1951, for example, refused to pose in a swimsuit again after snaring scholarship money. In 1951, winner Yolande Betbeze’s adamant and public insistence that “I’m an opera singer, not a pin-up!” so enraged the Catalina swimsuit sponsor that the corporation withdrew from Miss America and developed the *Miss USA* pageant.<sup>9</sup>

Lastly, I use this personal narrative not only to lend additional texture to Dow’s arguments about the relationship of the personal and political that undergirds feminism, but also to highlight distinctions between gender consciousness and feminist consciousness and between liberal feminism and other political varieties of feminism that reverberate in her analysis.<sup>10</sup> Awareness of gender inequities I already possessed as a youth does not invariably lead to feminist politics as aptly illustrated in comments by individuals who defend the pageant as compensation for an uneven playing field. As Lisa Maria Hogeland writes,

Gender consciousness is a necessary precondition for feminist consciousness, but they are not the same. The difference lies in the link between gender and politics. Feminism politicizes gender consciousness, inserts it into a systematic analysis of histories and structures of domination and privilege. Feminism asks questions—difficult and complicated questions, often with contradictory and confusing answers—about how gender consciousness can be used both for and against women, how vulnerability and difference help and hinder women’s self-determination and freedom.<sup>11</sup>

Although feminism, of course, emerged out of the actual personal experiences of discrimination and other forms of subordination, ameliorating such obstacles required and requires a collective politics, most identifiable in liberal feminism’s focus on equality of opportunity in the public domain, such as Title IX or the push for the ERA I described. Whatever Debra Barnes’s *individual* achievements, those obviously neither did have nor could have had bearing on the eventual opportunity of young women to participate in intercollegiate athletics, as I did, or to make the legal reproductive decisions occasioned by *Roe v. Wade*. As Dow argues, the mobility or “the exercise of agency by individual women does not substitute for nor even necessarily contribute to the subversion of patriarchy or the expansion of choices for women as a group.” Moving beyond liberal feminism, socialist and radical feminism, as examples, also critique persistent economic gender disparities or expose the myriad ways in which female subordination is deeply woven into the fabric of social life, whether it be in instances of domestic violence I mentioned previously or in a beauty-obsessed culture exemplified by the Miss America pageant. Like a number of others during the early years of the second wave, I somewhat naïvely assumed as an undergraduate that strides occasioned by liberal feminism would automatically quickly translate into more far-reaching social alterations, such as the elimination of the Miss America pageant.

Although she may not have intended it, one can read Dow’s analysis, on one level, as reflecting some positive implications for feminist progress. By this claim I mean that the appropriation of feminist concepts by Miss America pageant officials and certain journalists illustrates a process Burke describes in moments of historical cultural change as “the stealing back and forth of symbols [of authority],” “the approved method,” he writes, “whereby the Outs avoid ‘being driven into a corner.’”<sup>12</sup> Thus, one possible implication of the pageant officials’ seizure of feminism to “update” the Miss America pageant’s image or the media’s inversion of the feminist mantra of “the personal is political” is that certain aspects of feminism have been afforded cultural authority, have become socially “In,” whereas patriarchy, at least in its unadulterated form, has become the province of the “Outs,” who are thus forced to “poach” from feminist cultural authority to ward off patriarchy’s feared extinction. Yet, whereas radical feminists introduced the feminist “subtext” Dow describes in discourse about the pageant, the social changes occasioned by the liberal feminist agenda, such as the

vast numbers of women in the work force and in universities, has, to the greatest extent, provided its power. The bifurcation of “good” and “bad” kinds of feminism is evident in the commonplace refrain of young female college students: “I am not a feminist, but . . .” This discursive phenomenon enables young women to espouse approval of liberal feminist ideas such as equal opportunity and equal pay while simultaneously providing them an insurance policy against the type of political reprisals Dow traces in her essay: constructed images of feminists as dogmatic, unattractive male-bashers who likewise dislike most women. Worth noting in Dow’s analysis is that some pageant officials, pageant contestants, and the media implicitly reverse this “I am not a feminist, but” topos with the ironic suggestion, “We actually *are* feminists, but . . .”

