MISS HOMEGROWN: THE PERFORMANCE OF FOOD, FESTIVAL, AND FEMININITY IN LOCAL QUEEN PAGEANTS

Heather A. Williams

A Dissertation

Submitted to the Graduate College of Bowling Green State University in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

August 2009

Committee:

Dr. Ronald Shields, Advisor

Dr. Lynda Dee Dixon
Graduate Faculty Representative

Dr. Jonathan Chambers

Dr. Lesa Lockford
ABSTRACT

Dr. Ronald Shields, Advisor

The cultural phenomenon of the beauty pageant, one could argue, is deeply embedded in the gendered performance of the feminine ideal. Although, in recent years, the Miss America Pageant appears to be fading into kitschy nostalgia, the local pageant remains a celebratory and respected event held in many small Midwestern communities. The appeal of the pageant as a performance genre continues to reflect the qualities of the American feminine ideal – beauty, perfection, “healthy” competition, consumption, and consumerism. However, local pageants are often rooted within festival celebration and thereby represent and maintain the social and consumer values inherent in each individual community. Using case studies of local festival pageants held in the Midwestern state of Ohio as well as interviews with pageant contestants, in this study I locate the ways in which contestants perform, within the given boundaries of the pageant, a small town version of the feminine ideal. In relation to the values of economy and prosperity that local festival celebrates, I specifically examine festivals that are centered on the celebration of food. In doing so, I equate the gendered performance of the young female body in relation to the food whose title she bears and identify how the feminine body is at once consumed and celebrated by the local community. As queen pageants are contested feminist terrain, it is my hope that this study provides a new and provocative look at local femininity as defined by small town community through the valuing and celebration of the young female representative in local pageant performance.
For my Mother and Father who taught me the value of sugar beets and tiaras.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to extend my sincerest gratitude and respect to my committee co-chairs, Ronald Shields and Jonathan Chambers, as well as to Lesa Lockford, Lynda Dee Dixon, and Leigh Ann Wheeler for serving, throughout my process, on my committee. I am grateful for their scholarly advice, valuable time, and enduring patience as I moved through this project. I offer my appreciation to the Department of Theatre and Film at Bowling Green State University for awarding me the 2007-2008 Dissertation Fellowship. Without it, I would have never had the opportunities to travel as I did for my research. To the young women who spoke with me during the interview process, I am forever grateful for your willingness to contribute.

I also thank Marty Smith and Sue Shamhart for unselfishly providing me with food, flavored coffee, shelter, and companionship on that very first festival event – you helped get the ball rolling! I express my appreciation to Micheal Anders, Marie Louden Hanes, Vicki McClurkin, and Kathy Newell at The University of Findlay for their continued support of my progress as I worked through my first full-time faculty position and the end of this project. I am grateful to Lucy, Emma, and Morgan for keeping me company by sitting on my papers and my lap throughout the process. Finally, to Jim - my partner in life, love, and academia – thank you for appreciating my femininity and my feminism.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter I. INTRODUCTION: PAGEANTRY AND THE FEMININE IDEAL</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Statement of Key Research Questions</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Contributions and New Knowledge</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Limitations</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Theoretical Framework</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Femininity or Feminism?</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Performance</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Miss America: History and Beyond</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Consumption and Beauty</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Festival, Rites of Passage, and Community</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Food and Festival</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Additional Sources</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Summary</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter II. MISS AMERICA, A CONTESTED HISTORY</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Feminine Performances Presently Past: The Miss America Pageant</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bra-Burners Versus Beauty Queens: Mediated Recognition</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Victorian Leisure: A Moral Entertainment</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Festival Flavor: The First Fall Frolics</td>
<td>59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cleaning Up Her Image: Miss America Re-Vamped</td>
<td>62</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter III. FOOD, FESTIVAL, AND FEMININITY: THE PLAY OF LOCAL PAGEANTRY</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>64</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Sugar Beets and Ox Cart Days: A Personal and Narrative History......................... 64
Festival Celebration: Presenting the “Ideal” Community...................................... 76
American Turkey and French Wine: Food as Symbol......................................... 78
Telling Stories: Audiencing the Festival............................................................... 84
The Festival Road Trip: First Stop, Milan Ohio.................................................... 85
Walking the Walk: The Milan Melon Queen Pageant........................................... 100
Seeds of Discontent: Awaiting the Judges’ Decision............................................ 111
And the Winner Is.................................................................................................. 117

CHAPTER IV. ABUNDANT FEMININTY: TOMATOES, GRAPES, AND PUMPKINS.......................................................................................................................... 126
Lunching with the Queens: The Reynoldsburg Tomato Festival............................ 126
Let Us Eat: Feasting on Femininity......................................................................... 131
Questioning the Feminine: The Reynoldsburg Tomato Festival............................ 138
Sell it Girl: The Miss Grapette Pageant................................................................. 150
Miss Grapette Pageant Finale: The “Best” of the Bunch....................................... 162
Femininity Transplanted to Festival Grounds: The Geneva Grape JAMboree........ 168
Size Matters: The Circleville Pumpkin Show....................................................... 171
Community or Competition: The Miss Pumpkin Show Queen Contest............... 177

CHAPTER V. ROYAL VOICES ..................................................................................... 187
Local Misses: Borrowing and Adapting Miss America......................................... 193
I’m Not a Pageant Girl: Stereotypes Re-Examined............................................... 199
Do You Have a Bobby Pin? Creating Female Community................................... 203
Rewards of Representation..................................................................................... 206
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pricing Femininity: The Cost of Competition</td>
<td>211</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Promotional Speaker: The Queen Contestant as Community Spokesperson</td>
<td>213</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Swimsuits, Evening Gowns and High Heels: A Performance of A“wear”ness</td>
<td>216</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Question: Are You a Feminist?</td>
<td>220</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER VI. CONCLUSION</td>
<td>224</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Restatement of Major Research Question/s and Methods</td>
<td>224</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Summary of Findings</td>
<td>226</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Expanded Interpretive Research</td>
<td>237</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Concluding Thoughts</td>
<td>237</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>REFERENCES</td>
<td>239</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>APPENDIX A. RECRUITMENT FLYER</td>
<td>249</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>APPENDIX B. INTERVIEW QUESTIONS</td>
<td>250</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>APPENDIX C. INFORMED CONSENT FORM</td>
<td>253</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
# LIST OF FIGURES

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Figure</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Melon Man as Grand Marshal of the Milan Melon Festival Parade</td>
<td>97</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>The 2007-2008 Milan Melon Queen on Her Watermelon Throne</td>
<td>99</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>The 2007-2008 Milan Melon Queen on Her Musk Melon Throne</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>The 2007-2008 Milan Melon Queen Contestants</td>
<td>110</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>The Reynoldsburg Tomato Festival Luncheon Hosts and Visiting Royalty</td>
<td>137</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>The Royal Bounty on Display at the Miss Grapette Pageant</td>
<td>153</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Contestant Number One Advertising for Bilicics Busy Mart</td>
<td>159</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Contestant Number Six Reads the Story of the Caurso Family History</td>
<td>159</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Miss Grapette 2006-2007 and the “Lil’ Ole Winemaker”</td>
<td>165</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>The 2007-2008 Miss Grapette Royalty and Line of Little Girls</td>
<td>167</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>The Introduction of Visiting Queens at the Grape JAMboree</td>
<td>170</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>The Tower of Pumpkins at the Circleville Pumpkin Show</td>
<td>173</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>The “Kings” of the Harvest at the Circleville Pumpkin Show</td>
<td>174</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>A Supportive Fan at the Miss Circleville Pumpkin Show Queen Pageant</td>
<td>180</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION: PAGEANTRY AND THE FEMININE IDEAL

The iconic figure of the pageant queen is a construction produced through a performance of femininity. Although, some might argue she is, at present, a fading figure or a vestige of a bygone era, beauty contests and/or scholarship pageants remain plentiful and popular throughout the United States. From the more widely recognized and watched Miss America and Miss USA pageants, to the lesser acknowledged state and local pageants, the pageant queen remains a figure that represents for many a feminine ideal. She is attractive but not garish, cheerful but not giggly, sexy but not sexual, smart but not intellectual, and displayed but not available. In short, then, the pageant queen contestant is an embodiment of Middle American cultural and social values. She performs for her audience a version of feminine perfection, creating in one woman the expectations put in place for all women, even as these expectations are impossible to obtain.

These expectations constitute a feminine ideal. While this ideal may change in some respects from geographical location to geographical location—from state to state, from community to community, and from the East to the West and from the North to the South—the ideal qualities that the American pageant queen “should” embody remain somewhat consistent: her skin should be white, the size of her body should be small so as not to take up much space, her physical appearance should appear flawlessly made-up, and she should relish in the act of being displayed. These requirements are indeed troubling, especially for the feminist scholar, still, the pageant queen remains a prominent culture figure in American society.

It is true that the ratings for the Miss America Pageant, perhaps the most historically celebrated of beauty pageants, have fallen so low in recent years that the program has been moved from the national network to a basic cable station. Still, the continuing popularity of the plethora of local pageants across the United States attests to the fact that the queen contestant
and the pageant that celebrates her is still a performance that is not only desired, but admired by
large numbers of people. In light of this, it is my contention that the importance that local
pageants play in the maintenance of the feminine ideal cannot be overstated. As Michael T.
Marsden, in his article “Two Northwestern Ohio Beauty Pageants: A Study in Middle America’s
Cultural Rituals,” notes, “the pageant is a process of aesthetic agenda-setting which the citizens
of Henry County [OH] become involved in each year as they subtly redefine the qualities of ideal
womanhood by displaying and evaluating the ‘best’ of what they have raised up to challenge
earlier articulations of the standards” (176). Significantly, this “best” that Marsden refers to may
or may not hold to the widely accepted ideals of beauty. Furthermore, as Marsden notes, “This
process is not perceived as being in any way demeaning or vulgar. Rather, it is presented as a
respectful acting out of community standards and values in human form…” (176). Indeed, as I
argue in my study, the local beauty pageant is representative of the local or hometown feminine
ideal. While this local ideal is certainly connected to more far-reaching notions of womanhood
and femininity, it is nonetheless shaped in particular ways by local concerns, interests, and
passions. Moreover, embedded within this local ideal is community values and consumerism,
which the local queen contestants represent through their performance in the pageant. Unlike the
state pageant contestants, whose ultimate goal is to become Miss America, the local pageant
participant’s primary responsibility is to serve as a representation of the values of each individual
community.

My study will begin with a brief examination of the Miss America Pageant in an effort to
situate historical and cultural value associated with pageantry as a larger and all encompassing
enterprise, but my primary focus will be upon the ways in which that enterprise is reconfigured
and manifested in unique ways in local pageants. In more specific terms, although I contend that
many of the feminine ideals necessary for a Miss America contestant are also desired in a local queen contestant, there are two distinct differences. First, local pageantry, unlike the state pageants are often an end unto themselves. That is, contestants do not advance to any other pageant upon winning the crown. Second, the local pageants are oft embedded within festival celebrations. In this way, the local pageants, and the queen who wins the coveted crown, represent the social and consumer values inherent in each individual community. Thus, through the performance of the young women who compete in the local festival pageants, the values of the local community are contained, embodied, and reinscribed.

My study, then, will examine specific local pageants occurring in the Midwestern state of Ohio in an attempt to locate the ways in which contestants perform, within the given boundaries of the pageant, a local or small town version of the feminine ideal. In relation to the values of economy and consumption inherent in this ideal, I limit my examination to local festivals that are centered upon the celebration of food. Because Ohio has a strong agricultural economy, the food festivals occurring in small communities across the state are plentiful. Regarding the numerous ways in which food is representative of community mores and values, Theodore C. Humphrey and Lin T. Humphrey, in their “Introduction” to We Gather Together, note:

The foods that appear in a particular festive environment are not mere collections of nutrients upon a table. Because communities of individuals select, transform, and “perform” foodstuffs in ways appropriate to the full set of traditional expectations that govern a particular festive context, they define and perform significant aspects of the community, its values, its sense of itself. (2)

Thus, by focusing on food festivals and the pageant queens that represent such food, I hope to uncover how the contestants, like the food that is being celebrated, also “define and perform
significant aspects of the community, its values, [and] its sense of itself.” In order to determine this, I detail the ways in which the local pageant contestant is featured and celebrated within the festival events and, furthermore, examine what is required in this representative performance. Additionally, my study also includes personal interviews with local pageant contestants. In speaking directly to the young women who compete, it is my intent to discover what the experience of local festival pageantry holds for the participants and give voice to the agency that is embedded in such representation.

**Statement of Key Research Questions**

Whereas my study may appear to be limited to the performance of local femininity and the subsequent communal value attached to the young female body in the local festival pageants, within this examination it is necessary to explore several elements which have influenced the construction of the mode of femininity that corresponds to pageants in general. In light of this, I feel it is imperative to tussle with notions of agency and of objectification inherent in the pageant system. Indeed, I am keenly aware that in one sense, especially from a second-wave feminist prospective, it could be asked, “Why study beauty pageants at all?” In relation to this question, Elwood Watson and Darcy Martin, in their “Introduction” to *There She Is, Miss America*, remark:

> Many feminist scholars find beauty pageants and beauty culture in general a problematic topic. Some would dismiss writing about an institution that so clearly oppresses and commodifies women as a waste of time. Pageants unquestionably objectify the female body, drawing attention to contestants’ breasts, the smallness of their waists, the length of their legs, and appearance of
their hair. It can be argued that they deny a participant’s humanity on a fundamental level, basing her worth solely on her physical appearance. (2)

While the objectification of the female body is clearly evident within the structure of the pageant, I argue that within local pageantry this perceived objectification might be envisioned, at least in part, as a celebration of the female body. Regarding this more allowing vision of the politics of the beauty pageant, Watson and Martin continue, “Pageantry and beauty culture offer some women a certain level of empowerment and agency” (2). Lest I take it upon myself to “judge” these contestants further, with this study I aspire to remain open to this “certain level of empowerment and agency.” The personal interviews I conducted with local pageant contestants and discussed in chapter five, aided in granting me the ability to achieve such openness.

In light of such complex visions of what pageantry does and does not do and in order to situate local festival pageantry within a larger context of pageantry, in my second chapter I discuss the historical and cultural phenomenon that is the Miss America system. This not only establishes many of the differences between local and national pageants, but it also provides the project with a solid understanding of how and why the pageant has been vilified by many feminists and often disregarded as a viable subject for feminist study. As Watson and Martin note, “Such varied reactions no doubt indicate that the pageant touches a nerve in the American psyche. Perhaps the Miss America Pageant’s ability to generate strong feelings has contributed to its endurance; few American popular culture institutions have lasted so long” (1). To that end, I examine how the performance of femininity has remained somewhat constant, although not unchallenged, in the Miss America Pageant in order to establish how this performance may or may not transfer to the contestants’ performances in the local pageant.
Also, within this examination of the Miss America Pageant I include a consideration of the constructions of the female body as commodity. After all, the Miss America Pageant was conceived in 1921 for the primary reason of selling the Atlantic City Boardwalk to tourists for one more month of the short summer season. Today, it continues to be a sales tool, although not on the level it once was, for the American public and remains a primary touchstone for standards of femininity, beauty, and consumerism within the pageant system.

In regard to the body as commodity on the local level, I look to the Miss America Pageant as a gauge for ideal beauty standards, and note the differences in each in an effort to establish a possible differentiation between the media induced performance and the performance of community values. As Kimberly A. Hamlin in her article “Bathing Suits and Backlash,” notes, “Through its uniform selection criteria and format, [the Miss America Pageant] has fostered the notion that there is such a thing as the ideal American woman” (29, emphasis in original), I note the historical construction of the beauty queen ideal and how this ideal has been reimagined in an effort to uncover how this ideal is defined and reconfigured at the local level.

In my third and fourth chapters, which compose the bulk of my project, I turn specifically to local festivals and the pageants that are situated within such celebration. Whereas both chapters feature case studies of the festivals and pageants I attended, I employ my third chapter to introduce the nuances of reading local festivals and the food that is celebrated by them, as well explore the meanings of local pageantry. Additionally, because much of my research was ethnographic, I believe it is important to situate my own positioning regarding the art of local pageantry. Carol A. B. Warren and Jennifer Kay Hackney in their study, Gender Issues in Ethnography, note: “The myth of the ethnographer as any person, without gender, personality, or historical location, who could objectively (at the very lest intersubjectively) produce the same
findings as any other person has been dispelled” (ix). Thus, I begin my third chapter with a personal narrative of my connection to agricultural and pageant experiences. In doing so, I hope to acquaint you, my reader, with not only my reasoning for wanting to analyze the cultural and social phenomenon of local pageantry, but also to identify my own historical background with my subject. Thus, in keeping with a feminist methodology, I attempt to present my research not as disembodied authoritative voice, but as a self identified performer in the construction of my interpretations.

The latter half of chapter three focuses on the first festival I attended, the Milan Melon Festival and chapter four moves through a discussion of each of the additional festivals I attended in chronological order. If, as Marsden and Brown suggest, “Popular entertainments [such as festivals]…can be used as windows into the attitudes and values of the many who participate in them and enjoy them. They function as mirrors and lenses, reflecting/refracting the immediate society and, in some instances, affecting it” (1), then the celebratory nature of the festival should be given consideration in an effort to establish not only the notion of performance and play, but also of local pride and moral values. To do this, I observe and evaluate how the food that is being celebrated “reflects and refracts” its community. In relation to this, because all of the festivals I observed and include in my study are centered upon a specific crop, I note the ways in which the each crop is celebrated and how those celebrations differ from community to community. For example, I note if the harvesting of certain crop remains the primary source of the local economy, or if it is instead now little more than a nostalgic celebration of days gone by. Finally, if, as Humphrey and Humphrey suggest, “food is not only an item or thing, but also a way people express themselves, a means by which they can communicate with one another,” I give careful consideration to what each celebration of the food means within each community,
and too, how that is meaning transferred to the pageant and its contestants. In doing so, I hope to demonstrate how the festival is not only selling its cash crop, but also its human harvest.

As part of this discussion I note how the notions of feminine public display are played out in various ways both within the festival events and during the performance of the pageant. This exploration is conducted on three levels. Firstly, I examine how the pageant contestants are represented not only within the pageant but during the festival parade and as a spokesperson for the festival during the celebration. As Jerrilyn McGregory, in her study of her experience as a local pageant queen, reminds, “These queens act as pied pipers or lures, leading the masses to the festival grounds. In the name of civic duty, these contestants present a self for public scrutiny” (126). To my mind, this public scrutiny presents itself most blatantly when traditional notions of the performance of femininity go astray. I attempt to identify how this so-called “public scrutiny” takes shape within the community by taking into account how the audiences in attendance to the individual pageant events react to spontaneous enactments that belie the pageant contestants’ feminine performance.

Secondly, I feel it is necessary to pay close attention to the actual construction and live performance of the pageant for the festival audience. The typical structure of a pageant, based upon the Miss America system, includes an introduction of the contestants, an off-stage interview with judges (which takes place before the stage performance), an onstage question and answer session, the evening gown competition, the talent competition, and the swimsuit competition. Depending upon the moral and social value system of a particular community, the talent and/or swimsuit competitions are sometimes not included in the local performance. This exclusion is, perhaps, because local pageants (and the women who participate and organize the performance) represent, again, a local feminine ideal, and that feminine ideal sometimes
disallows such overt displays of the female body. Because most of the girls who participate in the local pageant have not been “groomed” or trained for the level of competition required for the Miss America Pageant or even state pageants, the expectations placed upon the contestants are very different in regard to both proscribed notions of beauty and presentational skill. Lavenda suggests, “In terms of growing up, the [local] queen pageant is not about being the best or about preparing for a professional stage career; it is about fitting in, doing well, and demonstrating poise, confidence, and capacity” (32: 1997). These characteristics, I believe, are vital in defining the performance of local femininity. I am interested, then, in what categories are included or excluded in the each of the local pageants I audienced in an effort to further determine the varied characteristics of local femininity and its communal value during the performance of the pageant.

In light of this, it is important to consider questions such as: What are the requirements to enter? Is sponsorship needed to compete? When and where is the pageant performed? Do the contestants have to perform a talent? What questions comprise the onstage interview competition? How much is community involvement valued on the stage? And, how much of the festival food is included within the structure of the pageant (either in the theme or acknowledged by the contestants)? All of these questions regarding the structure of the pageant will be considered in order to determine the ways in which performance of the contestants is gendered, and also to evaluate how this performance is played and valued. In other words, I am asking: What are the performative requirements contained in the structure of the local pageant that enable both a maintenance and celebration of femininity?

The queen pageant is often a highlight of the festival either “kicking off” the festival and occurring the night before the festivities begin, or ending the festival with the crowning of the
queen thereby putting the “cap” on the celebration. In some instances, the pageant occurs even before the festival commences and is situated away from the festival grounds. Thus, one of the questions guiding my exploration in this section is: Why and how does this event represent the highlight of the festival that is itself organized as a celebration of community? One intriguing answer to this question that has been offered is that the festival and the pageant work to celebrate local young people, especially young women, who are moving from childhood to adulthood.

Robert H. Lavenda, in his study of small town festivals in Minnesota, *Corn fests and Water Carnivals*, discusses this coming-of-age performance that is present in many local pageants: “A new generation of girls has grown up, and every year the town pauses momentarily in a ritualized form of play to honor that fact. For audience and candidates alike, the queen pageant provides a way of not letting the transformation slip by unnoticed” (25). Noting Lavenda’s reading, I argue that the pageant is more than a “momentary” event, as the young female body reigns over the entire community celebration not only during the time of the festival, but also for the following year. Thus, the ideals that the pageant queen embodies are qualities that the community holds dear even outside of the festival celebration.

Thirdly, I feel I must consider my participation in the pageant as a spectator and, too, admit that this spectatorship is one of outsider status. Quite honestly, I truly felt like an outsider attending most of the festivals alone and in small towns where “everyone knew everyone.” Therefore, it is significant to note that my viewing of these pageants was extremely different from most of the audience as I lacked, as Lavenda noted, the personal knowledge of the pageant participants. In part, much of my initial knowledge came from publicity announcements detailing the contestants prior to the festival activities. But rather than subscribe to the unfeminist notion that, “On occasion, I imagined myself a voyeur, glimpsing the details of other
people’s lives without having to reveal any of my own” (Kirsch xi), I attempt to engage in the analysis of my experience at the festivals by creating stories of said experience rather than one-dimensional truths. That is, my research is not only centered upon a specific time and place, but also within my own past history with local pageantry and my present experiences at the local festivals. Therefore, when reading meaning into the festival and pageant I also consider my own cultural performance as a spectator.

In chapter three and chapter four, then, through my description and analysis of the case studies of four unique Ohio fall food festivals and the pageants that were a featured event of each community’s celebration I not only define and dissect notions of local femininity, using theories surrounding festival, food, and feminism, but also demonstrate the “double duty” the pageant contestants are asked to perform. The young women are first engaged as a literal “selling” tool for the community celebration and in this enactment also represent and are celebrated as the respected and admired young woman of said community.

In my final chapter, I look to Donnelley R. Ruwe, who, in her article “I was Miss Meridian 1985,” poses the important question: “Can the lived experience of the pageant, as distinct from the imaginary ideal promoted by the pageant be empowering to the individual women who participate?” (138). With this question in mind, I return to Judith Butler’s notion of gender as a performance and the idea that femininity can be deliberately and intentionally enacted. Thus, in chapter five I address the possibility that this performance of gender is not only conscious, but also rewarding (both physically and mentally) for the pageant contestant.

In order to discover if and how this traditional ideal of femininity is interpreted on the local level, I include selected portions of the personal interviews I conducted with local pageant contestants. I believe it is vital to include the voices of the women who compete in order to, in
keeping with a feminist methodology, provide a critique of the theoretical research I have acquired and add lived experience to my own interpretations of such research. As queen pageants are contested feminist terrain, this final chapter of my study offers a critical assessment of this contestation, in part, through the privileging of the voices of the women who choose to participate.

Contributions and New Knowledge

It is my hope that this study provides a new and provocative look at local femininity as defined by small town community through the valuing and celebration of the young female body in local pageant performance. In order to achieve this, I believe it is necessary to address the lack of scholarly attention paid to the phenomena of the beauty pageant as a cultural and feminist prospect of study. I desire to explore what pageantry holds for not only the participants and spectators, but also as a cultural phenomenon. Indeed, while much feminist thought attempts to dismiss queen pageants as only an objectification of the female body, I simply cannot ignore that thousands of women remain committed to participating in pageants across the United States. I contend that the reasons for participation are far more complex than many feminist scholars have concluded. Moreover, while it is true that the Miss America Pageant has been documented to some extent, the scholarly research on the pageant remains somewhat sparse. As Lavenda reminds, “Scholarly literature on queen pageants is, perhaps surprisingly, almost nonexistent” (102). What is more, local pageantry and more specifically, pageants that are centered upon food have, if my research is any indication, been almost completely ignored by scholars.

One of the most comprehensive pageant studies is a 2004 anthology edited by Elwood Watson and Darcy Martin entitled There She Is, Miss America: The Politics of Sex, Beauty, and
Race in America’s Most Famous Pageant. While this work provides much food for thought on the historical, social, and cultural function of the pageant, it is dedicated almost solely – as the title suggests – to the Miss America Pageant. I find the work useful in that each of the contributors attempts to reclaim the pageant as a field of study worthy of serious feminist consideration. The authors of the essays do not readily glorify the pageant by any means, but rather labor to give the pageant value as a historical and cultural event. As the editors state in their introduction, “For better or for worse, the pageant reflects commonly held values, beliefs, and attitudes that Americans share about women” (2). While I agree that this is true, I believe it is significant that the editors and authors in this collection are focused almost entirely on the National pageant. For my purposes, I am interested in how these “values, beliefs, and attitudes” change or remain constant on the local level.

The anthology does provide a small glance into local pageantry. In particular, in her essay “Wiregrass Country Pageant Competitions, or What’s Beauty Got to Do with it?,” Jerrilyn McGregor compares the National and the local pageant. She endeavors to draw conclusions that equate the pageant, at any level, with standards of femininity. McGregor notes, “Locally and globally, small pageants are the sites where young women perform femininity according to a designated script. On one hand, pageantry speaks to the systemic nature of women’s oppression; and on the other, it multivocally addresses the symbolism that accompanies wish fulfillment” (126). I find McGregor’s arguments useful; however, I also believe she too quickly dismisses any possible agency granted the participants. In direct relation to local pageantry, she claims, “Let us say, in the spirit of carnival, as part of the public display, [the contestants] play at being what they are not” (128). Although the structure and requirements of local festival pageant certainly subscribes to certain standards of feminine “play,” I also believe that the contestants
“play at what they are” in relation to their positioning with a specific community. In this way, I argue, the pageant contestant is valued through her accomplishments within the community just as much, if not more than how she looks in her evening gown.

Possibly the most useful book-length study is Lavenda’s work. While *Corn Fests and Water Carnivals* (1997) is without question an invaluable resource, Lavenda details several aspects of local/community festival rather than focusing solely or even primarily on the queen pageants. Moreover, when he does address the pageants, Lavenda is less concerned with theorizing by way of feminist critique the pageant’s influence on its participants and spectators, and instead is more concerned with situating the pageant as a “normal” occurrence in a young girl’s existence. Lavenda writes, “For many candidates, however, the queen pageant is yet another site at which the conventional gender roles of one generation are strengthened and made to seem an inevitable part of growing up female” (36). While the gendered nature of the pageant cannot be denied, in my study I endeavor to explore how this gendering is, in extension, played out through the entire festival celebration and include some comparisons of the feminine representation of the pageant queen to the unique, if not somewhat odd, forms that masculine representation takes in particular local festivals.

An earlier article by Lavenda, “Minnesota Queen Pageants: Play, Fun, and Dead Seriousness in a Festive Mode” (1988) is perhaps the most useful scholarly document I have found. The brief article discusses the qualities present in a local festival pageant in comparison to National and state pageantry. Specifically, Lavenda addresses the nature of small-town community values and how these values are displayed through the local festival queen. He remarks:
The result is that the ideal festival queen embodies the hopes and ambitions of an upwardly mobile small-town middle class. She must be Everywoman – or Everygirl. This means she must be neither outstandingly good nor outstandingly bad, but instead must represent a golden mean of accomplishment that appears accessible to all respectable girls of her class in her town or other similar towns.

(173)

This observation aids in defining the local feminine ideal within specific “small-towns” and addresses the class system inherently in place in the pageant system. However, at the same time, I believe, it ignores the individuality of each festival, of each community, and of each pageant participant. This oversight has particular importance to my study which focuses on particular food festivals in the state of Ohio. While there are several similarities within the local pageant structure, the differences are also plentiful. Specifically, I believe the differences embedded in each pageant speak directly to what a particular community values in its feminine representation.

