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The Miss America Pageant's Influence on the Self-Construction of its 1985 Contestants

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**THE MISS AMERICA PAGEANT'S INFLUENCE ON THE
SELF-CONSTRUCTION OF ITS 1985 CONTESTANTS**

A Thesis

Presented to the

School of Communication

and the

Faculty of the Graduate College

University of Nebraska

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts

University of Nebraska at Omaha

by

Debra Deitering Maddox

December 2001

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THESIS ACCEPTANCE

Acceptance for the faculty of the Graduate College,
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for the degree Master of Arts, University of Nebraska at Omaha.

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THE MISS AMERICA PAGEANT'S INFLUENCE ON THE SELF-CONSTRUCTION OF ITS 1985 CONTESTANTS

Debra Deitering Maddox, MA

University of Nebraska, 2001

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The author was a contestant in the 1985 Miss America Pageant, choosing to research how participants of that event made sense of their participation and how that participation affected their construction of themselves. Eleven state representatives were interviewed, including the winning Miss America and her 2nd and 4th runners-up. Interviewees were chosen upon consideration of region represented and final placement. This qualitative study utilized a semi-structured style of interviewing and protocol of 15 questions. Contestants' narratives were analyzed within the frameworks of objectification theory and patriarchy.

Results indicated that making sense of the Miss America experience could be a lengthy process, a struggle impeded by post-pageant rumor and innuendo. Contestants concluded that the Miss America Pageant is about big business with politics playing a large part in the competitive outcome. Contestants are the commodity.

Also, the Pageant's effect on how contestants constructed themselves has been pervasive and long-lasting. Its narrow script for femininity has influenced what contestants define as appropriate dress, conduct, appearance, body type and image. Respondents report a present identification with their former

contestant status and will still practice performances of self in uncomfortable situations. A state title is perceived as having great cache' in the marriage market.

This study concluded that participation in the Pageant has provided some contestants with an identity, one they continue to use in defining themselves. Some contestants also continue to perform themselves as Miss America contestants and to compare themselves to the feminine ideal. Furthermore, participants construct themselves as privileged and as losers. The struggle between these two constructions can take years for a contestant to reconcile, if they ever do. Effects include a proliferation of self-esteem loss and emotional bankruptcy among contestants, regardless of placing. This catch-22 situation puts contestants in a situation in which there are no ultimate winners.

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Chapter One: INTRODUCTION

The beauty pageant industry is a lucrative one, generating over \$5 billion in revenue each year. It is big business, an enterprise composed of make-up and hair experts, pageant coaches, dress designers, talent consultants, modeling instructors, image advisers, and interview specialists. More than 3,000,000 females compete in beauty pageants in the U.S. alone, 80,000 of these within the Miss America system ("The Secret World of Beauty Pageants," 1997).

In 1984, I was one of those 80,000 contestants, competing for the Miss America title after four years of winding my way through the Iowa pageant system. As luck would have it, my Miss America competition was a unique one in the annals of Miss America Pageant history.

Prior to her winning the 1984 Miss America title, Vanessa Williams had posed for nude photographs, the likes of which were splashed across the country in *Penthouse* magazine ("Tainted Tiaras," 1998). As a result, Vanessa Williams became the first Miss America asked to relinquish her crown. She resigned a scant six weeks before I was to compete for the now abdicated throne. The Miss America Organization had no crisis management plan in place, they could not immediately find the first runner-up to take over the title's responsibilities, and there was a live production to stage and broadcast. The barrage of press was unprecedented and chaos reigned in the subsequent media firestorm.

It has been nearly 20 years since my year of competition and I am haunted yet by my Miss America experience. I believe the pageant affected both my self-esteem and sense of self. I have felt tremendous shame that I did not win

the Miss America crown. I have felt great pressure to live a life of wealth, fame and accomplishment in accordance to what I have felt were others' expectations for a young woman who supposedly "has it all". When this imagined life failed to happen, I did not return to my hometown for 10 years to avoid questions about my very ordinary life. I have also felt quiet desperation that this one honor, achieved at so young an age, not be the apex of my entire life.

Three years ago, the Miss Iowa State Pageant held a 50th Anniversary reunion, an occasion attended by many former Miss Iowas. I was able to speak and compare notes with other women who had also participated in the unique experience of having competed for the Miss America crown, albeit in different years. Through these discussions, I uncovered patterns in the effect(s) the Pageant had had upon former contestants' lives – unhealthy, pervasive, and sometimes debilitating, patterns.

This work is an extension of my Miss Iowa reunion conversations, focusing upon my own peer group – the young women who competed in the 1985 Miss America Pageant within the shadow of Vanessa Williams' resignation. This research is intended to explore how the beauty pageant affected participants' self-image.

This issue is worthy of study for three reasons:

1. Feminist methodology endorses the assumption that the most thorough kind of knowledge and understanding comes through efforts to change social phenomena. The purpose of knowledge in changing or transforming patriarchy is also central to many discussions of feminist methodology (Acker,

Barry and Esseveld, 1983). The social phenomena that is Miss America is rife with patriarchal practices.

2. Consciousness-raising plays a central part in feminist methodology. It is a process studied by feminists when women's lives are examined at structural rupture points such as divorce, unemployment, or the occurrence of rape. Studying women at rupture points can lead to emotional catharsis, an academic insight or an intellectual product (Fonow & Cook, 1991). For many women, participation in the Miss America Pageant was a rupture point.

3. Women in Western society are socialized in a highly sexualized and media-saturated culture. They face incredible pressures to be beautiful and sophisticated (Pipher, 1994). These messages are crystallized and intensified within the microcosm of the Miss America Pageant. How contestants construct and perceive their femininity – and present that femininity – may have implications for the rest of the female population.

This subject has never before been tackled from the perspective of the Miss America Pageant, particularly from an insider's, first person, view. To my knowledge, no one has ever gone back to former contestants, asking if, and how, this singularly unique experience influenced their professional and personal lives. After sixteen years, the young women of the 1985 Miss America contest are now able to stand back and critically reflect on these events, describing how their lives and perceptions have changed over the intervening years, and what – if anything – the Miss America Pageant had to do with that process.

Historical Overview. A historical overview of the Miss America Pageant

is necessary to understand the context of this research.

P.T. Barnum is credited with initiating our country's first beauty contest in 1854. When that era's moral codes prevented acquisition of enough entrants, Barnum changed the contest format from personal appearance to daguerreotype submissions. This type of beauty contest quickly caught on and became a popular and widespread promotional gimmick well into the 20th century (Riverol, 1992).

The nation's first "live" beauty pageant was held at Rehoboth Beach, Delaware, in 1880 (Latham, 1995). At the same time and up the coastline, Atlantic City, New Jersey, was witnessing its glory days as a popular playground of the rich. The city's sandy beaches teemed with families on holiday escaping the summer humidity on Atlantic City's long stretches of sandy beach. The resort city also offered its patrons such delightful diversions as diving horses, the nation's first merry-go-round, and Atlantic City's famous strolling chairs which constantly paced the miles of wooden Boardwalk constructed along the scenic shoreline (Osborne, 1995).

The Miss America Pageant was born 40 years later in the spirit of this climate of capitalistic opportunity. H. Conrad Eckolm, owner of the Monticello Hotel, dreamed up the idea of a Fall Frolic in hopes that tourists might be enticed to stay an extra week at the resort city (Jones, 1998). The Men's Business League bought Eckolm's idea, becoming the sponsor of what was dubbed as a Bathing Beauty Review. This "National Beauty Tournament" was held on September 7, 1921, fielding eight beauteous contestants. The marketing gimmick

quickly caught the attention of the national media and the Miss America Pageant was born. The title Miss America was a phrase coined by Herb Test, an *Atlantic City Daily Press* reporter (Bivans, 1991). The name stuck. Crowds stayed the extra week. The publicity stunt had worked.

The swimsuit competition has been a constant throughout the Miss America Pageant's 80-year history, evolving in style from woolen maillot to non-paneled one-piece (Osborne, 1995) and finally, well-padded bikini (Horn, 1998). The first contestants were sponsored by newspapers, theaters, and amusement parks, representing cities, states, even the country of Canada (Bivans, 1991). Not until the early 1940s was there full state representation in the program (Bivans, 1991). Rules governing age and marital status, insertion of a talent competition, establishment of an educational scholarship program, the advent of television, addition of a volunteer platform... All, and more, would follow.

A nationwide network of 300,000 community volunteers conduct approximately 2,000 preliminary pageants each year. Franchised by the Miss America Pageant, these local preliminary contests are modeled after the national pageant, encompassing the four phases of competition: interview, swimsuit, talent, and evening gown. All national rules and standards apply to these local pageants with the winner automatically advancing to the state level of competition (Bivans, 1991).

The number of preliminary pageants varies greatly between states. Texas and Utah may hold as many as 48 to 85 local pageants in a given year; Vermont and Rhode Island as few as four. The number of preliminary pageants greatly

impacts the number of contestants vying for the title of Miss State and the right to compete for the national crown (Osborne, 1995).

The Miss America Organization is headquartered in Atlantic City, where the pageant is still held in mid-September each year. As the state and local pageant organizations have their own Board of Directors, so is there a National Board of Directors that governs the decisions of the national pageant. All but a few part-time administrators are unpaid volunteers (Bivans, 1991).

The televised production is held in Convention Hall, a tradition since 1940 (Bivans, 1991). Contestants arrive two to three weeks before the telecast and stay in the grand Atlantic City hotels. The fifty young women are continually shuttled between their hotel and Convention Hall, enduring long 17-hour days that include endless hours of rehearsal and numerous appearances calling for media interviews and photographs (Maddox, 1998).

The Miss America contestants are divided into three groups, known as Mu, Alpha and Sigma (symbolizing Miss America Sorority). Each group competes in rotating phases of competition during the three nights of preliminary contests. For example, the Mu group may compete in talent the first night of competition, compete in swimsuits the second evening, and complete their presentation with evening gowns the third night. Thus, the audience enjoys all three segments of competition on any given evening (i.e., swimsuit, talent, and evening gown), but a contestant competes in only one phase of competition per evening. Those contestants achieving the highest scores in swimsuit and talent are given preliminary awards. The top ten point getters are automatically

advanced to the "Top Ten" for the television broadcast. Contestants do not know the identity of this Top Ten until it is announced during the telecast.

The Miss America Organization claims that educational advancement, achievement and public service are their primary objectives "in the face of changing roles for women in American society". Its competition is "established solely to provide contestants with the opportunity to enhance their professional and educational goals ... ("The Miss America Organization," 2001). The Miss America Organization takes great pride in being "the world's leading provider of scholarships for women," providing more than \$32 million in cash and scholarships to contestants ("The Miss America Organization," 2001).

All Miss America contestants must be between the ages of 17 and 24 years; never been married, pregnant or cohabited with a male; never have participated in the taking of pornographic pictures or movies; and born female. They must support and have volunteered for a charitable cause, known as "the platform" ("The Miss America Organization," 1998).

The young woman chosen Miss America faces a grueling year of appearances, logging 20,000 miles a month and changing location every 18-36 hours ("The Miss America Organization, 1998). It is a year of endless hotel rooms and interaction with strangers. Many of the appearances are booked months in advance, before she was ever crowned. She is accompanied at all times by a woman chaperone, of whom the Miss America Organization has previously approved. By nature of the position and its responsibilities, Miss America seldom receives the opportunity to be with young women her own age

and is allowed two weeks of vacation during her reign (S. Wells, personal communication, November 10, 1998). Miss America receives upwards of \$200,000 in appearance fees and is awarded \$50,000 in educational scholarship monies ("The Miss America Organization," 2001).

Chapter Two: LITERATURE REVIEW

In the United States, 7,500 beauty pageants are franchised by either the Miss America Scholarship program or the Miss USA Pageant (Banet-Weiser, 1999). This is not counting the thousands of other national pageants, proms, homecoming celebrations, and small town festivals that crown young misses as representative of a feminine ideal. These thousands of productions are dependent upon women's participation in competitive, rather than cooperative, relationships and are based on the objectification of young women (Jones, 1998).

Fredrickson and Roberts (1997) have proposed objectification theory as "a framework for understanding the array of experiential consequences of being female in a culture that sexually objectifies the female body" (1997, p.173). Sexual objectification occurs whenever a woman's body or body parts are separated out from the rest of the individual. The woman is reduced to being treated as a body, a body valued for the use and pleasure it brings to others (Bartky, 1990). Objectification theory embraces the concept that American women exist in a culture in which their bodies are continually looked at and evaluated. Such scrutiny can lead to multiple consequences for women.

One repercussion is that women and girls are socialized to adopt an observer's perspective on viewing their physical selves. This self-objectification leads women to view and treat themselves as objects, becoming preoccupied with their own physical appearance (Noll & Fredrickson, 1998). "Self-objectification is defined as valuing one's own body more from a third-person, rather than first-person, perspective" (Noll & Fredrickson, 1998, p. 624). This

division of women's consciousness between their own experiences of the world and their awareness of how they appear to others has a variety of emotional and physical costs, including eating disorders, unipolar depression and sexual dysfunction (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997).

Sociological research has shown that certain situations can trigger or magnify self-objectification, a phenomenon known as state self-objectification (Fredrickson, Roberts, Noll, Quinn, Twenge). In state self-objectification, "individuals are most likely to self-objectify in situations that accentuate their awareness of observers' perspectives on their bodies" (Fredrickson, Roberts, Noll, Quinn, Twenge, 1998, p. 270). Privately trying on a swimsuit was discovered to be one of these state self-objectifying situations, even when no observers were present. Women reported a sense of being on display and feeling shame and disgust in not meeting physical ideals (Fredrickson, Roberts, Noll, Quinn, & Twenge, 1998).