As Dow astutely demonstrates, this casuistic stretching of liberal feminist ideas to include the nation’s premier beauty pageant provides a cover by which more searching feminist critiques of patriarchy effectively become muted.<sup>13</sup> Perhaps most disheartening for feminists is that when the gaze is on the female contestants and the feminist critics of the contest rather than on the political dimension of the contest itself, it becomes perhaps inevitable that women frequently emerge as the losers. Central to this “Heads I Win, Tails You Lose” discourse is the constructed image of women as ridiculous neurotics who frequently compensate for their myriad deficiencies by scheming or seduction.<sup>14</sup> On the one hand, as Dow describes, defenders of the pageant paint feminists who “ridicule” the contest as “braless bubbleheads,” to borrow from Jennings Randolph’s term or, as the president of the National Council of Women put it, so “unattractive” they must not be “completely well.” Illustrative of their limited reasoning skills are feminists’ failure to see the pageant as a route to educational advancement for women, even though such evidence is blatantly obvious: the unrivaled fount of scholarship money and the uniform testimony by contestants themselves regarding this financial magnet. Although clearly dim-witted or demented on the one hand, second-wave feminists nonetheless somehow managed to hatch clever plots to lure a media into granting them attention they otherwise would not deserve. Additionally, as Susan Douglas’s comments in Dow’s analysis suggest, the media’s treatment of the bra-burning trope furthers the image of females as essentially seductresses who use the cry of political liberation as a ruse for capturing males enticed by sexually available women.

For their part, female pageant contestants fare best, of course, when their intelligence, beauty, talent, and honest ambition are exalted to point to flaws of pageant-hating feminists or other women who veil their secret ambitions. Yet they, too, are often drawn in the oxymoronic image of intellectually limited sexual strategists. Pageant apologist Frank Rich, for example, defends granting scholarship money for physical appearance by framing “Miss America wannabees” in one stroke as sexually savvy—aware they are parading “their behinds . . . on a burlesque ramp before hundreds of leering high-rollers”—but in another stroke as not particularly smart.

“[A]fter all, if the contestants were all so brilliant . . .” he writes, “they’d . . . be earning grants from bona fide academic institutions.” Indeed, the image of female contestants as ditzy or devious or both emerges as a major theme in an October 2000 *New Yorker* cover story on the pageant.<sup>15</sup> Like other media accounts Dow describes that focus on the personalities of pageant contenders rather than on the political dimension of pageants themselves, the essay by Lillian Ross (with the partial subtitle, “What becomes of an also-ran”) casts the contestants rather than the contest itself as ludicrous. Admittedly, the Miss America pageant now exudes an air of camp and farce, especially given attempts by pageant officials to package this revenue-generating beauty contest as socially progressive by requiring social platforms purportedly reflecting genuine devotion to performing good deeds. Yet, here Miss America management or corporate sponsors escape unscathed as butts of this social parody; rather, the real jokes are the women contestants who attempt to outdo each other in the scramble for scholarship money. Ross writes the following account of wardrobe choices by Miss New York, one of the recent losers. For the boardwalk parade, “a red fitted gown trimmed with red fur. One shoe had a battery-operated flashing Big Apple that was expected to upstage Miss Wisconsin’s cows’-head slippers, with a cheese on top of one cow’s head.”<sup>16</sup> As the central character, Miss New York most clearly supplies the vacuous side of the contestant coin, and Ross describes her as invariably exuding a “noncommittal, somewhat breathless manner” she compares at one point with “people under the age of seven.”<sup>17</sup> At one point, Miss New York purportedly says, “And I had to have a platform, which Paul [my coach] and I decided should be Colin Powell’s *America’s Promise* . . . [So] I’m trying to read Colin Powell’s book” [emphasis added].<sup>18</sup> Elsewhere, this Miss America loser shares this convoluted account of her struggle for personal identity, which expands her image from simply a moron to a dishonest manipulator: “I’m different from the way I was last September [in Atlantic City], when I thought I had to be what they wanted me to be. Now it’s about what I want to be. I’m not trying to make any enemies. If I’m too honest, I get in trouble. I’m learning how to package myself”<sup>19</sup> Amplifying this devious side of the female coin is the exposure of the personal phoniness of a number of contestants, although Ross nowhere pursues the larger charade of marketing this corporate venture, which originated as a commercial tourism scheme,<sup>20</sup> as a socially virtuous endeavor. Miss Kentucky, the reader learns, won the Miss America crown in 1999 after four failed attempts to snare her state’s title with various unsuccessful social platforms, “finally abandoning Volunteerism and Eating-Disorders Awareness for Homeless Veterans Outreach.”<sup>21</sup> Miss America 1998, reputedly famous for the best interview with judges in pageant history, allegedly admits to the following degree of devotion to her platform of AIDS Education:

It was a tremendous advantage to have that platform. As Miss America, I travelled [*sic*] twenty thousand miles a month. . . . I rode in a limo. When my year was up, I was

offered a full-time job with a lobbying organization for AIDS prevention. But I decided I would be a more successful advocate in the cause of AIDS prevention if I first became a famous actress.<sup>22</sup>