Finally, while there appears to be a thriving scholarly interest in studying food and its function in community festival, the focus of such research tends to remain committed to the act of preparation and consumption. In other words, the studies focus, for the most part, on how a communal identity is expressed and created through its celebratory food. Kathy Neustadt’s book *Clambake* (1992), Theodore C. Humphrey and Lin T. Humphrey’s anthology *We Gather Together: Food and Festival in American Life* (1988), and C. Paige Gutierrez’s article, “The Social and Symbolic Uses of Ethnic/Regional Foodways: Cajuns and Crawfish in South Louisiana” (1984) are just a few of the fine examples of reading food and the celebration of such as representative of local identity. I desire, however, to take this research further by looking at communal identity as not only represented by the festival food, but also by the body of the
festival food queen. In this way, the performance of community is figuratively and economically embodied through the local pageant queen in her representation of and as spokesperson for the local agricultural commodity.

Limitations

Although there are numerous local pageants across the United States, I chose to attend the ones that are featured in food festivals and located in Ohio. While the reasoning for choosing food festivals has been stated, the choice to limit my travels to Ohio has not. I have found that the state of Ohio provides a wonderful cross-section of small town communities. Additionally, perhaps because much of the state consists of plentiful farmland and a long growing season, the amount and variety of food festivals in Ohio is abundant. While I may have conceivably attended festivals throughout much of the year, I have limited my attendance to fall festivals which celebrate the end of the harvest season. Beginning with the North Ridgeville Corn Festival on August 10th and ending with the Circleville Pumpkin Festival on October 17th, a festival celebration occurs in Ohio almost every day of the week without pause. However, not every food festival contains a queen pageant, therefore my study is, naturally, limited to select festivals that feature this event. Additionally, I attempted to attend festivals that celebrate a variety of agricultural commodities, however, most of the fall Ohio food festivals are centered upon the production of fruits and/or vegetables. Interestingly, these foods are gendered female.

In *The Anthropology of Food and Body*, Carole Counihan points to feminist-vegetarian author Carol Adams’s thoughts regarding the feminine quality of fruits and vegetables: “Adams argues that patriarchal power in Western society is embodied in meat consumption, which involves the linking of women and animals and their objectification and subordination. Women, Adams
suggests, can rebel through vegetarianism, which she interprets as rejecting patriarchal values of domination and affirming female power and respect for nature” (10: 1999). Adams states it thusly, “In essence, because meat eating is a measure of a virile culture and individual, our society equates vegetarianism with emasculation or femininity” (25). While it is difficult to argue that the festivals are “affirming female power” or promoting “femininity” by celebrating the symbolic fruit or vegetable, because of the plentiful nature of the fall festivals that feature one or the other my project is limited to such celebrations¹. The festivals I attended, their locations, and the dates of each are as follows:

The Milan Melon Festival, Milan, Ohio – September 1-3, 2007
The Reynoldsburg Tomato Festival, Reynoldsburg, Ohio – September 6-10, 2007
The Jackson County Apple Festival, Jackson, Ohio – September 18-22, 2007
The Oak Harbor Apple Festival, Oak Harbor, Ohio – October 13-14, 2007
The Circleville Pumpkin Show, Circleville, Ohio – October 17-20, 2007
(www.ofea.org/events.php, Ohio Festivals & Events Association)

I should also note that while I attended two apple festivals, the queen pageant for each did not occur during the festival celebration and was not publicized as part of the festival event. Therefore, at both the Jackson County Apple Festival and the Oak Harbor Apple Festival I was only able to witness the formal introduction of the reigning queens. I note this particularly because I do not include either apple festival in my case studies of the festival pageants. However, I do believe, that the festivals did serve my research, if not directly through witnessing

the pageant, then certainly indirectly through audiencing the parades, which featured local
queens from the festival pageants throughout the state.

Finally, I understand that notions of femininity are disdained by many, especially second-
wave, feminist theorists. Yet as Janice Winship, in her article “A Woman’s World: ‘Woman’ –
an Ideology of Femininity,” reminds, “Our femininity is not something any of us can escape”
(134). While Winship admits that femininity is ever present in daily life, the notion that one
should or could “escape” from it presents, to my mind, a singular view to the more complex,
although not unproblematic, ways in which the pageant queen embraces her femininity in an
effort to speak for and about her community. To that end, I am not seeking to “reclaim”
femininity, rather I am attempting to tussle with notions of how such a concept continues to be
performed on the local level through pageantry and attempt to determine what is gained or lost,
for both the participant and the community, through this gendered performance of the feminine
ideal.

Theoretical Framework

For clarity, I have divided my theoretical framework into six distinct, but sometimes
overlapping, sections. The first section, *Femininity or Feminism?*, engages in defining
“femininity” and, to that end, attempts to outline how certain schools of feminism have labeled
the notion as an absolute objectification of the female. The second section, *Performance*, tussles
with femininity as a gendered and, perhaps, conscious enactment. Additionally, I refer to the
literal performance of the pageant, which prescribes to the traditional aspects of a theatrical
event. *Miss America: History and Beyond*, the third section, notes my engagement with studies
associated with America’s most famous pageant and details the ways in which these studies have
situated the pageant as a mediated construction of beauty and femininity while at the same time uncovers how pageantry has been analyzed in popular and scholarly ways. The fourth section, *Consumption and Beauty*, identifies the characteristics of beauty in relation to festival economy in the local festival pageant. Therefore, this section reiterates the idea that standards of value may differ on the local level as compared to the National level. The fifth section, *Festival, Rites of Passage and Community*, looks closely at the meaning of festival celebration and how this meaning is embodied by the pageant queen. The sixth and final section, *Festival and Food*, centers on the ways in which food and the local harvest can be read symbolically through community celebration, thereby reiterating the possible meanings that can be created by both the celebrated food and the pageant queen who is representative of said commodity.

**Femininity or Feminism?**

One of the key ideas I am engaging within my study is the struggle between the representation of the feminine on the one hand, and the conscious denial of/opposition to traditional notions of femininity by the first-wave and second-wave feminist movements on the other. Within this struggle lies the difficulty in finding a stable definition of femininity. While it is, arguably, the opposite of masculinity, that too, for me, is problematic. The remarks of first-wave feminist Charlotte Perkins Gilman illustrate both the continuing power and limits of such binary structures. Writing in 1911, Gilman remarked, “To the man, the whole world was his world; his because he was male; and the whole world of woman was the home; because she was female […] She had her prescribed sphere, strictly limited to her feminine occupations and interests; he had all the rest of life; and not only so, but having it, insisted on calling it male” (qtd. in Kolocotroni 186). Even though Perkins Gilman was writing almost a century ago, her
idea still haunts much feminist thought today. If one agrees with Gilman (and many radical feminist still do), the mere identification with the feminine restricts women to a small portion of social existence and traps her into a private prison, of sorts, with no capacity to negotiate in or with the world. Although now a hundred years later, and “the whole world of woman” is no longer regulated to domestic sphere, it may nonetheless be argued that the contemporary pageant queen is still situated within this private image of woman even while she is on very public display. Few would argue that the feminine qualities the pageant queen performs are not, at least in some respects, fixed by the male gaze; however, I hold that more research should be written on how the feminine is also defined and enacted by the female herself. The personal interviews I have conducted aid in supporting notions of agency and reward granted in pageantry for the women who participate. Though the interviews with local pageant contestants I acknowledge how the pageant contestant plays with notions of femininity through her self presentation during the pageant performance. By including a feminist critique of femininity and the voices of the actual pageant contestants, it is my intent to challenge the former while still keeping with a feminist methodology. Gesa E. Kirsch, in her study *Ethical Dilemma in Feminist Research: The Politics of Location, Interpretation, and Publication* contends: “no single methodology is feminist in itself, nor have feminists invented new research methods. Rather, it is a feminist perspective, including a commitment to improve women’s lives and to eliminate inequalities between researchers and participants that characterize feminist research” (5). Seeking knowledge directly from the pageant contestants has provided me with another side to the argument that pageants are solely objectifying women through the required performance of femininity inherent in the pageant structure.
The enactment of femininity was, perhaps, most famously vilified by Betty Friedan in her groundbreaking and accessible study, *The Feminine Mystique* (1963). In this work, Friedan attempts to provide answers to the “problem that has no name” in terms that the “average housewife” could comprehend and apply (15-27). Of course, Friedan’s conclusions were, although timely, by no means novel. Indeed, Simone De Beauvoir claimed ten years earlier in her Introduction to *The Second Sex* (1958), “It would appear, then, that every female human being is not necessarily a woman; to be so considered she must share in that mysterious and threatened reality known as femininity” (xix). Friedan, however, attempted to expose the chains of femininity as they applied to the suburban white American female. Her argument is still compelling. For the purposes of my study, I am most interested in how she names femininity as one of the primary causes of female oppression. Friedan writes, “over and over women heard in voices of tradition and of Freudian sophistication that they could desire no greater destiny than to glory in their own femininity…They were taught to pity the neurotic, unfeminine, unhappy women who wanted to be poets or physicists or presidents. They learned that truly feminine women do not want careers, higher education, political rights…” (11). The timing of the publication of Friedan’s book, at the beginning of second-wave feminist movement, is vital to note. Friedan’s attempt—to reach the middle-class, white, suburban housewife who embraced her femininity for no other reason than she was taught too—is to be commended. What I find most useful in Friedan’s outright vilification of middle-class 1960s femininity is the fact that her audience is quite similar, in terms of social class and race, to the local pageant participants, organizers, and spectators. If, as Friedan argues, “women in America are not encouraged, or expected, to use their full capacities. In the name of femininity, they are encouraged to evade human growth” (305), how does one reconcile reading the local pageant as an event that
encourages female representation and success? Indeed, if the local pageant is a celebrated display of femininity, Friedan’s arguments become less stable, but nonetheless fruitful from a feminist prospective.

On the heels of *The Feminine Mystique*, Susan Brownmiller’s popular *Femininity* (1984) continues what Friedan began twenty years earlier. As was Friedan’s, Brownmiller’s study is aimed at the general public, rather than an academic audience, and, as did Friedan, she presents convincing arguments against femininity while at the same time claiming, “it is a romantic sentiment, a nostalgic tradition of imposed limitations…femininity is something that women had more of in the past, not only in the historic past of prior generations, but in each woman’s personal past as well…” (34-5). The perceived innocence and presumed virginity of the pageant queen is, I argue, the very embodiment of Brownmiller’s definition. Also, the idea of femininity of a “nostalgic tradition” points to substantial elements of the festival pageant as well. For one weekend a year the community celebrates its history, its tradition, and its feminine ideal. Brownmiller also states that there is a “renewed interest in femininity and an unabashed indulgence in feminine pursuits” (17) mainly because females are now in competition with each other for “men and jobs” which are both difficult to obtain. This notion of regaining the feminine in order to position oneself competitively among other women is perceived as a primary, if not the main, driving element of pageantry. The question then becomes how this femininity is displayed for the local community given the social and moral values of such. Although I certainly don’t dismiss Brownmiller’s conclusions, I believe that there is something more in the performance of femininity by the pageant queen than “romantic sentiment.”

I am aware that Friedan’s and Brownmiller’s studies are centered upon a very particular race (white), class (middle), and sexual identification (heterosexual), but so too is pageant
culture. For better or for worse, the festivals I attended, situated as they were in small Midwestern communities, for the most part, also reflected this social and cultural atmosphere. Therefore, both authors speak intelligently and persuasively (not only about femininity but also about feminism) to my project.

Finally, I take my cue from Lesa Lockford’s work, *Performing Femininity: Rewriting Gender Identity* (2004). While her study uses an autoethnographic and phenomenological lens to critique normative constructions of femaleness encoded upon her own body through self-narratives detailing her personal performance experiences, I find her theories useful in that they tussle with ideas of femininity in a positive and feminist manner. She remarks in her first chapter:

> The performances I explore here are unified insofar as each may be regarded as a traditionally feminine gender performance. By traditional I mean those performative displays, enactments, or activities that are often called into suspicion by some mainstream feminist scholars and activists because they potentially promote the social expectation that women must be feminine. (3)

Through the detailing of the performance of her own body, Lockford situates the struggle between feminine behavior and feminist sensibility. I maintain that the performance of the local pageant queen is undeniably a performance of femininity, however, I also am interested in examining, as Lockford does in her chapter about joining Weight Watchers, the personal desire of the societal expectation that conforms the body to beauty normativity and how these expectations are played out on the body of the small town pageant queen. In other words, by including the interviews with the pageant participants I endeavor to produce a new way of reading the cultural phenomena of the local pageant using a critical and feminist lens that does
not, in essence, vilify the pageant’s spectators, organizers, or contestants. Rather, I tussle with ideals of femininity, beauty, economy, and the performance of each.

**Performance**

The term “performance” in my project, as I previously stated, will have a somewhat double meaning. First, there is the performance of the pageant, which subscribes to the traditional aspects of a theatrical event: There is, in most instances, a stage which the serves as the space for the contestants to be viewed, there is a designated area for the audience, and there is a specific, although unique to each individual pageant, script which is followed. In essence, the participants are actors performing their semi-rehearsed “lines,” choreographed walk, and practiced poise for the spectator who applauds or cheers appreciatively. On the other hand, the every day performance of each of the contestants is also taken into account: Who the young woman’s parents are, what high school she attends, her extra-curricular activities, what contributions she makes to her community, the quality of her academic achievements, and her future goals are all weighed as part of the contestant’s performance, prior to, during, and after the competition. Therefore, the definition of “performance” must be somewhat broadly constructed so that it is able to weave in and out of notions of the theatrical tradition and notions of the every day. Situated within these two “categories” of performance is a third element: the performance of femininity.

In *Gender Trouble*, (1999) Judith Butler convincingly argues that gender is performative through “act, gestures, [and] enactments” (173). That is, she attests that gender is a construction that others read as an abiding element of self. The performance of femininity, then, is not based upon biology, but rather upon the social constructions of normality: when one wears a dress and
applies make-up, one is performing femininity. Although Butler’s arguments are far more complex than this example suggests, this illustration exemplifies in many respects how I employ her theory to illustrate what I would term the pageant queen’s performance of ideal femininity. The local pageant queen has already “played the part” of “girl” in her community for her entire lifetime and now she is, by competing in the festival pageant, attempting to perform the role of ideal female. She has, in essence upped the stakes in her portrayal of “female.” As Butler notes, “as a strategy of survival within compulsory systems, gender is a performance with clearly punitive consequences. Discrete genders are part of what ‘humanizes’ individuals within contemporary culture; indeed, we regularly punish those who fail to do their gender right” (178). While the role of “girl” would be, what I consider, a “discrete gender” performance, once that “girl” enters the pageant she is expected to perform a version of femininity that eclipses her former role into one that is heightened. And, in line with Butler’s ideas, if the pageant contestant fails, she will be “punished” through disappointment of losing the crown. Butler’s theories aid in developing a notion central to my study; that femininity is performative. How that performance is enacted, and the consequences of such enactment, is what I further explore in this project.

A second notion of performance stems from Luce Irigaray’s fascinating work, *This Sex Which is Not One* (1977). Irigaray’s theories are related directly to consumption of the female body rather than structured performance. For this reason her theories are undoubtedly useful to my project. Irigaray writes, “There is…perhaps only one ‘path,’ the one historically assigned to the feminine: that of mimicry. One must assume the feminine role deliberately. Which means already to convert a form of subordination into affirmation, and thus to begin to thwart it” (76, emphasis in original). The idea of mimicry, although not in such theoretical terms, was often indirectly acknowledged by the pageant contestants in my one-on-one interviews. While the
pageant participant may not be consciously “thwarting” the role in the radical sense, she is
“converting” the subordination into affirmation by the celebration of her by her community. As
such, the performance of the pageant queen and the subsequent recognition by her hometown
audience should not be underestimated. Indeed, too, this mimicry involves not only upholding
community standards, but it is also a performance of cultural standards of female beauty.

*Miss America: History and Beyond*

Surprisingly, considering the fascination surrounding beauty culture, studies of the Miss
America Pageant are not plentiful and, not unsurprisingly, many are what one might term “coffee
table books,” filled with glorious, full page pictures of the winners smiling adoringly in their
tiaras and sashes. However, these popular press, pro-pageant works detail vital historical aspects
of the pageant, even if one cannot help reading them read with a critical eye. Ann-Marie Bivans,
*Miss America: In Pursuit of the Crown* (1991) and Angela Saulino Osborne’s *Miss America:
The Dream Lives On, A 75 Year Celebration* (1995) are two such publications.

Osborne focuses on the inner particulars of the Miss America Pageant system and
includes pictures detailing how the pageant has changed with time. Osborne also stresses the
point that Miss America is not a beauty, but rather, a scholarship pageant. The chapter entitled
“Family” is particularly interesting in that it discusses pageant sponsorship at the local level.
Bivan’s study, on the other hand, is an instructional guide to competing in the Miss America
Pageant system. In addition to a brief historical outline, she provides an in depth description of
each of the competition categories: “The Private Interview,” “The Swimsuit Competition,” “The
Talent Competition,” and “The Evening Gown Competition.” These two texts are of use, in my
project, as a comparative study between National and local expectations.
Catching the Crown (2000) by Lu Parker, who was Miss USA 1994, is a step-by-step guide to competing in pageant. Although Parker was a member of the Miss USA system, her book provides striking and somewhat frightening examples of “what it takes” to compete. In her first chapter, Parker notes: “Pageants aren’t for all girls, and that’s okay!...So, are you right for pageants? Are you interested in improving yourself? Are you interested in traveling? Do you want to help people? If you answered ‘Yes’ to the above questions, you can compete in a pageant” (3). The work is a shameless salute to the performance of femininity that is required for pageant contestants and is coded with enthusiasm. “It’s imperative you show excitement, but at the same time, you need to remain in control. Remember to walk like a lady” (62), is just one example of Parker’s advice. Although from a feminist perspective Parker’s musings are difficult to agree to do, I find the book useful in defining what is typically expected of a winning pageant contestant. With its easy to read text and very detailed guidelines, the book is clearly aimed towards young women who would be the age of the local contestants.

A second pageant guidebook that intends to cater to the teenage female is S. A. Bordenkircher’s proscriptive handbook, How to Win Your Crown: A Teen’s Guide to Pageant Competition (1988). Bordenkircher was inspired to write the book because as a dress shop owner, “almost daily, at my specialty shop, there were questions about what can and cannot be done; what works and what doesn’t when you’re involved in a pageant contest” (7). Thus, according to Bordenkircher, the pageant contestant must be thoroughly schooled in the ways of what she entitles “the Six P’s: Plan, Prepare, Practice, Poise, Projecting the image, and Primp,” which, accordingly, provide the titles of her chapters. Again, from a feminist standpoint the book is filled with arguably ridiculous instructions, however, it provides a firm example of how
many pageants are composed and the expectations of femininity often put in place for the contestants.

Finally, a fairly current pageant guidebook is the Jessica Nicely’s *Majestic: A Pageant Girl’s Guide to Winning* (2006). Nicely, who was Miss Arizona USA in 1997, has composed a workbook for the pageant competitor. The guide, along with “helpful” tips, includes a “food and nutrition journal,” an “exercise journal,” and an “interview worksheet” where the user can record her food intake, her calories burned, and her answers to mock interview questions, respectively. The book also contains photographs of how to stand (at an angle) and sample headshots (sexy versus serious) for pageant programs. Nicely’s *Majestic* is a clear example of the femininity and body maintenance that is set up by the traditional pageant system.

Three additional “picture books” that provide a historical and contemporary view of pageantry are Elissa Stein’s *Here She Comes: Beauty Queen*, Candace Savage’s *Beauty Queens: A Playful History* (1998), and Keith Lovegrove’s *Pageant: The Beauty Contest* (2002). All three studies offer glimpses of beauty contests that extend beyond the Miss America System. Stein, for example, gives tips to contestants such as “how to compete in an evening gown” (64) and relates the history of the beauty pageant as an entertainment venue. She also notes that festival pageants are “less competitive than a beauty pageant…many of these events select a girl based on her poise, personality, and good looks” (56). Savage, relating more historical detail, describes the glamorous life that winning a beauty contest could afford, at least in the 1920s. She notes, “At work and at play, the life of a working girl was a round-the-clock beauty contest, in which men did the looking and women did their best to be worth looking at. A beauty pageant took this everyday transaction and turned in into a sport. With the added allure of glittering rewards that real life was unlikely to afford” (55). Although Savage is speaking about an era
where women began to enter the corporate work force, her conclusions could very well apply to
the hometown girl who wins a festival pageant with the hopes of traveling throughout her
community and becoming a local “star.” Lovegrove, too, claims that pageantry is a glamorous
event, but he expands his examination to include not only Miss America, but Miss Universe, Ms.
Fetish, Miss Snake Charmer Queen\(^2\), The Manhunt International Contest, Miss Nude, and The
World’s First Lesbian Beauty Contest (to name a few). More pictures than prose, Lovegrove’s
work is dedicated to all realms of pageantry, which he calls “enduring theatre” (5). It is a tribute
to pageant queens (and kings) that reminds the reader that beauty can be defined in several
different ways by varied audiences.

Finally, I note the scholarly work that has been dedicated to pageantry. In addition to the
previously mentioned anthology, *There She Is, Miss America: The Politics of Sex, Beauty, and
Race in America’s Most Famous Pageant* (2004) edited by Elwood Watson and Darcy Martin,
there is a second anthology that is frequently noted, *Beauty Queens on the Global Stage:
Gender, Contests, and Power* (1996) edited by Colleen Ballerino Cohen, Richard Wilk, and
Beverly Stoeltje. The latter, as the title suggests, is dedicated to pageantry world wide, but
what is of interest, for me, are the authors’ attempts to reclaim beauty pageants as an academic
pursuit: “While many scholars fail to take the business of beauty pageants and contests
seriously, there is good evidence that assessments of physical beauty play a basic role in the
everyday life of most societies” (6). The book maps the global expectations of beauty through
pageantry. Of particular interest is Robert H. Lavenda’s chapter “‘It’s Not a Beauty Pageant!’:
Hybrid Ideology in Minnesota Community Queen Pageants.” As in his other works, in this essay

\(^2\) For a more in depth analysis of this particular pageant see: Stoeltje, Beverly. “The Snake Charmer Queen: Ritual, Competition, and
Signification in American Festival.” *Beauty Queens on the Global Stage: Gender, Contests, and Power*. Colleen Ballerino Cohen, Richard
Lavenda teases out the different expectations of local festival queens when compared with national standards: “To them [the National pageant audience], to talk of ‘beauty’ is to emphasize physical features when [local] pageants are supposed to find a representative for community who embodies what local people believe to be the best of themselves: talent, friendliness, commitment to the community and its values, upward mobility” (31). This construction of the local pageant serves to define how the local queen meets entirely different standards, but what I attempt to explore is how those standards are actualized and performed.

*The Most Beautiful Girl in the World: Beauty Pageants and National Identity* (1999) by Sarah Banet-Weiser tussles, for the most part, with issues of gender, class, and race in the Miss America Pageant System. Banet-Weiser also attempts to reclaim the beauty pageant as a viable subject for academic study. She remarks, “beauty pageants are clearly situated as a particular kind of cultural practice and, as such, call for a deeper intellectual attention” (6). To further this notion, Banet-Weiser provides a feminist critique of the pageant, citing both the perceived objectification and possible subjectivity of the pageant contestants. Of particular interest are her chapters on the swimsuit competition and the talent competition where she notes the “low” cultural construction of the former and the “high” cultural construction of the latter. Likewise, Brenda Foley’s very recent study, *Undressed for Success: Beauty Contestants and Exotic Dancers as Merchants of Morality* (2005), provides a fascinating comparison between the performances of the exotic dancer (which she claims is low culture) and the beauty queen contestant (which she equates to high culture). Foley’s study “treats performance as its ‘organizing concept’” (4) and explores constructions of femininity, display, commodity and morality maintaining that the performance of the exotic dancer and the beauty queen are quite similar in their embodied presentation, but entirely different in the audiences reception of such.
She notes, “The linkage of female display in popular entertainment with manufactured value systems resulted in the compartmentalization of forms as ‘clean’ (i.e., vaudeville, beauty contests) or ‘dirty’ (i.e. burlesque, striptease), and these universally understood classifications operated as reminders of a woman’s acceptable ‘place’ in public” (5). Although Foley’s work is, for the most part, a historical endeavor, she also interweaves examples of contemporary beauty pageants in order to support her claim that traditional social and moral perceptions of the beauty queen have remained intact. In addition to its examination of displayed performance, the study is valuable, for me, in looking at the ways in which Foley explores civic and moral constructions in local pageants.

Finally, two historical studies concerning pageantry in general and the Miss America Pageant specifically are A.R. Riverol’s *Live from Atlantic City: A History of the Miss America Pageant* (1992) and Lois W. Banner’s *American Beauty* (1983). Both are important resources with regard to the first chapter of my study. Riverol’s work, for example, is a chronological telling of the construction of the Miss America pageant and begins with his theories about why the pageant was born: “[During the Industrial Revolution] women were among the many gimmicks used to attract a paying audience to the new world of relaxation, amusement and entertainment” (7). Furthermore, the study covers every decade of the Miss America pageant up to the 1980s which Riverol entitles “the Scandal” years. More descriptive than prescriptive, Riverol’s study provides me with ample historical data that aids in my teasing out notions of the performance of feminine display that has always been apart of the pageant system and furthermore, how this display may or may not have changed throughout the century.

Banner covers the early historical era between 1800 and 1921, the year that the first Miss America Pageant was held. She indicates how perceptions of beauty changed in America during
this span and notes how those changes were tied directly to changing social and cultural conventions. For example, she notes that there were four distinct beauty ideals during these Modern eras: “the frail, pale, willowy woman” who was then replaced with burlesque’s “buxom, hearty, and heavy model.” In turn, the “tall, athletic” Gibson Girl came on the scene only to be replaced by the “small, boyish” flapper (5). The changing “ideal” beauty standards that Banner details aid in identifying how beauty is constructed in relation to the social space in which it is presented. Additionally, Banner’s chapter on beauty contests explores the history of beauty contests and relates how such events are used to “further cultural homogeneity and to integrate social classes within the American democratic order” (248). For my purposes, Banner’s theories can be applied not only to the beauty ideal formulated through the Miss America Pageant, but also local notions of civic duty and local femininity present in the festival pageants.

Consumption and Beauty

For definitions of consumption, I return to Irigaray’s This Sex Which is Not One (1977). Although she is not the first theorist to present ideas concerning the female body as a commodity, I believe her statements are, perhaps, the most lucid and, for my purposes, useful: “The society we know, our own culture, is based upon the exchange of women…In still other words: all the systems of exchange that organize patriarchal societies and all the modalities of productive work that are recognized, valued, and rewarded in these societies are men’s business” (170-1). In relation to my project, I believe this statement is important to consider. The food festival is celebrating, in part, the cash crop that provides the economic livelihood for the community throughout the year. That crop is, traditionally, harvested by the male farmer who is head of the traditional household. The celebration extends from the actual commodity to the
producer of such; without the male farmer there would be no crop to celebrate. Additionally, by
taking on the title of the food, the pageant queen is representing exchange not only through her
performance of femininity, but also as a spokesperson for the work of the male farmer. She is, in
essence, a walking and taking commercial for her agricultural community. Yet, in this role of
spokesperson, the pageant queen is also granted a certain amount of agency, albeit one that is
proscribed by certain tenets of feminine behavior.

A second seminal discussion on the exchange of women is presented by Gayle Rubin in
convincingly argues that exchange is not, at the time of her writing, nor has it been historically
based upon biology. Instead, she states that exchange is socially constructed with men serving as
the exchangers or givers and women serving as that which is to be exchanged or given. She
states: “If women are the gifts, then it is men who are the exchange partners…As long as the
relations specify that men exchange women, it is men who are the beneficiaries of the product of
such exchanges – social organization…The ‘exchange of women’ is a seductive and powerful
concept. It is attractive in that it places the oppression of women within social systems, rather
than in biology” (qtd. in Nicholson 37). I am interested, then, at teasing out notions of how this
social exchange functions in local pageantry. True, the women who compete are serving the
community through their representation of the commodity (and the male farmer who produced
it), but also they are, in some ways, also serving themselves in becoming something more than
just “another” female community member. Upon competing in the local pageant, and most
certainly if they win a title, a contestant’s status is heightened. I propose that the exchange
present in local pageantry is, albeit situated in a social system, less disempowering than more
traditional male/female customs. As Rubin notes, “And if men have been sexual subjects –
exchangers – and women sexual semi-objects – gifts – for much of human history, then many customs, clichés, and personality traits seem to make a great deal of sense (among others, the curious custom by which a father gives away the bride)” (40). The structure of the pageant does present the young female body as an object of exchange, but the exchanger is not just the male (father) or the female (mother) but rather consists of the entire community. Furthermore, the pageant contestant is not silent in this exchange; she speaks and performs for her community in an effort to win the crown. Thus, I might argue that she is both the giver and the given in the community exchange.