Swimsuit clad Miss America contestants parade in front of a live audience of thousands and millions of television viewers. The line of female bodies are judged and assigned numerical values according to how closely they approximate the cultural physical ideal. It is a production inviting homogeneity and the visual consumption of bodies, a spectacle of femininity on display (Banet-Weiser, 1999). Miss America regulation swimsuits are replete with padding, tucks, and structured reinforcements wherever necessary. These super-structured suits have been constructed to never meet the water, but to instead regulate the body, controlling its display for a competition that is clearly both

encouraging and legitimizing sexual objectification and commodification (Banet-Weiser, 1999). The Pageant uses the swimsuit competition as a way of directing uncompromised focus on the body, allowing the rest of the pageant program to define itself as dedicated to far more than that body. The end result is that the swimsuit competition mirrors and invents standards for the “average” body, an average that is inextricable from feminine ideals (Banet-Weiser, 1999). It should be noted that the swimsuits gracing the Miss America stage have become skimpier throughout the years, most notably in 1998 with the addition of 2-piece bikinis (“The Miss America Organization”, 2001).

Pageants invite objectification through their separation of women’s and girl’s bodies from the total individual, openly evaluating female bodies for consumption (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997). The first 15 years of the Miss America Pageant featured judging criterion with a severe 100-point breakdown:

Construction of head:	15 points	
Eyes:	10	
Hair:	5	
Nose:	5	
Mouth:	5	
Facial expression:	10	
Torso:	10	
Legs:	10	
Arms:	10	
Hands:	10	
Grace of bearing:	10	(Deford, 1978, p.58).

Fredrickson & Roberts (1997) claim that internalizing the perspective of another’s gaze involves habitual, self-conscious body monitoring, a given for any Miss America contestant. Undergarments must not show, pantyhose be intact,

make-up and hair picture perfect, and swimsuits taped perfectly in place to offset the unfortunate chance of revealing too much skin.

This preoccupation with appearance involves every Miss America contestant, a preoccupation accompanied by a rather extensive “bag of tricks”: taping and padding breasts to affect a fuller bustline, rubbing Vaseline on teeth for an easier smile, spraying adhesive tape on buttocks to keep the ubiquitous swimsuit in place, and applying hemorrhoidal cream under the eyes to hide darkened circles (Jones, 1998). In the quest for the perfect face and form, many contestants undergo extensive cosmetic surgery – many of the operations financed by the state pageant organizations (Neimark, 1998).

Among other effects, habitual body monitoring can increase women’s opportunities for shame and anxiety (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997). Self-objectification also provides increased opportunities for individuals to experience shame when they compare themselves to cultural ideals and fail to live up to their own internal or external standards (Noll & Fredrickson, 1998). Not only does the individual experience great shame, but there is also an intense desire to hide in order to escape the painful gaze of others. There are feelings of worthlessness and powerlessness (Tangney, 1993).

One of the moments of greatest potential shame for a Miss America contestant is following the announcement of the Top Ten finalists. In the Miss America Pageant, women’s bodies are scrutinized and evaluated according to cultural ideals of attractiveness. Those candidates not in the Top Ten have been found wanting and very publicly declared so – in front of family, friends, and

millions of others. Yet after the Top Ten announcement is made, the Miss America Pageant parades its non-finalists in front of a nationally televised audience for a musical number used as “filler”. In their time of greatest disappointment and shame, contestants are expected to put on a big smile and perform perfectly – red, tear-filled eyes and all.

Eating disorders pose the most obvious risk for women and girls living in a culture that objectifies the female body (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997). Eating disorders are largely a white, female, middle-class disease; 90 to 95 percent of all cases involve females. Statistics are staggering: Four percent of all American women have the disease. Some college campuses have reported a 25 percent incidence rate. Eating disorders are manifesting themselves in girls at a younger and younger age; 10 years old is no longer an uncommon case (Maddox, 1999).

Of all psychiatric diseases, anorexia is the most difficult to treat and has the highest fatality rate. It is a condition that is both the result of, and protest against, the cultural rule that young women must be beautiful. Anorexic girls are typically perfectionists, controlled, and the ultimate people pleasers. Commonly oversocialized to the feminine role, most anorectics are attractive with good social skills. They are the cheerleaders, straight-A students, and homecoming queens (Pipher, 1994).

Objectification theory predicts that body shame can produce troubled attitudes toward food, inducing restrained or disordered eating. A recent study found supportive evidence of a causal path leading from self-objectification to body shame when women, scoring highly on a test of self-objectification traits,

also reported the most body shame which, in turn, predicted self-reported restrained and disordered eating (Fredrickson, Roberts, Noll, Quine & Twenge, 1998).

The Miss America Pageant has always kept a complete database of statistics on its contestants, including height, weight, and measurements. In analyzing these statistics, Rubinstein and Caballero (2000) found a significant time-dependent decline in body mass index (BMI) when comparing the BMI of Miss America winners from 1922 to 1999, inclusive. Specifically, contestants from the 1920's had BMIs within the normal range of 20 to 25. However, the decline in BMI over the decades has resulted in an increasing number of winners with BMIs so low as to be classified within the range of undernutrition (18.5) as defined by the World Health Organization. The study also found that pageant winners' height had increased less than 2 percent throughout the years, whereas body weight had decreased by 12 percent.

Eating disorders are an occupational hazard for women who make a living or have an identity based on being thin (Banet-Weiser, 1999). Beauty pageant contestants are in a high-risk category; their physical bodies must closely approximate the feminine ideal to remain competitive, and gaining weight can be considered a serious offense. If a currently reigning Miss Texas gains more than two pounds, she is given two weeks to either lose the weight or relinquish her title (Banet-Weiser, 1999).

The most subtle and ubiquitous form of objectification is through "gaze" or visual inspection of the body (Kaschak, 1992). This form of sexualized evaluation

may be a subtle, everyday practice, but on the beauty pageant stage, the gaze is anything but subtle. Contestants are exposed and displayed upon elevated, spotlit runways numerous times, standing before judges who sit in the dark as faceless surveyors – relentlessly scrutinizing every aspect of appearance and demeanor (Banet-Weiser, 1999).

Pipher (1994) also speaks of the American “culture that encourages girls to become forever the object of another’s gaze” (p. 253). Young girls quickly learn that attractiveness is both a necessary and sufficient condition for their success. Faced with the realization that appearance is important in defining social acceptability, girls allow the culture to define who they should be. It is this gap between girls’ true selves and their cultural prescriptions of what is properly female and feminine that creates such enormous problems as depression and eating disorders (Pipher, 1994).

Why would women consciously subject themselves to such treatment? The answer may lie in the power of beauty. Empirical research has shown that physical beauty can function as a prime currency for women, greatly impacting their social and economic success (Unger, 1979). As a result, girls feel an enormous pressure to be beautiful and their appearance begins to overdetermine their identity (Pipher, 1994).

Objectification theory posits that women are most targeted for objectification during their years of reproductive potential (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997). Certainly as they begin to mature physically, they also experience an upsurge of sexually objectifying treatment (Fredrickson, Roberts, Noll, Quinn, &

Twenge, 1998). There is dawning realization that their new body has become part of a larger, more public, domain – it is increasingly looked at, commented upon, and evaluated by others (Martin, 1996). This initiation into the culture of sexual objectification has many ramifications, one being that women's positive self-concept is rooted in their perceived physical attractiveness, whereas for men, a positive self-concept hinges on perceived physical effectiveness (Lerner, Orlose, & Knapp, 1976).

In her best-selling book *The Beauty Myth*, Naomi Wolf (1991) pinpoints the 1980s as a pivotal time for status-seeking women. Beauty now held the same role for women as money held for men. Their beauty had become the informal currency system of the marriage market, a currency system assigning value to women in a vertical hierarchy according to a culturally imposed physical standard. The English language has many common phrases that formalize this relationship between women's beauty and currency: *a woman looks like a million dollars, she is a first-class beauty, her face is her fortune.*

Miss America is a well compensated position. In addition to her \$50,000 educational scholarship, Miss America receives upwards of a \$200,000 salary and moves in power circles, from Hollywood elite to the President of the United States. Some Miss Americas have enjoyed visible and lucrative careers, such as Lee Meriwether (actress best known for her role on *Barnaby Jones*), Phyllis George (actress and former NFL sportscaster), Gretchen Carlson (CBS Washington news correspondent), Leanza Cornett (former *Entertainment Tonight* correspondent), and Bess Myerson (New York City politician) (Miss America

Organization", 2001).

Literally meaning "rule of the fathers," patriarchy is a term with a history. Originally created by powerful men who dominated Western culture, the patriarchal social system explains the form and function of male domination, of their political and social control of women. Patriarchy involves "an overall system of structures and practices designed to sustain inequities between the experiences, responsibilities, status, and opportunities of different social groups," but especially that between women and men (Wood, 1997, p. 314). Fredrickson and Roberts (1997) argue that the practice of objectifying women's bodies is a patriarchal practice to create and maintain male dominance within our society.

Pageants have been linked to the economic gain of men as the baring of the female body has become an ever more profitable commodity. The Miss America Pageant is widely recognized as a lucrative venue for Atlantic City tourism and the city uses the Pageant's national exposure to present itself as a desirable place to visit and spend money (Banet-Weiser, 1999).

Jones (1998) has explored the correlation between the rise of women's social and political power in America and the emergence of beauty contests. A new brand of American woman burst upon the scene in the 1920s. She voted, swore, drank, smoked, rode the subways and collected a paycheck. Jones postulates that with the deconstruction of gender lines, "American society offered up a ritual sacrifice, in the body of Miss America, to reestablish and reinforce traditional gender boundaries ... At a time, when women were beginning to enjoy the benefits of a collective and united political voice, a pageant emerged which

set them against each other in competition and, by focusing on their bodies, effectively silenced their voices” (Jones, 1998, p.101).

The beauty pageant structure is firmly and squarely situated within a commodity framework. Beauty is considered a commodity, of course. But participants also pose as commodities, positioning their bodies and personalities to sell an idealized version of American citizenship and life and defining the standardized disciplinary practices of femininity for many young women. Even gender becomes a commodity as the Pageant offers up one particular brand of gendered body – universal, nonspecific, and sporting the egalitarian promise that anyone can be Miss America (Banet-Weiser, 1994).

Miss America guarantees the construction of ideal womanhood as prescribed by patriarchal standards:

“Superwoman is alive and well. This pageant tells us what women are supposed to be. She’s the cultural icon of the perfect girl. Today, Miss Americas are asked to be beautiful, to achieve, and to serve. She has a platform, and it’s inevitably for social good” (Neimark, 1998, p. 46).

Our culture prescribes an intense pressure for women to look “perfect”, particularly in a context of upward social mobility in which acceptance is sought from the dominant white male culture – a culture that very clearly values thinness and beauty in women (Unger, 1979). Women construct their feminine identities in relation to, and because of, this power (Pipher, 1994).

There is potential conflict within this construct of femininity and the competitive spirit of Miss America competition. Ambition, however ruthless, must

be veiled behind a palatable cloak of voluntarism, unshakable moral foundation, strict behavior codes and self-sacrifice (Banet-Weiser, 1999).

Connell (1987) believes that the cultural practice of objectifying female bodies was originated to create, maintain, and express patriarchy, certainly patriarchy in the workplace. It was not until women crowded the workplace that laws proliferated about appearance in the workplace. Since 1971, U.S. law has recognized the existence and standard of perfection against which a woman's body is to be judged in the workplace. Falling short of it, she may be fired. This same standard of perfection has never been legally determined for the male body. Likewise, societal fixation with beauty occurred in the 1980s as a direct consequence of, and a one-to-one-check and balance upon, the entry of women into powerful professional positions (Wolf, 1994).

Pipher (1994) claims that girls become aware of this societal fixation of beauty in early adolescence. Studies show this is a time of sharp and long-lasting drop in self-esteem (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997). Moving into the broader culture, they first realize men have the power and their only opportunity for power as females is rooted in their consent to become submissive, adored subjects. Facing the conflict between their autonomous selves and the need to be feminine, women split into true and false selves and, in public, pretend to be who others want them to be (Pipher, 1994). Yet another outcome is the onset of eating disorders as means of protest against the patriarchal system. Intake of food is the one thing these women feel they can control in a society in which they otherwise feel helpless, powerless and manipulated (Fredrickson & Roberts,

1997).

Beauty pageants place women in competition with each other for the praise of men who have been allowed to create the criteria for judgment (Jones, 1998). The emphasis on beauty assigns value to women in a vertical hierarchy that divides women from one another, keeping male dominance intact. For women to compete with one another on a beauty basis is in direct opposition to the way the rest of the mammal kingdom operates. There is no legitimate historical or biological justification for the beauty standard. It is nothing more than the creation and maintenance of today's power structure, fueled by its enormous impact on the marketplace: a \$33 billion-a-year diet industry, \$20 billion cosmetics industry, \$300 million cosmetic surgery, \$7 billion pornography industry. Women's low self-esteem has apparent financial value to all of society, (Wolf, 1991).

Beauty contests are ritual events replicated in communities, states and nations around the globe. Spanning every conceivable group, interest and topic, these pageants reflect the social norms and cultural values of the communities in which they are held. Competitors range in age from infants to centenarians. Yet for all this diversity, what these contests do, and how they do it, are remarkably similar: Gender norms – conventionally, idealized versions of femininity – are presented on stage. The concept of beauty is forced into a narrowly prescribed mold. Standards of beauty and behavior are on prominent display. Contestants' bodies, habits and tastes are closely scrutinized and measured against a stylized mental image of the ideal woman (Cohen, Wilk & Stoeltje, 1996).