I challenge no one who might read a certain shallowness in such statements (if accurately reported), and I certainly refrain from couching these young women as purely innocent victims of outside exploitation. To cling unreflectively to notions of victimized sisterhood can lead to a type of gender reasoning akin to what Cornel West describes as the dangers of “racial reasoning,” a trap of identification that he argues led black leaders to remain silent in the face of Clarence Thomas’s nomination to the Supreme Court when both his qualifications and truthfulness were severely in question.<sup>23</sup> Still, the themes of such accounts raise legitimate feminist concerns. Beyond how the onus for hypocrisy, exploitation, and naked opportunism is meted out, an essay such as Ross’s, for example—completely devoid of any attempt to pry into political reasons why this “pink flamingo” remains on the nation’s purportedly progressive gender lawn—is the effective mirror image of the framing of second-wave feminists who attempted to dismantle it. Irony, Dow accurately notes, is the controlling trope in media discourse surrounding the Miss America pageant, and ironically, “braless bubbleheaded” feminists have evolved full circle into garishly garbed and skimpily clad “bubbleheaded” Miss America contestants. Moreover, just as feminists were suspected by the media of using their political platform of “liberation” from oppression to mask attempts for personal sexual gratification, disingenuous Miss America contestants exploit social problems—homelessness or AIDS—for patently personal gain. The real problem, or so it would seem, is not the *political* nature of the Miss America pageant per se, but the *personal* nature of American women as a lot.

This pathological image of women as essentially untrustworthy in dual respects—their capacity for intellectual judgment and their insincere scheming—is not, however, peculiar to discourse surrounding the Miss America pageant. In an earlier essay on the accidental killing of a woman in her backyard by a deer hunter in Maine, I and my coauthors detail how blame for this woman’s death is transferred from the hunter to her, in large part, by framing her as an admixture of idiot and temptress. The hunter’s defenders emphasized the woman’s “stupid” decision to wear white mittens during hunting season, attire that, along with even her dark hair, allegedly formed the disguise of a white-tailed deer that lured her unsuspecting victim into seeing her as prey and shooting her.<sup>24</sup> In a more recent analysis of media discourse about Princess Diana, I point out that those persons painting her as an essentially vacant pretty face sometimes paradoxically included charges that she shrewdly “manipulated” the media to advance herself and her numerous charities and political causes. Such volunteer charity work—some of which generated a Nobel Prize for Peace—nonetheless was debunked in a number of quarters as



lacking the “authentic” level of commitment of another woman, Mother Teresa, a comparison made by some even *before* the coincidental death of the nun in the days leading to Diana’s funeral (another illustration of the pitting of women against women to discredit women).<sup>25</sup> Three years after the princess’s death, reports of the clever deviousness of the dotty Diana persisted, as illustrated in a book that frames her as “alternately childish, manipulative, vulnerable and vindictive,” a “master plotter” who “exploit[ed] her personal struggles to gain public sympathy.”<sup>26</sup> Moreover, in some accounts by columnists such as Mona Charen and Charles Krauthammer contiguous with the princess’s funeral, the Diana phenomenon became their device by which to draw generalizations about deficiencies of females as a group, especially women’s lack of wits as voters.<sup>27</sup> As with myths of racial inferiority, such mythic images of inferior females are particularly tenacious, not automatically eroded by social entrance of females, blacks, or other minorities into the workplace, universities, or politics. Consider, for example, a study published in a 1999 issue of *Sex Roles* wherein both male and female members of the American Psychological Association rated a presumed female job candidate as significantly inferior to the presumed male candidate even though their qualifications were virtually *identical* in every respect save the gender implications of their names. Not only did fewer than half of the academics give “Karen Miller” the nod for employment, while more than two to one chose to hire “Brian Miller,” but evaluators rating a second set of identical credentials for tenure were four times more likely to issue qualifiers, cautionary remarks, and skepticism over the authenticity of the accomplishments for the “female” tenure case (for example, “I would need to see evidence that she had gotten these grants and publications on her own”) than they were for the “male” case.<sup>28</sup>

As Dow notes, in focusing on women pageant contestants or pageant testers, the media fail to engage with the complicated and threatening questions that she, Hogeland, and others rightfully argue a feminist politics routinely addresses. An important issue meriting analysis, for example, is the stark disconnect between the continued popularity of the Miss America beauty pageant, especially among female viewers, and the public revulsion toward beauty pageant culture in the Jon-Benet Ramsey murder case. There, the horror of a child’s killing was amplified by photographs of a six-year-old in heavy makeup, teased hair, and revealing clothes—an eerie incarnation of a Stepford *child*. All of the analogies to pageants as mere equivalents of athletic contests notwithstanding, it defies imagination that pictures of the young Ramsey in a soccer uniform would have engendered a similar kind of public repulsion. It is a *radical* feminist analysis that interrogates such important and threatening questions as, for instance, why and how a pageant culture that produces public horror can evolve into a spring of public honor or humor, positing discomfiting answers that can illuminate the purposes for and processes by which a culture symbolically constructs female identities and images.