To further Irigaray’s and Rubin’s theories, a second aspect of consumption that I address entails the ideal of beauty. While I do not claim to define beauty absolutely (as I previously noted, as far as pageantry is concerned, local beauty standards may well differ from National standards), I do want to highlight that the value placed on beauty has always proliferated in American culture. Moreover, it would be difficult to deny, that no matter what it is called in name – a beauty, scholarship, or festival pageant – the focus, at least in part, is on appearance. Kathy Davis’s article, “On Beauty…and the History of Business,” neatly remarks, “Beauty and business seem most closely related in the modern era, but beauty has always been for sale. Whenever and wherever markets arise, beauty has had a commercial value…Beauty added exchange value to women, whether in the market in slaves, in prostitutes, or in wives” (9-10). What I, in part, explore, in relation to Davis’s notion, is how the commercial beauty standard is adapted on the local pageant level.

Although there are numerous scholarly books about beauty and the expectations such a term holds for women, I am admittedly limiting my research to works that feature American notions of appearance. To that end, Joan Jacobs Brumburg’s study, The Body Project: An
Intimate History of American Girls (1997), offers an in-depth analysis of beauty that focuses upon adolescent females. Using personal dairies coupled with historical and theoretical analyses, Brumburg attempts to “tell the story of how the American girl’s relationship to her body has changed over the past century” (xxi). Her work is peppered with notions of constructed female appearance during the teenage years. The source is valuable to my project as it delves into both the historical and contemporary constructions of beauty citing an adolescent female perspective.

Conversely, a study that fails to credit the female with any sense of propriety with regard to appearance is Dawn Perlmutter’s article “Miss America: Whose Ideal?” (Beauty Matters: 2000). Perlmutter’s piece does make valid points concerning our social construction of the “acceptable woman,” however; she discredits women for even desiring to enter a pageant. She unabashedly states, “They [pageant contestants] are perfect examples of the damage caused by patriarchal ideals of women, including their lack of awareness about patriarchal notions of beauty, sex, youth, competition, and hierarchy” (164). While Perlmutter’s statement may hold some validity, I cannot comfortably agree with her claim of “their lack of awareness.” I have found, especially in speaking directly to pageant contestants, that many of the women who compete have a profound awareness of the positive and negative aspects of the pageant system as well as compelling reasons for participating.

In researching the study of beauty in America I feel I would be amiss to not to include Naomi Wolf’s persuasive book, The Beauty Myth (1991). Wolf provides a provocative and contemporary reading of how beauty has been (and perhaps continues to be) a regulator of value in females. Wolf also notes that what is considered beautiful in a woman at any give time “are merely symbols of the female behavior that that period considers desirable: The beauty myth is always actually prescribing behavior and not appearance” (13-14, emphasis in original). I
believe Wolf’s claim is helpful in determining how the dichotomy between “behavior” and “appearance” is defined on the local level.

Lastly, while there are numerous books and anthologies dedicated to critically exploring media induced standards of beauty\(^3\), I am interested in determining if and how these mediated standards remain constant within the pageant system. This, of course, does play into the beauty standards set by Miss America, but, I argue, these standards change at the local level. How much or how little a “beautiful” appearance is valued will be compared to the contestants’ community service and involvement. In essence, then, I question what exactly the local pageant is “selling.” Is it the cash crop? Is it the community and its values? Is it the appearance of the young female? Is it the mediated standards of beauty? Is it the human harvest represented in the young female body? My findings support, to a greater or lesser degree, all five.

**Festival, Rites of Passage, and Community**

This study would not be complete without theoretical discourse on festival celebration. While celebration encompasses a wide and varied field of inquiry, I first turn to Victor Turner’s *Celebration: Studies in Festivity and Ritual* (1982). For my purposes, Turner’s work neatly situates festival as a performance of community values and outlines how such values are played out on the festival stage. He notes, “when a social group, whether it be a family, clan, village, nation, congregation, or church, celebrates a particular event or occasion, such as birth, harvest, or national independence, it also ‘celebrates itself’…it attempts to manifest, in symbolic form, what it conceives to be its essential life” (16). I believe the symbolic nature of local festival is evident. In the celebration of the harvest, the cash crop becomes the symbol of prosperity for the community.

---

community. The community, in turn, shares this prosperity not only with members of its own “clan,” but also with outsiders who visit specifically to participate in the festival. In addition, the pageant queen is a symbol of the community’s capacity to raise and present for consumption ideal female citizens. Through all these means, among others, the community, to use Turner’s phrase, most certainly “celebrates itself.”

On the other hand, Turner also notes the lack of celebration in Western culture of “rites of passage,” where a young person transfers from puberty to adulthood. He claims that “commencement exercises and graduations have a rather weak functional equivalence” (25). While this may be true, I maintain that the local pageant is, indeed a “rite of passage” as the young female of the community is crowned in order to “go out into the world” and represent her community’s value and prosperity. Too, this rite of passage contains, to use Turner’s phrase, a “liminal period” of transformation. In his article, “Betwixt and Between: The Liminal Period in Rites of Passage” (1967) Turner astutely describes his theory: “The transitional-being or ‘liminal persona’ is defined by a name and by a set of symbols. The same name is frequently employed to designate those who are being initiated into very different states of life” (qtd. in Mahdi, Foster and Little 6). True, the young women in the pageant competition are surely defined by a name (the Miss Vegetable/Fruit contestant) and by a set of symbols that reflect the femininity performed within the pageant (the evening gown, the sash, and upon winning a title, the tiara). Also, in their decision to compete in the pageant the women are publicly acknowledged by the community as both “girl” who has grown up and “young woman” who can now serve to represent them. In this way the pageant serves not only to “designate those who are being initiated into very different states of life,” but also in keeping with the liminal experience
identifies the contestants as “that which [are] neither this not that, and yet both” (qtd. in Mahdi, Foster and Little 9).

Barbara Myerhoff’s article, “Rites of Passage: Process and Paradox,” further clarifies Turner’s position in a way that can be directly related to local pageantry. Myerhoff notes that the body participating in the rite must represent individual and community at the exact same moment. She writes, “rites of passage announce our separateness and individuality to us and at the same time remind us most firmly and vividly that we belong to our group and cannot conceive of an existence apart from it” (115). The local pageant is organized by the community, yet it is the individual female’s choice (for various reasons) to participate. In this decision are embedded not only individual desires to compete, but also communal influence and support to do so. In addition, upon winning, the pageant queen then travels throughout the year extolling the virtues of her community to neighboring areas. In essence then, this rite of passage supports Myerhoff’s conception that one “cannot conceive of an existence apart from it.” Further, once a pageant queen wins a title, she will forever hold that title in the community’s eyes. She will often be asked back for future pageants and parades and is never entirely able to “escape” her own hometown’s construction of her as a young female.

Finally, I must note, once again, Robert Lavenda’s book, *Corn Fests and Water Carnivals: Celebrating Community in Minnesota* (1997), Theodore C. Humphrey and Lin T. Humphrey’s anthology, *We Gather Together: Food and Festival in American Life* (1988) and additionally, Rodger Lyle Brown’s *Ghost Dancing on the Cracker Circuit: The Culture of Festivals in the American South* (1997). These three studies provide valuable information concerning local festival celebration. While the small town festival is often dismissed because

---

4 For further information on festivals and holidays see: Etzioni, Amitai and Jared Bloom, eds., *We Are What We Celebrate: Understanding Holidays and Rituals* (NY: New York University Press, 2004); Santino, Jack, *New Old-Fashioned Ways: Holidays and Popular Culture*
of its lack of commercial or widespread appeal, Lavenda, Humphrey and Humphrey, and Brown detail, in numerous ways and through a number of different festivals across the United States, how community is developed, strengthened, organized, represented, celebrated and, at times, disrupted, during moments of festival. Additionally, the authors have helped me clarify my positioning within the specific community festivals that I participated in. Brown remarks, “Considering the subject matter – festival – my approach can’t be static and objective; it must contain an element of the carnivalesque, must be spontaneous and chaotic within a controlled format” (xiv). All four authors have encouraged me to think further and in a scholarly way about social, cultural, and economic influences that construct small town communities, not only during festival time, but throughout the year. As Lavenda explains, “this material allowed me to think about the ways in which political economic forces could have an impact on, and could be symbolized by, such apparently ‘lightweight’ events” (xi). What is more, an even “lighter weight” event within the festival, the queen pageant, to my mind, affords the opportunity for reading the social, cultural, economic, and feminist meanings embedded within the performance of such.

**Food and Festival**

*Festivals U.S.A. and Canada* (1967) by Robert Meyer furnishes a brief description of every festival imaginable. Although somewhat dated, the information on agricultural festivals provides constructive rationale as to why and how America celebrates its harvest. Meyer also notes the variety of reasons that festivals occur, arguing that “they usually reflect the cultural,
economic, historical, religious or social aspects of communities” (vii). All of these elements, to a greater or lesser degree, surfaced in my study of community festival.

*A Guide to Fairs and Festivals in the United States* (1984) by Frances Shemanski lists by state the most popular celebrations and offers useful descriptions of each. She also categorizes the festivals by their focus on economic, cultural, historic, ethnic, and/or harvest elements and notes that “festivals are held annually and attract visitors from other parts of the world. In this way they contribute to local economies by bringing in money and jobs” (vii). In addition to exploring the economic advantages of holding a community festival, of particular interest for my project is the inclusion, in Shemanski’s study, of one of the festivals I attended, The Circleville Pumpkin Show. Her work is also useful in identifying the plentiful number of festivals that celebrate food and how these celebrations differ throughout the United States.

On another level, Kathy Neustadt’s book *Clambake: A History and Celebration of an American Tradition* (1992) is a microcosmic glance at the ritual and cultural constructions of one specific American food festival. Particularly useful is the way she constructs meaning from the celebrated food, claiming the clambake is a ritual performance and a rite of passage within the community. The rules and regulations of the clambake support and enforce the values of the community, much in the same vain, as I argue, the local pageant does. Similarly, Greta Pratt’s *In Search of the Corn Queen* (1990) chronicles Midwestern fairs and festivals pictorially. Of interest for me are the delineations Pratt constructs between fairs and festivals. In addition, she pays heed to the organizers and community members who assist behind the scenes thereby differentiating between the insiders and outsiders even within the community. Pratt focuses upon the rural aspects of small town community and through her pictures, especially of the
pageant contestants, one can see how small town beauty ideals might differ from the national pageants.

Finally, as my research will be limited to Ohio festivals, Lucy Long’s chapter “Food” in *The Midwest: The Greenwood Encyclopedia of American Regional Cultures* (2004) edited by Joseph W. Slade and Judith Yaross Lee provides helpful definitions of what characterizes the food in this region of the country: It is “plain and straightforward, hearty and wholesome [. . .]” (281). This definition of food, I argue, could also define the local pageant queen. Long’s article also discusses the importance of and dependence upon the Midwestern harvest which provides the economic stability of the small communities in this region. Additionally she notes that little scholarly attention has been paid to Midwestern food because of its perceived lack of “distinction” and “innovation,” yet she identifies festivals as an “excellent resource for information of Midwestern foodways” (285). I have found that this is the case. Furthermore, I have discovered that the “distinction” and “innovation” can be seen not only in the food that is being celebrated, but also in the ways that food becomes represented and promoted by the festival queen.

**Additional Sources**

The “Ohio Festivals and Events Association” website lists every possible festival scheduled in Ohio for 2007-2008. It also provides a festival summary and, in most cases, homepages for each event. The website has been an invaluable resource in planning and executing my research. To that end, the individual homepages have also provided me with key information about each festival including the history of the festival and how the agricultural commodity that is being celebrated is influential to each individual community. Additionally,
many of these homepages feature a section on the queen pageant. Here is where I have been able to access, in some cases, the rules, regulations, and applications for the pageant. Festival brochures and newspaper articles have also provided me with avenues into determining how the festival pageant is “sold” to the audience.

Summary

While the feminist nature of studying queen pageants has been questioned because they are a site of contestation, I believe that they provide numerous avenues into the ways in which the female body is constructed, represented, displayed, and performed. Although some theorists might be tempted to dismiss pageantry as an ultimate form of objectification, in the study of local festival pageants, I find that there is great potential to note the agency of and social value for the young women who compete. While I maintain that the pageant queen is, indeed, commodified by her community, I also believe she in many respects, celebrated by that same community. In addition, as femininity has and continues to be performed both in media representation and on the bodies of young females everywhere, I am interested to determine how this gender performance takes flesh on the local pageant stage.

Finally, in the observation of each festival queen and food she represents, I note how community values, agricultural prosperity, and celebration are reinforced and embodied. Although she is not Miss America, the local pageant queen’s endurance, I believe, is guaranteed as she is less likely to become a product of nostalgia. As long as the local community and its agricultural commodity remain, the festival will be in need of feminine representation. How this representation is valued and performed is what I uncover in my project.
CHAPTER TWO: MISS AMERICA, A CONTESTED HISTORY

Obviously (or not so obviously) there is something about this seemingly innocuous pageant that raises an eyebrow, a giggle, or a picket sign. As such, its social significance cannot be dismissed as trivial.

- A. R. Riverol, Live From Atlantic City: A History of the Miss America Pageant

Um, I think Miss America’s a good thing. Um, it may just be for the pure fact that it’s an American icon. It may just be for the pure fact that you can win a lot of money doing it. Um, those women work hard to do what they do. They work on their bodies, they stay in shape. They go to school. Some of them are like biochemists. I have immense respect for them. Um, a lot of people stereotype beauty queens, a lot. We think, dumb, dumb blonde or without a brain …

- A local pageant participant via personal interview\(^5\)

Some call her a Beauty Queen. We call her a scholar.

- MissAmerica.org

Feminine Performances Presently Past: The Miss America Pageant

Sarah Banet-Weiser, in her detailed and poignant study of pageantry, *The Most Beautiful Girl in the World: Beauty Pageants and National Identity* astutely notes, “In general, beauty pageants are grouped with popular cultural forms that are regarded as either to ‘low’ to merit serious investigation or so obvious and opaque that vigorous interrogation would be both uninteresting and unnecessary” (4). Banet-Weiser, as I too have done in my first chapter,

\(^5\) Respondent D.
willingly acknowledges the lack of attention paid to pageantry as a scholarly venture. Yet, additionally, she argues that this seemingly frivolous display of the female body must be re-examined in an effort to acknowledge the agency of the thousands of women who choose to compete in pageants at various levels throughout the United States as well as to perceive the rich and affecting history that pageantry holds in popular culture and in social and civic constructions of women in America. Furthermore, Tracy Davis, in her article “A Feminist Methodology in Theatre History” states, “The feminist historian’s task is to address the censoring impulse, to validate the experience, and to connect the women with the work and the work with world at large” (66). Although my project is not primarily focused on the historical aspects of pageantry, before recounting my personal experience as a spectator at the local festival pageants in chapter three and chapter four and featuring the interviews of pageant contestants in chapter five, I feel it is necessary to note in some small detail the history of the Miss America Pageant in an effort to, as Banet-Weiser and Davis contend, secure a connection between women who perform in pageantry and societal implications implied by such a performance.

In light of this, I divide my chapter into three distinct historical junctures: Firstly, I examine the cultural phenomena of pageantry as a site of contention for feminist thought. In doing so, I note a very specific moment in the not so distance past of both pageant and second-wave feminist history where the performance of femininity perpetuated by the Miss America Pageant considerably led to the development of the disregard for the pageant as viable area of feminist pursuit. Secondly, I consider how the construction of the performance of femininity was marked and maintained by the pageant in response to changing and challenging notions of feminine beauty standards in the early twentieth century. Finally, I employ this chapter to account how the local festival pageants featured in my study are the direct “descendants,” if you
will, of the earliest Miss America pageants, specifically the years of 1921-1927, in an attempt to note not only the commodification present in the early pageant structure, but also the sense of play and celebration. In discussing these three different, but linked, moments in the Pageant’s history, I hope to acquaint my reader with a knowledge of how the Miss America Pageant has and continues to influence social and cultural constructions of a performed femininity.

**Bra-Burners versus Beauty Queens: Mediated Recognition**

The contemporary second-wave feminist tensions clouding the Miss America Pageant can most immediately be traced to the Atlantic City Boardwalk in September of 1968. The now famous “No More Miss America” protest staged by the New York Radical Women’s Liberation group and headed by Robin Morgan provided timely fuel for the idea that the woman who competed in the Miss America Pageant, and, too, pageants in general were nothing more than a “Degrading Mindless-Boob-Girlie Symbol” (Morgan 80). Quite a performance in its own right, the advertised call for the protest requested activist participation. It reads:

Picket Lines; Guerrilla Theater; Leafleting; Lobbying Visits to the contestants urging our sisters to reject the Pageant Farce and join us; a huge Freedom Trash Can (into which we will throw bras, girdles, curlers, false eyelashes, wigs, and representative issues of *Cosmopolitan, Ladies’ Home Journal, Family Circle*, etc. – bring any such woman-garbage you have around the house); we will also announce a Boycott of all those commercial products related to the Pageant, and the day will end with a Women’s Liberation rally at midnight when Miss America is crowned on live television. (Morgan 80)
The protest, which took place outside of the New Jersey Convention Hall that served as the performance space for the annual pageant, sparked notable controversy and functioned to forever ingrain in the minds of the public the, popular cultural yet unfounded, label of feminists as “bra-burners.” What is most interesting, or perhaps ironic, is that the pageant (although the protesters claimed complete disassociation with the event, what it represented, and with the women who competed) aided in providing recognition for feminist thought in mass culture: “In the days and weeks after the pageant, those words [women’s liberation] rang round the globe. As Robin Morgan exulted afterward, the demonstration had announced the existence of Women’s lib to the world and drew a host of eager adherents to the cause. To Morgan, the protest marked nothing less than the birth of the modern feminist movement” (Savage 7-8). What is more, Susan J. Douglas in her study, *Where the Girls Are: Growing Up Female with the Mass Media* remarks, “Before the Miss America demonstration, few outside the New Left knew of such [feminist] women. As a result, they seemed to come from nowhere – or, as the press seemed to suggest, from outer space or under a rock” (142). The kitschy Atlantic City Boardwalk was perhaps an unlikely place for the media to finally take notice of the feminist movement. Nevertheless, the distain for the Miss America Pageant expressed in the protest by the New York Radical Women juxtaposed against Middle Americas’ admiration for the contest created spectacular media frenzy.

As one might imagine, in much of the pro-Miss America books and studies I have researched for this project, the 1968 protest is given little literary attention. A. R. Riverol, in his detailed historical recounting of the pageant, employs his chapter titled, “The Seventies: Relevancy Knocks and No One Answers” to offer a brief note:
By 1970, the revolution had finally arrived in Atlantic City. Protests on the grounds of sexism and racism were plenty. To look at the show on television, one would never know it though. Rather than facing the core issues presented by the protestors, the pageant people continued to insist that the pageant was doing the women of America a great favor by offering scholarships. (92)

True, the Miss America Pageant implemented the offering of substantial scholarship monies for the contestants both at the state and National levels beginning in 1945, and this element of the pageant is thoroughly noted in Miss America Pageant literature, yet the lack of acknowledgement of the feminist movement in such is in keeping with the pageant’s pure, controlled, and feminine image. It seems, then, that while both pageant organizers and feminist scholars claim to promote women’s intelligence and independence they do so in a manner that requires all women to choose a stance – one must be either pro-pageant or pro-feminist, never both.

Thus, given the methodology of my project, what I find problematic with this particular historical moment and the recording of such is that whereas the 1968 protest gained much needed recognition for the feminist movement, it could be argued, the action served historically to pit woman against woman – with neither “side” being acknowledged by the media (or for that matter, one another) as more than a one-dimensional being. What is more, in their refutation of the qualities of femininity prescribed by the pageant’s structure, the protestors, with ample “help” from the media, created a picture of feminists as anything but feminine and therefore furthered, in part, the disdain over any feminine expression that still remains ingrained in much feminist consciousness. The media, for example, was completely fascinated with the Freedom Trash Can and by the “feminine” articles that the protestors were tossing into the bin. A New
York Times article entitled “Miss America Pageant is Picketed by 100 Women,” written by Charlotte Curtis (the protestors would only speak to female reporters) and published the day following the protest and the 1968 pageant, thoroughly details the fiery event:

They ripped up a Playboy magazine before dumping it into the trash can. And they danced around shouting ‘Liberation now!’ ‘Down with these shoes,’ cried 68-year-old Mrs. Clara Demiha…as she tossed a high-heeled shoe into the container. ‘And down with bound feet!’ shouted another woman amid cries of ‘Tell it like it is.’ One woman threw her bottle of pink-liquid detergent into the heap. She said she was against ‘such atrocities as having to wash the dishes.’ Another held a girdle high over the trash can, reciting, ‘No more girdles, no more pain. No more trying to hold the fat in vain.’ (8 Sept. 1968)

The spectacle of the protest, as reporters accounted it, provided ample suggestion that the female protestors were wild women, unafraid of the uncontrolled and uncontained body and thus posed a threat to cultural and social feminine norms. The feminist protesters were depicted by the media and imagined in mass culture as women who, because they were not “beautiful” enough to compete in the pageant, had to act out – not because they had something to say, but because they were “jealous” and “envious” of the “pretty” women inside the convention hall. The New York Times article continues with a brief account from the “pageant” side: “After an hour or so, three counterpickets [sic] appeared among the spectators. They were led by Miss Terry Meewsen, a runner-up in the 1967 Miss America Contest…She wore a hand-painted sign that read: ‘There’s Only One Thing Wrong with Miss America. She’s Beautiful’” (Curtiss, 8 Sept. 1968). Thus, the media’s report of the feminist protest and the feminine pageant easily confirmed the stereotypes
that still are somewhat ingrained in American consciousness - ugly versus pretty, intelligent versus dull-witted, and wild versus controlled.

Considerably, the historical moment has paved the way for anti-pageant sentiment in feminist scholarship that remains a contemporary construct. As Douglas reminds, “The media representation of feminism reinforced the division between the acceptable and the deviant, between the refined and the grotesque, between deserving ladies and disorderly doges. This false dichotomy helped to reaffirm, more than ever, the importance of female attractiveness to female success, and the utter folly of taking to the streets” (191). To my mind, and I can not deny my endearing affection for the work and the agenda of the second-wave feminist protestors, the mediated depiction of the street wise protesters and the robotic beauty queens resulted in misrepresentation of both groups of women. In the contested terrain that is pageantry, the problematic binary of femininity versus feminism remains engrained in our culture even while the pursuit of individuality and independence by the women who choose to compete in pageants often goes ignored. Thus, in analyzing this defining historical moment I attempt to re-consider the implication of alignment with “one” side or the “other.”

Still, there are many moments in the history of pageantry that fueled the division of feminist thought and feminine performance; the construction of the “active” and empowered women of the former and the construction of the “passive” and displayed women of the latter. The very creation of the Miss America Pageant, it could be argued, began, in part, as a response to first-wave feminism and the activism of the suffragettes. The first organizers of the pageant would perhaps not admit the direct correlation, but the beginning of the Miss America Pageant has definite ties to the newly conceived public presence of women in social and civic society and the attempt by much of American society to keep women positioned in the domestic sphere. I
now turn to the inception of the American “beauty” pageant in an effort to trace how this form
created not only commodification and display of the female body, but also served as a venue
which granted some women a public platform on which to be recognized. I do acknowledge that
this platform was constructed by a double-edged sword drawn by a patriarchal society.
However, I adhere to the notion that the performance of femininity is not simply an act of
objectification, but also one that might afford opportunity.

**Victorian Leisure: A Moral Entertainment**

To begin to trace the history of the “beauty” pageant, I must step decidedly back from the
first Miss America Pageant or, rather, the Inter-City Beauty Contest as it was initially titled.
While it is true that the Miss America Pageant was conceived in 1921 to extend tourism beyond
Labor Day on the Atlantic City Boardwalk, the invention of the American beauty contest is often
credited to showman P.T. Barnum. As a result of the Industrial Revolution in the 19th century,
middle- and working-class Americans suddenly found themselves with a certain amount of
“leisure” time: “As such, industries associated with leisure sprang up, including carnivals, fairs,
circuses, musical theatre, Wild West Shows, amusement parks, and seaside resorts. Women
were among the many gimmicks used to attract a paying audience to the new world of relaxation,
amusement, and entertainment” (Riverol 7). Indeed, the “selling” of women to draw audiences
has a long and vast history. In relation to my project, however, I find consequence to note that
the local festivals of my project are each community’s expression of their own local leisure: The
fall celebrations represent the spirit of carnival rewarded after a successful harvest. The crops
have been laboriously reaped and, thus, festival time is a communal opportunity to feature the
hard earned bounty. As such, the bounty (and the community) is in need for a symbolic
representative which takes form in the festival queen. What began as a “gimmick” to entice paying audiences has since developed, in the local festival queen of today, into a spokesperson for community. The subjective role of spokesperson is constructed by a performance of femininity that can be traced to the origins of the beauty pageant – a performance that had to negotiate for an acceptance in the public arena.

Barnum’s first attempts at producing a “beauty” contest were clouded by the social fear of seeing a live woman displayed on the public stage. I again refer to Riverol’s history of the Miss America Pageant. He contends, “Barnum initiated what many consider to be the first actual beauty pageant.” In the 1854 contest, women paraded before judges who appraised their faces and figures…In Barnum’s contest, the winner, if married, would win a diamond tiara. If single, she would win a dowry. The contest turned out to be a failure because the only ones to apply were women of ‘questionable reputations’” (8). It is difficult to know the specific details of why the contestants of the 1854 pageant were deemed to have ‘questionable reputations’ because personal information on their backgrounds and biographies were not, to my knowledge, recorded. Yet, similar to the positioning of early actresses examined in Tracy Davis’s study, the contestants who participated in the early pageants suffered from social stigmas. Davis astutely accounts that when “the official religious and legal institutions of masculine culture did not formally preclude women from appearing onstage, the cultural context determined the social meanings of actresses’ public lives and generically fixed all aspects of their status in the community at large without respect to actual personal conduct” (69). In regard to nineteenth-century American society, one can deduce that Barnum’s audience would not tolerate a version of femininity that did not meet proper Victorian social standards and the public and live display

---

6 Many scholars also cite Rehoboth Beach, Delaware as the location of the first American bathing beauty contest in 1880, however, the event did not gain the national attention of Barnum’s efforts. See: Lovegrove (2002), Stein (2006), Savage (1998), and Banner (1993).
of the female body was not considered a feminine trait. Susan Bordo reminds us that the "nineteenth-century ‘lady’ was idealized in terms of delicacy and dreaminess, sexual passivity, and a charmingly labile and capricious emotionality” (169: 2003). Considerably, any women would promote herself through the scandalous display of her live female body on stage for the general masses would certainly not merit “sexual passivity.” Barnum attempted, in his awarding of the “proper” financial prizes for the single or the married woman who competed, to encourage what one might, at the time, consider women of high moral and social values to enter the contest, still, the live female body on stage was a frightening spectacle – much like the live and uncontrolled body of the 1968 feminist protesters. Given this ever present and affecting historical fear of the female body, it is no wonder that the entrants of the “first beauty contest” appeared to maintain “questionable reputations,” for certainly a “proper” Victorian woman would not dare to allow herself to be displayed in such a public venue.

After the failure of the first pageant Barnum, ever the entrepreneur, did not give up the gimmick, rather he wisely, “announced that [the contestants] need only submit daguerreotypes for judging” because, “by 1854 the popularity of the daguerreotype was so widespread that its use for these purposes cleansed the occasion of the taint of immorality otherwise thought inherent in the public displays of women’s figures” (Banner 256). By removing the live female body from the spectacle Barnum’s audience could look, but not be tempted to touch and the contestants could maintain their prescribed modesty and femininity by appearing in the one-dimensional photograph. In light of my project, the success of Barnum’s second pageant should not be underestimated. As a result of his savvy business scheme, when the first Miss America pageant was held some 67 years later, the organizers used the same technique to recruit the initial eight would-be contestants. Riverol remarks, “The idea to have a beauty contest as part of the
[Fall] Frolic of 1921 is credited to Harry Finley, an Atlantic City newspaperman…Finley proposed that a ‘popularity contest’ run by newspapers in various cities would increase their circulation…The prize? A vacation in Atlantic City!” (12). As a result, young hopefuls submitted their photographs to their city newspaper and the chosen winners made the trip to Atlantic City in order to compete – but this time, live and in the flesh.