This context in which beauty pageants are held is necessarily external and male. Contestants are measured against an ideal, and while these women can never fully achieve the idealized role they are performing, the contest itself communicates strong cultural messages to *all* women on how they should appear and what they should be about. Winners are given the enormous burden of representing the ideal woman, an impossible task (Cohen, Wilk & Stoeltje, 1996).

Sarah Banet-Weiser is Assistant Professor at the Annenberg School for Communication at the University of Southern California. Her doctoral dissertation focused upon the connections between beauty pageants and national identity. Her extensive field research included working backstage at Miss America local competitions and the interviewing of numerous contestants.

In her research, Banet-Weiser (1999) concluded that a beauty pageant contestant is stripped of personal identity and elevated to icon status. Absent of all identity markers (but the banner they wear proclaiming their respective titles), contestants are reduced to merely a body and a face. Their identification becomes synonymous with the particular geographic area they represent; their title is their only identity. The larger and more significant the geographic area represented, the more sophisticated and complicated the job of representing becomes, yet another form of objectification.

Banet-Weiser (1999) also says that beauty pageants are sites for crucial conversations about definitions of femininity, sexuality and national identity, “disrupting, regrouping and retrenching our cultural understandings about how

‘we’ are and should be” (Banet-Weiser, 1999, p. 176). They are measures of what is happening in the nation politically, culturally and economically while serving as a discourse of feminine subjectivity within the disciplined constructs of national identity, femininity and racial identity (Banet-Weiser, 1999). In short, beauty pageants clearly communicate to women how they should appear and what they should be about.

The Miss America Pageant calls up a relationship between discourses of nation and discourses of femininity. Its images and narratives articulate cultural expectations about who and what American women are and should be while simultaneously communicating who and what the nation should be through promises of citizenship, fantasies of agency and tolerant pluralism (Banet-Weiser, 1999).

The Pageant sees itself as a litmus test for American womanhood, moving with the times while simultaneously promoting an eternal feminine code. Miss America is the official standard of beauty – simultaneously the face of America, the face of womanhood and the face of diversity (Banet-Weiser, 1999). All women are reduced into the body of one woman through the Pageant’s construction of universalized femininity (Jones, 1998).

Neimark (1998) argues that the woman chosen Miss America is considered a living snapshot of the entire country. She must be eternally young for she is an indication and guarantee of the country’s health (Jones, 1998). She ought to come from the middle class and go to college. She should be strong, but weak; aggressive, but submissive; totally committed to both family and career; be

civic and volunteer minded; and have a picture perfect appearance at all times.

All of this should be made to look effortlessly easy (Neimark, 1998).

As Neimark suggests, being Miss America is a role requiring contradictory characteristics and functions. It is an impossible situation, setting up the contestant for failure. Taken with the rest of the literature, this leads to my research question: ***How do participants of the 1985 Miss America Pageant make sense of their participation in this event and how has that participation affected their construction of themselves?*** I am particularly interested in the 1985 contest, not only because of my participation, but also because of its historical significance to the Pageant itself. Vanessa Williams' unprecedented resignation impacted every facet of the Organization. It became a touchstone for examination, reorganization and reinforcement of patriarchal forms and objectification of constructing women.

Chapter Three: METHODOLOGY

Personal narrative has long been a part of oral tradition (Stahl, 1983), having universal structure and appeal and crossing racial, ethnic and cultural boundaries (Barthes, 1977). One form of presenting the self to others, personal narrative plays a role in the construction of identity, playing an integral role in the persons we are and the persons we present to others (Shaw, 1997).

Personal narrative is the result of memories taking shape through language. Stories may be told for entertainment, as an effort to relive the past, or as presentations of self (Bennett, 1986). Langellier (1989, p. 267) posits that “in a most profound way, our stories tell us who we are and who we can – or cannot – be, at both surface and deep-level meaning”. These stories are told as a means of constructing and negotiating social identity. They support the individual’s self-concept or view of self, a self whose substance is made up of autobiographical memories of one’s life (Eder, 1989).

Bruner (1986, p. 30) argues that there are two ways of viewing the world, the ‘logico-scientific’ and the ‘narrative’ mode. The narrative mode focuses on the ‘vicissitudes of human intention’ where readers engage with characters to form a construction of reality based around desires and intentions. It is a way of knowing the world and oneself, a way of defining attitudes and organizing experience. Radway (1984) explains narrative as a highly constructed performance that draws upon a range of linguistic, literary and cultural repertoires which are specially selected for a particular audience.

In self-narration, Eakin (1985, p. 226) argues that a teller is not only

recalling the past, but is recreating it in an attempt to discover and invent the self. It is a reach "back into the past not merely to recapture, but to repeat the psychological rhythms of identity formation . . . an integral and often decisive phase in the drama of self-definition." Kehly (1995) found that the self-narrator socially displays language that speaks of and constructs identity while simultaneously creating and presenting a sense of self. However, this sense of self for public consumption may recreate a certain version of identity which is only socially recognizable and socially validated.

Shaw (1997) found that self-concept is presented through personal narrative and that narrative self-presentations function as impression management. Arkin's study on self-presentation (1986) also links the phenomena of self-presentation and narrative: An individual confirms the self by telling narratives that support his or her own view of self.

Feminist methodology centers its inquiry on women and involves a concern with consciousness, feminist consciousness and consciousness-raising. The type(s) of methods used to gather evidence should always be chosen based on an appropriate fit with a study's research question. Yet there are limitations placed on feminist studies by a patriarchal academic and research infrastructure, e.g., investigations involving feminist or women's issues are seen through a patriarchal prism (Cook & Fonow, 1986) in which many aspects of women's experience have not yet been articulated or conceptualized (Mies, 1983). Likewise, there are modes of thinking, data collection and analysis that are more appropriate than others for studying the situation of women from a feminist

perspective (Acker, Barry, & Esseveld, 1991). The most effective of these strategies are those which are most consistent with feminist values and which allow women to express their experience fully and in their own terms, to describe the world as they experience it (Mies, 1983).

The reasons behind choosing feminist methodology for this study were threefold: (1) This study involves many issues that encompass feminist concerns, research and thought, (2) this study is framed within feminist theory, and (3) feminist methodology recognizes that the process of investigation can have a consciousness-raising effect on subjects and on the researcher herself (Cook & Fonow, 1991). This project was undertaken, in part, for me, the researcher, to make further sense of my Miss America experience.

This is a qualitative study, utilizing interviews with former contestants. A protocol of 15 questions (Appendix A) was used and a semi-structured style of interviewing employed. Self-disclosure was a natural part of discussion since I had shared the pageant experience with all respondents. I felt that to not self-disclose would have placed an awkward timbre upon our discussions. Project aside, we simply chatted at the beginning of each conversation, playing "catch up" with our respective lives. Topics discussed were not covered in my protocol: what we'd done in our intervening years, describing our present lives, what they'd done with their scholarship money, if they'd kept in touch with other contestants, how they initially got involved in the pageant program, and the like. I feel that this discussion time helped in establishing rapport and that subsequent responses were more open, honest, complex and involved than they might otherwise have

been.

These techniques and strategies were chosen upon review of the following research:

Jayarathne and Stewart (1991) believe that qualitative methods permit women to express their experience fully and in their own terms, to describe the world as they experience it.

Interviews typically focus on a particular experience or phenomenon, enabling an interviewer to “hear” individual women and “see” patterns derived from the study (Reinharz & Davidman, 1992). They can also create new material about women, validate women's experiences, enhance communication among women, and discover women's roots (Bluck, 1979).

Interviews can be too structured, limiting the quality and quantity of information communicated to the researcher. Helena Lopata (1980) found that, without a predetermined interview schedule, her respondents focused on subjects very different from those she had thought would be important. Semi-structured interviews have become a principal means by which feminists have sought to achieve the active involvement of their respondents in the construction of data about their lives. It involves freer interaction between researcher and interviewee and includes opportunities for clarification and discussion (Reinharz & Davidman, 1992).

Open-ended interviewing is particularly suited to female researchers as asking people what they think and feel is an activity females are socialized to perform in contemporary Western society. Open-ended questions likewise

maximize discovery and description, exploring people's views of reality.

Researchers are given access to people's ideas, thoughts and memories in their own words rather than the words of the researcher (Reinharz & Davidman, 1992).

Feminist methodology rejects the assumption that a strict separation between researcher and research subject produces more valid, objective and legitimate knowledge (Cook & Fonow, 1991). It is instead believed that interviewing is best achieved when the relationship between the interviewer and interviewee is nonhierarchical and when the interviewer is prepared to invest his or her own personal identity in the relationship (Reinharz & Davidman, 1992).

In Ann Oakley's feminist paradigm for interviewing (1981), she advocates allowing the respondent to 'talk back' to the researcher to minimize objectification of the subject. The interview should be viewed as an interactional exchange. Oakley argues that answering the questions of interviewees personalizes and humanizes the researcher, placing the interviewer and interviewee on a more equal footing.

Oakley's paradigm is compatible with the feminist interviewing model which strives for intimacy and includes self-disclosure with the interviewee. The model involves commitment on the part of the researcher to form a relationship in a spirit of commitment and egalitarianism that generates trust (Reinharz, 1992), attempting to reduce the power differential between themselves and those they research (Fonow & Cook, 1991). The goal is to have minimal role differentiation between researcher and subject (Reinharz, 1992).

While there is no single perspective on researcher-interviewee relations and self-disclosure, several studies argue that researcher self-disclosure during the interview is good feminist practice as it puts women interviewees at ease (Reinharz, 1992).

Consciousness-raising as a specific methodological tool has been advocated by a number of feminist researchers (Mies, 1983) and is a central tenet of feminist methodology (Cook & Fonow, 1991). One way to raise consciousness is to examine situations that produce a rupture in the 'normal' life of a woman, such as divorce, unemployment, widowhood, infertility, rape, physical abuse or sexual harassment. Such life-course transitions provide an opportune context in which to examine women's worlds.

Feminist methodology's emphasis on consciousness-raising is related to its ability to uncover aspects of social reality not previously visible. This focus on consciousness-raising is rendered important because of its potential for stimulating social change (Cook & Fonow, 1991).

Because feminists often investigate topics of a controversial, emotional nature, use of a situation-at-hand methodology is an especially appropriate and creative way of gathering and analyzing data. This methodology takes advantage of existing circumstances which are relevant to a particular topic of study or to elicit information in a more naturalistic manner of study. Research subjects have little control over events because they have already occurred or occurred for some reason other than research. This approach is an excellent means for consciousness-raising (Gurney, 1985).

To answer the research question required interviewing contestants from the 1985 Miss America contest, a universe of 51 women (author included). A sampling of 13 participants from this pageant (or 25 percent) was found and contacted for interviews. Eleven women, or 84 percent of those former contestants found, were interviewed. One contact inexplicably refused to be interviewed; another potential interviewee was out of town for an extended period of time. Potential interviewees were selected upon consideration of the region of country represented by the contestant and a contestant's final placement in the pageant (e.g., semi-finalist, finalist).

Region of country and final placement are the two most important considerations in obtaining representative sampling. Great inequities exist between state pageant organizations, inequities that loosely exist along regional boundaries. The South is Big Pageant Country. The Southern States (self-defined as Mississippi, Florida, Georgia, Alabama, North Carolina, South Carolina, Arkansas, Louisiana, Virginia, Texas, Tennessee, and Oklahoma) give higher scholarships, greater clothing allowances, and offer substantially more paid appearances. To be a southern contestant is the difference between wearing an outfit from JCPenney or Saks Fifth Avenue and making an \$8,000 or \$80,000 salary during that year as a state representative.

In addition, coaches and consultants for every phase of competition are readily made available to southern contestants. There appears to be a relationship between this investment and results: All but one of the southern states (Louisiana) has had at least one Miss America, and all but one of the

southern states (Alabama) has had at least one 1st runner-up to Miss America (Deford, 1978; "The Miss America Organization", 2001).

In contrast, the "weaker" pageant states are the smaller northeastern and western states (with the exception of California). Five states have never had a finalist in the Pageant: Vermont, North Dakota, Delaware, New Mexico, and Montana (Deford, 1978; "The Miss America Organization", 2001).

I also considered final placing an important factor in choosing interviewees. Contestants' perceptions of their pageant experience could be influenced by the fulfillment (or lack thereof) of an individual's great hopes and expectations. Final placing could also determine the possible opening (or not) of personal and professional doors which could impact a contestant's overall assessment of the pageant experience.

There were several resources at my disposal for locating these contestants: state pageant organizations (available via the Miss America web site), various authors of Miss America books, former judges, Internet telephone directories, university alumni associations, and my Miss America mailing list – a confidential index of peers and addresses the Miss America Organization mails each contestant within the first few months following each televised competition.

My search began using the 17-year-old Miss America mailing list and Internet phone directories. Plugging in a contestant's last name, city, and state, I had a match if any of the last names on the directory matched the addresses given on the list. This method yielded me nine exact matches. I also found fourteen other probable matches. (The addresses themselves were not exact

matches, but an unusual last name in a smaller community could mean either the parents had moved or it was a relative's phone number.) I entered all information on a spreadsheet.

I purchased a recorder and auxiliary device for the telephone that allows the recording of telephone conversations. My application to the Institutional Review Board (IRB) was approved and assigned a number, 027-01-EP. I then developed a protocol (Appendix A) designed to elicit responses from contestants on their perspectives of the Pageant experience and its effect(s) on their self-esteem, career path, and self-concept. All interviews were conducted over the telephone and all interviewees were told that the conversation was being taped for purposes of transcription and encoding. All respondents were made aware that these interviews were part of a class project in my course of study for a Masters degree. Conversations lasted anywhere from one to just over two hours. All interview tapes are marked with contestant name, state represented, and date of interview.