More than three decades have passed since at least one Kansas adolescent was enchanted by Miss America 1968, who appeared, or so it seemed at the time, to have defied the consignment of living the life of a female “also-ran” (to borrow Ross’s own term). In the intervening years, liberal feminism has undoubtedly changed much about the face of our America, insinuating itself into unexpected places such as beauty pageant culture, but also sometimes in the “homeplace.” Like some others of us, certain members of my family, for example, used theories of the flesh to bridge certain contradictions of their life experiences, meaning that their exposure to feminists *in the flesh* altered to some degree their conceptions of female mobility, female voice, and female identity. And in his final years, my father, who had once strongly opposed my oldest sister’s dream of higher education, took no greater pride than in the educational distinctions earned by his only biological granddaughter.

Even so, increasing claims that we have entered a post-feminist era are, in my view, premature. After all, a certain irony (that theme again) also infuses my undergraduate optimism during those heady second-wave days. While the Miss America pageant “soldiers on,” as Dow put it, the ERA long ago fell short of ratification, never to be revived, Title IX has yet to reach full compliance at most educational institutions where women students now outnumber men, and *Roe v. Wade*, ironically decided on the day before the cease-fire agreement officially ended divisive U.S. involvement in the jungles of Vietnam, has since become this generation’s most contentious and bloody domestic battleground. And more specific to the Miss America pageant itself, efforts by Miss Americas or contestants to navigate between the dishonor and shame associated with pageant culture and their need to claim some dignity in their pragmatic choices have not disappeared. Similar to the ambivalence of her 1943, 1951, and 1974 predecessors, Miss America 1998 voiced markedly contradictory assessments of this continuing autumn ritual in an October 2002 “My Turn” column in *Newsweek*. On the one hand, this former beauty queen openly bristles at the assumption that she, a “dean’s list student at Northwestern . . . didn’t have a brain” and is more concerned with “makeup” than with her commitment to eradicating AIDS. “Miss America contestants and the Miss America organization have much to be proud of,” she writes, noting that “The pageant is the nation’s largest provider of women’s scholarships, and encourages thousands of young women to take leadership roles in their communities.” At the same time, though, she implicitly acknowledges her recognition of the type of personal price women pay for such “opportunities.” She concludes,

[O]rganizers should have enough respect for the contestants and the public to be honest about the competition. We’re told it’s about scholarships. We’re told it’s about leadership. If it’s also about looks, then organizers should admit it, instead of capitalizing on the swimsuit competition while swearing that it is an insignificant part of the show.<sup>29</sup>

That this central contradiction is noted yet again, but merely warrants greater honesty about the “rules” of competition rather than an overt challenge to the ideological problem of linking academic scholarships to physical attractiveness, is yet another reminder of the limits of liberal feminism to remedy the cultural problems around female identity that the Miss America pageant makes so visible. As a feminist scholar concerned with what Hogeland describes as the most salient “arenas” for young women to “discover and construct” their identities, their “selfhood,”<sup>30</sup> but also as an ordinary woman who was once a wide-eyed young girl of 13, I found one passage in Lillian Ross’s thinly veiled indictment of these young female contestants particularly haunting. The “losing” Miss New York, a student at New York University, described the allure of pageant culture this way: “It’s not just the [scholarship money] . . . It’s all so fulfilling. For the first time, people were asking me for my ideas. I liked the attention.”<sup>31</sup>

Most likely, Ross intends this comment to be read with amusement at the shallowness, indeed the fatuousness, of a young woman who would find intellectual fulfillment in a context in which she enthusiastically dons footwear sporting a “battery-operated flashing Big Apple.”<sup>32</sup> Yet this young woman’s story, and the story of the Miss America pageant itself, deserves a more thoughtful response. In a truly post-feminist—or, more accurately, post-patriarchal world—quibbling over whether or not pageant contestants are feminists or opportunists, powerful agents or victims of false consciousness, would be unnecessary. Indeed, a sign of how far we have to go is that we live in a media culture that still searches, as I did in 1968, for images of female emancipation that come packaged with a rhinestone crown.

## NOTES

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