One possible reason for the difference in audience perception of Barnum’s first contest (which viewed the display of the live female body as a disgrace) and the first Miss America pageant (which selected women were not only on public display, but costumed in bathing attire) can be credited, I argue, to the advances made by first-wave feminism and the suffragettes. In essence, the work of the suffragettes and their own claim of the public and civic space, facilitated, only one year after women procured the right to vote, the possibility of a competition that enabled women of “unquestionable” reputation to take the public stage in Atlantic City. Albeit, with a very different performance strategy. Thus, in stating this, I am not claiming that the work and political activism of suffragettes would align with what the contestants were judged upon or with the contest in any manner. Rather I am noting how, much like the 1968 protest, the beauty pageant and feminist thought has in unusual ways aided one another in the public recognition of both.

The American influence of pageantry as a performance genre can, then, in part, be credited to the work of the suffragettes. Kimberly A. Hamlin, in her article “Bathing Suits and Backlash: The First Miss America Pageants, 1921-1927,” notes the comparison. She credits the pageant performance of the suffragists as a useful and political tool:

[S]cholars cite the suffragists’ skillful use of pageants as one reason for the success of the Nineteenth Amendment in 1920. Suffrage pageants consisted of a
series of short scenes, or tableaus, that generally depicted important women in history, such as Joan of Arc or Florence Nightingale, and showcased women’s contributions to the community as mothers, pioneers, and workers. (28)

Of course, Hamlin’s article favors the performance of the suffragettes over the performance of participants of the first Miss America Pageant. In fact, she suggests that the work of the suffragettes was overshadowed or, perhaps, demeaned by the adaptation of the pageant genre for marketing “beauty.” Hamlin continues:

In contrast to the suffragists’ pageants, the Miss America contest did not celebrate women’s history, solidarity, or new opportunities, nor did it encourage feelings of liberation or agency among participants. Instead, it encouraged women to vie for male approval based on physical appearance and to view their looks as their most important assets. Despite the fact that these two types of female pageantry have little in common in terms of goals or purpose, they are linked by chronology and proximity in the public imagination. (28)

I agree with Hamlin regarding the “apolitical” agenda of the beauty contest contestants, the women who competed were hardly in Atlantic City in order to procure voting rights for American women, however, I do question the notion that the pageant did not celebrate “new opportunities” or “encourage feelings of liberation or agency among participants.” In claiming this, Hamlin disregards the lived experiences of the female contestants, and furthermore continues to perpetuate the constructed binary of feminist action versus feminine passivity. As I stated in my analysis of the 1968 protest, in light of my project, this juxtaposition is troubling. Whereas the suffragettes performed historical female characters in their pageants to enact a message to the American masses, so too, did the creation of the queen pageant create a female
character that has been a historical representation of femininity. I believe one must keep in mind that both constructions of women were public and very active performances and in turn, both served to influence early twentieth century interpretations of women.

As such, because of the public discontent to first-wave feminism’s disregard for Victorian era feminine behavior – marching in the public arena and speaking for women’s rights – the early years of the Miss America pageant did function to retain the decorum of feminine morality and purity for the American public: “In short, the early Miss America Pageants, from 1921 to 1927, provide a window through which to view the struggle to define women’s proper place in society at a time when traditional gender roles were in upheaval” (Hamlin 29). The contemporary mind may find it difficult to imagine that young women posing in (however contemporarily considered unrevealing) bathing suits could be considered the epitome of moral values. Yet, the early pageant organizers advertised the young female contestants as just that: “To avoid conservative protest, the managers presented their contestants as natural and unsophisticated. Their publicity stressed that none of the entrants wore makeup or bobbed their hair” (Banner 266). Thus, the mediated selling of the contestants as wholesome, pure, and a vision of domesticity, enabled the public and the pageant promoters to maintain their sense of dignity and civic duty while they indulged in the act of looking. I maintain that the pageant contestants were not only employed as a tool of display, but the advertised morality of the contestants may be one reason that, perhaps, the pageant was (and still is) considered an entertaining and acceptable event to audience.

A short time after the work of the suffragettes won the right of women to vote, another “threat” to Victorian womanhood appeared. The flapper burst onto the scene, shedding her corset, cutting her old-fashioned locks, and shortening her skirt. The ideal image of beauty
among American women began to change. Still, this change was shocking for much of conservative America. Therefore, and despite of the appearance of the boyish flappers, the early years of the Miss America Pageant continued to promote beauty standards akin to Victorian morals, and the pageant provided, for the woman who competed, an opportunity to use her pleasing and “traditional” appearance to enter into the male dominated world. In her analysis of the presumed objectification inherent in the performance of the pageant queen Candace Savage reminds, “the perplexity of beauty lies in its double-ness. If beauty is oppressive, it can also provide access to pleasure, power, and wealth...beauty can serve as an instrument of ambition” (118). Given the newfound public presence of women in 1920s society and the public fear induced by the uninhibited flapper, the promotion of a traditional form of femininity was highly desirable.

In her historical and poignant study, *American Beauty*, Louise Banner discusses turn of the twentieth-century American queen pageants and notes, specifically, how the American pageant system has propagated a traditional and non-threatening beauty ideal. She notes, “the appearance of most Miss Americas, as well as that of the winners of the hundreds of local contests that precede her selection, is wholesome and clean-cut, that neither their faces nor their figures are really appropriate for fashion modeling or the movies. Most...become wives and mothers once their reign has ended, proof to American women that the real end of beauty is to secure a husband.” (264). Banner’s observations still ring true: Upon serving the year-long reign representing the hometown all-American female, the majority of contestants “settle down” into a role that includes, among others, wife and mother, although there are notable exceptions.7 Yet, in some cases, despite Banner’s valid suggestions, the history of the Miss America Pageant

---

7 Vanessa Williams (who had to relinquish her 1984 title because of the releasing of nude photographs) and Lee Meriwether (the first Miss America to be crowned on live television in 1955) are two notable exceptions.
supports the notion that the pageant provided the women who competed an avenue for independence and success. In speaking of the early Miss America Pageants Savage reminds:

If the contestants were squeamish about being ogled by onlookers and scrutinized by male judges, they did not voice a protest. Perhaps no one bothered to ask them how they felt, or perhaps they were so used to being assessed by men that they didn’t think to object. At work and at play, the life of a working girl was a round-the-clock beauty contest, in which men did the looking and women did their best to be worth looking at. A beauty pageant took this everyday transaction and turned it into a sport, with the added allure of glittering rewards that real life was unlikely to afford. (55)

Thus, the feminine quality of beauty, it could be argued, held power for the women who subscribed to such a notion. Of course, on the other hand, it cannot be denied that this determination of what was beautiful (traditional femininity) and what was less appealing (the unfeminine flappers) came somewhat from the men who held the power in civic and social society. Still, and I believe Savage’s contention that “no one bothered to ask them how they felt” is in part key to my study: In tussling with the contested terrain that pageantry maintains in feminist scholarship I maintain that often times the performance of femininity can have rewarding and positive aspects for the women who engage the experience.

So how does the above analysis of early pageant history speak to my project concerning local festival pageant queens? At first glance, it is perhaps, most easy to read the local contestants as “keepers” of the feminine and traditional image as moral and pure representatives for their hometown communities. Yet, the local pageants that I have witnessed are not what one might label “beauty” pageants (appearance is valued, but the structure of the local pageants
considers much more than the physical aspects of the female form in the chosen representative). This is not to state that the Miss America pageants solely consider consideration of the women who compete is based upon physical beauty. Still, to my mind, because of the mediated representation the icon of Miss America serves, stereotypical beauty “standards” are adhered to more severely in the National Pageant. I cannot deny that the first pageants perpetuated beauty standards in that the pageant contestants were crowned in their bathing suits, a category that awarded several judging points. However, despite the bathing contest, as I read through the histories of the Miss America Pageant, I am drawn to the vast similarities of the earliest pageants, specifically the pageants from 1921-1927, and the hometown festival pageants featured in my project. Perhaps the comparisons linger because the Miss America Pageant was in its infancy and the contestants did not have the performance and mediated “polish” I now see on the Miss America Pageant stage. Maybe the collation stems from the festive nature of the first “fall frolics” of Atlantic City. Or the parallelism could be credited to a lack of technological advancement – the televised pageant had not yet guided our view of the women parading before a camera. For these reasons, among others, I find similarities between the early Miss America Pageants to the contemporary local pageants I attended. In doing so I employ the latter half of this chapter to explore this past history with my present experiences in an effort to trace the development of some of the tenets of local pageantry that can be credited to those first elections on the Atlantic City Boardwalk. Through these early pageants I can trace the development of a “homegrown” femininity. As Elissa Stein, in her book, *Here She Comes...Beauty Queen*, notes, “Today’s beauty queens are showered with fabulous prizes during their reign: they travel the world, meet dignitaries and heads of state, and get priceless media exposure. This royal treatment is a far cry from that of the first beauty queens, many of whom were crowned at the
beach and then went home to relative anonymity. Unlike today’s glitzy affairs, those first pageants made for an afternoon’s simple entertainment” (23-24). While I do not agree that the local pageant, or for that matter, the first Miss America Pageants, were “simple entertainment” given the organization, preparation, and commitment necessary from the contestants and the producers of the pageant, I do contend that the first Miss America Pageants and the local festival pageants share characteristics in the performance of femininity that are less mediated than the Miss America Pageant of today.

Festival Flavor: The First Fall Frolics

The organizers of the first pageants were selling the boardwalk to summer vacationers and they were using the pageant contestants as one of the prime elements of their sales pitch. But, the pageant, as in local festival structure, was not the only draw for the leisurely tourists. The pageant was situated within a week-long festival celebration and the event was just one of the many activities in which vacationers could participate. Similar to the community festival celebrations, which in part function to entice visitors from surrounding communities to their town, the Fall Frolic served to create tourism for Atlantic City. As such, the audiences’ involvement in the Fall Frolic was integral to the celebration’s success: “the events which made up the early Miss America Pageants were not only many in number, but also varied in type and appeal. Whatever the form, for the most part, all events were designed to favor audience participation, input, and feedback” (Riverol 25). Again, like at the festivals embedded in my project, especially the Circleville Pumpkin Show which is discussed in detail in chapter four, audience participation in and support of the first pageant was an integral element to the event’s appeal and success. In fact, the winner of the first Miss America pageant was decided by both
the “official” judges and the audience with each receiving a 50 percent vote (Riverol 22).

Contemporary popular culture has witnessed a return to the desire for audience participation in the genre of “reality” television shows. American Idol and Dancing with the Stars are two notable examples that enable the audience to vote for their “favorite” performance. The success of the first pageants and the decreased ratings of the current Miss America pageants seem to point to an ever-present need of audiences to actively participate – whether in person or from the confines of the sofa in their living rooms. The desire by audiences to be included in the performance is certainly an element of the local festivals – from the pageant to the parade - and this need was realized in the structure of the first pageants.

Subsequently, audience attendance and the success of the Fall Frolic grew and so did the popularity of the pageant. In the early years of the pageant (and before the pageant adopted the now familiar format of state representation) the number of contestants substantially increased. The opportunity for public recognition and a possible career afforded to the young women by the pageant drew them in vast numbers to the Atlantic City Boardwalk. Riverol notes that “The 1922 pageant had representatives from fifty seven cities from all over the United States. In 1923, seventy four contestants entered. By 1924, the figure had risen to eighty three contestants” (22). As I witnessed at the festivals I attended for my study, the pageant was one of the highlights and top drawing performances, however, this is where the comparison of the early pageants and the local festivals becomes strained. The local pageants are not constructed primarily for financial gain for pageant organizers. They are rather, as I argue, an event that serves to elect feminine representation for the community and the festival’s commodity. This is not to state that the pageant does not aid in bringing tourists and money into the community, but to my mind, that is not the primary goal. Of the earliest Miss America pageants, Riverol reminds:
[T]he pageant of the 1920s, could be classified as pseudo-events, that is they were non-spontaneous, highly orchestrated, manufactured events which were self-promotional in nature…the pageant’s original aim was not to promote pageantry, beauty, scholarship, or any other such lofty ideal. Its creation was to make money, a point that many pageant aficionados still feel uncomfortable admitting…Not to be seen in a negative light, the pageant concept instead must be lauded as a stroke of entrepreneurial genius. (24)

Thus, the roots of the Miss America pageant, according to Riverol, were purely commercial.

Yet, to my mind, it is difficult to dismiss what the pageant provides for the women who chose to compete. Apart from financial gain (for participants and sponsors alike), in the following chapters I look further at the feminine performance contained in the local pageants and how this performance provides for many, among other things, less materialistic rewards.

In direct relation to economic factors, only seven years after its inception, the pageant began to lose monetary reward for the Atlantic City businessmen and it was dissolved in 1928. In her book, Miss America: The Dream Lives On, Angela Saulino Osborne notes, “Somebody had to pay for all those fireworks, flowers, special trains, carnivals, balls, and hotel accommodations, and the Pageant managed to find itself with a $52,000.00 deficit at the end of its first seven years” (78). Other factors that are blamed for the dissipation were “a series of embarrassing incidents that focused an unflattering media spotlight upon the event:” Married women were entering the competition, contestants were claiming they represented a city or state in which they did not reside, and “several women’s clubs label[ing] the competition ‘indecent’”

---

Therefore, whether economics or morals are to be blamed, America went without a “Miss” for almost seven years until the pageant was reworked and resumed in 1935. 9

Cleaning Up Her Image: Miss America Re-Vamped

Once the Miss America Pageant resurfaced, one of the primary goals of the planning organization was to re-deem the amateur and immoral image of the pageant by focusing upon the pageant’s entertainment value. The “new and improved” contest was named The Showman’s Variety Jubilee and Lenora Slaughter, “a member of the St. Petersburg Florida Chamber of Commerce Staff” was hired to coordinate the pageant event (Riverol 31). Originally offered a contract for six weeks, Slaughter would remain with the Miss America System for the next 32 years. Under the watchful eye of Slaughter, the pageant transformed its reputation. Slaughter instilled in the contest extreme tenets of femininity maintaining that the feminine behavior of the contestants would provide a suitable public representative and considerable financial gain and opportunity for the women involved. Some of the many rules and regulations posed and enforced by Slaughter to polish the pageant’s tarnished image included; the incorporation of chaperones for the young women, a 1:00 am curfew during the pageant contest and on tour, the disallowance of any of the contestants to visit drinking establishments, as well as the addition of the talent competition in 1938, and the development of scholarship awards in 1945. Turning once again to Stein’s analysis of this historical moment, it is important to underscore when “Leonora Slaughter came on board and revamped the pageant’s image into one of respectability, helping Miss America become the ultimate celebration of the girl next door – the one every girl wanted to be and every boy wanted to marry” (40, emphasis in original). Slaughter, then,

9 A pageant was held in 1933. It was “sponsored by carnivals and amusement parks” rather than the Atlantic City Businesses. As such, “As part of the arrangement, many had to participate in a seven-week vaudeville tour” prior to their arrival in Atlantic City (Riverol 27). See also: Osborne (1995).
thoroughly aided in establishing the pageant’s reputation as a celebration of the hometown or “every” girl. However, and as I argue more completely in the proceeding two chapters, the relationship to the feminine value of beauty maintained by the Miss America Pageant – even in its earliest inception – and the local festival pageants differs widely.

In my very brief examination of the constructions of femininity put in place and upheld by the Miss America Pageant and my acknowledgement of the second-wave feminist denunciation of such constructions, I have hoped to provide a nuanced if limited understanding of the social and cultural contestation of the pageant system as a whole. In light of this examination of the historical construction of the beauty queen ideal, I now turn to the primary focus of my study, local festival and the pageants featured in these communal celebrations in an effort to discover, among many things, how this ideal is defined and reconfigured at the local level.
CHAPTER THREE: FESTIVAL, FOOD, AND FEMININTY: THE PLAY OF LOCAL PAGEANTRY

Sugar Beets and Ox Cart Days: A Personal and Narrative History

The seeds for this study, and specifically this chapter, were planted in the quaint and rather ordinary small northern Minnesota town where I grew up: Fisher. Do not be deceived by the name. Although the state of Minnesota is dubbed “the land of 10,000 lakes,” in my hometown fish were not the commodity or even, for that matter, the delicacy of choice. Instead, my tiny community thrived economically upon the planting of, the tending to, and the yearly fall harvest of a rather large and unsightly root vegetable lovingly named the sugar beet. The hairy and creamy white colored vegetable was granted a considerable stature, not only in my community, but also in my family history.

My great grandfather, Pete, had come over “on the boat” from Norway to secure a plot of fertile land located in an area of the United States, which featured an unusually flat landscape, and laid just east of the North Dakota border on the Minnesota side. It was not quite Canada, although an hour’s drive north would put you under the Queen’s rule. But, by chance or choice, long ago my great grandfather chose Minnesota. There he began his life’s work as a farmer, and stayed, along with his family, to endure the bitterly cold and wind-chilled winters and the mild and mosquito-filled summers. Most likely, my great grandfather did not imagine in those years that he was starting a life’s work that would continue for, thus far, four generations. As was the tradition with most northern Minnesota farm families, once the land was secured it became one’s duty to use it and hold on to it at all costs. As such, in keeping with custom and the work ethic and dedication to family he brought with him from Norway, my great grandfather’s land was passed on to his son, my grandfather, and then eventually, though perhaps reluctantly on the part
of the recipient, to my father. While the history of this passing of the land from one generation to the next is far more complicated and involved than my brief recounting here suggests, it is nonetheless important to note that the element that remained constant throughout the generational transference was the sugar beet. The hearty vegetable is processed to yield the pure and white granules so complementary to morning coffee and it loves to grow in the Northern Minnesota climate (that is, of course, if the weather cooperates).

There is a stereotypical myth or a running joke, seen in the form of a well-worn cartoon appearing every so often in small town Minnesota newspapers, that essentializes the ethic and material conditions that has guided my family of farmers. It goes something like this: Two farmers in overalls and baseball style caps stand in the middle of a field looking upward toward the clear sky. One hand is perched at each of the farmers’ foreheads in an effort to block the sun. The first farmer says: “Looks like rain.” The second replies: “Yep.” They continue to stare at the heavens. The first farmer speaks again: “Might be rain.” The second responds: “Yep.” And finally, the first farmer asks: “Think it’ll rain?” The second confirms: “Yep.” A dead pan reply of: “Good.” A reaffirmation of: “Yep.” Though not necessarily the material of a successful stand up routine, the “joke” nonetheless points to several elements present in the construction of a culture that depends on not only the weather, but also the personal ethic necessary to sustain a livelihood that is, in many ways, out of ones’ control. The cartoon conveys a sense of calm and hope of each farmer; they are men of but a few words. It also indirectly calls attention to community; both of the men are dependant upon the weather for the growth of their own crop, and in a sense, they are “in it together,” awaiting the perfect blend of sunshine and rain. I point to this illustrated and rather banal comic banter in order to establish, in part, how one of the subjects of my project, agricultural farming and the commodity that results
from the fruits of this labor, is not simply a way to earn a living, but also creates and sustains community among its members.

Significant to my study, it warrants noting that the agricultural community has established very specific gender roles. The men and boys work the fields, plant the crops, and harvest the bounty. They also order the seed, fix the machinery, and discuss the weather over black coffee. The women (at least in my family and community) cook the food, pack the lunches, and make sure the men are awakened at the crack of dawn to get out of the house and into the fields. The women also sometimes ride along in the beet truck during harvest to provide conversation and keep the men company on the long twelve hours shifts. And, more often than not, they worry quietly about the weather.

In my experience, northern Minnesota farm wives, after the preparation and serving of supper, watch the evening news along with their husbands, being careful not to speak during the ten minutes of programming that reveals the projected forecast. I recall many evenings watching my father curse or cheer at this moment of local news and observing my mother sitting pensively and hoping for the best. At these particular moments, my sister and I would just silently sit by, eating our bland gray meatloaf and canned green beans, unaware of the vast gravity the information about to be broadcast held in our daily lives. What we were undoubtedly aware of was the tension that those few minutes of television created at our dinner table. Most troubling to adolescent minds and hearts was the fact that if the weather did not cooperate, there would be few new school clothes, sparse presents under the Christmas tree, and no annual winter vacation to Disney World. For my sister and me, the weather was always a threat; and, like the rest of my family and our community, the forecast was constantly invading our thoughts.
I recount this moment of disquiet from my upbringing not to convince the reader that my sister and I were spoiled children only interested in material goods (although I cannot deny that we lived a modestly middle-class life and did not want for much), but rather to point to my recollection of the nature of my performance of “farmer’s daughter.” With the benefit of age, I now realize that not all females in farm families watched from the sidelines, and that many were and are involved in the producing of the crops. However, in my hometown community the idea of gender neutrality was anathema. Even today, because my parents’ two children are both women, there is a serious question of what will become of the family farm in the future. It was never expected that my sister or I would become farmers, and as such our career choices have lead us away from the family land. While my father has no intention of retiring anytime soon, he is nonetheless deeply concerned with what will happen to the land that has been in the family for generations.

In light of this brief accounting of my and my family’s history, I am left wondering; Where might a young female “fit” into this scheme of agricultural production? I have found a suitable position that, to my mind, encompasses the performance of the role of female and holds the honor of representing the agricultural community. Granted, as explored in chapter two, this role is steeped in an American tradition that dates back to the 1920s and bears many negative feminine stereotypes; however, it is possible that this feminine role carries with it rich historical and cultural meanings that are favorable for the female who embraces such. It is the role of the performance of pageant queen.

In this and the following chapter, I will explore the performance of local pageant queen contestants in small town communities in the state of Ohio. For the practical research of this project, I have traveled throughout the state of Ohio attending fall harvest festivals and the queen
pageants that are featured as part of the festivities. My personal experience and history have led me to interpret the festivals in various ways. As I have stated above, growing up in an agricultural community with a dependence upon a crop for all of my material needs, I bring an understanding of how vital a particular commodity can be to the survival of day to day life as one perceives it. Furthermore, influenced by my background, I acknowledge the desire to celebrate such a commodity as a source of pride, hard work, success, and tradition. Finally, I recognize that my reading of the festivals is peppered by an awareness that doctoral study provides.

Rodger Lyle Brown, in his provocative account of his journey to several Southern U.S. festivals, *Ghost Dancing on the Cracker Circuit*, claims, “Personal engagement is required, as so is a *consciousness* of personal engagement, i.e., an awareness of the fact that one’s motivation, situation and background profoundly affect whatever representation one creates” (xvii, emphasis in original). I have found this personal engagement necessary in my travels as well. As such, and in an effort to be conscious of it, I include here a personal narrative of my childhood growing up in a small agricultural community. By introducing this chapter with my personal experience it is my hope that you will become familiar with my background and history which, in essence, color my work in the field. Again, as Carol A. B. Warren and Jennifer Kay Hackney astutely remind, “The myth of the ethnographer as any person, without gender, personality, or historical location, who could objectively (at the very least intersubjectively) produce the same findings as any other person has been dispelled” (ix). Therefore, I feel it is only fair to state not only my reasons of wanting to explore this subject, but also my personal ties to and the experience of participating in the subject at hand. That is, I cannot deny my own background, education, social and cultural stances. My own “story” undoubtedly affects the story I tell.

Which brings me to a second reason for my interest in this project: I was once a pageant queen.
When I was a junior in high school, among filling out college applications, cheerleading for the football team, and auditioning for the school play, I also filled out another application; for Miss Teen Minnesota. It was a state pageant that required both talent and scholarship from its contestants. My mother, who has always supported my interest in drama and academic pursuits, was convinced that I would be an ideal candidate. Always one to linger in the spotlight, I agreed to enter and began the process of soliciting local businesses to help cover the one hundred dollar sponsorship fee. As my family was quite prominent in our tiny community, my parents had many family friends who were able and willing to contribute. Upon obtaining the monies to cover the fees, I sent in the application along with a money order for one hundred dollars. I promptly received notification that I was a contestant.

The competition took place early in the summer in Minneapolis, a six hour drive southwest of my hometown. With the car packed, my entire family drove down to the metropolis. Thereupon arriving, I had the distinct feeling that anyone who had raised the hundred dollar entry fee was accepted: There were over 100 eager young women in the pageant. Contestants were first assigned to dorms (with one roommate each), and then hurried into the preparations for the two day affair. If I remember correctly, there was a talent competition, a private interview portion with the judges, and an evening gown parade. I can hardly recall the interview, but I do know that I sang “Somewhere Over the Rainbow” dressed in a blue gingham dress (a choice I made, in large part, because I had recently played Dorothy in our school musical). I wore my “recycled” baby blue “Cinderella” prom dress for the evening gown requirement. The competition was somewhat of a whirlwind with so many contestants competing for the crown. What I recall most is being told where to go and when. Well, that, and putting Vaseline on my teeth so my lips would not stick to them when I smiled.
On the second day, after each contestant had been given the opportunity to compete in all three categories, the judges finally narrowed the playing field down to twenty-five young women – my name was called. When they cut the field to ten, I again heard my name. Next they announced the four runners up and the 1989 Miss Teen Minnesota. Alas, my name was not called, but it didn’t matter. I had made it into the top ten out of over one hundred contestants. It felt amazing. I was hooked.

What is perhaps notable, but not uncommon given my age and background, is the pride and excitement I felt from participating in the pageant. At that point in time, I did not process that idea that I was on display parading my body in front of strangers to be judged. For me, the pageant was another chance to be on stage (I wanted to be an actress more than anything in the world), another occasion to sing and entertain, and another opportunity to wear the prom dress for which my parents paid so much money. Thoughts of Miss America danced in my head (for years my mother and I had religiously watched the pageant, always with the grand hope that Miss Minnesota would place among the top ten finalists). I admit that I never had real expectations or even hopes of competing in the Miss America contest. Even then I knew that those women were in a group that I was not a member of with my stocky legs and wide hips. However, placing in the Miss Teen Minnesota Pageant was an opportunity for me to live out a sort of fantasy that had colored my childhood, a daydream that contained sparkling gowns, toned and long legged bodies, perfect hair and make up, and beautiful, warm, and inviting smiles.

Much to my mother’s delight, I was more than content to continue competing in less exclusive pageantry. Pageants, for me, were similar to cheerleading or playing the lead in the high school play: a chance to perform for an audience. Although I was aware that the performance had a very different script from the ones I was accustomed to memorizing, pageants
still provided an opportunity to costume myself and act for the judges. Little did I know at the
time that this performance can have very specific (if not hidden) criteria based upon where and
why the pageant takes place. This is a lesson I would learn soon.

After the Miss Teen Minnesota pageant I returned to my small hometown to begin my
senior year of high school. I competed in one more large pageant. While I can’t remember the
title of the pageant, I do remember that it took place in a hotel and had a substantial entry fee.10
It was also the first pageant I competed in that included a swimsuit competition. I remember,
too, that I didn’t place. I did, however, enter my senior picture in the “Most Photogenic”
competition (for an additional fee) and took home a trophy for winning that subset of the
pageant. I was satisfied, but I still didn’t have a tiara.

A third opportunity to capture a crown presented itself in the summer after I graduated
from high school. It was a fluke coupled with proper timing that I even entered the contest.
Most of my summer that year was spent at the University of North Dakota in the Department of
Theatre Arts where I was about to start college. I had auditioned and was cast as a member of
the university’s small, summer stock company. When the last show closed at the end of July, I
went back to work as a teller at a bank in Crookston, Minnesota, a town of about 10,000 people
located about ten miles west of Fisher.

My family had many connections to the city of Crookston: my father’s farm was located
about half way between Fisher and Crookston; my family did our weekly grocery shopping
there; and we sometimes attended church as well as “ate out” at restaurants in Crookston.

10 The pageant circuit can be a bit of a commercial racket, if you will, and one must be careful. Although there are
many legitimate pageants, for example the local and state pageant which are part of the Miss America System, there
are many that are simply out to make money. The organizers of these particular pageants ask the potential
contestants for large entry fees and accept as a contestant any single female within a certain age range who is able to
pay them. The “pageant organizers” rent a ballroom in a hotel, set up a runway, buy a tiara and sash and put on a
pageant. This, one might say less legitimate form, is the type of pageant that my second experience in the circuit
was. Perhaps this illegitimacy is why I can not remember the title of the pageant, that, and the fact that I didn’t
place.
Additionally, I was cast in my very first play at the tender age of ten in Crookston Community Theatre’s production of *Annie*, and I went on to perform in the Crookston Community Theatre’s spring musical production for four consecutive years. I spent a lot of time during my adolescent years in Crookston, not only working as a bank teller on Saturday mornings and Thursday evenings throughout my high school career, but socializing as well. My high-school boyfriend and his family lived in Crookston. About the only time I drew communal boundaries is when my hometown team, the Fisher Flyers, competed against the Crookston Pirates in football or basketball. I note all this to explain my deep association with the town of Crookston. Although it was not my hometown - I did not physically reside in the “city” - it was *the* closest town that had the opportunities that my hometown of Fisher did not. As such, when, as a part of Crookston’s annual Ox Cart Days Festival, the festival committee decided to add the “Miss Crookston Pageant” to the celebration, I didn’t hesitate to fill out my entry form.