The success of this paper depended greatly upon the honesty and cooperative spirit of my peer group. Oakley (1981) stresses the importance of establishing a nonhierarchical relationship when interviewing women, saying the interviewer must be prepared to invest her own personality into the relationship to foster an atmosphere of rapport and trust in establishing mutual and reciprocal communication.

Only three of the interviewees remembered me from our competition. Yet curiously enough, I encountered little or no difficulties in immediately establishing

a bond with any interviewee. It was as if the common experience of having competed at the Miss America Pageant – so unique to all but a small number of women -- transcended any protective walls or uncertainties in speaking with someone about it, issues that may have arisen with an “outsider”. All participants were cordial, willing and wanting to participate, and extremely open with their thoughts and feelings on the topic.

My list of 11 contacts included four participants from southern states, four contestants from the Western contingent, two representatives from the eastern states and one representative from the midwestern states. This field of 11 interviewees represented a wide scope of placings within the competition: the 1985 Miss America title winner, the 2nd runner-up to Miss America, the 4th runner-up to Miss America, and three of the eight non-finalist talent award recipients. The remaining five participants received no special recognition or awards at the 1985 Miss America Pageant.

Miss South Carolina: Coming from a big pageant state (i.e., plenty of contestants and plenty of money), Vickie Harrell was what is called an “also ran”, one of the 40 contestants not named as a Top Ten semifinalist. The rumor during Pageant week was that she looked too much like Vanessa Williams, resulting in the pageant rejecting any bid she might have had for the title.

Miss Texas: Also hailing from a big and wealthy pageant state, Tamara Hext dripped with \$100,000 worth of diamonds during rehearsals. Promoted by the Texas organization as the best body the Texas Organization had ever sent to Miss America, Hext won a preliminary swimsuit award, despite wearing a

swimsuit with an illegal cut-out. Hext finished 4th runner-up to Miss America.

Miss Nebraska: Allison Boyd and I knew each other for years before Miss America. She had finished as 4th runner-up at the Miss Iowa Pageant before crowning me Miss Southwest Iowa at my local preliminary pageant. Attending college at the University of Nebraska at Lincoln, Allison entered Nebraska's pageant system and won the Miss Nebraska state title. An innovative gymnast, Allison won a non-finalist talent award and traveled internationally as part of Miss America's USO troupe.

Miss Alaska: One of the handful of black contestants that year, I felt that Maryline Blackburn's perspective could be most interesting and informative, particularly with Vanessa Williams' so recent fall from grace as the Pageant's first black Miss America. Vocalist Blackburn won a non-finalist talent award.

Miss Louisiana: Anita Whitaker was the first black contestant ever to represent a southern state. While this unique status afforded Whitaker more press attention, it was also accompanied by its own set of pressures and expectations.

Miss California: Donna Cherry was an immensely talented, extremely intelligent contestant. As my mirror mate (the woman who would sit directly across from me in the dressing and make-up room), I got to know Donna extremely well and thought her a remarkable woman – fresh, open, comedic, not a typically conservative pageant girl type. From another big pageant state, Donna won her local and state pageants on her first tries. An also ran (a non-placing contestant), Donna had been “discovered” by a former Miss America and had

lost a lot of weight to compete.

Miss New Jersey: Patricia LaTerra always received thunderous, rousing applause and warm reception wherever we went. I wanted to explore the possibility of unique pressures and possible advantages in being in front of that home crowd and how having the Miss America competition in your own backyard influences a contestant's perspective toward the pageant. LaTerra presented a dramatic monologue for her talent segment and received a non-finalist talent award.

Miss Utah: Sharlene Wells won the Miss America title our year. It was generally felt she did not want the title, was not prepared for winning it and consequently had a horrible year, even rumored as being fired by one sponsor. Sharlene was extremely likeable, tomboyish, athletic.

Miss Connecticut: Another also ran, Joanne Caruso's sister also competed in the Pageant as Miss Connecticut, albeit four years earlier. Caruso could offer rare insight into two competitive situations.

Miss Mississippi: I witnessed Kathy Manning win her state title at the Mississippi State Pageant. The transformation between the girl crowned Miss Mississippi and the contestant who showed up at Miss America a scant six weeks later was nothing short of miraculous. Manning was polished and scripted to a level I would not have thought attainable in so short a time period. Manning won a swimsuit preliminary award and was 2nd runner-up to Miss America. Again representing the state of Mississippi, Manning entered the Miss USA Pageant a few years later, finishing again in the Top Five.

Miss Wyoming: An also ran, Annie Easterbrook was unpretentious, energetic, fun, down-to-earth. Nothing seemed to bother her; she just had fun.

Chapter Four: RESULTS

These former contestants came from diverse backgrounds. They entered the Miss America Pageant with varied degrees of preparedness. Each had her own set of expectations of what the experience and outcome would be. In reviewing the interview transcripts, six common themes emerged. These are: (1) the influence the Vanessa Williams scandal played upon the competition; (2) the feelings that resulted from the inequities of resources provided contestants; (3) the realities behind the post-pageant crash; (4) the Pageant's effect on professional pathways; (5) the Pageant's effect on contestants' personal lives; and (6) thoughts on whether the experience would have been worth repeating.

Vanessa, the Scandal. Every former contestant interviewed believed the dethroning of Vanessa Williams had enormous impact upon the competition. Many of the interviewees believed the scandal had affected them personally. All believed it had affected the outcome.

When Tamara Hext, Miss Texas 1984 and 4th runner-up to Miss America, thinks of the 1985 Miss America Pageant, the Vanessa scandal is what first comes to mind: "The horde of reporters, all the negative press."

Much of that negative press surrounded Hext. Upon winning her state title, the Miss Texas Organization billed Hext as the best body they'd ever sent to the Miss America Pageant. Hext said that, given the current climate, this "best body" billing became a huge mistake as the "best body" comment was taken out of context and given a sexual connotation. Then *Penthouse* published Vanessa's nude photos and publisher Bob Guccione said he had nude photos of a current

contestant. The media immediately concentrated on Hext with many of her interviews focused around the best body billing.

The chaotic publicity also sticks out for Kathy Manning, Miss Mississippi and 2nd runner-up to Miss America. With benefit of hindsight, she wishes “I’d have dressed up in lace to my patootie and sung *Amazing Grace* instead of some slinky torch song.” Manning says she was terribly naïve to pageant politics and has never reconciled how much, if any, of Vanessa’s scandal affected the outcome of the Pageant. “It’s all been banded around: They picked Sharlene because they knew a Mormon girl would never pose in the nude. To then show their hands were not forced, they chose a shoplifter as 1st runner-up,” she said. For Manning, these post-Pageant rumors were the worst part of the Miss America experience, producing a lot of headgames that she said went on for her during her year.

Joanne Caruso, Miss Connecticut, also looks back and realizes she was naïve about the ramifications and environment produced by the Vanessa debacle, a factor that she feels not only affected the ultimate outcome, but events of the entire week. Had she understood its impact, Caruso said she could have been a smarter competitor and points to her judges’ interview as one example of where she fell short in not phrasing answers to her best advantage.

“I just never really thought the scandal would affect the entire competition, that it would be the one thing the judges and the media would focus on,” Caruso (2001) said. “I didn’t realize I had to come out and tell the judges IT WASN’T ME [who had posed for Guccione’s nude photos].”

Caruso reported that every media interview involved her being asked if she had posed for nude photos.

When Vanessa Williams stepped away from the title, her 1st runner-up became Miss America in her stead. Also an African-American, Suzette Charles had competed for the Miss America crown representing the state of New Jersey. She took over Williams' reign four days after Patricia LaTerra was crowned Miss New Jersey 1984.

"I had just gotten home from winning the state pageant," LaTerra (1998) said. "At 8:30 the next morning, the doorbell rang. It was the TV news stations, wanting to interview me about the scandal. I was thrilled about getting the interview, but it wasn't anything about me. It was all about Vanessa. My first experience as Miss New Jersey was the Vanessa thing, not about me being New Jersey."

It was a trend that dogged LaTerra's entire reign. Everywhere LaTerra went -- at every appearance, for every interview -- she was questioned about Charles: How was the new Miss America? What was she doing? What was she like?

"I really lived in Suzette's shadow," LaTerra (1998) said. "New Jersey hadn't had a Miss America since 1938; they'd never had a 1st runner-up. Suzette was a big deal for the state. I was of no interest to people. It was disheartening. I was excited to be Miss New Jersey, but no one else was [excited she was Miss New Jersey]. It made me feel bad and resentful. I mean, who was I? It screwed up my entire year."

The scandal also had great effect on what LaTerra was allowed to wear for the evening gown competition. The tastefully sexy gown she chose was nixed by pageant directors as inappropriate for the year, in light of what had happened.

In the end, LaTerra wonders if it would have made any difference. While she hates to think the Pageant was fixed, she does believe the Pageant was looking for a particular type of person. "They looked through the resumes and anything that looked shady or questionable ... that person was written right off. Certain girls were not going to win – like if they were black or in show business," she said.

Maryline Blackburn, Miss Alaska, was one of six African-American contestants in 1984. Her media questions revolved around the Vanessa situation and how she felt it affected her chances. At the time, Blackburn felt that what Vanessa had or had not done had no bearing on her. Blackburn came to a different post-pageant conclusion.

"I didn't have a chance no matter how well I did," Blackburn (1998) said.

"They were not going to pick back-to-back blacks. Because of Vanessa, they had to go to the opposite extreme. They were trying to be cautious about who was picked Miss America because they didn't want to lose any more national sponsors."

Nita Whitaker, Miss Louisiana, knew going into Miss America week that the Vanessa scandal had greatly undermined her, another African-American, chances of winning the title.

"Even though I knew a black girl probably wasn't going to win that year,

there was still that hope factor. I hoped they would see *me* and not just another black contestant. They'd see Nita," Whitaker (2001) said. "I think some of them did, but I also think the Miss America committee had a lot of control and strength that year in pointing the judges in particular directions. I think there was a lot of politicking that year."

Sharlene Wells, the woman crowned Miss America 1985, is very well aware that she surprised a lot of people. She knows she was a controversial winner and the butt of many a joke. She eventually quit trying to prove how or why she won or to fill the expectations she felt others had of her – to 'fix' the pageant. "People didn't look at my resume to give me enough credit. Everyone assumed I'd won because of the scandal and because I was a Mormon from Utah," Wells said.

The Second Class Citizen Syndrome. All interviewees reported arriving in Atlantic City with a keen awareness of the many inequities existing between the states: salaries earned, scholarship monies awarded, training and coaching provided by state organizations, and extent and value of wardrobe. Interviewees cited media attention as another area of inequity with some states enjoying ubiquitous press, a legacy that Hext (Texas) and Manning (Mississippi) specifically discussed enjoying. Other state representatives, e.g., Wells, (Utah), Caruso (Connecticut) and LaTerra (New Jersey) expressed their resentment in being relegated to bit player status during the competition and cast as "wallflowers" during media conferences.

Manning remembers arriving at the Miss America Pageant and getting a

lot of attention and publicity. "Mississippi goes in with lots of publicity because of their track record," she said. "It felt good – to know that you were going in kind of strong. It bolstered my confidence."

Texas is another big pageant state. Although Texas hasn't won the Miss America crown since 1974, people still connote Texas with pageants. Tamara Hext recognized that advantage: "There's something about being Miss Texas – about Texas in general – that creates some mystique. It means something; it's big and important. It takes on a personality of its own." To Hext, the Texas identity was larger than life, a preconceived notion that has rubbed off on the pageant. "Being Miss Texas has always been larger than life," she said. Like Manning, Hext also felt strong going into the Pageant: "...hopeful, confident, excited. I felt good about being there and about my chances of doing well," she said.

On home turf, Miss New Jersey was welcomed by great hurrah everywhere she went. LaTerra says she felt the warm embrace of the crowds. Backstage was another story. Constantly comparing herself to her fellow contestants, LaTerra didn't see herself as talented, well-spoken or as pretty as many of her peers.

"I thought I was pretty middle-of-the road. Better than some, not as good as others. I didn't like it. I just wanted to be there and do the best I could, but I found myself comparing myself to everyone," LaTerra (1998) said.

LaTerra knew she wasn't one of the Top Ten semifinalists by the way she was treated during the day of the telecast. Never called to rehearse making Top

Ten, a make-up expert refused to do her make-up for the telecast although she then proceeded to “make up” other girls considered favorites for the crown (and who did indeed make the semifinals).

Blackburn openly uses the term “second class citizen” when describing her feelings during her Miss America experience. From the moment she arrived, she felt slighted.

“Normally, Miss Alaska is the first girl to arrive at the pageant. It’s a tradition. It’s an automatic press opportunity because you’re the first. My year they made sure I was the second girl [to arrive]. I missed all that press attention,” Blackburn (1998) said.

Blackburn also remembers Misses Tennessee, Mississippi and Texas as always being in the limelight, always being asked for a photograph or interview. She was seldom asked.

“Others got the interviews. No one ever wanted to speak with me,” says Joanne Caruso, Miss Connecticut. She felt the girls from New England were looked at as a homely part of the country and the press’ attitude was “They never win. They never do anything. They never get in Top Ten. We’re not even going to bother dealing with them.” And they didn’t. Miss Connecticut felt ignored and inconsequential.

Donna Cherry managed to keep a positive exterior, but inside she was feeling like a fish out of water.

“I looked around and saw all these really pretty girls who had been probably groomed to do this kind of thing – to be the perfect, lovely little

miss. I was just a college student who liked to perform. I felt clumsy to these little dainty links. I felt awkward next to them. I let my sense of humor and my impersonations buoy me, however false that was. I felt I deserved to be there, but these girls were much more refined than I was. It was all so far from what I was," Cherry (1998) said.

Noticing the media favoritism toward some contestants, Annie Easterbrook, Miss Wyoming, talked it over with her parents. "We just figured that that's where the money was from and it was big business talking," she said. "It's just the way it was."