The Miss Crookston Pageant was less formal than the previous two pageants I had competed in. Since it was the first year of what has now become an annual pageant, the organizers kept things simple. The year I, and eleven other girls (all of whom either lived in the city of Crookston or attended Crookston Central High School), competed we were judged on two main elements: interview and poise. I distinctly remember the judges; radio personalities from Grand Forks, North Dakota and who were presumably “objective” by not having direct ties to the community. The contestants were interviewed early in the day and then changed into formal attire for the crowning. By the conclusion of the competition I finally had my tiara and sash: I was crowned Miss Crookston 1990. I was thrilled, excited, and overjoyed. Not once did I hesitate to think about the fact that I was not actually from Crookston. However, many in the
community did take notice and were not pleased at all with the selection of their queen. I would soon find out just how displeased some residents were.

Parades are almost always included as a part of local festivals. Often one of the highlights of the festival, parades are the moment when the local celebrities of the community are displayed, respected, and admired for creating and protecting what each community holds dear. Therefore, most festival parades feature civic leaders, such as the mayor or members of the school board, riding in shiny cars, waving and smiling out of open windows as they pass by the adoring crowds. Fire trucks and police cars with lights flashing and blaring horns also make the slow trek down main streets. And of course, there are the themed floats full of cheerleaders, boy scouts, and football or basketball teams (depending on the season). Included, too, in the parade is the marching band, proudly displaying their team colors and musical (if slightly out of tune) talents. Often, too, church youth groups are represented, waving to the crowd or dancing to Christian rock in order to extol the virtues they are learning every Sunday morning and Wednesday evening. Finally, of course, the festival parade includes many floats representing local businesses: senior care centers, flower shops, hair salons, grocery stores, funeral homes, lawn care, and auto body shops; establishments that are still locally owned. The festival parade, then, is a displayed celebration of “best” the community has to offer, the human and economic highlights, if you will, of small town pride. As the parade passes by, the voyeurs on the sidewalks are able to both recognize and show their appreciation for the members of their community that they know and love and, in turn, the performers on the floats and in the cars are allowed to be celebrities for the moment before returning, at the end of the parade route, back into “normal” sons and daughters, hard working civic leaders, or independent business owners. The trick to this is, however, that to be revered in the parade, one must either belong directly to
(or at the very least represent the immediate interests of) this specific community or be an invited
guest of the community (such as a neighboring high school marching band or fire department).
Although this seems simple enough, I did not realize how this social structure was organized as I
prepared to ride in the Ox Cart Days parade wearing across my chest the sash that read Miss
Crookston 1990.

The first cue of the unwelcoming experience that awaited me further down the parade
route should have been the float. I am not entirely sure who built or pulled it, but there was a
clear hierarchy present in the arrangement of the girls who would sit atop it. Now, most would
think, that as queen I would be at the center of (or at the very least featured in) the crepe papered
trailer. In truth, I was featured, but not on the float. The monstrosity was pulled by a bright blue
pick-up truck in which I was to sit on a stool in the flatbed. Meanwhile, all the other contestants
got to ride on the decorated float, looking sincere and serine while I was exiled to the back of
somebody’s farm vehicle facing the other contestants. Even at the time, I thought this a bit odd.
After all, I was the queen and the audience could barely see me. Still, I did not let this phase me.
I just scrunched up the sides of my baby blue and lace adorned dress, climbed as gracefully as
possible into the back and waited to greet my adoring public.

I am not claiming that this float arrangement was intentional slight against me; however,
it was clear that certain persons were featured while others (principally me) were not. As I sat in
the back of the pick-up truck, alone and without the companionship of the other contestants I felt,
for perhaps the first time during the entire pageant competition, like the outsider. The other
women whom I competed against never once noted that I was from “out of town.” In fact, most
of us were high school friends and part of the same social circle. Nonetheless, this notion that I
was indeed an outsider was confirmed as we made our way down the parade route. As the pick
up truck slowly crept by the Crookston Ox Cart Day’s crowd, I heard unforgiving boos and
hisses from the audience directed at me. What had I done wrong? I was smiling, I was waving,
and I was happy. My outsider status was, to my surprise, undoubtedly confirmed. After my
“part” of the float had passed, the spectators cheered and shouted for their favorite hometown
girl. It was through this experience that I realized how the performance of femininity as
prescribed by local pageantry has strict community guidelines.

I have since reconciled this moment of history in my youth. Additionally, it warrants
mentioning that this experience did not stifle my desire to compete in pageants (although I never
did win a second tiara). I share this story not to vilify local pageantry or, for that matter, the
community of Crookston, but rather to point to the cultural and social meanings produced by
local pageantry, and furthermore, to give voice to the women, like my younger self, who choose
to compete in such pageants. While many feminists dismiss pageantry as a form of
objectification, this way of thinking does not take into account, among many other factors, the
skill and knowledge required to compete. My experience as a pageant contestant, in essence,
influenced the inspiration for this entire project. While my reign as Miss Crookston might be
read as a negative event in my young life, it has encouraged me to think further about the women
who compete in local pageantry and the ways in which these women are representative of and
celebrated by their community. Contained within this representation and celebration is a
performance of femininity. However, before moving to a discussion of this specific performance
situated within the local pageants, I feel it is necessary to explore the local festival in which the
pageants are a featured event. In doing so, it is my hope to clarify how festival celebration
creates, maintains, and sometimes, heightens a communal identity.
Festival Celebration: Presenting the “Ideal” Community

Festival celebrations serve a local community in a variety of capacities. The annual celebrations are events that bring a particular community together in an attempt to create, for a few short days a year, an ideal version of each individual small town by honoring the historical, economic, and/or cultural novelty that has made each town (at least in the immediate communities mind) unique. To that end, festivals are organized to feature almost any person, place, or thing imaginable. Included in this varied list of celebrated community pride are historical figures and reenactments, eras of the past, fictional characters, folklore, art and music, industrial innovations, and agricultural commodities. Although the festivals are as exclusive as the community itself, the function of most festival celebrations is to create, maintain and reinforce a sense of communal pride and construct and display a set of particular community values. As David E. Procter, in his study “Victorian Days: Performing Community through Local Festival,” astutely notes, “Community festivals are brief but recurring intense moments in the life of a town or city when citizens come together to celebrate some facet of their community. In this celebratory process, citizens also organize and perform important cultural, community truths” (132). These so called “truths,” to my mind, are invented and expressed not only through the novelty that is being celebrated, but more importantly, within the performance of the festival itself. That is, it is not only what is being celebrated, but also how the celebration is enacted. In this way, community cultural and social values are not stagnant, but decreed through the performance of the events favored and included in each individual festival. This observation holds particular importance to my study with regard to the value placed on the local queen pageants in each festival. When and where the pageant occurred, the categories that were included in the pageant, the audience attendance of the pageant, and the requirements of the
contestants and winners, I believe, all speak to how each individual community included in this study reinforce, value, or, in some cases, disvalue the enactment of local femininity as embodied by the pageant contestants.

This is not to state, however, that the celebrated festival item does not have meaning. Quite to the contrary, I contend that the item becomes a symbol for and of the events that are included in the festival schedule. This is especially the case in the festivals that I choose to include in my study; fall festivals that celebrate and feature food. In the field of study of foodways, scholars Humphrey and Humphrey state:

[In festival celebrations] we may see a performance of a particular vision of the community, of its values, assumptions, world views, and prescriptive behaviors, for it is within festive contexts that the transformation from staple to symbol becomes most apparent. The complex of behaviors associated with selecting, preparing, serving, and consuming foods creates a symbolic vocabulary of the basic assumptions of the community… (3)

In light of this, before moving to a closer examination of the festivals that I attended and the pageants that were a featured event in those festivals, I feel it is substantive to further address how food can be read, particularly during holiday and/or festival celebration, as more than just a substance for nourishment. As was the case in the festivals, the celebrated food item can represent a certain community’s agricultural and economic accomplishments (as in the fall harvest), their sense of fun and play (through the activities and contests centered upon the food), their originality (in the tasty, but sometimes odd recipes that find their way to festival food booths) and, more often than not, a collective identity (as the community gathers once a year to promote and celebrate the festival food).
American Turkey and French Wine: Food as a Symbol

Food and celebration have often, throughout American history, functioned in tandem. Again, I note Humphrey and Humphrey’s observations: “Perhaps it is contrary to our Puritan heritage to meet or talk or visit unless there is some more tangible reason for getting together, such as harvesting, preparing or sharing food and drink. Perhaps this need to eat together is part of our underlying assumption that America is the land of plenty, a plenty which can and must be shared with others” (8). One of the most obvious, but nonetheless palatable examples of this “plenty which must be shared” is the traditional American holiday of Thanksgiving. While many holiday meal menus are composed of varying ingredients based upon personal family traditions and individual tastes and preferences, Thanksgiving is undoubtedly centered upon, in both theme and as a source of nourishment, an unusually large and slow cooking bird. Identifying the turkey as an apt symbol for Thanksgiving extends, however, beyond its mythical place at the table of the “first” shared meal between the pilgrims and Native Americans. Whereas the myth of the “first Thanksgiving” carries with it hegemonic and quite problematic themes, Thanksgiving, for many Americans, has expanded to mean something in addition to the lessons about the “pilgrims and Indians” they were taught in elementary school. For many, Thanksgiving, like many local festival gatherings, is a time of homecoming. As Janet Siskind, in her article “The Invention of Thanksgiving: A Ritual of American Nationality” comments, “In every household that considers itself American or desires to be considered American, Thanksgiving brings family members back home, physically and emotionally, ritually transforming attenuated times of kinship into a strong bond” (42). This bond, it might be argued, is strengthened through the preparation and eating of the traditional meal. The centerpiece of this meal is, of course, the symbolic turkey. If one considers the creation of this family “bond”
by reading the literal qualities of this specific bird, the symbolism of the turkey extends meaning beyond the historical mythology and, furthermore, beyond the actual act of consumption. The turkey as a symbol, like many of the foods celebrated by local festival holds traditional, historical, cultural, and social meanings.

I had never thought deeply about the reason we serve the turkey once a year on Thanksgiving (other than the fact that it is “tradition”) until I took a course on “Food and Culture.” The instructor encouraged the students to ponder the Thanksgiving meal searching for not only historical meanings attached to the tradition, but literal and practical associations as well. For example, most families, because of the amount of time and preparation required to cook a 15-20 pound piece of meat do not serve a whole turkey on an everyday basis. In this way, the Thanksgiving meal represents a special occasion. Moreover, because of the turkey’s size, it can feed several family members, close friends and distant relatives, all in one sitting creating a community at the dinner table centered upon the main dish of the meal. In addition, the time needed to cook the turkey requires many hours allowing the “chef” to socialize with guests while still preparing the meal. Therefore, socialization during the Thanksgiving holiday, it could be argued, is not only a given, but also a necessity. The symbolism of the Thanksgiving turkey extends beyond being just a “traditional” food. It also serves to create and reinforce ideas of social interaction so important to every homecoming. Furthermore, much like the lucky celebrity that is awarded the honor to ride atop the oversized, wide-eyed, wing flapping bird in the Macy’s Thanksgiving Day parade, I will later detail how food can become an uneatable, but nevertheless appetizing, throne for one local queen to sit upon.

Another, and perhaps more theoretical explanation of food as symbol, or in this case, as sign – that which takes form (the signifier) and concept (that which is signified) to create
meaning – can be found in Roland Barthes’ study of French wine. In *Mythologies*, Barthes tackles and analyzes several popular culture subjects ranging from the “spectacle of wrestling” to the “snowy solitary face” of Greta Garbo. He aptly reads events, personalities, objects, and articles as myths. However, Barthes reminds, “Myth is not defined by the object of its message, but by the way in which it utters this message…” (109). Although Barthes’ project was engaging in a variety of subjects, his inquiries into French culture and nationality through its culinary preferences (including not only wine, but also steak and chips and magazine recipes) are partly responsible for shaping the ways in which many food scholars read food as a social and cultural phenomenon. Bob Ashley, Joanne Hollows, Steve Jones, and Ben Taylor in their study, *Food and Cultural Studies*, justifiably credit Barthes’ innovative research when they remark, “Barthesian structuralism performs the valuable function of demonstrating how apparently natural or commonsense meanings attach themselves to objects and practices” (5). By investigating Barthes’ theories, I hope to demonstrate how food can express and contain meanings that reflect not only nourishment and consumption, but also, as is the case in the festival celebrations, a communal identity.

In his chapter “Wine and Milk,” Barthes identifies several ways in which wine is truly reflective of French (at least in the mid-nineteen fifties) society. Among the characteristics of the French people expressed through and by wine are attitude and sophistication, conventionality, and moral values. Wine, then, for Barthes, speaks volumes about the French people as a culture much like, I will argue, the festival food speaks about the people who inhabit particular small towns in Ohio. Specifically noting how, as Barthes claims, food can signify a sense of belonging and insider status.
Regarding attitude and sophistication, Barthes contends that consuming wine, for the French, proves to be an act of refinement. The declaration that the French people can “hold their liquor,” according to Barthes, expresses a superiority that is lacking in people of other nations and cultures. While this claim may seem a bit troublesome in light of what is now known about the dangers of alcoholism, writing in the mid-twentieth century Barthes reads the consumption of wine by the French as an polished and every day act: “Other countries drink to get drunk, and this is accepted by everyone; in France, drunkenness is a consequence, never an intention…The gesture has here a decorative value, and the power of wine is never separated from its modes of existence (unlike whisky, for example, which is drunk for its type of drunkenness…)” (59, emphasis in original). The “decorative value” of drinking wine proves, for Barthes, that the French are a cultivated people as compared to their European neighbors and provides them with a perceived superior social status. Reading this example one can comprehend how a food might create and maintain an entire nation’s identity. Again, this will be explored in my discussion of local festivals noting that the particular food being celebrated does allow for a communal pride and, at times, superiority, especially in the events that feature the food in competitive performance.

The skill required to employ a certain food in a performative manner allows for insider status within the communal group. Barthes continues to stress the sense of belonging that wine provides for the French people, “Knowing how to drink is a national technique which serves to qualify the Frenchman, to demonstrate at once his performance, his control and his sociability. Wine gives thus a foundation for a collective morality…” (59, author’s emphasis). Likewise, the festivals I attended include several events that “served to qualify” the insider status of the members of the small town community. Through the performative events of the festival,
members of the community confirm their knowledge of how to create, incorporate, perform, and promote the celebrated food. Possessing the recipe required to make champion apple butter, exhibiting the agricultural ingenuity to grow a thousand pound pumpkin, or even the asserting the correct answer when asked the question of the history and origin of a particular food, all reinforce a sense of belonging and a communal identity.

The insider status created by the knowledge and incorporation of the performative aspects of a certain food can also be quickly revoked. So strong are the ties of the community to the celebrated food that if one does not possess the knowledge necessary or skill required to use the food in performative ways, they can be immediately identified as an outsider. Barthes notes, “But this very universality [created by the myth of wine] implies a kind of conformism: to believe in wine is a coercive collective act. A Frenchman who kept this myth at arm’s length would expose himself to minor but definite problems of integration, the first of which, precisely, would be that of having to explain his attitude” (59). The “integration” or lack thereof contained in the knowledge of how to properly execute the performance of a socially symbolic food becomes particularly evident, as I shall discuss further in chapter four, in the structural elements of the local queen pageants. Aside from the many requirements to participate in the pageant, one of the elements in almost every local pageant I attended (the Milan Melon pageant was the rare exception to this rule) was a question and answer or interview category which inevitably posed queries to the contestants about the celebrated food and said food’s direct associations with the history and traditions of the community. If the contestant was unable to give a sufficient answer (after all the winning queen would be traveling throughout the year to other communities representing and advertising her hometown and its commodity), it was evident that she could not possess the qualities, attitude, and knowledge needed to bear the queen title. In fact, at times the
knowledge of the celebrated food may take precedence over the physical appearance so often valued in National beauty pageants. In stating this I am not by any means claiming that appearance is not a local pageantry value, but rather pointing to, perhaps, another major difference in the two venues. Hence, the insider status as regulated by the knowledge of the representative food is confirmed in the choice of the winner of the local pageant.

Thus, building on the examples that turkey at Thanksgiving and wine in French culture demonstrate, throughout the study that follows I will argue that food in the context of festivals and the pageants that are featured within them, is indeed more than just a source of nourishment. More precisely, food, especially during festival celebration, provides not only a way “to keep the interactions and communications flowing smoothly” within the community gathering, but also lends itself to be read as a symbol: A symbol that is embedded deeply in historical, traditional, and social realms. Therefore, within each of the festivals I discuss, it is my intent to explore how this symbolism of the edible commodity is created and performed. In doing so, it is my hope that the detailed description of each individual festival and the way in which it celebrates its agricultural commodity will aid in the development of an understanding of not only the community and its social, cultural, and economic values, but also inform how these values are then transferred, upheld, and performed by the local pageant contestant. In light of this, before moving to a detailed discussion of the local pageant embedded in each celebration, I believe it is necessary to first render a picture of each individual festival I attended in order to develop a nuanced understanding of how each of these small towns individually express, celebrate, and perform their sense of community through their food and their festival. Furthermore, through the study, I discuss the individual festivals and pageants in the chronological order in which I attended them.
Telling Stories: Audiencing the Festival

In the proceeding section, my voice becomes less formal and I depend on a certain narrative of my own experiences in the field. Once again I refer to Brown, who supports this notion of personal experience, when he states his belief in, “the necessity of telling stories as part of my own personal experience of exploration and discovery, because the process of remembering is a significant as the product” (xvi, emphasis in original). I point to Brown’s method for several reasons. Firstly, the observations noted in this section of the chapter and in the proceeding chapter recounting case studies are, for the most part, purely based upon my experience of attending the festivals. Where my concluding chapter will explore through interviews the personal experience of the women who participate in local pageantry, this chapter and chapter four remain focused on my experience as a spectator at the festivals and as an audience member of the local pageants.

Secondly, I feel it is necessary to acknowledge my outsider status at the festivals. That is to say, I traveled throughout Ohio visiting, at times, remote communities that I would never have found without the help of mapquest and the festival websites. Festival celebrations, as previously noted, are often a time of homecoming for the people of a particular community. Thus, my status at the festivals was that of foreigner in the small towns. This is not to claim that I was “cast out” of the festival atmosphere, quite the contrary. The carnivalesque ambiance of festival time appears to allow, on one hand, the opportunity for welcoming outsiders (tourists) into the community perhaps more than any other time of the year (especially, I have found, when that outsider has a notebook in her grasp). Yet, on the other hand, as is traditional in small towns, most everyone knows their neighbors. I must admit that at times I felt, naturally, as if I could not fully engage in the intimate relationships surrounding me in the festival streets.
I, again, note Procter’s study of Waterville Victorian Days: “The festival…provides tourists a vicarious sampling of foods, activities, objects, and lifestyles that they have heard and seen but not personally experienced” (140). In stating this, I acknowledge my position as both actor and observer in the festival celebrations. Therefore, the stories that I tell will reflect my own past and present experiences. As noted at the beginning of this chapter, the fact that I grew up as a farmer’s daughter in a small agricultural community and participated in my late teens in local pageantry color my experience in particular ways. Whereas my primary motivations for composing this study – completing my doctoral degree – and my desire to render my project through a feminist lens also prove to be significant elements that inform my observations. Keeping this explanation of my personal experience and motivations for my research in mind, I move to a chronological discussion of the individual festivals I attended.

**The Festival Road Trip: First Stop, Milan Ohio**

I began my journey around the state of Ohio on Labor Day weekend by attending the Milan Melon Festival and concluded my travels in mid-October by taking in the Circleville Pumpkin Show. In between these bookend festivals, the former which marks the end of the summer growing season and the beginning of the fall harvest and the latter which, conveniently, marks the last Ohio festival celebrating the fruits of that harvest, I attended The Reynoldsburg Tomato festival, The Jackson County Apple Festival, The Geneva Grape JAMboree, and the Oak Harbor Apple Festival. As I stated in my first chapter, the food festivals throughout the state of Ohio are plentiful and a person could spend almost an entire year beginning in the spring and continuing through the holiday season traveling to various celebrations. In addition, many of the festivals overlap each other requiring me to make a sometimes informed and at other times
random choice about which festival I envisioned to “better” suit my research. This decision often stemmed from what I read as the significance placed on the pageant within the festival. That is, I looked for events, in addition to the actual pageant, that featured the queens and their courts. These events included “Introductions of the Festival Queen and visiting Queens from the Ohio Festivals and Events Association” and the “Queen’s Parade.” Using this criterion, I believed, would enable me to better infer the community value placed on feminine representation as embodied by the local pageant queen. Once attending these events I soon realized that although there is, indeed, a certain amount of “sameness” to these affairs, the individual performance of each event, including the ways in which each community’s pageant is structured, differs dramatically from festival to festival. Likewise, although a festival format could be described as following a particular script, what makes each festival unique is expressed, in part, by the food that is being celebrated.

The foods featured in my project, fruits and vegetables, are available and consumed by many Americans on a regular basis, but outside of the festival environment these crops are characteristically not granted celebratory status. That is, the typical consumption of them is an everyday act or performance. Yet, during festival celebration the foods, naturally healthy fruits and vegetables, metamorphoses into somewhat unnatural states. The meaning of the food becomes heightened and performed through the variety of dishes that are made with the food, the contests that feature the food, and, sometimes, on the body of the individual literally portraying the food. What was most intriguing and, to my mind, usual about the food festivals I attended (with the notable exception of the Circleville Pumpkin Show which dedicated almost an entire block to homegrown pumpkins and gourds) was the lack of the celebrated food in its “normal” state. Furthermore, even at the Circleville Pumpkin Show the main attraction on the vegetable
stand block was an oddly colored and monstrous version of the Halloween staple weighing in at a winning 1,524½ pounds. I, in my naiveté, expected to see rows of stands selling and displaying the “cream of the crop” as produced by the area farmer’s fruitful harvest. Instead, at the first festival I attended, I was enticed by the festival brochure to “try our specialties: watermelon sherbet and muskmelon ice cream” and somewhat taken aback by meeting a superhero named, appropriately, “Melon Man.” I very quickly realized, that while the food at festivals indeed reflects meaning for the community, this meaning is inscribed with novelty. This is important to note as I maintain that the food, like the local queen contestant representing the food, is an important commodity for “selling” not only the festival, but also promoting the community. Whereas the entire festival might maintain a novelty status, it is through the performance elements of both the food and the pageants that this novelty gains and intrigues an audience.

My experience at my first celebration, the Milan Melon Festival, for the various reasons noted in the above paragraph as well as other proceeding sections of this chapter, in essence, made me re-think all my previous assumptions about food, festival, and femininity. This project was not going to land in my lap and allow for me to sit back and academically observe the “ways of the people.” This fieldwork, like most all fieldwork, would require me to reserve my academic “judgment” and “learned” theory for a later date. At the moment that I attended the festivals, as much as I admit this was difficult for me, it was important to be a participant (while acknowledging my outsider status) and an observer. This self prescribed dual role, again, is in part where my stories stem from.

The Milan Melon Festival was an appropriate festival for me to begin my research. Not only does the festival’s date, being held on Labor Day Weekend, traditionally mark the end of
summer growing season and the beginning of fall harvest, but also the village of Milan is one that I was not a complete stranger too. Granted, I had never actually been to the small Ohio town, but I have worked summer stock theatre for the past seven summers in a community about ten miles north of Milan in Huron, Ohio. Many of the patrons who make up the audience of our summer productions are Milan residents. In fact, I encountered two such patrons at the Melon Festival. When each of them saw me, I was greeted with an odd “what are you doing here?” look before the actual small talk that is typical of semi-strangers ensued. To these particular Milan residents, I was clearly out of place, but I still felt welcomed as they asked me questions about my reasons for attending the festival. I must admit, my answers we short: “I’m doing research on local Ohio Queen Pageants,” not wanting to get too preachy or invasive about my academic intentions. I was, at this point in my research, very new to fieldwork, and I confess I was negotiating my “authoritative” positioning. Nevertheless, the Milan Melon festival did prove to be less of an outsider experience for me than any of the other festivals I attended.

The Melon festival was also the only festival I did not attend alone. Perhaps because of its location (only an hour from Bowling Green, and, again, ten minutes from Huron) and the fact that the festival is held annually on a holiday weekend, I was grateful to have company as I procured my first fieldwork research. Furthermore, the friends that joined me resided in Huron and although they did not live in Milan proper, one of my companions had taught several of the residents of Milan years ago as a junior high school choir teacher. This allowed, on her part, the opportunity for several familiar reunions. For me there were positive and negative aspects to this companionship. On the plus side, the field can be a very lonely place – and I would be remiss to not mention this. Attending the festivals without companionship in a strange community can be daunting. After all, festival is a time of homecoming, of reunions and family gatherings. It is
not unusual, and is, in fact, a rather a normal occurrence to see members of the community gathered chatting in small groups about current jobs, children, spouses, the school system, and recent news about their lives. In essence, the town members gather to discuss the familial, cultural, social, economic, and political systems presently at work in their community.

Sometimes this is a familiar meeting; that is, neighbors who perhaps see one another on a more than yearly basis greeting one another. On other occasions, and from what I observed this encounter happens just as frequently as the former, the meeting is clearly a reunion: “You remember Janet, she’s Frank and Muriel’s daughter. She was in your brother’s grade and got married to Brad. Well, she lives in California, now…” To which the response is: “Oh, yes, I remember. How are you? It’s great to see you again.” (This is usually followed by a hug or a handshake depending upon the gender and familiarity of the respondent.) In a case such as this, even the “outsiders” become “insiders” as long as they have ties, however tethered, to the community. At my first festival, I did not realize how much this, what I shall term, “inside sociability,” was a vital part of the community celebration. It is perhaps obvious that the festival would provide an opportunity for formal reunions, but it is through these informal meetings and conversations of the community’s past and present members that the reunions become enacted and thereby create communal identity. Courteous of my companions at the Milan Melon Festival I, in part, became initiated into the community through their introductions. This, in some ways, eased my investigation into fieldwork.

The negative aspects of companionship in the field for me personally stemmed from the creation of a safe space. When one travels to an unfamiliar place, even if it is a celebratory festival, having a familiar partner or partners makes the event comfortable. There is always someone to turn to and comment on what you are witnessing and experiencing. In essence, the
presence of more than one “outsider” at a festival creates its own community, a group of people who perhaps share the same insights and opinions about what they are witnessing through their outsider status. There were numerous times as I attended the various festival and local pageants that I desired to share what I was seeing and experiencing in the immediate moment. Instead, I had to simply jot it down in my notebook and rely on my photographs, notes, and memory to impart my feelings, my observations, and my assumptions. But, this, moment of reflection is vital to fieldwork. To be sure, the fact that I could not draw immediate conclusions by conversing with another, and instead had to return home from the festival or pageant with only notes and memories has allowed me to re-think my initial observations. While this, of course, does not make my observations any more objective, it does I believe lead to a more nuanced and considered understanding of my findings. With this in mind, I return to my experience at the Milan Melon Festival and further investigate the ways in which this particular festival celebrates its community identity.

The 2007 Milan Melon Festival was celebrating its 49th year. Members of the quaint town of approximately 1,500 residents annually barricade a block of the main square in order to provide ample space for its citizens and visitors. Clearly an economic venture for the community, the festival brochure entices audiences: “Over 100,000 people can’t be wrong – They were here last year!” (“A Preview of the 49th Anniversary”). The annual festival, which lasts through the three days of the Labor Day holiday weekend, features the usual midway rides and carnival games (which were present at every festival I attended) alongside more homegrown events. I gathered amongst the crowd to listen to both the Edison High School Band and the American Legion Band, which each drew an appreciative audience. The festival schedule included an antique car show, a fun run, and of course, several arts and crafts booths that also
appear to be a staple at local festivals. The vendors selling “fair” food\textsuperscript{11} were more than plentiful, but again, I noted the lack of melon-related food items. The food items that “sell” the Milan Melon festival are the aforementioned watermelon sherbet and muskmelon ice cream. These celebratory items are so popular, it seems, that they stand alone as the edible draw for the festival crowds. An article in a local newspaper confirmed their novelty:

‘We had somebody come in and buy 37 gallons,’ said Ann Carroll of Columbus, who was helping her sister Lisa Gilliam of Milan at the ice cream booth. Carroll said that the man who bought 37 gallons of the frozen treat comes to the Melon Festival every year from Cleveland just to stock up on the specialty flavors found only at the Melon Festival. (Sandusky Register, 2 Sept. 2007)

While the innovation of adding these unusual melon favors to a traditional treat - and it was tasty - enticed the multitudes to stand in long lines just to get a small cup or cone of the featured food item, it still appeared odd to me that this was, for all practical purposes, the single literal representation of the celebrated food. The ice cream and one tiny lone melon stand:

“Tendershoot Farms of Milan was one of the only [and from what I witnessed the only] vendors selling melons of all shapes and sizes at the 49\textsuperscript{th} annual Melon Festival” (Sandusky Register, 2 Sept. 2007). Could a “specialty” cold treat really be representative of a community identity? I attempted to find some history on the Melon festival with the hopes of uncovering days when the melon reigned as an economic and agricultural staple of the Ohio town.

Much to my disappointment, according to the website “MilanArea.com,” the nearest mention of a famous Milan vegetable was the invention of “potato digger” by Isaac W. Hoover in 1885. The article does note that Milan is, however, the birthplace of Thomas Edison. So why

\textsuperscript{11} I use the term fair food to indicate a playful group of edibles one typically encounters at State and Local fairs. Corn dogs, funnel cakes, French fries, fried veggies, lemonade, snow cones, are all examples.
not a “Potato Festival” or “Thomas Edison Days?” Besides my conclusion that an ice cream made out of potatoes would probably not sell very well, it appears that melons were at one time thriving in Milan. A New York Times article dated June 23, 1991, provides proof for the melon as a once flourishing agricultural commodity in the Milan region:

In Milan, Ohio, population 1,500, the Musk Melon Festival was started in 1959 as a side event to the high school’s homecoming. These days the town plays host to 150,000 visitors over Labor Day weekend. The tiny town’s square – sliced in half by Ohio Route 113 – is taken over by melon farmers who pull up their trucks to sell fresh melons. Church members can be counted on to provide musk melon pie and watermelon sherbet. And a nearby dairy has devised a musk melon ice cream for the event. While the sandy soil and temperate Lake Erie breezes in Milan were always habitable for musk melon, the crop has grown from a novelty to one of the area’s thriving industries… (Stoffel, “A Bounty of Food Festivals”)

If the lack of melons at the 49th annual Milan Melon Festival is any indication, it seems that the crop has grown back into its novelty status. Before moving onto a discussion to what this infers for the women who bear the title of “Melon Queen,” I want to include in this section a discussion of the symbolic nature of the melon as represented by the festival’s male super hero, “Melon Man.” I do so because I believe that his performance deserves exploration and is important to my project, not as only an example of the performance of food, but also as a juxapositional example deeply embedded in notions of acceptable gender performance.

Melon Man was the grand marshal of the Grand Parade, which took place the afternoon of the second day of the festival. The parade, as indicated by the number of people attending, was one of the highlights of the festival. Because it is such an important part of the festival (and
as such informs my discussion of Melon Man), I feel it necessary to detail some of the systems at work in the structure of most festival parades. This discussion will also assist in informing my interpretations of several of the festival parades that I auditioned.

In anticipation of the festival parade, spectators claim their spot on the grassy berm hours (and in some cases, days) before the parade begins. They do this by setting out a foldable camping or lawn chair or even just a bench towel down on the grass that will belong to them for the few short passing moments as the parade makes its way down the designated route. This “chair” honor system was quite odd – and it was present at every festival I attended. Honestly, I thought, “what would happen if someone exchanged a stranger’s chair for their own? Or moved a chair over to one side or the other to make room?” Yet, this did not seem to happen. Ever. Once a chair was placed on the curb that is where it stayed. Thus, a tiny piece of land was claimed by the chair’s owner, at least until the last marching band passed along the town street.

Pre-parade time was a peculiar site. Hundreds of foldable, somewhat makeshift, chairs in every color imaginable, lining the streets waiting for a spectator to occupy them. Ohio State chairs sat cordially next to Michigan State and Dora the Explorer occupied the same territory as Spiderman. Yet, truth be told, this informal ritual of claiming a piece of parade “territory” for me and my status as an outsider, was most helpful. By following the lines of empty chairs, I was able to determine the exact parade route and thereby stake out my own spot (one that I felt would enable me to take the best photographs). After attending the Milan Melon Festival, I went out and purchased my own foldable camping chair and thereby began participating in the communal ritual. I did, however, try to “claim my territory” in front of public buildings rather than on the berm of a private residence. The latter were usually prime locations due to the presence of large shade trees employed to shield the spectator from the afternoon heat and reserved for the family
who owned the house that was lucky enough to be located along the parade route. Somewhat comparable to an informal block party, the parade also allowed for neighbors to greet each other as they gathered in front of their homes. Before the festival parades began there was most often a moment when neighbors would chat, providing another opportunity to introduce members of the community who were home for the event. At such moments, it was again clear who the outsiders were. Like me, they were usually the individuals who had placed their chairs on the lawns of public buildings.

I find it of interest to note how the parade route (whether consciously or unconsciously) enforces a system of class. I, again, refer to Procter’s study of Victorian Days: “by highlighting or privileging certain events, issues, and people over others, community festivals…function to create and sustain certain community hierarchies. Through festival performance, communities highlight and reinforce a certain public identity that is ultimately communicated to both local citizens and external publics” (132). The parade, a definite highlight of the festival, is routed through and/or around the main square. Surrounding this area are sometimes the oldest and most posh residential neighborhoods. The homes are elaborate and large; many have ample front porches and immaculately manicured flower gardens and lawns. These homes, although not the new and up-to-date versions one might find in the suburbs, carry with them an air of nostalgia while at the same time reflecting the success and wealth of the community. That the parade is routed through these nostalgic neighborhoods provides the spectator with a vision of not only the success of the community, but also an understanding of the communities’ architectural history. As a reward for the upkeep and restoration of these historical homes the owners’ are granted a front row seat in which to view the parade. This is an undeniable seat of privilege. Even within
these small and rural communities class systems are highly visible within the festival environment.

At the Milan Melon Festival, my companions and I were fortunate enough to be invited to sit in one of these prime spots. It happened purely by chance; we were looking for a shaded place to stand so as to block the sun from not only the heat, but also from my digital camera. We settled on an area at the crossroad of two blocks which was home to a large tree. We comprised the third “row” of this particular parade section of the parade audience as we stood behind the camping chairs two rows deep. As luck would have it, some of the second row chairs’ intended occupants did not arrive and we were invited to “have a seat.” The generosity extended by the chairs’ owners was an element present at every festival. Because the community is “opening” its doors to tourists as well as residents, there appears to be an unwritten rule that community members are on their “best behavior.” It is through this generosity that I enjoyed a close up view of the Milan Melon Parade and Melon Man, in all his hot pink glory.

I describe in detail Melon Man’s performance because he proves to be a significant foil to the pageant contestants’ performance. Both figures are representing the community’s commodity as apparent by the title they possess, Melon Man or Melon Queen. However, the way in which this representative performance is played out upon the body of the individual is very different. What a community will tolerate as acceptable representation of their commodity can be seen in the performances of Melon Man and the Melon Queen and, to be clear, this acceptability is a highly based upon the gender of the performer. What is suitable and even entertaining in the performance of Melon Man would not be tolerated in the performance of the Melon Queen. What is more, he is not accorded “royal” status. He is Melon “Man,” not Melon “King.” Granted, the Melon Man’s performance is strictly regulated to the festival days, whereas
the Melon Queen’s performance is one that will be committed to an entire year. Additionally, Melon Man’s performance is regulated to the space inside the community and the Melon Queen will travel to other communities throughout the state of Ohio. Still, as grand marshal of the parade, Melon Man’s position is assumedly one of respect and admiration. He, in fact, was the third entry in the parade in place only behind the mayor of Milan and Milan’s fire department. Directly behind him were the Melon Queen floats. This juxtaposition of the two very different representations of the festival food commodity is what prompted me to think even further about the meanings associated with both the festival food and its gendered representation.

The Melon Man was an unlikely super hero. Dressed in a hot pink unitard and black cape, he had a green “M” patch across his ample chest. Reminiscent of the father from the animated feature film “The Incredibles,” he sat with bulging and, from what I could tell, artificial muscles proudly in the back of a silver convertible waving to the adoring crowd. He also wore a watermelon helmet (made of the actual fruit) upon his head, which I assume was the reason for the pink fabric clinging to his body. In essence, he looked ridiculous, yet because of this, the crowd loved his performance. Melon Man’s performance was parodic, but not by any means subversive. Regardless of his feminine pink attire, he was clearly performing his masculinity for the crowd, and this is, in part, why his audience found humor in his performance.
Simply stated, the traditional “job” of a super hero is to “save” the society from evil and impending doom. Although fictional, the characteristics of a super hero are conventionally masculine. Through his performance of a super hero and from his seat of privilege of parade grand marshal, Melon Man provided a strong masculine contrast to the feminine performance of the Melon Queen and attendants riding in the floats behind him. In this way, the community’s identity through the celebrated food is confirmed in playful, but gender “appropriate” ways. The masculine identity is established by the super hero and followed by the feminine identity epitomized by the princess. These two performances, both representative of the celebrated food, conform to gender norms while at the same time promote and participate in the playful nature of festival time when “mores that are upheld during the rest of the year are suspended to allow for indulgence… (Etzioni 11). Whereas Melon Man’s performance, it could be argued, is over
indulging in a performance of masculinity through the parody contained in his over the top presentation, because it is festival time his performance is not only accepted but greeted with gracious approval. Likewise, although in an entirely different manner, the queens on the floats that followed him, costumed in their extravagant gowns and shiny tiaras, participated in an indulgent performance of femininity.

There were two different Milan Melon Queen floats in the Milan Melon Parade. The first held the previous years 2006-2007 Melon Queen and her court. The second presented the newly crowned 2007-2008 Queen and her attendants. What is notable about each of these floats is the hierarchy present even within the feminine presentation. While both floats hold smiling and waving young women dressed appropriately to reflect their performance of femininity in stylish prom dresses, sparkling tiaras, and sashes announcing their titles, the outgoing Queen’s float is first in the line up. There is nothing too usual about this as it would be natural to pay respect to the woman who spent the year representing the community by giving her this head position.

What is vital to note and is also representative of the festival food is the difference in the “thrones” that the old and new queen are granted. The thrones on each of the floats are literally oversized slices of melon with the middle section cut out in order to provide a seat for the Queen. In essence, the body of the Queen replaces and becomes the “meat” or the edible part in the center of the flesh of the fruit. The out-going Queen’s melon, however, is a gigantic slice of the musk variety coming up on the sides almost to her shoulders. Whereas the in-coming Queen was seated on a small, but brightly colored piece of watermelon. The musk melon in reality is a much smaller fruit than the watermelon, but at the Milan Melon festival it seems to be honored more than the latter. Hence, it would be appropriate to make the larger throne out of the musk

---

12 After the festival and about nine months into my writing, I found out (from his father) that “Melon Man” was created by the performer while he was in high school as a joke – and now, many years later, the Milan resident is “expected” to make an appearance annually.
As I attended other festivals and their parades, I often saw the 2007-2008 Melon Queen participating as a visiting Queen. At this point, she had traded her watermelon for the musk melon and thus been granted the position of official spokesperson for the community of Milan.

FIG. 3. The 2007-2008 Milan Melon Queen riding on her float at the Geneva Grape Jamboree seated upon her official and much larger musk melon throne. Photograph by Heather Williams, 2007.

Walking the Walk: The Milan Melon Queen Pageant

The privilege of riding on the melon slice is granted, of course, by winning the festival pageant. While all the pageants I attended were “official” pageants of The Ohio Festival and Events Association, the rules, requirements, and structure of each individual community pageant varied drastically. Through my research on pageants and as a former pageant participant I had a distinct idea of what I assumed traditionally composed a pageant. While I didn’t suppose that there would always be a swimsuit competition, I did believe that there would be categories
similar to the National structure. I expected some sort of self introduction, an interview portion, and, perhaps, a talent competition. These elements not only entertain the audience, they also aid in reinforcing the judges’ decisions for the spectator. Traditionally, the winner of the crown exudes certain stereotypical feminine criteria such as poise, grace, polish, and politeness. If the spectator is not allowed to see these elements enacted on the pageant stage, one might wonder how and why the winner was chosen. I was quite amazed at how different each local pageant was and with my expectations thrown asunder, I had to reconsider what each local community was valuing in the organization and structure of their pageant.

Again, I want to stress that these local pageants are supposedly not beauty contests. In light of the current resurgence of pageant culture on reality television (Pageant Place, The Mother of all Pageants, and Miss America: Reality Check are just a few examples of our popular culture obsession with beauty queens) in addition to the televised national pageants, the media presents a very singular view of the pageant queen. As I will discuss further in my final chapter, several of the young women I interviewed wanted to make it clear to me that they were not “pageant girls.” There seems to be a clear division between the stereotyped beauty queen and the local pageant participant. The divide is perhaps partly due to the way that the local pageants are structured. Having said that, I do not deny that local pageants and their judges consider appearance in the crowning of a queen, as I shall note regarding the winner of the Milan Melon Pageant, “appropriate” feminine appearance is a definite communal consideration.

The Milan Melon Pageant was held outdoors in the evening of the first day of the festival on the main stage. The “stage” was a small, but had a wide proscenium. Obviously set up once a year specifically for the festival, it was somewhat makeshift but functional enough to accommodate several of the events included in the festival activities. Prior to the pageant, the
high school band had given an hour long concert. So, in preparation for the pageant, several adjustments had to be made. First a crew of festival volunteers had to remove the poster board with the band’s sponsors’ names on them and exchange them for a poster board with the pageant sponsors’ names. This latter list was much longer. As there were nine contestants, there were at least nine different sponsors and few more who donated the flowers, the sashes, and the tiaras. Each contestant also initially wore a sash with their sponsors name inscribed on it and, in a sense, acted as a walking advertisement for the business. After changing the sponsor board, the crew then constructed a runway at the center of the proscenium and extended out into the audience. Folding chairs, one for each contestant, were placed in a horizontal line facing outward toward the bleachers reserved for spectators. In the center and toward the back of the stage, a large wicker throne reminiscent of the type used in senior photographs from the late 1980s was put in place for the reigning queen.

To further change the setting, two oversized ferns where positioned on either side of the Queen’s throne and a small basket arrangement of watermelons and sunflowers was displayed at the end of the added runway. If not for this basket and a few random comments regarding melons within the pageant, a spectator might not even know for what title the contestants were vying. Like the lone melon stand at the festival, the pageant too lacked a presence of the seasonal fruit. Again, I allow that my expectations were perhaps overzealous, as this was the first local pageant I attended as part of my fieldwork.

I assumed that contestants would have to possess a deep knowledge of both their community’s history and the history of the melon as the representative fruit for the community. At many of the festival pageants I attended, this was a requirement of the pageant participants. Yet, at the Milan Melon festival, it appeared that the contestants did not have to have a great
knowledge of *anything*, other than the ability to strut in high heels. Indeed, all they did in the performance of the pageant is glide across the stage and the runway dressed in prom dresses. I do not intend for this latter statement to dismiss the intelligence of contestants of the Milan Melon pageant. However, I do find it curious that the contestants in this particular pageant were silent, and I am interested in exploring how this silence may reflect community’s values. The young female contestants, literally, were not allowed to speak. The only females given voice in this pageant, other than the master of ceremonies, were the previous years’ Melon Queen and her court. Perhaps the right to speak publicly as a young female in this community had to be earned through the appropriate year-long representation of the small town.

I should have been prepared for this act of silence. As the crew of volunteers was setting up the pageant performance space, I was seated in the metal bleachers and surrounded by members of the community present to support their favorite hometown girl. From this positioning I was able to gather snippets of conversations going on around me. A pair of teenage females one row below me chatted about “who they knew” in this year’s competition. One of the teens had obviously been a member of the pageant audience in previous years, while the other was a first time spectator. The latter inquired, “So what do they do?,” to which the former replied, “They walk. There’s no talent or dance competition.” Apparently schooled in traditional pageant structure, the respondent was preparing her friend for the differences in this local pageant as compared to the national structure. When she said, “they walk” she wasn’t embellishing. However, I did not know that this was *all* that was required of the contestants for the entire public performance.

This is not to state that the winner was only determined by her ability to maneuver in high heels. Before the pageant began, a mother of one of the contestants approached the family
seated on my left. When the maternal figure from the family asked the mother of the contestant how things were progressing she responded: “[The] interviews went well, that was at 1:30 today. I’m a little bit nervous.” She took a deep breathe and continued, “She’s only slept like 3 hours in the past two days…and now her throat is sore. She’s number eight.” Considering contestant number eight’s predicament, perhaps it was to her advantage that the contestants did not have to speak. Yet, the silence required of the contestants lead to some scathing comments on a local newspaper’s website based primarily upon the winner’s physical appearance and her inability to “fit” into the traditional feminine mold that is customarily acceptable for pageant queen. If the contestants were granted a voice to speak on the public pageant stage about themselves and their accomplishments, perhaps certain audience perceptions of the individual young women might have been expanded to include a great deal more than outside appearance.

Before revealing the telling comments written about the winner of the 2007 Milan Melon pageant, I feel it is necessary to describe the structure of the pageant in more detail. I do this to reiterate not only the differences present between local and national pageants, but also to further explore how this particular community “represents” and maintains its feminine ideal. As I continue throughout this chapter and the next, describing and detailing the various pageants I attended, I investigate the many different ways in which femininity is valued and maintained in these small town festivals. Although silence was one of the presumed criteria for the Melon Queen contestants, the master of ceremonies of the pageant who spoke on behalf of each of the contestants, presented for the audience several items that were of “value” in the young women participating.

The master of ceremonies at the Milan Melon pageant was radio personality from a country station based in Toledo, Ohio. She took the stage after a brief welcome from Milan’s
mayor who commented on the primary duty of the Melon Queen: “Kelsey [the 2006-2007 Melon Queen] sold our community and sold our Melon Festival...” The mayor thanked Kelsey for a job well done and, in doing so, confirmed my theory that the local festival queen is a vital tool in the promotion of the small town. Yet, in order to earn the privilege of promoting and representing the community of Milan, she must walk.

After the mayor’s greeting, the MC began the pageant with the introduction of the 2006 - 2007 Queen, Kelsey Parker and her court. Individually each young woman walked the stage traveling from stage left, to stage right, and finally center stage, stopping at each of the designated positions to stand, smile, and wave at the audience. If the vigorous cheers from the spectators were any indication, Miss Parker was a very successful and popular representative. Once Miss Parker and her court were seated, the master of ceremonies introduced the visiting Queens from the Berlin Heights Basket festival. These young women were at the Melon Festival, of course to “sell” their own community celebration. I found that it is often the case that there are invited queens and their courts at the various pageants. Likely, the invited royalty are from a neighboring community. The promotion of “her” festival by the neighboring festival queen at adjacent local pageants is practical because the host audience might possibly make the short drive to attend the neighboring festival. This is an additional example of how the performance of the local queen is employed in the promotion of her community.

The next scene in the Milan Melon Pageant script was the introduction of the three judges. Through brief biographies read by the master of ceremonies, I learned that the judges of the Milan Melon pageant were members of the Ohio Festival and Events Association and had judged festival pageants in the past. For the most part, however, the audience was not informed about the competence of the judges To my mind, I would think that the best individual to judge
the pageant would be someone who had participated in them herself. Therefore, I would presume it sensible to include former pageant queens or contestants as part of the judging panel. However, this was the case at only one local pageant I attended: the Reynoldsburg Tomato Queen pageant did have a former Tomato Queen as a judge. To be fair, given the size of the communities and the friendship often created among current and former participants, it is possible that a former queen may have personal ties to one or more of the contestants. Still, I was left wondering about the qualifications required of the judges. At the Milan Melon Pageant, like several of the pageants I attended, we as spectators were never informed.

The brief biographies of the judging panel, however, appeared to be more than enough information for the audience. While the contestants’ fates are riding on the outcome of the trio’s decision, the spectators are attending to support their favorite local young woman. As such, the next scene in the Milan Melon pageant was the introduction of the contestants. Each woman individually walked the stage in the same pattern as the outgoing Melon Queen and her court – crossing stage left, to stage right, and finally to center stage, again posing briefly at each mark to acknowledge the audience. As each contestant walked across the stage, the master of ceremonies read her particulars from a sheet of paper. This script for each Milan Melon Queen contestant was divided into three distinct categories. The first category contained what I term community relations: the statistics that made the contestant an asset to her community and thereby confirmed that, based upon her family lineage and community activities, she might be a suitable representative of the community. The second category detailed physical appearance: the characteristics that conformed to traditional beauty standards. The third category included what I label future relations: this information confirmed the contestant’s desire to leave the community and expand her education in order to participate fully as a citizen in the world. Through these
three biographical categories, it is possible to establish what characteristics the community of Milan values in its young female members, at least in the females who may represent the community state wide throughout the year.

The community of Milan, it would appear, places a high value on family relationships. While the parents of the local pageant contestants were usually acknowledged in all of the pageants I attended, the biographies of the Milan Melon Queen contestants also included the naming of their siblings and the placing of the contestant by age within the family structure. The script the master of ceremonies read from was also printed in a local newspaper, The Norwalk Reflector, but omitted the physical appearance category. The first section of the winner of the 2007-2008 Melon crown’s biography stated: “Mandi Richards, 17, daughter of Mike and Kathy Richards, is a senior at Edison High School. She has one older sister, Maggie and one younger brother, Sam” (“Nine Vying for Melon Festival Queen Title” The Norwalk Reflector 29 Aug. 2007). Whereas the mention of the high school the contestant attended is perhaps important when considering communal ties, the biographies of the Milan Melon participants all read exactly the same on this point. All nine contestants were “seniors at Edison High School.” What made each contestant “unique” in this initial introduction was their family structure. And, quite frankly, because of the importance seemingly placed on the family unit, I found the introductions somewhat jarring when a contestant was announced and the latter half of the first sentence of her biography read: “She is an only child.” In Milan, family and one’s place within this family is an important value in the community.

The second section of the community relations category expounded upon the contestants’ participation in high school activities. Every pursuit one would imagine a small town high school to offer was included on this list. The contestants’ participated on sports teams and
served as class officers. Some were members of National Honor Society or Big Brothers/Big Sisters. Others played in the marching band or acted in the Drama Club. Of course, from the biographies, one could determine which contestants were more athletically inclined which and were more organizationally apt. Yet, almost every contestant’s biography included some type of sport. As is the case in many small Midwestern communities, the emphasis on competitive high school sports is prominent. The strikingly usual aspect, in this case, was the importance granted to sports – a traditionally unfeminine activity – in a queen pageant. To balance this participation in a characteristically masculine activity, the next portion of the contestants’ biographies listed their hobbies which included, in addition to “playing sports,” traditionally feminine acts such as “sewing, babysitting, scrap booking, writing poems, and shopping.”

If the audience was still unconvinced of the feminine nature of its young women in the community, the next category of their biographies put that to rest by giving details of physical appearance. The master of ceremonies relayed each contestant’s height, eye color, hair color, and, oddly, zodiac sign. These “vital” statistics were not included in the local newspaper article, and perhaps for good reason. This physical resume, to my mind, was completely unnecessary. As an audience member I could reasonably guess how tall the contestant was, almost determine her eye color, and most assuredly ascertain the color of her hair. But, again, I would guess that corporeal statistics were included in order to remind the audience and the community that these local women (and the pageant organizers) value the feminine qualities of appearance.

To my mind, the strangest item on this list was the inclusion of each of the contestants’ zodiac sign. While I watched, I couldn’t help but equate this information with the long stereotyped pick up line: “What’s your sign, baby?” In turn, I read this tidbit of information as an oblique reference to the dateability of the contestants. In keeping with the rules and
regulations of the local pageants, the participants must be unmarried. The mentioning of the contestants’ zodiac sign, for me, aided in identifying the marriageability of the young women. Furthermore, it reinforced the dating potential of the women which lends itself to the availability of the young women as future brides. Thus, in keeping with the feminine nature prescribed by the pageant, the young female contestants (as indicated by my reading of this information) will eventually settle into their domestic role as wife and mother, but not quite yet. First she must serve the community by seeking higher education.

The last category of the Milan Melon pageant contestants’ biography, what I termed future relations, briefly informed the audience of each young woman’s college and career plans. The contestant’s pursuit of further education and career goals were detailed in every pageant I attended. As higher education is now the “normal” if not expected next step in a high school graduate’s plans, it makes perfect sense that this data would help to secure the contestant’s place in society. The essential fact to note is that the majority of contestants in the pageants that I attended plan to attend college in Ohio. Choosing to stay in the state serves the community in two distinct ways. Firstly, and in a practical manner, it enables the winning queen and her court, if they are graduating seniors, to be available to make appearances without the added time and expense of traveling too far. Secondly, attending an Ohio college or university proves that the young women are willing to continue to support their state and, perhaps, return to their community upon graduation. It also could strengthen family bonds if one or more of the woman’s family members attended the same school. In keeping with the tradition of local pageants remembering the winner does not advance to any other pageant but purely represents her community for the upcoming year, the desire of the contestants to stay in Ohio for higher
education seems appropriate. The contestants not only value their hometown community, but also the opportunities presented by staying in the state.

After this last category which pointed to each contestant’s desire for higher knowledge was presented, we were again assured that a “suitable” physical appearance is a vital criterion for the winner of the Milan Melon pageant. The contestants, in two separate groups, stood in a line down the runway that extended into the audience. First they faced front, but as soon as the master of ceremonies called “quarter turn” into the microphone, they obeyed. Thus, we in the audience were able to view the contestants’ bodies from all four sides including the last quarter turn of the sequence which required the contestants to face the back wall of the stage and present their back side. Once we in the audience had the opportunity to view the contestants thoroughly, the judges left to deliberate and make their final decision.

FIG. 4. The Milan Melon Queen contestants seated on the main stage as they await the judges’ decision. The winner, Mandi Richards is fourth from the left in the lime green gown. Photograph by Heather Williams, 2007
This moment in the local pageants I attended always proved to be, as far as performance is concerned, an awkward one. The script of the local pageant appeared unwritten during this time. In a play this moment would be the point of intermission or in a televised program a commercial break. In the televised National pageants the judges’ deliberation is the scene where a featured entertainer might perform a musical number for the audience. Only one local pageant that I attended, the Miss Grapette Pageant in Geneva, Ohio “filled” this moment by including both an intermission and local entertainment – and this pageant’s structure was most similar to the National format. For the most part, the instant that the judges leave to make their final decisions on the local winner, the previously organized and scripted pageant becomes improvised. In turn, this lack of structure invites chaos in the audience.

To be fair, the 2006-2007 Milan Melon Queen, Kelsey Parker, did plan for this moment. As the judges left the performance area, she stepped up to the microphone to give her farewell speech. She told us what she had done throughout the year as the Melon Queen (which consisted of visiting other Ohio festivals and riding in the parades). She thanked her court, the community of Milan, and her parents for supporting her throughout her reign. The crowd of 300-400 people, many of whom were about the same age as the contestants, gradually became noisy and restless. Ms. Parker then informed us that she had planned to use this moment to show a power point presentation that her Dad had made featuring photos of her travels as the Milan Melon Queen. Unfortunately the pageant volunteers could not get the technology to work. Maintaining her composure, Ms. Parker invited her court to the microphone so that they could share their thoughts with the increasingly impatient audience. As time moved slowly on, the 2006-2007
Milan Queen and her court decided impromptu to give advice to the contestants seated at the front of the stage.

The very practical knowledge imparted to the pageant contestants by the outgoing court provided a strikingly different contrast to what we, the audience, had just witnessed on the stage. Up until this unscripted moment, the young women who had represented Milan the past year had appeared poised, elegant, and feminine embodying all the qualities that one would imagine a queen to embrace with ease. Through the impromptu advice Ms. Parker and her court were obligated to share in their attempt to fill time, the audience saw just how much maintenance is required to sustain this performance of femininity. Even though much of the audience was not paying attention and distracted by their own conversations, I felt as if we were witnessing the private world of local queendom in a very public setting. The advice poured out of the previous year’s royalty and, in essence, broke the façade that the pageant had previously created. Some of the practical instruction included: “Carry an umbrella for the heat and get underarmour for the cold.” “Hold onto your buckets in the parade as you go over bumps.” “Carry a stool for ‘back of the picture’ positioning, especially if you are short, like me.” “Always have bobby pins and baby wipes.” “Watch the top of your head and look out for tree branches in the parades. The crown will dig into your head if you hit a tree branch.” “Talk to all the little girls, they think you are a princess.” And finally, “Maintain your composure, you will get inappropriate Melon comments.”