The woman who eventually became Miss America was also in the initial ranks of the ignored. Wells was also rankled by the favoritism. She says it began the minute the bus pulled in under Convention Hall (where the Miss America Pageant takes place).

"There was all this press," Wells (1998) said. "All the contestants were already there, dressed perfectly. I was wearing a white cotton dress that JCPenney gave me. They lined us up in alphabetical order for the picture and I was standing next to Texas in her mink trimmed suit. She was so beautiful with this beautiful dress and I thought: 'I should just go back home. I don't belong here. I haven't come prepared with the right clothes or anything. Everyone knows what they're doing, and I don't have a clue.'"

In response to her feelings of being ignored, Wells decided to just do her best and have a good time. The third day of rehearsals, she quit dressing up, opting to wear jeans and baseball cap. "It was a great release for me," she said.

“I didn’t have to follow the formula that they tell me what to do.” Wells put it all in perspective by thinking that the worst thing that could happen to her is that she would go home where everybody loved her.

Like the majority of contestants, Wells was not interviewed all week. She recalls walking through the huge interview room, filled with selected contestants involved in press interviews. She saw Lauren Green, Miss Minnesota, standing by herself against the wall. Green hadn’t been interviewed at all either. Wells and Green (the eventual 3rd runner-up to Wells) stood together, talking, commiserating, “watching like two wallflowers watching the dance.” Wells said that, because of this treatment, her first press conference was particularly sweet. She mentally thumbed her nose at the press that had first thumbed her nose at her.

Slightings were not limited to the press. Wells had everyone sign her program book for a souvenir. She approached four girls in a circle, talking. Asking if they could sign her book, they continued their conversation without interruption, signed the book and handed it back to her. Their dismissiveness was complete; they had not said a word to her. Wells felt they exhibited an air of “Oh, you’re from a little state...”

The Post-Pageant Crash. Contestants revealed that the roads to the Miss America runway vary, both in pathways taken and the amount of time needed to get there. Regardless of these differences, each contestant reported an enormous investment of time in preparing for the national contest. When the pageant was over, every respondent reported experiencing the void and the

struggle to fill it. And everyone grieved – albeit some more, and longer, than others.

Kathy Manning is often introduced as a former contestant and almost Miss America. It was a title she thought was hers for 8 seconds.

“The papers and oddsmakers in Vegas had Mississippi and Texas pitted against each other. When Tamara was called 4th runner-up, I seriously thought I’d won. Just because of the publicity and what that does to a girl’s head there. The press cameras were looking right at me. I got a cold chill. For just a minute there. A little flash like this might really happen. I had gone from a sorority saying ‘Let’s get Kathy to do Miss University [Pageant]’ to boom, the stage of Miss America. The feeling that I’d almost won and then the shock [of being named 2nd runner-up]. I can’t even describe the electricity or rush that hit me. Like cold water. I can still feel [it] to this day, feel that feeling. It would have been great fun to be Miss America and the life experiences that go along with it,” Manning (2001) said.

Manning was “very upset” at the outcome, saying she did not have a hard time moving on although it was difficult for her to figure out how to do that. She was frightened to move to New York City or Los Angeles and was disappointed not to have the launching pad of Miss America to promote the professional singing career she wanted. She floundered for a number of years, beginning midway through her year as Miss Mississippi (1984) through the year following her Miss Mississippi-USA title (1988). Manning said she’s not sure that her

floundering can be attributed to the Pageant, (“I don’t like to give that pageant thing too much power”). She wonders instead if the searching could be attributed to a life stage. Her healing began when she met her future husband that year and started the next phase of her life.

Manning has no regret surrounding the Miss America competition. Instead, her “hell” was coming back to the rumors – of why Sharlene had been chosen, what had gone on behind the scenes, what could have been done differently. Manning reported that this kept the sense of disappointment fresh for her. “It [the talk] kept everything stirred up. I’d entered the pageant fresh, naïve, innocent. The pageant changed me,” she said.

It took several years for Tamara Hext to put the pageant experience behind her, to answer several questions that haunted her: What did all this mean? Where would I be if things were different? Why did it happen this way? What am I supposed to do now? She says she floundered for a few years before marrying and having children.

Hext dealt with unique pressures at the pageant. She said the entire Texas delegation believed they had the new Miss America and were very open with Tamara about their hopes and expectations. After being named 4th runner-up, Hext remembers crying a lot and being very emotional and exhausted. She felt she’d let the group down.

Although Hext entered the competitive fray a well-touted favorite, she admitted she didn’t want to win the national title as much as some other girls. “I was afraid of it. I wanted to win for the people who thought I could, but it was a

good feeling to be going home,” she said.

On that airplane ride home, Hext (1998) had a telling conversation with B. Don Magnuss, Executive Director of the Miss Texas Pageant. Hext was crying. Magnuss patted her arm, telling her not to worry.

“I said, ‘Well, I don’t know. I’m just upset. It’s over. It’s over, you know? You work so hard to come here, and all of a sudden, it’s over. There’s nothing more to work for. It’s a real sense of loss. Now what do I do?’ His response was: ‘Don’t worry. We’ll come back again and try next year.’ In his mind, he got to do it again. Sure he was disappointed, but he got to try again next year. It wasn’t the huge letdown for him that it was for me. This was the biggest thing in my life at that age and I didn’t get to try again. This was it for me. He didn’t get it.”

For more than a decade, Hext lived with the widespread rumor that, when announcing the new Miss America, emcee Gary Collins accidentally read the names backwards. The implication is that Tamara Hext should have been the new Miss America instead of 4th runner-up. When Hext eventually asked Gary Collins about this rumor, he neither confirmed nor denied the story. Sam Hascall, one of the 1985 Miss America judges, finally dispelled the rumor by telling her that Sharlene Wells had indeed been their pick. (Hascall has also told Wells she was the judges’ unanimous choice [Wells, 1998], yet he still tells Nita Whitaker today that she was his choice for Miss America [Whitaker, 2001].)

Donna Cherry had been told there were three women to watch for at Miss America: Miss Utah, Miss Ohio, and herself. She reported that her “expectation

level catapulted to beyond reason”: She believed she was going to claim the Miss America crown, and if she didn’t win, she would at least do well. That she never even made the semifinals is a blow from which she’s never truly recovered. The night following the pageant, Cherry slept in a fetal ball between her mother and sister in a double bed. “I hurt so much, I couldn’t straighten out my body,” she said. The physical pain in her gut continued for six weeks.

When emcee Gary Collins called off the Top Ten, Blackburn was not included. Her immediate response was not an emotional one, but to assess and analyze where she’d fallen short, to figure out what had gone wrong. While the live event was being broadcast across the nation, Blackburn headed upstairs along with a number of other contestants. There were many, many tears.

Maryline Blackburn doesn’t remember going home from the Pageant.

“I felt like I let so many people down. I’d failed,” Blackburn (1998) said.

“Even though I won a non-finalist talent award and was asked to do tours, I failed everyone who had been supportive [of me]. I wanted to do big things for Alaska and put them on the map. I felt I failed them.”

Blackburn entered a cycle of questioning herself: What had she done wrong? What had not worked? She was very disappointed in herself and felt she had done something wrong to cause her not to make Top Ten.

“There’s nothing to prepare you for that kind of disappointment and failure,” Blackburn said. It took her a few years to move through it. Only when she’d completed touring for the Miss America Pageant did she begin to heal.

Blackburn chooses to not watch the Pageant telecast. To do so induces

anger and tears. "That could have been me. I could have had more opportunities to do more than what I'm doing. My career could be so much further advanced. All that money. All the gifts. I felt robbed," she said.

These feelings were exacerbated by Blackburn's receipt of a letter from "someone who would know" (Blackburn, 1998) that she was in the original Top Ten, but because she was an African-American considered a viable threat of winning the crown, her name was pulled. Blackburn still has the letter. She received an unprecedented standing ovation from two of the judges when her name was called as a non-finalist talent winner.

Joanne Caruso resents that she's never heard from the national pageant since she competed. "The Pageant discards you when it's over. Unless you make it big in entertainment. Then they hold you close to them," she said.

Caruso wanted to win the Miss America title, but said she didn't think she could win. Setting her sights instead on making the Top Ten, Caruso was severely disappointed when she was not a semifinalist.

"It was so final. There were no do-overs, no opportunity to try it again or go back and do it over. There's not many things in life that final. You just pack up and leave the next morning. You don't even get to say goodbye," Caruso (2001) said.

Caruso said she went into a deep funk following the pageant, a depression she could not seem to shake. For four months, she laid around a lot, not doing much of anything but re-living the pageant experience. "I just couldn't get past it," she said. "There was a complete sense of loss when it was over, a

void. It was discombobulating.”

Allison Boyd felt abandoned by her state pageant organization, feeling they were disorganized and unsupportive of her in both her pre-Miss America Pageant preparations and its aftermath. “I had hardly any appearances as Miss Nebraska and had little contact with them [the Miss Nebraska organization] all year long,” Boyd said. So negative was her experience with her state pageant that Boyd refuses to have anything to do with the organization today.

Harrell immediately burst into tears when she was not included in the televised Top Ten announcement. She calls the episode embarrassing, but said that it was a release of emotion she could not help, the result of building, pent-up emotions. She cried, she said, over the death of a dream.

For its winner, Miss America was an entirely different life for a different person. Wells has respectively attended her state and national pageants only once each in the 17 years since she won the national crown. She found these return visits miserable experiences – an unreal world in which she felt out of place. She calls the pageant a 2-year hobby, “a little sidetrip off of her lifepath”, a path to which she immediately returned after her year of duty.

Influencing Career Paths. All respondents reported varying degrees of expectation, hope and assumption that the visibility and networking opportunities provided by the Miss America Pageant system would translate into higher profile, post-pageant careers. All contestants discussed their subsequent disappointment in how their pageant participation had, in fact, little or nothing to do with their eventual career trajectories.

Joanne Caruso is a defense attorney for a large California firm. While Caruso said Miss America did not get her career going for her, the skills learned during her year as Miss Connecticut have proven invaluable in the courtroom. She specifically mentioned the maintenance of poise in various situations, being center stage in front of a lot of people, and public speaking.

Patricia LaTerra entered the pageant with full expectations that it would further her acting career: "... someone somewhere would see me perform and doors would open." It did not happen. She did receive career advice from Miss America judge Sam Hascall (a vice-president at the William Morris Talent Agency) and she established a lifelong writing relationship with another of her Miss America judges, actress/singer Pearl Bailey. Bailey even set up an interview for LaTerra with her own agent. It did not work out.

LaTerra no longer has "former Miss New Jersey" on her resume.

"I got maybe 20 percent of my interviews because of the title, but how many did I lose? Some thought it was great. Others had no regard for it at all. I was actually belittled during one interview because of it," LaTerra (1998) said.

Being Miss California helped Donna Cherry's career in some ways, but not as much as she had anticipated or hoped. More than specific bookings, she attributes the pageant with helping her care about her look and image which she believes has translated then to more career opportunities.

Sharlene Wells defined being Miss America as a crash course in public relations and a proving ground for making mistakes that she could learn from. "I

would probably have made the same mistakes later on and they could have hurt me professionally. I'm glad I learned early," she said.

The Miss America title changed Wells' career aspirations. At the time of competition, she was interested in becoming a veterinarian or working in international relations with an MBA. After her year as Miss America, however, Wells was offered a sports reporting job at a local television station. She found she liked the work and changed her major to broadcast journalism. Wells reported that being Miss America helped her on the other end of the microphone. She knew better than other reporters how to treat professionals and how to ask questions without annoying them.

ESPN hired Wells without knowing she was a former Miss America. Once word was out, however, Wells said she was the subject of derision among her peers. Jokes were made; respect denied. Wells found that she had to prove her professional credibility not once, but every time she entered a new industry, market or arena. "They assume you're here only because of the title," she said.

Kathy Manning also became a TV reporter but, unlike Sharlene, did not have journalism education or experience. She admitted she was hired because of her pageant titles. Manning also said she was resented by her colleagues "who went to school and worked their way up through smaller markets in Podunk USA". In contrast, Manning had jumped off into a Top 40 television market, never having done the work before.

Tamara Hext was a journalism major, but changed her career goals after her experiences as Miss Texas jaded her toward the media. "I could never ask

the probing questions and be rude. I just was unwilling to do that," she said. She began pursuing an acting and modeling career to meet the expectations she felt others had of her.

Hext eventually found her niche as a commercial spokesperson for Bally's Health Club. For seven years, she made television commercials and infomercials for the organization. Eventually, she had enough professional experience that she didn't need the pageant experience on her resume.

Being Miss Texas put Hext in the public eye, a place she said she very much enjoyed. She had a talent for speaking on-camera and was unwilling to leave the spotlight. "I couldn't let go of it," she said. "I needed to do something celebrity-like. I needed to be accomplishing something in the modeling or acting arena because this was what people expected of me."

Annie Easterbrook worked as a stuntwoman in Hollywood for several years after the pageant. Easterbrook claimed that her pageant title never helped her professionally although her Atlantic City gymnastic performance did net her two offers: to join a New York City dance troupe and to join a circus. She turned down both employment opportunities.

Marylaine Blackburn was on her way to a career in the fashion industry before she won the Miss Alaska title. When she began performing as part of her pageant appearances, her ambitions changed. Today she lives in Atlanta and sings country music, a calling she said she found through performing at Miss America.

Blackburn believes that people perk up and take another look at her upon

finding out she was once a Miss America contestant and that her title has opened professional doors of opportunity for her.

Conversely, Nita Whitaker believes that her participation in the Miss America program did not influence her career path nor grant her more opportunities. Whitaker has taken the title off her resume. "It didn't hurt, but it didn't help," she said.