As I listened to these comments, I first questioned the need to verbalize them so publicly. “Hold on to your buckets” and “watch out for tree branches?” Surely these were the elements of common sense. But then I thought again about the performance of femininity and how difficult such a performance is to maintain during a moment of unscripted improvisation, perhaps even
more so for a young woman charged with representing her entire community outside of that community. In the giving of advice to the incoming Queen and her court, the former Queen and court were, in a sense, creating a community within the community. In the moments before the crown was to be passed on from one young woman to another, the women who had experienced the position were helping to ease the transition for the women for whom the experience was yet unknown. The women awaiting the results of the judges are, to use Victor Turner’s theory, in a liminal position.

In his pinnacle study, “Betwixt and Between: The Liminal Period in Rites of Passage,” Turner analyzes specific rites of passage and notes that: “The transitional-being or ‘liminal persona’ is defined by a name and by a set of symbols. The same name is frequently employed to designate those who are being initiated into a very different state of life” (6, emphasis in original). In relation to Turner’s theory, the pageant contestant, then, is transitioning from high school or college female into “Miss Hometown.” Upon winning, she is converted into a community representative and thereby, given a position of dominance over the other contestants and “initiated into a very different state of life.” The set of symbols required for this initiation reflect her ability to maintain her femininity. Thus, the evening gown, the high heels, the grace, and the poise all play a symbolic part within her state of liminality. In addition, the tiara and the sash provide symbols of heightened femininity requiring a suitable performance. No longer simply a young woman or girl in her community, once crowned she becomes the spokesperson for that community and her position has been both secured and elevated.

Contained within this initiation are several rules and regulations. At the Milan Melon Pageant the advice from the prior year’s queen and her court was aiding to ease the transition. Turner continues: “If complete obedience characterizes the relationship of neophyte to elder,
complete equality usually characterizes the relationship of neophyte to neophyte, where the rites are collective” (10: 1987). In the pageant, which is clearly a competitive event, there is an opportunity for camaraderie among the contestants. I believe this camaraderie is especially present in local pageantry. For one, most (if not all) of the young women competing probably know each other well. As was the case in the Milan Melon Pageant all of the women competing were graduating seniors at the same high school. They perhaps play sports together or are members of the same organizations. This is not to say that they are close companions or even friends, but rather to point to how the performance of femininity required in the pageant may bring the contestants together even within the competitive event. In other words, because most often the contestants are not “pageant girls” who are schooled and practiced in the systems of pageantry, the local pageant grants the young women participating a sense of kinship with one another as they all are required perform their femininity in specific, yet similar ways. The advice given by the 2006-2007 Melon Queen and her court was, in keeping with this kinship, easing the transition for the incoming members by counseling the contestants in the ways of this feminine performance.

The 2006-2007 Melon Queen, Kelsey Parker, must have performed her role as representative appropriately because as the judges returned with their results and before the winner was announced, she was presented with a five hundred dollar check as a token of the community’s appreciation of her service throughout the year. In that the parents/family of the winning contestant cover the travel and wardrobe expenses during the year of the queen’s reign, it might seem more appropriate to give this monetary award at the beginning of the Queen’s reign. But given that this is not the case, this financial contribution, I would think, would have to be a consideration before the young woman filled out her application form to compete. In the
local pageants that I attended, there were very few monetary awards given. Unlike the Miss America system, which prides itself on the notion that it is a scholarship pageant, the winners of the local pageants often received as a “prize” the tiara, the sash, a trophy, perhaps a gift bag, and, of course, the honor of bearing the title. So, in essence, the community is receiving free or at the very least inexpensive advertising in the performance of the festival queen. This is not to state that the winner of the crown is not rewarded, rather, that the rewards are not of a monetary value. In fact, I would guess that the winner of a local crown spends a great deal more money than she ever receives. The ramifications of this financial burden will be discussed in further detail in the proceeding chapter.

Despite the pecuniary contribution mandatory for the winner of the local title, the nine contestants at the Milan Melon Pageant excitedly, but patiently awaited the judges’ decision. As the outgoing queen and her court readied the crowns and sashes in order to place them on the heads and chests of the newest members securing a place in Milan Melon Festival history, the audience finally settled their conversations and became somewhat silent. The liminal moment of the pageant was confirmed by the hushed energy in the formerly rambunctious audience. Turner reminds, “When play makes serious statements about the human condition, people take its outcomes seriously” (123: 1983). Although it many appear somewhat dramatic to claim that the outcome of the pageant is making a “serious statement about the human condition,” the local pageant does function as a performance that speaks to a particular community’s values, specifically the ways in which femininity is performed by the hometown girl. A “proper” performance is rewarded with a crown and an “improper” performance leaves one left sitting in a folding chair.
What I find interesting about this performance is the fact that the community members do not choose the winning queen and her court. The judging is executed by outsiders who are supposedly objective and do not have a vested interest in the immediate community. Still, (as every pageant I attended had a different structure) what elements/categories are included in the pageant that require the contestants to enact and display femininity are put in place by the organizers of the pageant and thereby confirm the community’s standards. Thus, the contestants of the local pageant are being judged on their performance of femininity by both insiders and outsiders.

This structure seems to appease our human nature and validate a performer’s worth. I am reminded, again, of the enormous amount of reality television shows currently on air. Most notable is “American Idol,” where the audience gets to vote for their favorite contestants. The “judges,” with their “professional” knowledge weed out the hopefuls and comment on each contestant’s skill. Undoubtedly the comments of the panel of judges influences the audience and sets the bar for the level of talent required to win. Still, “America votes” and watches to see if their favorite remains in the competition. The audiences of the local pageant do not get to “officially” vote. Nonetheless, it is clear from the response of the audience who their “favorite” is. The cheers and screaming (and sometimes booing) from the audience when their “girl” takes the stage is often so vigorous that one cannot hear the pronouncements of the master of ceremonies. As I attended each of the pageants, not personally knowing any of the contestants, I found this both irritating and influential. My irritation stemmed from not being able to evaluate each of the contestants on my own because I could not understand what they were saying. On the other hand, the sheer energy of the crowd around me and their shouting and cheering for their certain “favorite” contestants was infectious. In keeping with the festival atmosphere which
“often involves the entire person…[where] Citizens become part of the festival performance, joining in parades, dance, speech events or community skits” (Procter 134), the audience maintains their right to participate in the pageant by expressing their opinion concerning the outcome. In the case of the Milan Melon pageant, this critique and participation continued in a very public venue even after the 2007-2008 Melon Queen’s tiara was firmly placed upon her head.

And the Winner Is…

The climax of the Milan Melon Pageant finally arrived after about a half an hour of deliberation by the judges. I note that in the Milan Melon pageant there were six titles awarded: A sash and a tiara was given for Miss Congeniality as well as for fourth through first attendant and, of course, for Milan Melon Queen. This is not the usual number of winners in the local pageants I attended. Several of the other festival pageants only awarded three titles, second and first attendants and Queen. Because only nine contestants competed in the Milan Melon pageant, the chance of winning something was quite high at almost seventy-five percent.

I interpret the odds of succeeding at the competition by winning an award as both a negative and a positive aspect for the contestants involved. On one hand, a young woman may decide to compete because her chance of winning is great. The plentiful amount of awards also expresses the desire of the community to involve and celebrate as many of their young woman as properly possible in the representation of their community throughout the year. On the other hand, I can not help but admit I felt extremely sorry for the four contestants left sitting tiaraless in the folding chairs while over half of the contestants were standing, smiling, and waving at the animated crowd.
Perhaps these non-winners might perceive their participation in the pageant as a unique experience; following the ceremonies they can go home, trade their prom dresses for a pair of jeans, and enjoy the rest of the festival. Not so at the Milan Melon Festival. The non-winning contestants had to perform their femininity once again by riding in the parade the very next afternoon. If losing to young women they go to high school with everyday was not enough of a personal affront, the titleless contestants had to display their non-successful attempt by riding in a convertible behind the 2007-2008 Milan Melon Queen and court on their watermelon float, which, as was pointed out earlier in this chapter, follows behind the 2007-2008 Milan Melon Queen and her court and the melon slice. What is more, the non-winning contestants still wore the sashes with their sponsors name across their chests which, to my mind, declared that they were not privileged to represent the entire community, but rather only individual businesses. While in the community’s collective mind, the inclusion of the non-winning constants in the parade may provide a reward for the efforts they made to complete in the pageant, I found it rather unnerving watching the hierarchical parade arrangement. Because so much of the focus and attention is placed on the winners of the pageant, the opportunity to view, for a second time, the non-winners displayed so prominently as “losers” disturbed me. The young women who did not win any title were publicly displayed again and unlike, in the pageant, where the outcome was, initially, undetermined, in the parade it was clear who the non-winning contestants were. This parade arrangement, however, was not nearly as troubling as the commentary posted publicly online the day after the new Milan Melon Queen was named.

Mandi Richards earned the title of 2007-2008 Milan Melon Queen. She was also named Miss Congeniality, which is an award that is most often voted on by the other competing contestants: “Characteristic of many American festivals, this award permits recognition of the
relationship among women, stressing the importance of qualities that encourage consideration and politeness among women... (Stoeltje 25-6). Presumably, Miss Richards was not only a favorite of the judges, but also of the other contestants. As she was crowned the crowd cheered wildly and appeared happy that she would be their representative for the coming year. The dress she wore in the pageant was a striking shiny satin lime green gown. The bold choice in dress color proved to be too much for some in the audience. The young high school aged girl seated directly one metal bleacher below me made a rather uncomplimentary comment about prominent shade of Mandi’s dress to which her friend replied logically, “Well, melons are green.” The primarily innocent and harmless conversation of the two young women seated below me could, in a sense, infer that Mandi chose the dress because it, indeed, is the same color as the outside of a watermelon or the inside of a honeydew. Yet, by choosing to compete in the Milan Melon Pageant, Mandi, as well as all the other contestants have, in one sense, put themselves on display for feminine critique. In performing the femininity that is required to compete in the pageant, the contestants set themselves up to comply with a mediated standard even while this unrealistic standard may not be feasibly realized or expected on the local pageant stage. As Susan Bordo reminds, “Today, teenagers no longer have the luxury of a distinction between what’s required of a fashion model and what’s required of them; they perfected images have become our dominant reality and have set standards for us all – standards that are increasingly unreal in their demands on us” (116: 1997). Perhaps if we, in the audience, have a “standard” of what the ideal “should” be, then we cannot but help measure the local presentation against that ideal.

The manner in which the contestants’ style their hair, the dress they chose to wear, the physically of their walk, and the discretion applied to their posture while they are seated in the on stage chair are all influenced by the proscribed mediated beauty standard. The competition is not
only taking place on stage, however, it is also being played out in the audience as the spectators comment upon what they believe is the proper performance of femininity. By entering the pageant, the contestants, in a sense, give permission to be judged. The audience of a local pageant, in turn, feels that they have been granted the right to express their opinions because of their membership in the community. After all, the winner of the pageant will be representing them as she travels throughout Ohio. Influenced by media induced standards of beauty certain members of the Milan community felt it necessary to publicly express their opinions of how Ms. Richards did not fulfill all the “requirements” needed to be the Milan Melon Queen.

There are numerous female occupations where a favorable or “beautiful” outward appearance is a requirement of the job. Models, actresses, television personalities, dancers, and, of course, beauty queens all must mold to stereotypical performances of beauty. Yet, as has been noted, the standards of the local pageants differ somewhat drastically from the standards required of the National pageants. The fact that there was not a swimsuit competition included in any of the local pageants I attended seems to speak not only to the prescribed modesty of the young women competing, but also reinforces the impression that the community is less concerned with the physical appearance of the young women. I suppose that is why I was both shocked and amazed when I came across an online newspaper article covering the Milan Melon Festival the day after Ms. Richards was crowned.

The article was from the Sandusky Register and it is the same piece that I quoted earlier in this chapter. The only difference in the two articles, one a hard copy and the other an online source, besides the title, is a small box at the end of the online article that allows readers to post their personal comments and opinions regarding the articles content. Many online venues include this “service” for their readers on their websites and many readers take advantage of the
forum with little thought or time wasted. While the time and effort needed to compose a letter to
the editor of a newspaper would be somewhat consuming, posting a “comment” online can be
completed with very little energy or contemplation. What is more, the online commentator can
maintain his/her anonymity, substituting a clever screen label in place of his/her real name.
Therefore, when an individual posts a comment online he/she is, in essence, relived of any
responsibility associated with their words. This lack of accountability on the part of the writer, it
could be argued, might lend itself to a more honest opinion. On the other hand, it can also lead
to telling, but perhaps hurtful prose. The comments posted at the bottom of the article “Melon
Festival Fun Lasts through Monday” definitely comprised the latter. Yet, the comments are also
very telling: to be the Milan Melon Queen, one should fit into a very specific mold concerning
physical appearance. I believe it is useful to quote the majority of the comments displayed on
the website in order to support my former statements. The online “conversation,” which began
the morning after Ms. Richards was crowned, read thusly:

‘well’ wrote on Sep 2, 2007 [at] 11:34 AM:
‘i [sic] can’t believe that they actually let a fat girl win one of these things. never
would of [sic] happen [sic] 10 or 15 years ago’.

Re: Well wrote on Sep 2, 2007 [at] 1:37 PM:
‘You were so wrong for that comment. What page are you on in the Guiness [sic]
Book of World Records for most beautiful people?’

Re: Well wrote on Sep 2, 2007 [at] 3:10 PM:
‘What a disgusting human being you must be to have such a hateful criticism!!! I
hope you never put on a [sic] extra pound or two. You’d probably be
devastated!’
‘Chubby Chaser’ wrote on Sep 2, 2007 [at] 5:30 PM:

‘I can’t believe they let an idiot like ‘well…’ post a comment like that! Never would have happened 10 or 15 years ago.’

Surprised wrote on Sep 2, 2007 [at] 5:51 PM:

‘I was really surprised at who won the queen there. I watched the parade and when I saw who won I couldn’t believe it. There were numerous hot chicks on the float. I’m not trying to be mean but I was really surprised one of the many hot chicks didn’t win.’

‘Once again’ wrote on Sep 2, 2007 [at] 6:00 PM:

‘people [sic] from these small towns never let me down. Ignorant comments…keep showing the inbreeding…I am sure your [sic] a fat kid yourself…’

‘2 chubby chaser’ wrote on Sep 2, 2007 [at] 7:57 PM:

‘truth hurts. I have to agree with the first post. I was a big girl in school and I can tell you there’s no way in hell they would’ve let a big girl be homecoming/prom/festival queen. Times have certainly have changed.’

‘Surprised’ wrote on Sep 2, 2007 [at] 8:40 PM:

‘I am fat. That’s not the point. The point is I am surprised someone like me won queen. I would never in a million [years] expect it.’

‘well, well, well………..’ Wrote on Sep 2, 2007 [at] 9:03 PM:

‘I knew I’d get you going on this. Joke’s on you – I never said I was a size 2, did I? But my comments stand. I never actually thought a fat girl (she ain’t [sic]
skinny) would be allowed to win one of these things. I also never stated that beautiful people were all slender. HA HA. I know cuz [sic] I’ve been there.’

‘Biscuits and Gravy’ wrote on Sep 2, 2007 [at] 9:12 PM:

‘Big women need lovin [sic] too. My wife is a large woman and I love her very much.’

‘deserved’ wrote on Sep 2, 2007 [at] 9:12 PM:

‘I personally know the girl who won and I must say that she deserves it! She is a beautiful person on the inside and out and I wish her the best of luck in the future!!! (And as a 2001 grad [sic] of Edison, I must say that this year’s winner deserves it more than any winner that I’ve seen in the past.)’

Re: deserved wrote on Sep 2, 2007 [at] 9:37 PM:

‘Are you saying that she deserves it more than any winner in the past because you are a large person and have it out for skinny hot chicks?’

Re: biscuits and gravy wrote on Sep 2, 2007 [at] 9:47 PM:

‘ur [sic] very sweet. your wife is lucky – not all of us are.’

‘disappointed’ wrote on Sep 4, 2007 [at] 9:39 AM:

‘I too know this year's queen and just because she isn't a size 2 doesn't mean she doesn't deserve to be queen. She is a beautiful person regardless of size and for anyone to think that type of person doesn't deserve to be queen is totally wrong. The queen is not picked on superficial beauty alone, the girls go through an interview process and that is a large percentage of their score. I think it is great that Mandi won...CONGRATS... I am so proud of you. I know you will represent Milan well.’
I feel it is necessary to include this entire “conversation” to highlight the, somewhat unfortunate, but still ever present physical expectations placed upon the body of the local festival queen. Thankfully, the posting are composed as a debate, with comments on both sides of the “weight” issue. What I find most unbelievable is that Ms. Richards is, to my mind, an attractive and vibrant young woman. Unfortunately, our society (and many of the local community members) measure a women’s worth, or at the very least her ability to be a proper queen, on the size of her body. In this online exchange, it is obvious that for some members of the Milan community physical appearance should play a vital part in the choice of who represents them. While this online posting proves an insignificant representation of the Milan community, because of its public forum and its inclusion of very blatant, if somewhat crude and hurtful remarks I felt it necessary to include the passage in an effort to point to traditional feminine traits still expected by some of a queen contestant. This is not to state that physical appearance is the only expectation, but rather to reiterate how the local performance of femininity is still affected by national and mediated standards. It is also my hope that Ms. Richards either did not read the posted comments or has a strong enough personality to withstand the negative remarks. As elected representative of the Milan Melon Festival and the city of Milan, my guess is that it is probably the latter.

After my enlightening and fruitful experience at the Milan Melon Festival, the next stop on my festival travels was Reynoldsburg, Ohio where once a year every fall they celebrate the tomato. I then traveled east to Geneva, Ohio to take in the wonders of the Grape. I concluded the journey of my festival celebrations in Circleville, OH with the great pumpkin. Using case studies of the three latter festivals, the following chapter will build upon the ideas of female
representation, community values and festival celebration explored at the Milan Melon festival, but maintain the individually of each festival put in place by particular communal values and enacted through the local pageant organizers and participants.
CHAPTER FOUR: ABUNDANT FEMININITY: TOMATOES, GRAPES AND PUMPKINS

In this chapter, I continue the discussion of local pageantry using the lens of my ethnographic fieldwork. As such, this chapter, like the preceding chapter, is composed primarily as a personal narrative of my experience at three Ohio festivals and the pageants that were featured within them. However, as I have discovered throughout my travels, each festival and pageant is clearly unique in the manner in which it is presented for the community and thusly the notions of feminine value, representation, and performance in each event varies in specific ways. Throughout the following, I further consider the construction of femininity as it appears in the local pageants and, too, how the construction serves as a valued commodity for each hometown community. The discussion features the case studies of the following festivals and pageants in order of my attendance: The Reynoldsburg Tomato Festival, The Geneva Grape JAMboree, and The Circleville Pumpkin Show.

Lunching with the Queens: The Reynoldsburg Tomato Festival

Located in central Ohio, Reynoldsburg, is a suburb of Columbus where once a year the community celebrates the ruby red, juicy, and versatile vegetable, the tomato. My experience at the Reynoldsburg Tomato Festival was unique in several aspects. To begin, (and as I will explicate in this chapter) the structure of the Tomato Queen Pageant was vastly different from that of the Milan Melon Pageant. Nonetheless, this may be said about all the pageants I audieneced. Instead, the elements that made my experience at the Tomato Festival especially novel were dependent upon numerous factors that are both directly and indirectly related to the Tomato Queen Pageant. Included among these factors were the financial troubles plaguing the festival, the uncooperative weather that struck the festival weekend, and, finally, the gracious
invitation I received to attend the Reynoldsburg Tomato Festival Queen’s luncheon. Before I move into a comprehensive discussion of the Tomato Queen Pageant, I will briefly attend to the three aforementioned elements such as they relate to this particular pageant, in an effort to identify and situate the value that pageants as a larger enterprise hold within the communities. In this specific case, it will become clear that the role of the young woman who earns the title of Reynoldsburg Tomato Queen is extremely vital in the maintenance of the festival and the community as a whole, as both appear to be threatened by a lack of economic stability.

According to the 2007 Reynoldsburg Tomato Festival website, the festival has been “A Community Tradition for 42 Years.” The birth of the Tomato Festival is credited to the innovation of Alexander W. Livingston, a Reynoldsburg native, who in the last years of the nineteenth century “became internationally known through his development of the Tomato [sic] for commercial use” (www.reynoldsburgtomatofestival.org). The festival, however, was not established until over half a century later, prompted by a declaration of the Ohio Historical Society claiming Reynoldsburg the birthplace of the commercial tomato and therefore establishing the tomato as symbolic source of pride for the community. I believe it is pertinent, then, to note the economic burden that the festival was facing in 2007. As I have established, a festival is an event that serves to, in addition to celebrating the members of the community, bring in tourists to the community who, in turn, contribute to the local economy by spending money, not only at the festival, but also by staying at local hotels and eating in local establishments. Financially speaking, then, the cost of putting on a festival, though extreme, is hypothetically offset by the monetary benefits brought about by the spending by outsiders. Thus, one of the goals of a festival event, it could be argued, is increasing tourism and thereby bringing “outside” money into the community. As a way of facilitating this agenda, the Ohio food festivals are
always more than a one day events, with organizers holding the festivals over the course of two
to five days, and scheduling high profile events (such as the pageants) late into the evenings.
Thus, if one who does not reside within the community wants to attend the high profile events
(the pageant or the parade) one must make arrangements, as I often did, for overnight
accommodations and eat multiple meals in local establishments. Historically, this economic
strategy can be easily traced back to the organizational make-up of the Miss America pageant:

> With almost a full day’s agenda, most events were scheduled either on separate
days or on the same day but hours apart. This scheduling favored those living in
the local community and the over-night hotel guest rather than the day-
tripper…To enjoy all of the offerings of the Miss America Pageant, however, that
day-tripper would either have to wait for hours or travel to Atlantic City the next
day. The answer? Stay overnight, of course. (Riverol 24)

The Reynoldsburg Tomato Festival is, by some standards, a lengthy festival running five
days. The celebration begins on the Wednesday after Labor Day and ends on Sunday with the
Tomato Queen Pageant and crowning of the new Tomato Queen. Each day of the festival
schedule features several enterprising events including, “The Tallest Tomato Plant contest,”
“The Little Princess Pageant,” “A Pooch Parade,” and “Civil War reenactments.” These events
are in addition to the numerous bands which play late into the evening. The inclusion of so
many “featured” – and costly – events coupled with the length of the festival, while encouraging
an outside audience to not only attend, but also spend a substantial amount of time (and dollars)
in the community, at the same time requires a great amount of initial financial contribution on
the part of the festival organization. The “up front” investment demanded for the festival is so
great that in 2007, when I attended the Reynoldsburg Tomato Festival, the celebration’s future
appeared to be in jeopardy. The shaky status of the festival was confirmed in an article published online in the online edition of the Columbus Messenger a little more than two months prior to the festival: “Rumors have circulated throughout central Ohio communities, and even on the radio, that the Reynoldsburg Tomato Festival is canceled” (Garrett, “Tomato Fest”). The author, speaking on behalf of the Tomato Festival President, encourages the citizens and businesses of Reynoldsburg to contribute money to the festival organization. Supporting this plea is the Kiwanis President who notes: “If every resident [of Reynoldsburg] would donate one dollar, and each business $50, it would help” (Garrett, “Tomato Fest”). Apparently, the desperate plea was successfully answered as the festival did go on as planned, with one unforeseen exception: The weekend I attended the festival I didn’t even make it to the festival grounds. Ironically, on Saturday and Sunday the festival was rained out and the location designated for the celebration was too muddy to accommodate any type of crowd. As a result, all of the Tomato Festival activities scheduled for Sunday were cancelled, with the exception of two of the most prominent events: the Queen’s Luncheon and the crowning of the 2007-2008 Reynoldsburg Tomato Queen and her court. I intentionally use the term “most prominent” here, not only because the events relate directly to my project, but also because they function to create the much needed community representation in private and public ways.

The first event, the Queen’s Luncheon, is a private gathering that requires an invitation from the host festival in order to attend. Only the festival committee, the current Tomato Queen and her court, the invited/visiting Queens and their courts, and chaperones are allowed to participate. The second event, the Tomato Queen Pageant, is the public event that anyone can attend. I will discuss the details of the Tomato Queen pageant later in this chapter. Before I do so, I feel it important to note my experience at the Queen’s Luncheon in order to address the
tenets of the private community created by participation in the festival pageants and how this community maintains and monitors the femininity necessary to the pageant participants through shared knowledge.

The Queen’s luncheon functions in numerous ways: It welcomes the (select) visitors by offering a private and distinctive event for them to attend, it celebrates the host festival and the work of the previous years Queen, it provides a meal that advertises and recognizes the host festival food and, finally, it acts as a ritual gathering where the community of festival queens and their chaperones from throughout the state come together to share conversation and nourishment. Additionally, I feel it is necessary to include a discussion of the luncheon I attended within my project in light of what I witnessed there. My experience at the luncheon speaks to the various social and economic requirements placed upon the festival queen(s) and how such requirements are, in essence, also heaped upon the young woman’s family. Finally, from my position at the chaperones table I was able to gain inside knowledge of some of the negative and positive aspects of local pageant life from the perspective of the parents of the young women/little girls/little boys who compete and win.

To begin, this was the only Queen’s luncheon I was able to attend during my research. I was able to do so by contacting the pageant organizer, Nancy Mergel, who graciously extended an invitation to me. It is worth noting, that I attempted with little success to secure invitations to other luncheons by emailing other festival pageant organizers and explaining my research purposes. In all cases except for Reynoldsburg, my requests went unanswered. This highlights an important point: These truly are private events with strict guidelines as to who can participate in and be witness to them. Receiving an invitation to the Queen’s luncheon is a privilege that is obtained only by earning a local crown or serving as a chaperone to one who is wearing that
crown. As such, approximately forty Queens, attendants, little miss and misters, and their chaperones filled the spacious dining room of the Reynoldsburg Senior Center.

**Let Us Eat: Feasting on Femininity**

I arrived in Reynoldsburg on a dreary and wet Sunday mid-morning. As I followed Ms. Mergel’s directions to the Senior Center, I passed signs prompting visitors to the park where the festival was to be held. It was my intent to attend the luncheon, which began at noon, and then travel to the festival grounds to participate in the festival activities while waiting for the pageant to begin at 4:00 p.m. As I pulled into the parking lot of the Center, despite the drizzle, I was caught up in the bustle of activity: girls in fancy gowns and satin shoes desperately attempting to keep umbrellas in place above curled and hair sprayed hair, mother’s carrying sashes close to their bodies in an effort to keep them from staining in the unforgiving rain, and snappy quips here and there urging one or the other to “hurry up” or enquiring “where do we go?” as several twosomes entered the building.

As I had in other festival contexts, I felt completely outside this world with my notebook in hand. These feelings were further confirmed when I entered the dining room and reached the registration table. A college-aged female firmly inquired: “What festival are you representing and whose chaperone are you?” I bumbled for a brief moment: “Ahhh, Ms. Mergel invited me?” The coed, who was dressed in a red t-shirt, responded after some hesitation: “Okay, she’s over there in the tomato shirt. You can ask her.” I approached the busy Ms. Mergel and introduced myself. She greeted me with as much grace as an overwhelmed pageant organizer could possibly muster, surrounded as she was by scampering, giggling young women, dressed in elegant prom dresses with sparkling tiaras. Ms. Mergel instructed me to sit at any of the three
back tables reserved for the chaperones - the tables in the front were reserved for the visiting queens and their courts. The head table, at which the 2006-2007 Reynoldsburg Tomato Queen and her two attendants sat, was situated to the side and centered among the visitor’s tables. I note this arrangement because of its similarity to other ceremonial meals. The inclusion of a head table allows the guests – in this case, the visiting queens, courts, and chaperones – to immediately recognize and acknowledge who is being celebrated. Even in a room full of tiaras, there is, at least at this meal, a crown that is granted more importance than the others.

The Queen’s luncheon, then, is an event that welcomes outsiders, while at the same time it maintains a clear hierarchy – the hosting festival’s queen and her court are the ones given special recognition. Much like a bride at a wedding, it is the hosting Queen’s day. And because the hosting Queen is the outgoing Queen, it is also one of the last “official” gestures she will perform as community representative before she relinquishes her crown. The luncheon grants the outgoing queen and her court a performance platform where they, for one last moment, are the stars. Perhaps this extensive lauding could only be tolerated by an audience that has or will be performing in the same manner. For the “average” festival attendee (who would not attend the private luncheon), the queen and her court serve to perform a feminine representation of the community and its commodity, but for the visiting festival queen and her court the hosting festival queen performs a shared experience. Additionally, because the audience at the luncheon has intimate and lived knowledge of the construction and requirements of the performance, the opportunity for critique of the host pageant and its organizers seemed to necessarily and willingly present itself.