Vickie Harrell was a piano player at the Miss America competition. She discovered she could also sing while performing as Miss South Carolina and now believes singing to be a calling. Harrell has subsequently sung as part of her ministries in churches throughout the U.S. and feels she would not have had a musical ministry nor certainly name recognition had she not been a Miss America participant.

Personal Life Effects of Miss America. Six of the Miss America Pageant contestants interviewed have so internalized the experience that they said they cannot separate how they might today be different had they never participated. They discussed extensively how their pageant participation had affected their self-presentation and world view.

"The pageant has been a key aspect in everything I've done," Hext (1998) said. "I would never have moved to Dallas. I would not have changed my major. I would not have graduated from college when I did. I would not be married who I'm married to."

Hext said she reaped a lot of positives, but there had also been a lot of negatives, the latter revolving around self-esteem issues and her search of what

she should do with her life.

Hext said she had always had self-esteem issues and believes she entered the Pageant for validation: "Yes, you are intelligent. Yes, you are beautiful. Yes, you are talented." And while Miss America was a wonderful experience overall, Hext said she has dealt with many self-esteem issues as a direct result of her Pageant participation.

"It has to have affected my self-esteem," Hext (1998) said. "It's hard to give specific and tangible examples, but the smallest things affect self-esteem, and Miss America was a big thing. And although it doesn't influence my personal life anymore, it still does [affect] my self-esteem. I still try to be that same person, look the same person, try to be that image -- especially if I'm in a situation where I don't feel very secure or comfortable. I put on that face, that air, that game face. I tell myself, 'You can do this. You're Miss Texas.'"

Hext became a full-blown bulimic during her Pageant years, a condition she struggled with for seven years before arresting the condition through intense counseling. It is still a struggle for her: "that whole image thing, perfection, being someone you're not."

No one speaks more vehemently or passionately about the effects of Miss America than Donna Cherry. "Discovered" by a former Miss America while performing in a Los Angeles nightclub, Cherry won her first attempts at local and state titles.

As a result of her competition, Cherry said "personal demons" have

chased her throughout the years. "I was just dying after the Pageant. I was hurting so much that I actually physically hurt in my gut. I'd say it really affected my self-image for a good five to six years afterward," she said.

Cherry lost 30 pounds to compete at Miss America. In response to her devastation at the Pageant's outcome, Cherry became what she termed "a rebel", gaining back all the weight she had lost, plus 20 pounds more.

"I was ready to quit Miss California," Cherry (1998) said. "I thought the whole thing was a sham. I ended up fulfilling my year as Miss Cal, but I just didn't care. I felt kind of anti-establishment ... I'd say it was pretty damaging."

Cherry said the biggest lesson learned from her Pageant experience is that, for women, beauty is power.

"If I was going to have money, I was going to have beauty – to get what I needed with beauty. I think it's a real sick lesson to learn, but that's what I learned," Cherry (1998) said. She suddenly became a hot ticket to date and started looking at a different caliber of men. "Debbie Maffett [Miss America 1983] told me that a lot of Miss America girls marry doctors and lawyers and do well for the rest of their life. So I thought okay, in addition to my own money, I want a guy who's well-heeled. I set my sights higher."

Another lesson Cherry cited involved marketing. "... The whole thing about being yourself. It's the stupidest thing I've ever heard. In the pageant, it's all about marketing yourself. Go in and market the heck out of yourself, but don't be yourself," she said.

Cherry felt so traumatized by the competition that she has blocked those two weeks of competition from her mind and purposely has nothing to remember them by: no pictures, no videotape, nothing. "My self-image after Miss America plummeted I approached my 20s with a sense of failure," she said.

The South Carolina State Pageant recently held an anniversary reunion for their past state queens. Vickie Harrell was not invited, a deliberate slight Harrell attributes to the many confrontations she had with her state organization during her year as Miss South Carolina. She said the acrimony became very intense and very public.

When crowned Miss South Carolina, Harrell was cautioned by a former state queen to not let her state organization take away her identity. The South Carolina Pageant had done that to her – changed her hair color, dressing style, and talent. She told Harrell she had competed at the Miss America Pageant a completely different person and had always regretted it.

Two months after Harrell's crowning, Harrell was forced to change weight trainers, speech coach, and talent coach. The executive director was adamant Harrell live with his family and change diets, a regimen in which she gained 13 pounds in eight weeks. Harrell was limited in wardrobe choice, not allowed to use the telephone nor talk with her family. She was often cursed and threatened with dethronement. With a continuing loss of freedom in making her own decisions, Harrell said she felt as if she were in prison. She went home to her parents and obtained a lawyer. The controversy caused so much press, Harrell was invited to appear on *Donahue*. It was a jolting introduction to the real world. For Harrell, the

result was great disillusionment.

Yet Harrell also says the Pageant positively affected her life. Before entering pageant competitions, she wore coke bottle glasses and was a self-described "buck-toothed tomboy". Her insecurities and lack of confidence included playing the piano in front of any kind of audience and public speaking. In preparation for pageant competition, Harrell said she learned how to put on make-up, walk gracefully, display good manners and dress well. Her self-esteem and confidence grew as did her happiness with who she was. Although the Pageant had its negatives, Harrell also attributes the Pageant with broadening her life: She became more outgoing, confident and mature for the experience.

Maryline Blackburn credits the pageant with helping her communicate with people on a personal level. It also helped her realize that she's not very good at playing a role.

"The pageant somehow develops women to be who they really aren't rather than allowing them to be who they are and developing that," Blackburn (1998) said. She used the example of smiling in a situation the contestant would not ordinarily smile in. Blackburn compared it to playing a role. "Afterward, I came to realize I was just a little puppet on a string. They pulled the strings and I did as they said. That's what a lot of girls do, but it didn't feel right to me. I'm more straightforward than that," she said.

Kathy Manning believes she is pretty much the same person now that she was when she entered the pageant, although she said her feet came off the ground a bit during the 18 months between her Miss America and Miss USA

competitions.

“Of course, add in the whole head game of being judged what’s on the outside and then the attempt to judge for what they think is on the inside, and it’s a wonder any of us walk away from something like that with any healthy thoughts or memories,” Manning (2001) said.

Later in the interview, Manning said that she entered the Pageant fresh, naïve, innocent. The Pageant changed her, but she did damage control and didn’t give the pageant “very much power.”

Manning was one of three preliminary swimsuit winners. At competition time, she was 5’7” and weighed 107 pounds. Manning claimed that weight had never been an issue for her. She did not have to work out and did not have to watch what she ate. She entered the competition feeling confident about her swimsuit body, a confidence further buoyed by a fairly lucrative modeling career in Memphis. Manning is now overweight, a huge issue in her life, and where she claims her headgames come into play.

“My body ... I mean that’s how I made my money for a long time,”

Manning (2001) said. “I have a poster out in my garage. I’m in a bikini on rollerblades for Coppertone and it was on all the bus stops in southern California. It’s this huge 4x6 poster, and it’s funny because I drive up in the car and there’s this thing. And it’s almost like this cruel joke ... That’s been the hardest thing, I guess. The expectations other people have of you and your looks...”

Manning discussed her role among the other carpool moms: “We go to

church together. We see each other socially. They're great women. They didn't do pageants or modeling, yet there's this undercurrent of competition going on to see who can be thinnest." Manning feels that she's embraced more readily and easily by these group of women than if she still had the swimsuit winner figure.

Being on the other side of 140 pounds, Manning said she can stand back from the situation and see how personal the entire weight and beauty issue is.

"I'm not comfortable with my weight," Manning (2001) said. "I'm not comfortable with myself in terms of that. I'm so frustrated. Until the age of 27, I didn't have to work hard to have a good body. I never had to work out. I could eat anything. I didn't have to think about it. I didn't have to worry about it. Weight was a non-issue."

Manning said her self-esteem has suffered and that she has had to do a lot of searching and redefining of self. "My body was my identity and it isn't anymore. I mean I'm still attractive, but it's not that power thing as when you're a swimsuit winner," she said.

Patricia LaTerra feels the Miss America Pageant has been a double-edged sword in her life. She met her husband as a direct result of being Miss New Jersey and made a close coterie of friendships among her Miss America chaperones. The latter are women who attended her wedding, who she still meets for lunches. LaTerra also feels the Pageant helped her develop personally in areas of competitiveness, openness, assertiveness, and self-confidence.

In contrast, LaTerra is haunted by the 1985 competition. Although living close to Atlantic City, she has not been back since she competed. Instead, she

watches the telecast every year on television.

“It always goes back to 1984,” LaTerra (1998) said. “I’m still second guessing: What should I have done? Why didn’t I do better? I dwell on it and am depressed the next day. And then, I think, ‘My gosh, life goes on. Look at all I have ... 2 kids and a wonderful husband. Why am I still making this so important? Why can’t I get past this?’ It’s terrible.”

Not making the Top Ten affected LaTerra’s self-esteem initially although she felt she did the best she could at the time. She began second-guessing herself: she should have dieted more, worked out more, practiced her talent more. LaTerra said that she had felt badly that all her relatives had spent “all that money” to see her as a Top Ten contestant and then it didn’t happen. For an instant, the question crossed her mind: Will my parents still love me?

Joanne Caruso was naturally “on a high” happy when she won the Miss Connecticut title. It lasted all of five minutes, and came to a crashing halt, when BeBe Shoppe Waring, a former Miss America and one of her judges, walked up to her and commenced in telling her everything she’d done wrong. Caruso felt deflated. Nothing she’d done seemed right.

“All anybody did was critique,” Caruso (2001) said. “Looking back, I see they wanted it to be constructive criticism, but it didn’t come across that way. It seemed to be a personal attack on how you looked, what you wore, how you walked.”

Caruso said this feedback had long-lasting effects that she still deals with today.

Caruso's sister was Miss Connecticut 1979 and a semifinalist. "The pretty one," Caruso said. Joanne has always seen herself as somewhat plain. How she felt people related to her never had anything to do with looks. Competing in a pageant atmosphere, Caruso perceived she was seen differently than before. It felt strange to her, to have people commenting on what she looked like. Never before had she felt that her looks were a part of who she was or how she was judged or perceived. Caruso had never seen herself in terms of looks in dealing with people.

Caruso said she will always have issues stemming from the pageant. They lessen with each year, but are always still there. She doesn't ever feel completely comfortable with the way she is. She regrets the "grand waste of time" she's taken in worrying about gaining weight and is careful to never say the words "fat" or "diet" in front of her two daughters.

Sharlene Wells said her Miss America reign did not change her goals for the person she wanted to be nor what she calls her "absolutes", which are trust in God, family first, and integrity. She said she did, however, exit her year more educated, aware and savvy. "I was very anxious to be anonymous again," Sharlene said. "Within two weeks [of being crowned Miss America], I discovered that I am a person who doesn't really like the spotlight." After her year as Miss America, Wells just wanted to hide anonymously. She went back to college.

In discussing her year as Miss America, Wells said she always traveled with a chaperone. A constant sea of strangers looked at her "not as a person with real feelings." People felt they knew her because they'd read a couple of articles,

the result being that they always wanted to be a lot more cozier with her than she did with them. She hated wearing the crown, finding it intensified people treating her as an object. She'd pretend to forget it at the hotel.

"I wasn't seen as a person," Wells said. "I didn't have a name. There were no boundaries." Wells found this so stressful, doing it every day, she considered quitting. "The social aspect was so exhausting, mentally exhausting. It drained me completely. I can't believe a program exists that puts a girl that age through it." Wells called her parents every night of her reign.

The schedule was demanding. She felt overwhelmed. She balked. She got into trouble with the Miss America Organization.

"I thought I was going to get fired one time," Wells (1998) said. "I was invited to perform at a dinner with a lot of the other state girls for a national sponsor. I was so excited to see girls my age. It was so much fun to talk with girls my age, to chat, talk about boys. The next morning I got a call from [the] Miss America [Organization]. Unknowingly, I had snubbed Gillette's executives when I hadn't played up to them. Heck, I was a lonely little girl. No one had explained the expectation. I'd had no direction at all."

Wells said she'd always had a good self-concept and a strong support system at home. She always felt capable and valuable to people, always safe and wanted and loved. Her year as Miss America was hardest on her self-esteem.

"Everyone has something to say about why you shouldn't be Miss America – from girls in the program to the press to people you meet on the street:

You shouldn't be this. You're not pretty enough. You're not this enough.

You won because whatever," Wells (1998) said.

Wells' mother made five scrapbooks of her year. Wells hates looking at them. They make her feel bad about herself – even today.

Wells' big dream was to go to Harvard. She had applied and was accepted. Her intervening time as Miss America changed her course. "Family and friends became so critically important during that year as Miss America," she said. "It just wasn't the right time to go out and be alone again after that year. It just wasn't the right time to be alone." Wells said she would have done a lot more academically had she never won the Miss America title.

Wells lives in Utah (the state she represented in the Miss America Pageant). She said people still treat her differently if they know about her past, a fact that annoys her. She cited other long-lasting effects as her growing wariness of people and their motives and the attachment of an image to her personal self.

To Do It Again? All respondents interviewed said they were unsure of what they were getting themselves into when they headed for Atlantic City. Ten of the 11 respondents felt the pageant had been a life-changing, defining, experience. Life lessons were learned. Although 8 of the 11 interviewees reported competing for their state title numerous times, responses were mixed as to whether these respondents would enter the national arena again, knowing what they knew now and if rules were changed so that contestants might compete multiple times on the national stage. Four respondents said they would enter the contest again, two former contestants said they would not (including the

woman who won the title), and five interviewees remained unclear about what they would do if faced with an informed choice.

Hext admitted she had reaped many benefits from her Miss Texas title. "I can't even begin to imagine what my life would be like," Hext (1998) said. "I'm from a backwards little town, from a poor family, a poor environment. With the Pageant I got to do things I would never have gotten to do otherwise."

Yet Hext sends confusing messages as to whether she would enter the pageant again. At one point, she said she'd definitely enter it again. At another point, she said she does not like where the Pageant is today and would not be an entrant. "There are a lot of negatives too," she said. "It's not reality. It's an exciting time, bigger than life, but it's not real life – which is what made afterwards so hard to deal with."

Hext felt she'd grown a lot during the week of competition. She'd gone into the pageant with one expectation [that she was going to win] and came out of it realizing that she'd just been part of one big game. The result was lost naivete.

Hext will not recommend entering the pageant to others. "I won't put girls in that situation where the downside can be just as bad as the good side of it," she said. Hext also refuses to be on the judging circuit. "I don't want my children exposed to that environment," she said.

"I might do it again, but I'd do it differently," was Joanne Caruso's (2001) response. "I had a lot of fun and getting the opportunity to perform my talent in front of that audience... For just that experience, I might do it

again if the Pageant were the same as it was back then. The way the Pageant is now, I'm not sure I would do it."

Caruso added that she hoped her two daughters were never interested in Miss America. "I think it can do a lot of damage," she said.

Easterbrook and Boyd both said they would do the pageant again. "I wasn't your typically schooled pageant person and I absolutely saw the polish others had from all their years of preparation, but I'd do it again," Easterbrook said. "I wouldn't discourage anyone from doing it."

Boyd concurs. A born performer, she was named to the USO tour which she named as the highlight of her Miss America experience. Not expecting to either win the Miss America title or make the semi-finals, Boyd achieved her goal of winning a non-finalist talent award and had "'a wonderful Pageant experience.' Miss America got me to Europe," she said. "I don't know that I'd have ever made it otherwise."

LaTerra would also enter the Pageant again, but only because of the friendships made during that year. "If all the friends were removed from the equation, I'm not sure I'd want to then," she said.

Perhaps no one is more familiar with the Miss America Organization than its 1985 winner, Sharlene Wells.

"The pros outweigh the cons and I'm glad I did it, but I would not want to do it again," Wells (1998) said. "My parents were missionaries; I grew up in South America. I wasn't aware of how America perceives pageants and their winners. Had I known everything about it – the perceptions out there

– I probably would not have taken that first step. If I had had all the information, I've gotta be honest: I don't think I would do it."

When Wells' daughters watch the televised pageant each year, Wells makes it clear to them that it is not necessarily something they want to do.

Kathy Manning looks back and says she shakes her head that she stood in a swimsuit and heels before the nation, but says yes, she'd do it again if she were that age.

"I wouldn't want to go back any wiser," Manning (2001) said. "There was something innocent about not being wise to that whole political system. I felt good about – and will always feel good about – feeling innocent and fresh about that whole experience. I would never want to feel jaded."

Maryline Blackburn speaks adamantly:

"I would not do it again," Blackburn (1998) says. "I wouldn't want to put myself through the disappointment again. Yes, it was a good experience. It was a wonderful opportunity. It helped me to develop as a person. At the same time, it was a very confining experience that constantly took a part out of me. It took a part of my self-confidence that no matter how hard you try, or people tell you things, you can't get back. They took it away. By the time I'd left, they'd taken a chunk of it away. They stripped me of my innocence."

Chapter Five: ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

The Miss America Pageant is a two-week experience for its state representatives, full of whirlwind photo-ops, interviews, appearances, rehearsals and preliminary competitions. It is a heady time fraught with activity, pressure, and glitz. While true that each contestant perceives and processes this two-week experience differently, it can unequivocally be said that the two weeks at the Miss America Pageant leave an indelible mark on nearly all of its participants' lives with many far-flung ramifications.

For a few contestants, Miss America is a blip on their radar screen, a fun sidetrip. They move on with their lives and reach out toward other goals. For the majority, however, Miss America remains unfinished business, an open sore that rankles, a source of great, unresolved pain. There is anger, resentment, bitterness, doubt, sadness, regret, and pain – even after seventeen years.

In answering the research question, respondents reported that it had taken years for them to make sense of their Miss America experience, to put together the puzzle pieces of what had happened there. Collectively, they reached the following conclusions:

1. The impact of Vanessa Williams' abdication on the 1985 competition cannot be overestimated.
2. The Pageant's outcome is oftentimes politically motivated, if not rigged.
3. The struggle for understanding was impeded by the rumor and innuendo that followed the competition.
4. The universally felt post-pageant void was an entirely avoidable

situation – if the Miss America Organization had handled the contestants' transition differently or been initially open about their own agenda.

5. The Miss America Pageant is all about big business. Contestants are the necessary commodity to make it all happen.
6. Despite the Miss America Organization's projections to the contrary, the Pageant is not a competition per se with the best contestant winning, but a competition greatly influenced by many extraneous and political factors.
7. Participation in such a richly traditional and time-honored event had been a distinct privilege, but had come at a monumental, unforeseen price.

The specifics of the above revelations are as follows:

Participation in the Miss America Pageant carries a potential risk of subsequent psychological difficulties which can include depression, shame, significant loss of self-esteem, self-doubt, and loss of direction. The presence and extent of these difficulties appears to be positively correlated to an individual's expectation level of her performance and outcome of the Pageant -- an expectation fueled by friends, family, pageant personnel and the media. For the 1985 contest, rumor and innuendo exacerbated and prolonged the aforementioned symptoms even while contestants struggled to make sense of their Miss America Pageant experience.

This struggle was exacerbated by the fallout created in Vanessa Williams'

abrupt and unexpected abdication from the title. Banet-Weiser (1999) states that pageants communicate how women should appear and what they should be about, serving as sites for defining femininity and sexuality while measuring a nation's barometer on constructs of racial identity. Vanessa's resignation sent a strong public message on the acceptable limits of sexuality and femininity. Her dethronement affected everyone, differing only in extent and scope. There is no one, including the winner, who does not believe the outcome of the 1985 competition was "pure". At best, it was politically influenced. At worst, it was a rigged competition.

The truth is hidden somewhere within a secretive morass of half-truths and lies, a situation that fuels contestants' residual feelings these many years later and ultimately denies contestants closure – particularly the African-American contestants who believe their chances were ruined before they even arrived in Atlantic City. Contestants are denied the ability to make the ultimate sense of – and peace with – their experience at Miss America.

There are strong elements of patriarchy and objectification associated with the Miss America Pageant. Specifically, the Pageant support system once behind the contestant – helping her assemble her wardrobe, prepare her talent, coordinate her competitive presentation – makes itself unavailable to that contestant once the Pageant telecast is over. Blackburn said, "If you don't do anything at Miss America, the state organization drops you like a hot potato." Blackburn eventually was forced to sue the Miss Alaska Pageant Organization over rights to her musical arrangement. The Nebraska State Pageant had little

post-pageant communication with Boyd, booking very few appearances for her. Caruso said she seldom hears from the Connecticut state organization and never from Miss America: "It's as if I was never there." Neither Harrell nor myself were given our promised awards – prizes that included fur coats, exotic trips, a car. The loss of this support system, the lack of follow-up and follow-through, becomes yet another facet of the post-pageant void, another loss facing the contestant at this crucial juncture of her year as a state representative.

Of course, the implication behind this disruption of relationship is that it was really no personal relationship at all, but one based on the business of preparation and production of a media event. Once that event is over, the Organization moves forward to the next area of business, which is preparing for next year's competition. Contestants have been effectively reduced to being just bodies; the Organization has separated out the woman's body from the total individual (Bartky, 1990) – an individual with feelings and needs. The contestant is relegated to the status of has-been at the average age of 21 years.

It should be noted that chaperones can be the exception. Serving as long-time companion, consultant, and confidant, a lasting relationship may be forged as was the case for both myself and Patricia LaTerra, Miss New Jersey. Unfortunately, there is no accounting for chemistry and the formation of a contestant-chaperone bond is a relatively rare occurrence. Case in point: Despite traveling with the same two women for a year, Sharlene Wells, Miss America, specifically mentioned the loneliness of traveling with a virtual stranger.

Much of the contestants' anger directed toward the Miss America Pageant

involves a perceived loss of innocence. Participants admittedly entered the Pageant with little or no understanding of its larger commercial and financial considerations. With benefit of hindsight and both life and business experience, contestants eventually came to believe that the Miss America Pageant exists largely as a money-making venue for Atlantic City and associated vendors and is driven primarily by money and image. The baring of their female bodies had been the commodity, linked to the economic gain of men (Banet-Weiser, 1999).

Surprisingly, no angst accompanies this realization. Rather, there is rancor and bitterness that the Pageant presented itself as a fairly held contest existing solely to provide opportunity and academic scholarship for young women. That is, "The Miss America competition exists for the purpose of providing personal and professional opportunities for young America women and promoting their voice in culture, politics and the community" ("The Miss America Organization", 2001).

"From the moment I got into it [the Miss America Pageant system], I knew it was a roll of the dice. It was a crap shoot," Miss America Wells said. "Girls need to be prepared for that. You can't know what they're [the Miss America Organization] looking for, what particular type of girl they want. You just need to do the best you can so you feel good about it." "The politics are so irritating and the young women don't know any part of that," Caruso, Miss Connecticut, stated. "You are told and given the impression that things are so different. It's fair, it's equal. That's all propaganda hooey." Maryline Blackburn of Alaska is particularly angry: "How dare an institution who promotes itself as all-American as apple pie,

full of character, girl-next-door wholesomeness, and integrity be the one who strips you of your innocence. You expect that from big business. You expect that from bad people. You do not expect it from Miss America.”

Contestants articulated the need for state pageants to communicate the larger, over-all picture of the Miss America competition, i.e., Miss America is looking for a specific type of woman to fill a role, a woman who will best fulfill their marketing and public relations functions. It is not necessarily a competition based on being the most accomplished, intelligent, talented or even beautiful. Rather, the Pageant is more an audition for those interested in playing the Miss America role for a year. This information could help defuse the sense of betrayal and pain many feel upon exiting the national contest.

In summarizing these responses, it appears that contestants are conflicted in how they ultimately make sense of their participation in the Miss America contest. The opportunity to compete is a privilege afforded to only a few women and can be considered a great compliment, validating them as ideal women, i.e., perfect examples of femininity and of women possessing greater beauty, talent and intellect.

Conversely, participating in the Miss America Pageant is viewed as a debilitating, scarring experience. Rather than a fair competition, contestants believe they participated in a process that was rigged and political. The Miss America Organization had used them and then thrown them away.

Consequently, these two seemingly opposing perspectives, when taken together, lead to the conclusion that the Pageant is a worthwhile institution

providing wonderful opportunity – if only the process were not corrupt.

The Miss America Pageant left its thumbprint on the development of its contestants -- as individuals, as women. The Pageant's effects on how these contestants constructed themselves have been pervasive. Many interviewees predicted they would last a lifetime, describing the Miss America experience as "life defining", a "pivotal point" in their lives. They cited several instances in how the Miss America Pageant had affected their construction of self:

1. The Miss America Pageant has a narrow script for femininity and has influenced what contestants even today define as appropriate dress, conduct, appearance, body type and image.
2. The competition still impacts their sense and view of self. Former participants still feel identification with the role and the pressure to live up to it.
3. The state title gave state representatives some cache' when it came to the marriage market.
4. Participation in the event was oftentimes prompted by a seeking of validation, to be seen as a worthwhile person, as an attractive woman.
5. Contestants still practice performances of self, a tool that is most often used in uncomfortable and/or professional situations.
6. The skills and tools learned through the Miss America Pageant system, e.g., make-up application, accessorizing, and public speaking are still very much used today and have long been internalized.

Pipher (1994) cautions that young girls quickly learn that attractiveness is

both a necessary and sufficient condition for their success. Realizing that appearance is important in defining social acceptability, they allow the culture to define who they should be. The Miss America Pageant is part of this culture, undeniably a powerful instrument in the molding of young women, for its contestants and female viewers alike (Banet-Weiser, 1998). The Pageant clearly and narrowly defines the script for femininity, the consequence being a limitation of possibilities in who and what a woman will be.

For participants, this script is most clearly and directly communicated by the Pageant's state organizations and encompasses appropriate and desirable dress, conduct, body type, appearance and image. For female and male viewers, the feminine script – of what is considered attractive and desirable in our society -- is most predominantly communicated via the televised pageant (Banet-Weiser, 1999).

As Noll and Fredrickson (1998) documented, self-objectification leads women to become preoccupied with their own physical appearance. In this study, almost all former participants felt the pressure to still be beautiful and sophisticated, to live up to their billing as a former Miss America contestant. These contestants have internalized the perspective of another's gaze, resulting in what Fredrickson and Roberts (1997) call a habitual, self-conscious body monitoring. The preoccupation with appearance continues and what had been perceived in youth as a tremendous honor had become an enormous weight and everpresent burden, a chapter that, for some, will never be closed.

Following the Miss America competition, contestants experience a time of

overwhelming feelings, among these being fear, disappointment, floundering, depression, indescribable pain, self-blame, shame and abandonment.

Contestants have suffered a very public defeat. They have been judged and found wanting before a national audience of millions. After so many hours and months of intense preparation, there is now no longer anything to prepare for. How to now fill that time becomes an issue. Non-finalist contestants hoping to use the pageant as a launching pad for an entertainment career are left with no idea of how to accomplish that goal. For the majority, the months – and sometimes years – following the Miss America competition becomes a time of “floundering”, a time of intense personal search of self.

For the majority of contestants, this time of internal searching did not cease until marriage. Indeed, marriage seems to have been a refuge where contestants dropped their internal struggle (and subsequently their former dreams and goals), to settle comfortably into the twin roles of wife and mother. For many, it was only at this time that the pain of the Miss America competition began to subside as they began a totally new life.

Debra Maffett, (Miss America 1983) claimed that Miss America girls tended to marry “well”, that is, to marry men of greater financial means, giving credence to Unger’s (1979) statement that physical beauty can function as a prime currency for women. Naomi Wolf (1991), likewise, mentions beauty as the informal currency system of the marriage market, targeting the 1980s as the time when this shift occurred.

I found similar results when applying these concepts to my research

population. Kelly Brumagen, Miss Kentucky, married a physician (A. Easterbrook, personal communications, December 1, 1988). Manning is married to a multi-millionaire real estate tycoon. Whitaker admitted marrying a man of wealth. Hext is married to an orthopedic surgeon. Francesca Adler (Miss North Carolina) married a three-star general (J. Caruso, personal communications, June 27, 2001). Harrell is the wife of a minister of a large Baptist church, a minister with a doctorate degree. Mary Ann Farrell, (Miss New York) married a multi-millionaire and lives in Monte Carlo (J. Caruso, personal communication, June 27, 2001). LaTerra is married to an upper management executive. Boyd married a professional football player. Hext, Adler, and LaTerra said they would have not met their spouses had they not been a state representative. None of these women work outside the home.

It is ironic that these contestants – extremely accomplished, educated, and visibly ambitious – dropped the gauntlet of their career aspirations to instead opt for the age-old traditional roles of wife and mother. Many of them (particularly those from the South) appeared to use their state title as a bargaining chip into marrying well, thereby fulfilling a patriarchally described role, *i.e.*, trading feminine beauty for financial security and status. It could be argued that, in the end, nothing separated them from their non-pageant counterparts. They merely took a more “scenic” circuitous route to a very normal and traditional destination.

Validation appears to be of great issue among Miss America contestants. One reason for this might be that, at an age of great self-discovery (*i.e.*, late teens and early twenties), identity formation is more complicated for them

because of a splitting of self. Pipher (1994) says that this splitting and subsequent gap between girls' true selves and cultural prescriptions in what is properly female creates enormous problems, including disorientation and depression. Pressured to be someone they are not, girls stop "being" and start "seeming" – seemingly poised, well-balanced, all-American, having it all, sophisticated, perfect.

To present this all-encompassing image, beauty pageant contestants constantly practice "performances of the self". These performances are conducted within the spirit of "being the best you can be". This "Best You" expresses female liberal selfhood within the patriarchal culture – that somehow there is a best You out of all the possible Yous and it is possible to choose to become "It" with work and discipline. Great investments are made in training and practice to cultivate good pageant answers while also fostering the ability to elicit convincing spontaneity. The patented answers and rehearsed spontaneity is not seen as dishonest nor disingenuous, but as well-defined strategy (Banet-Weiser, 1994).

The Pageant appears to draw young women who are preternaturally disposed to feeling insecure about themselves or in what they perceive as insecure family situations. They feel the Pageant offers the opportunity to validate personal worth and value to others. It thus becomes a vehicle to raise self-esteem. Manning discussed a possible link between her adoption and her choosing to participate in the pageant. "Adopted kids want to be affirmed and accepted. There's always fear of abandonment, always a thread of that," she

said.

Hext, the second of three adoptees I happened to interview (Nebraska is the third), said it is her nature to please and keep unpleasantries inside. She said she's always been somewhat insecure and had self-confidence issues. She has used the Miss Texas title to bolster her confidence in uncomfortable situations although she still finds herself "trying to be that image, that state person."

In her interview, Donna Cherry recounted running on the beach three days after winning Miss California and thinking: "I won Miss California. My body must not be so fat. My body must be okay."

There are numerous elements of self-objectification taking place within the Miss America system. These include wearing the crown, intense coaching and subsequent re-making of an individual into someone she is not, the ubiquitous personal criticism, post-pageant abandonment of the contestant by their state organization, and inclusion of the swimsuit competition in the contest. The swimsuit competition was still an uneasy issue for seven of the eleven interviewees, whether it be disagreement with its inclusion in the pageant or their own post-pageant struggles with body image and bulimia as a result of the pageant's focus on the body.

Despite recognizance of these negative factors, contestants are also aware of the many benefits gained by their participation in the pageant program. Ironically, the scholarship monies gained (Miss America largely validates its existence on the awarding of these educational scholarships) were not among the most valued benefits. Rather, contestants most valued the process of self-

discovery and skill acquisition for which the Pageant acted as catalyst.

Specifically cited were fashion sense, make-up application, public speaking, assertiveness, interview skills, poise, and performance opportunities and skills.

Many contestants changed direction in their respective career paths as a direct result of self-knowledge (.e.g., "I never knew I could sing" [Harrell, 1998]) gained during their pageant years. Yet while the Miss America Pageant undeniably provides a forum for young women to speak, perform, network, and hone social skills and graces, it can also provide contestants with long-standing emotional scars. As there is no way of forecasting the extent of psychological damage a contestant will incur, a contestant acquires these benefits at a substantial risk.

To summarize this set of responses:

1. Participating in the Pageant has provided some contestants with an identity; they continue to define and perform themselves as Miss America contestants yet today. They also continue to compare themselves to the feminine ideal, selecting clothing, make-up, hairstyles and accessories as though their identity still depends on how they stack up against this ideal.
2. Contestants seemingly construct themselves as privileged and as losers. Regarding the former, the Pageant helped some participants marry well, affording them experiences few other individuals ever have the opportunity in which to partake. Being a contestant validated their sense of self as an ideal woman.
3. Conversely, contestants consider themselves losers because they did

not meet the Miss America ideal, failing to capture the Miss America crown. It is the struggle between these two constructions that can take years for Miss America contenders to reconcile, if indeed they ever do. Believing the competition to be corrupt helps a contestant protect her self-esteem in explaining why she lost the competition or to believe she may have won if the competition had been a fair one.

Despite these realizations, several contestants are either inexplicably ambivalent or claim that they would enter the pageant again, if possible. This seemingly defies reason. There may be two possible reasons behind these surprising responses.

Noll and Fredrickson (1998, p. 624) say that "self-objectification is defined as valuing one's own body more from a third-person, rather than first-person, perspective." It is possible that some contestants have so internalized the third-person perspective that they have lost touch with their first-person, authentic, self.

Pipher (1994) gives this possibility further substantiation. In recognizing men have the power, women feel that their only opportunity for power is to become submissive, adored subjects. They thus construct their feminine identities in search of approval from the dominant white male culture, splitting from their autonomous, authentic self into a false self who pretends to be who others want them to be. They lose themselves and their authentic feelings along the way.

Another possible reason centers around validation issues, the reason why

so many women enter the Miss America Pageant. Unfortunately, the pageant environment is geared not to alleviate validation issues, but to exacerbate them. Noll and Fredrickson (1998) cite that self-objectifying individuals experience shame when they compare themselves to cultural ideals and fall short. They also experience feelings of worthlessness and powerlessness (Tangney, 1993). These contestants experienced the public humiliation of not winning the Miss America title. For the contestant seeking validation, perhaps the pull is too strong to not try once again.

Ultimately, there are no winners at Miss America. Those who do not win struggle with residual self-esteem and failure issues. Yet ironically, the young woman who wins the Miss America title also struggles with these same issues. Sharlene Wells, the 1985 winner, was a young woman who entered the pageant self-assured with a strong sense of family and self. She completed her reign emotionally bankrupt. There had not been enough space and time; there had been too much criticism from the public, press and Miss America Organization. For the 51 contestants of the 1985 Miss America Pageant, the chances were slim of exiting the experience a whole person.

It has been three years since I wrote my first paper on this topic. In the interim, I married and have had a child. As so many respondents told me, these new developments in my life have greatly eased the pain and disappointment of my Miss America experience. This would probably have been the end of my Miss America Journey, but for the research conducted for this thesis. As a result of my new knowledge and enlightenment, the ache has turned to anger. I now feel very

used by a duplicitous organization that I feel preys upon the innocence and hopes and dreams of young women to the detriment of their psychological – and sometimes physical – well-being. The Miss America Organization's propagandistic marketing is irresponsible in its purposeful misrepresentation of what they are about and what they do. It is telling that, at times, some of my peers gave contradictory answers about the pageant's ill effects upon them and their uncertainty about whether they would enter the pageant again. Yet these same respondents do not want their daughters involved in the pageant program.

In *Reviving Ophelia* (pp. 268-269), Pipher includes testimony from a woman named June:

"The year Mom died, I watched the Miss America pageant all by myself. I stared at those thin, poised girls and knew I would never be like that. I had no looks and no talents. Only my mom had loved me as I was. I thought about giving up."

For me, this remains one of the most powerful, haunting passages in my research. Looking through the chapter for contextual clues as to timing, I realized that June could very well have been watching me at my Miss America Pageant. We had positioned our bodies and personalities to sell an idealized version of American beauty, femininity and life (Banet-Weiser, 1994) and June, along with countless others – including us contestants – had bought the image the Miss America Organization was promoting. June, too, was a victim of the 1985 Miss America Pageant. I wish she knew the whole story.

Chapter Six: CONCLUSION

The author was a contestant in the 1985 Miss America Pageant, representing the state of Iowa. The experience proved a haunting one, leaving her with a sometimes debilitating sense of failure and shame. The author undertook this qualitative study in an attempt to make sense of her Miss America Pageant experience.

Eleven state representatives were interviewed for this study. They included the winning Miss America, the second and fourth runners-up to Miss America, three recipients of non-finalist talent awards, and five contestants who received no special award at the national competition. This field of 11 respondents represented four representatives from western states, four Southern contestants, two women representing the northeastern contingent, and one Midwestern contestant. Interviews were conducted using a semi-structured style of interviewing and a protocol of 15 questions.

Respondents appeared to have two main reasons for having entered the Miss America Pageant: (1) To receive validation as a woman and/or individual, and (2) to use the pageant as a professional stepping stone. It is ironic that of the many benefits contestants say they received from competing in the Miss America Pageant, validation and professional opportunities were not two of them.

Respondents reported both positive and negative effects from having participated in the national pageant. Positive benefits included the experience of partaking in such a large, mass media event; the opportunity to perform before such a large audience; travel; the meeting of celebrities; scholarship monies

gained; the discovery of previously unknown talents; acquisition of fashion sense and make-up skills; the learning of good presentational skills. Interviewees expressed a reverence toward having been a part of something so large, historical, and rich in tradition.

In contrast, respondents reported deleterious effects from their pageant participation, the ramifications of which affect many of them yet today. These include intense feelings of disappointment, failure, loss, shame, rejection and self-doubt. There were also reported cases of anorexia and bulimia and significant losses of self-esteem. Many contestants also reported a shift in how they saw themselves, putting a greater emphasis on appearance.

The 1985 Miss America Pageant was a particularly tumultuous competition. Six weeks before, Vanessa Williams had prematurely stepped away from her Miss America title upon the publication of pre-pageant nude photographs taken of her. Vanessa's abrupt and unexpected abdication had enormous impact upon the competition and its participants. All interviewees believed it had affected the outcome of the pageant. African-American contestants felt particularly impacted by the unexpected development, feeling it ruined any chances they might have had to win the Miss America crown.

The study was conducted within the frameworks of patriarchy and objectification theory. The Miss America Pageant was found to be firmly situated within a patriarchal framework, promoting participants as a commodity while using the mass media event as a lucrative venue for Atlantic City tourism. Women are encouraged to use their physical beauty for economic gain and

social success.

The Miss America Pageant system also exhibits many instances of objectifying behavior. Women are reduced to a title. Contestants are expected to fit a narrow mold of feminine ideal to increase their chance of becoming Miss America. The swimsuit competition asks women to put their body in a judging situation. Contestants are repeatedly exposed and displayed upon elevated, spotlit runways.

Yet contestants from the 1985 Miss America contest do not seem to have a consciousness of the critical, feminist arguments presented in this study. No interviewee ever used the term "objectification" nor articulated an awareness of the effect of male domination within the pageant's organization and structure. They failed to see that the Pageant perpetuates patriarchy and self-objectification of women or how the patriarchal image of "woman" is reinforced by the pageant as a patriarchal institution.

What former contestants did have to say was that the Miss America Pageant served as one possible route toward validation and that if it were not such a corrupt system, the Pageant would be a positive experience with minimal scarring. Contestants also reported that they still largely define and perform themselves as Miss America contestants yet today, and while they ultimately see themselves as privileged in having been able to compete for the title, they were also losers in failing to meet the Miss America ideal when they did not capture the crown. That the winner also suffered loss of self-esteem and emotional bankruptcy reveals that the Miss America Pageant creates a catch-22 situation.

There is no way for a young woman to win the Miss America game.

Further study of this topic is merited as the Miss America Pageant enjoys a wide net of access and influence to U.S. women. Limitations of this study included the number of contestants and time constraints pertaining to project deadlines. One suggestion for further study is to increase the universe of respondents from the 1985 competition. Another suggestion is to include contestants from other, less tumultuous, years of competition.

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APPENDIX

APPENDIX A: PROTOCOL

Tell me what you remember from the 1985 Pageant.

What were your expectations going into the Pageant?

What are the moments during that week that really stick out in your mind?

What were some of the best parts of the Miss America experience?

What part of the Miss America experience do you wish you could just “cut out”?

How did you see yourself before the Pageant?

How did you see yourself during the Pageant?

How did you see yourself after the Pageant?

How do you think you'd be a different person today if you'd never participated?

Looking back on the experience, how has it affected your life?

Has the Pageant influenced your career path? If so, how?

Has the Pageant influenced your personal life? If so, how?

In looking back, what were the life lessons you learned from having participated in the Pageant?

Describe your thoughts and feelings when you arrived back home after the Pageant.

Knowing what you know now, would you do it again?