From my seat at one of the chaperone tables, I was able to observe, as I will discuss, this sometimes unflattering critique first hand. However, in addition to what I perceived as
negative comments expressed by the chaperones, the presence of a shared insider’s knowledge of the practical elements required of a local pageant winner was also prevalent in the chaperones’ conversations. By listening closely, I was able to determine that I was seated among the parent(s) of the queens who were running about the space snapping pictures with each other: Often throughout the luncheon the young women would return to the chaperone’s table needing something: “Mom, what did you do with the camera?,” “Mom, my crown is falling off, can you fix it?,” “Mom, I need some money to buy a Tomato Festival Pin for my sash.” The “chaperone” would dutifully, if somewhat reluctantly, attend to her queen’s needs in preparation for the meal that was to follow.

Given the nature of my project, my initial interpretations of the luncheon were focused not on the chaperones, but rather upon the queens attending and how the host festival chose to represent itself through the celebrated food. I was pleased to note that the Reynoldsburg luncheon menu featured numerous tomato-based items. Even before the attendees were invited to the buffet style meal, we were each given a can of “commercial” tomato juice as an appetizer of sorts. Among the other menu items that incorporated the tomato were pizza and spaghetti with tomato sauce and an iceberg salad with cherry tomatoes. For dessert, in addition to a chocolate sheet cake, guests could opt to try tomato fudge – a light pink concoction that outside of its rather strange color resembled in appearance its chocolate relative and tasted of apples and cinnamon. The luncheon was sponsored by a local pizza parlor, hence the “Italian” fare. Given that the festival’s founder, Alexander Livingston, is credited with creating the commercial tomato, it seemed a suitable and fitting way to celebrate this advance by serving a pizza buffet, perhaps one of the most convenient and commercial foods incorporating the tomato.
The guests of honor at the luncheon, the majority of whom were teenaged females, seemed perfectly content with this menu selection. The spaghetti, however, with its sloppy tomato sauce appeared to pose an immediate threat to the young women. I overheard one chaperone remark: “I told Kelly she better not spill on her dress.” Several other chaperones nodded in agreement and expressed their displeasure at the menu selection: “Who serves tomato sauce when the girls are in their dresses?” Perhaps they needed to remember that they were, after all, at the Tomato Festival. From the comment, one might assume that even clad in floor-length gowns and sparkling tiaras these young women are lacking the “ladylike” manners required to keep food off of their laps. The costume of each of the young queens and court members surely required a performance of their femininity and the performance necessitated mediation. From my insider’s seat among the chaperones, I was reminded that these young women are not accustomed to wearing the expensive gowns their parents have dutifully purchased for them. The prescribed feminine role required of the local queen is one that does not come a “naturally” as one might assume. The feminine performance must be taught and practiced. Yet, once the role is granted, by winning a local title, it appears that it must be enacted – even if the young woman has to be “coached” or reminded of the script of such a role by her chaperone. These mothers are, in essence, assisting their daughters by making certain the performance is staged as rehearsed.13 The chaperones are not quite the “directors” of the performance. That task is the responsibility of the festival and pageant organizers. Nonetheless, the chaperones do take on the responsibility of costume designer (in the purchasing of the dresses/jewelry/shoes), hair and makeup designer (in aiding in the initial preparation of appearance), properties mistress (reminding the star of her tiara and sash), set designer (in the

13 Historically, with regard to the Miss America System, chaperones for the contestants were introduced when Lenora Slaughter became the pageant’s director in 1935. Slaughter employed chaperones as part of an effort to transform the pageant’s image from a “leg-men’s spectacle into a respectable civic venture” (Foley 48).
construction of the float), and company manager (making travel arrangements and accommodations). Although the structure of each individual Ohio festival pageant is different, the roles required of the queen’s chaperone seem fairly consistent. The Queen’s luncheon, then, also functions, in part, to provide a venue for the mothers of the winning contestants to exchange knowledge across communities. In essence, they are all experiencing the same joy and burden associated with the responsibility of having a daughter who is a local queen or court member. The sharing of these experiences often results in the formation of a community among the chaperones.

The community of chaperones serves as one that monitors and maintains the feminine performance of the festival queens outside of their hometown festival. In this required supervision there is, from what I observed, not only a sense of shared experience, but also a feeling of deserved recognition among the chaperones. The conversations among the female chaperones at the table I was seated at ranged from a sharing of “inside” secrets - “I only paid twenty dollars for her dress. It was on sale at Dillards” - to a discussion of the festival organization’s requirements – “we’ve gone to seventeen festivals and they only required ten” – to a mutual disdain at the host festival’s organizers – “That pageant coordinator is bossy. She kept telling people to quit taking pictures and sit down to eat. I don’t like to be bossed around like that. I would have just turned and snapped a picture right in her face.” In the private world of the Queen’s luncheon, the requirements for maintaining the femininity prescribed for each Queen contestant is shared within this select group of chaperones with communal experience. Much like the festival event, where the women of the community are, for the most part, responsible for organizing and participating in the traditionally feminine events - not only the pageants, but also the cooking contests and the arts and crafts booths - once a woman’s daughter
takes on the role of pageant queen or court member the chaperone/mother is again employed to monitor the femininity not only within her home community, but also in communities throughout the state. The luncheon, then, serves, in part, to give voice to the chaperones’ shared experiences even if that voice is only heard by one another.

A voice that is bestowed a more public platform to speak at the luncheon is the outgoing Queen and her court. Once all the attendees where properly fed, the concluding portion of the luncheon was dedicated to a presentation from the outgoing 2006-2007 Reynoldsburg Tomato Queen and her court. The hosting Queen and court are granted the floor, so to speak, to say their farewells, to express their appreciation to those who have helped during their reign, and to present gifts to the members of their hometown community who assisted in helping create a successful year. Much like the improvisational moment at the Milan Melon Pageant, the 2006-2007 Reynoldsburg Tomato Court detailed the “funny” moments and “cherished” memories that made the year special for them. But unlike the raucous audience at the Milan Melon Pageant, the luncheon audience with their shared knowledge and in keeping with the traditional feminine qualities of politeness and poise, sat quietly and attentively as each young woman indulged in the sharing of inside jokes and private experiences. As a reward for their attention, after the speeches were done and the tears were sufficiently wiped away, the visiting queens and their chaperones were given door prizes by the hostesses. Traditional gender roles were reflected in the prizes that were awarded, most notably among the chaperones: The female chaperones were given candles, bath products, decorative plaques, and Tupperware. If a male’s name was drawn, he received an ice scraper or a flashlight. Not surprisingly, the hostesses purchased far fewer of the latter two gifts. The luncheon was a clear reflection of the feminine world that the pageant is
perceived to be situated within. However, rather than a public display of such, it is a private and shared experience, a community created out of communities.


To further the sense of community and to mark the occasion, after the luncheon was finished all of the invited royalty was asked to gather outside the Senior Center for a posed photograph. Fortunately, the rain had cleared for a brief moment to provide a picturesque background to capture the event. Of course, the Reynoldsburg pageant organizers encouraged their guests to stay for the 2007-2008 Reynoldsburg Tomato Queen pageant that would commence approximately two hours later at 4:00 p.m. However, with the festival grounds closed and the cancellation of the parade due to lack of funding, thus prohibiting a large public audience in which to promote their own festival, it was unlikely that many of the luncheon guests
would stay in town. As such, once the photograph was taken, the visiting royalty and their chaperones loaded up their cars and left Reynoldsburg. They had performed their royal duties for this festival, would receive another pin for their festival sashes, and could return to their homes to prepare for the next event. I also returned to my car, but instead of departing for home I anxiously waited to attend the second pageant of my research, the 2007-2008 Reynoldsburg Tomato Queen Pageant.

**Questioning the Feminine: The Reynoldsburg Tomato Queen Pageant**

The Reynoldsburg Tomato Queen Pageant finally commenced at 4:00 p.m. and, as I anticipated, the attendance was meager. The lack of spectators in the audience resulted in a much more intimate experience than the one I encountered at the Milan Melon Festival Queen Pageant. I assumed that the audience was composed of mostly family and friends of the eleven contestants who, according to the candidate “call” posted on the Reynoldsburg Tomato Festival website must be “young ladies ages 16-18 entering the 11th or 12th grade who live in the Reynoldsburg School District” (“Royalty,” www.reynoldsburgtomatofestival.org).

In addition to the age requirement, as I discovered when I accessed the “Candidate Rules/Guidelines” link on the festival’s website the regulations mandated for the young women who chose to enter the Tomato Queen Pageant are meticulous in detail. While not as exhaustive as the “how to win your crown” pageant help books that pervade the commercial market, the guidelines included therein are still very much in keeping with the expected traditional femininity. Upon entering the Reynoldsburg Tomato Queen Contest, the young women are to follow these (among several) rules of femininity:
As representatives of Reynoldsburg and the festival, proper, positive conduct is expected at all times. Candidates must be of good moral character, must be single and never been married or pregnant. When candidates are at festival related activities they are to wear the crown, sash, and name badge provided for them. When candidates are wearing their sash, crown, and name badge, they are not permitted to partake in any public displays of affection with boyfriends (this includes holding hands, hugging, and kissing).

(“Candidate Rules/Guidelines,” www.reynoldsburgtomatofestival.org)

While this example provides only a select listing of the requirements of the young women upon entering the Reynoldsburg Tomato Queen Pageant – and the prescriptions do get much stricter once a young woman wins her crown – these “rules” appear to be bond to notions of a virginal and chaste performance. Further, in keeping with the rules of femininity, the requirements of the pageant contestant serve the male gaze. She is expected to (at least in her public personae) appear innocent and available. She must have “good moral character” and never have been married and thusly still able to be picked as a bride. To further this feminine façade, even if she is in a heterosexual (another assumed requirement) relationship, she must appear as if she is single while wearing the costume denoting her as royalty. She is not allowed to “partake in any public displays of affection” with a boyfriend while on public display as a community representative as this would suggest that the young woman may have deviant emotional and/or sexual desires. As Jerrilyn McGregory, in her article on local pageantry, reminds, “although there is no criterion upholding virginity [in the pageant guidelines], the edict that women be never married and without children at least symbolizes chastity” (130). While the pageant organizers do not deny that the young women who enter the local pageant might be
romantically involved with another, they require that this element of the young woman’s personae be hidden, at least when she is dressed as a queen. The performance of femininity required by the pageant contestants, then, is a performance of strict guidelines that is adhered to a specified script – a script that, perhaps, many young women choose not to follow and thus opt not to participate. For the eleven contestants that did opt to play a role in the 2007-2008 Reynoldsburg Tomato Queen Pageant, however, the opportunity to embrace this feminine display was, at least in comparison to the Milan Melon Festival, also an opportunity to speak out, speak with, and speak on behalf of the young woman’s community.

In her article, “The Snake Charmer Queen: Ritual, Competition, and Signification in American Festival,” Beverly Stoeltje theorizes the social implications of some of the defining categories that compose local pageantry. One of these categories is the public interview. Stoeltje states: “In providing a podium for the contestants’ voice, the pageant displays some recognition that women are voting, speaking members of society. However, the fact that only the finalists are expected to speak suggests a distinction between a class of women whose opinions are worth hearing and another class whose voice we do not want to hear” (25). As I noted in the previous chapter, in the Milan Melon Pageant none of the contestants were allowed a public platform to speak during the competition. However, the Reynoldsburg Tomato Pageant differed from both the Milan Melon Pageant and the Snake Charmer Queen Pageant models. At the Reynoldsburg Tomato Queen Pageant the opportunity to speak publicly was granted to all eleven contestants on several occasions throughout the competition. In fact, I might even go so far to deduce, by witnessing what was presented to the pageant audience, that the Tomato Queen contestants were judged solely on their ability to astutely and gracefully answer the “random” questions that the master of ceremonies judiciously recited. If as Stoeltje claims, “[P]ublic
speaking represents one of the skills that women learn in beauty pageants...they learn that they will be judged on the basis of their verbal performance by the community/audience” (25), the Reynoldsburg Tomato Queen Pageant, out of all the local pageants I attended, provides a key example in my study, of this lesson at work.

After witnessing the “silence” required of the Milan Melon Pageant contestants, I was initially grateful that the Reynoldsburg Tomato Pageant’s structure was almost completely composed of the question and answer category. In stating this, I do not deny that the young women competing in the competition were not also judged on feminine qualities of appearance: All of the young women competing were dressed in the required evening gowns and sat demurely on folding chairs holding a small basket of flowers as they awaited their turns at the microphone creating the effect of mismatched bridesmaids biding their time before their individual moments on the stage. Yet, with the lack of competitive categories that focused on the young women’s physical form – the participants were not required to “walk and turn” in their dresses – the structure of the Reynoldsburg Tomato Pageant, at least from my spectator’s prospective, seemed to favor the contestants’ minds over their bodies.

When the pageant began, the master of ceremonies, who had once served as the second attendant on the 1999-2000 Reynoldsburg Tomato Queen Court, greeted the small audience by stating that this was the first time, at least as she remembered it, that the pageant was rained out and had to be held indoors. This apology of sorts was followed by a description of how the winning queen and her court would represent the Reynoldsburg community throughout the year: They would travel to twenty Ohio festivals, attend the City of Reynoldsburg’s tree lighting festival, and participate in the Taste of Reynoldsburg. We, in the audience, were also informed of the qualities on which the contestants were judged: The winner should be well-spoken,
poised, and knowledgeable about the Tomato Festival. While all three qualities are required to compete in the pageant, the “poise” category, according to the written “Queen/Court Guidelines,” is given the highest priority during the Queen’s year-long reign. In addition to the previously quoted “Candidate Rules/Guidelines,” the “Queen/Court Guidelines” include, among others, the following requirements – which, to my mind, have little to do with maintaining intellectual knowledge about the Tomato Festival:

The responsibility of the Queen and attendants will be to represent the Tomato Festival to the best of her ability. A high standard of moral conduct will be expected at all times. The queen and court will refrain from the use of illegal drugs, intoxicating beverages, or the use of profanity…Royalty shall appear in either a dress or formal, as required by the host festival…Slacks, jeans or shorts are not acceptable attire while performing the duties as Queen or attendants…When riding on the float or on the convertible in the parade, cell phones, gum chewing, and sunglasses are not permitted…Failure to abide by these guidelines …will result in the forfeiture of the title and prizes given.

(“Rules/Guidelines,” www.reynoldsburgtomatofestival.org)

Thus while the competitive categories presented in the Tomato Pageant appear to almost exclusively value the contestant’s ability to speak her mind thoughtfully and intelligently, the proper presentation of the feminine body is still carefully monitored. If not overtly displayed during the pageant, it is most definitely an expectation after the young woman has claimed the crown. Perhaps the Reynoldsburg Tomato Pageant’s format, unlike the structure of the Milan Melon Pageant, attempts to create a balance between the mind/body dichotomy while at the same time covertly valuing the latter in the chosen winners. The contestants must first prove that they
are intelligent enough to deserve to represent the community, but after that mission is accomplished the winner can then embrace the performed feminine display stereotypically required of a pageant queen. In stating this I am not claiming that this displayed performance is easily enacted. It may, in fact, be more difficult to maintain than the answering of a few brief questions. Furthermore, even within the spoken performance of the contestants, the femininity expected of the pageant queen was noted in both the questions and the given answers.

After the master of ceremonies greeted the audience the pageant began, as most pageants do, with the introduction of the contestants. Another difference in the Reynoldsburg Tomato Pageant was that the contestants each stepped up to the microphone for a self introduction (although as I audenced more and more local pageants throughout my research, I discovered, that this is a common occurrence in local pageantry). The Introduction portion of the Tomato Queen Pageant was clearly scripted (and, I assume composed by the contestant) and memorized. The introductions that each contestant gave followed a typical pageant structure: She stated her name, her age, her grade in school, her grade point average, the names of her parents and siblings, her high school activities, her hobbies, and finally, her future college plans. Although this information was the standard in all of the pageants I attended, it was refreshing to hear the woman who lived it provide it first hand. As the contestants outlined their biographical facts, they appeared quite nervous. The young women had obviously been coached to memorize the audience’s first impression of themselves as several of the contestants “forgot” the order of speech, subsequently breaking “character” by fidgeting and allowing their eyes to go up to the ceiling in an effort to grasp the next line. All of the contestants managed to get through this first performance; however, some were more successful than others. Based upon the success or

---

14 The desire of the contestants to pursue a higher education was prevalent in all of the pageants I attended. This element follows the Miss America System which provides ample college scholarship monies for the winners.
failure of this first performance at the microphone, the audience might already be making predictions of who the best representative might be.

After the contestants shared their brief biographies with the audience, the master of ceremonies again approached the microphone and began the first of four “question and answer” sessions that formed the entire structure of the Reynoldsburg Tomato Queen Pageant. Furthermore, with each “session” the stakes were raised. The questions did not necessarily require more knowledge on the part of the contestant, rather, the process of what question was asked of each contestant, after the initial round, was left to chance. The first questions were composed using information taken from the individual entry applications. However, the second and third questions were “picked” by the contestants out of a fishbowl. Thus, the latter questions were not tailored to the contestant’s individual accomplishments and/or interests.

The questions were written on construction paper tomatoes. Much like the farmer who waits to pick the ripened and fresh tomatoes off of the vine in order to send to market the best product, the young women are picking what they hope will be a question they are able to answer in order to market themselves as the best choice to represent Reynoldsburg. Unlike at the Milan Melon Festival Pageant where there was rarely any recognition given to the celebrated food, at the Reynoldsburg Tomato Queen Pageant the tomato’s past and present history was thoroughly acknowledged in the themed décor and in some of the onstage questions, particularly (and as I will discuss) in the last question of the evening which every competing young woman was asked to answer.

The first round of questioning began and, as stated above, the young women were asked to expand upon something they already shared about themselves in their introduction. For example, one of the contestants was asked: “How do you become a member of National Honor
Society and what do you do as a member?” From these more in-depth explorations of their interests and activities we, in the audience, were able to further our knowledge about each contestant’s personalities. As the young women were asked the spontaneous (in that they did not know exactly what would be inquired), yet predictable (as they were based in personal information) questions the contestants appeared to relax (as much as one can in an evening gown and in front of a microphone) and relay their answers dutifully. The contestants must have been instructed, however, to stand with their hands behind their backs because every single contender assumed this position as soon as she reached the microphone. One contestant even “broke” this pose and apologized, “Oops, I’m talking with my hands.” Apparently “talking with ones’ hands” signifies unqueenlike communication. Allowing the body to appear uncontrolled is not within the boundaries of femininity. As feminist scholar Susan Bordo reminds: “Where femininity is measured and evaluated on the basis of appearance, women are expected to be conscious of and concerned about how they look to others” (153: 1997). Yes, the contestants were on display in their evening gowns to be looked at and this display must be carefully and physically contained. I believe it is notable that even at the local level many of the national and traditional standards of the controlled female body desired in pageantry are incorporated. Lu Parker, a former Miss USA, in her “guide” book Catching the Crown: The Source for Pageant Competition, in addition to noting not to ever wear green or “reddish blush with pink tone lips” (16), gives these pieces of advice, “Be sure not to swing your hips too much. When you stand to present yourself, make sure you stand at an angle to the judges. Never put your body in direct line with the judges. It makes you look thick” (59) and “It’s imperative you show excitement, but at the same time, you need to remain in control. Remember to walk like a lady” (62). Furthermore, in direct reference to the interview portion of the pageant, Parker reminds, “Avoid being to giggly, because you
may appear dense. Be polite and be yourself. If something is funny, laugh, but use good
judgment. For the audience’s sake don’t ramble” (63). While these “tips” may seem extreme,
they are fairly standard rules included in pageant “how to” books. S. A. Bordenkircher, in her
chapter to the instruction of how to sit, stand, and walk even though it seems that most of us
learned these bodily skills before reaching the age of one. Thus, it seems clear that, the
presentation of the controlled female body in pageants is a vital part of the performance. While
this performance is, perhaps, not as rigidly controlled or pursued on the local level, it is
nevertheless expected and required. In light of this, even as I listened to the Reynoldsburg
contestants share their thoughtful answers to the questions the master of ceremonies was posing,
I was reminded (as were they) that the physical body should remain feminine, that is poised and
controlled.

Controlling the feminine body became more of a challenge for the contestants in the
following two rounds of questions as the answers required more spontaneity. The master of
ceremonies told the spectators that these were the “fishbowl” rounds because the order that the
contestants would take the stage would be drawn out of a bowl as would each of questions that
the contestants would be asked. The master of ceremonies also expressed that these may be
“questions that the contestants are not prepared to answer.” To that end, the questions varied
dramatically and covered subjects that ranged from knowledge of the Reynoldsburg community, to
information regarding popular culture; from improvisational descriptions of themselves, to
relaying their plans for the future of Reynoldsburg and the Tomato Festival. Some of the
questions, in my opinion, required more complex thought than others. For example, “Where is
your favorite place you’ve traveled to and why?” seems, to my mind, a bit easier to answer than
“If you were mayor of Reynoldsburg what would you do?” However, regardless of the questions, the “fishbowl” round did serve to illuminate what the Reynoldsburg community is claiming they look for in its representative: A young woman who is well-spoken, informed, and poised.

The forth and final round of the question and answer session was vastly, but fittingly different from the previous three. All of the contestants were asked to leave the “stage” and escorted into a “sound-proof” room. In other words, the young women were instructed to go to an adjacent room where they listened to a stereo playing loudly (at such a volume, in fact, that the audience had to strain to hear each contestant’s individual answer.) The young women were, again, picked in a random order to enter back into the performance area. Each contestant’s journey from the sound-filled room to the microphone was, for all practical purposes, the only time the audience saw them walk in their evening gowns and heels. I do not know if the judges took this stroll into account when scoring, but it was, nevertheless, an element of the pageant.

Once each young woman reached the microphone, the master of ceremonies asked this pivotal question: “What makes you the best candidate to be the Tomato Festival Queen?” While each contestant phrased her answer differently, the general consensus was that she would work hard to promote Reynoldsburg during the Tomato Festival and throughout the year. Many stated that they were easy to talk to, which seems fitting (or not depending upon how well the presented themselves in the category) as they had just spent the last two hours answering questions. The claim that the young woman would “promote” Reynoldsburg also appeared to be an appropriate answer given the financial woes that the community and the Tomato Festival were enduring at the time. The Reynoldsburg Tomato Queen, then, serves a vital role in the preserving the longevity of the festival and the Reynoldsburg community.
The judges left to deliberate soon after the eleventh contestant finished relaying her answer. This particular moment, much like at the Milan Melon Pageant, became somewhat improvisational. Again, a restlessness befell upon the audience as the outgoing Queen and her court shared their “thank yous” and said their farewells. This was the first time during the course of the pageant that the 2006-2007 Tomato Queen and court were given the opportunity to speak to the audience. This was very different from the lengthy platform they were granted at the luncheon. The results of this public presentation were also very different because of the “general” audiences’ reception of such. In other words, to use a well worn phrase: “They didn’t get it.”

To fill time while the judges were still making their decisions, the 2006-2007 Queen and court decided to perform their “Tomato Cheer” for the spectators. This cheer involved call and response and asked for the audience to participate in the spelling out of T-O-M-A-T-O. The first attendant noted that this is something they do to “get energy” when they are riding on the float in the festival parades. Needless to say, the audience didn’t know the cheer and had no desire to take part. The moment became, to my mind, extremely awkward as we, the spectators, watched the outgoing court and the pageant organizers perform something only they were in on. Even the eleven contestants were at a loss for words because they have not yet been initiated into this group of representatives and therefore, did not know the cheer. For the pageant audience, (unlike the audience at the luncheon), the private and shared experience seemingly important to the outgoing pageant queen and court did not transfer. The cheer eventually faded away and in a desperate attempt to keep the audience focused, the master of ceremonies decided to tell her Michigan State jokes. Thankfully, the judges soon returned with their final decision.
Before the 2007-2008 Reynoldsburg Tomato Queen and her four attendants were announced, the master of ceremonies awarded each contestant with a participation trophy. In this particular pageant, everyone was a winner. The master of ceremonies further recognized the pageant’s sponsors by sharing with the audience the names of those who donated the numerous trophies and sashes. Next, the contestants stood and held hands mimicking the final round of the Miss American Pageant. As is pageant tradition, each contestant was presented with her crown and sash by the outgoing member of the royalty who held the particular title the previous year. When the second and first attendants were announced, in addition to awarding the trophy, sash, and tiara to each winning young woman, the outgoing attendants also “passed on” a memento. The new attendant is supposed to wear the keepsake whenever representing the Tomato Festival and, in turn, continue the tradition by passing the item on to next year’s winner.

The first attendant presented a necklace which seems appropriate and feminine, but the second attendant passed on men’s boxer shorts which she was wearing underneath her gown and proceeded to take off by pulling her long gown up to her waist in front of the audience. She was literally stripped of her title by willingly giving over her undergarment. While this might appear to be an inappropriate gesture, the act was a public display of a private and inside joke that is maintained year to year. What is more, one might argue that the boxers are representative of the “real” young woman who hides her more masculine side underneath her feminine dress out of public view. At any rate, it was a jarring moment during the pageant because of the performed femininity that the audience had just witnessed. Finally, the 2007-2008 Queen was announced with nothing passed on except the proper and traditional trophy, sash and tiara thereby enabling the feminine performance to take precedence. An elated Jennelle Angela Krumlauf was crowned the 2007-2008 Reynoldsburg Tomato Queen. The newly crowned Queen and her court gathered
to pose for pictures while I proceeded back out in the rain wondering how I would possibly answer one of the judge’s queries: “If I could choose an actress to portray me in a movie, who would it be and why?” With two very different festival pageants informing my research, this, among other questions, pervaded my mind as I drove home pondering what the next pageant might possibly have in store for my project.

Sell it Girl: The Miss Grapette Pageant

The third example in my study is the pageant that attempted to resemble the Miss America Pageant structure most closely. I note this in reference to form, not necessarily content. The Miss Grapette Pageant is a part of the Geneva Grape JAMboree that is held in late September in Geneva, Ohio. Before beginning my research, I was unaware that you could grow grapes in Ohio. This, perhaps, is not surprising as Geneva, a town located at the northeastern tip of the state, is the only region in Ohio that maintains a climate where the growing and harvesting of the fickle fruit is possible. According to the proclamation on the Grape JAMboree website:

Approximately 1500 acres of grapes are grown in the Geneva, Ohio area. Most of the grapes are processed into juices, concentrates or wine. Specific growing conditions, which exist only in a narrow band from the Lake Erie shore to 10 miles inland, contribute to the success of grape growing in this region. In the spring, the frozen waters of Lake Erie keep the air in the region colder later into the spring. This prevents the vines from budding out early only to be damaged by a late spring frost. In the fall, the now warm waters of the lake help prevent early fall frosts which may damage the grape crop before it can be harvested. The local grapes, especially the concords, are featured at the annual Geneva Grape
JAMboree held the last full weekend in September. The Geneva Area Grape JAMboree celebrates the harvesting of various grape products. ("About the Festival," www.grapejamboree.com)

In addition to celebrating the “various grape products,” the Geneva Grape JAMboree celebrates the young woman who will be a spokesperson for these products by crowning a new Miss Grapette the weekend before the official festival commences. Thus, the Miss Grapette Pageant did not take place during the festival celebration, although Miss Grapette was naturally featured at the festival in the parade and at a brief public ceremony, which also included the introduction of visiting festival queens. By moving the Miss Grapette Pageant intentionally\(^\text{15}\) off of the festival grounds, the organizers were able to hold the pageant in a more formal setting. The Geneva High School Auditorium, a theatre space that contained seating for at least three hundred spectators, served as the location for the pageant. The formal and theatrical setting of the pageant, to my mind, made it appear to be more of a high brow event when compared to the outdoor and makeshift stages of the pageants situated on the festival grounds. What is more, the Miss Grapette Pageant was also the only pageant of my study that charged a small fee (five dollars for adults and three dollars for children) for admission. Paying to attend the pageant, it might be argued, further heightens the event by placing expectation on the entertainment value of the performance. Indeed, the Miss Grapette Pageant did include performance categories that were not present in any of the other pageants I attended for this project. The contestants did not only “walk” as in the Milan Melon Pageant and neither did they only “answer questions” as in the Reynoldsburg Tomato Pageant. To be sure, the young women who competed in the Miss Grapette Pageant performed in both of categories, as well as several others.

\(^{15}\) I note this in comparison to the Reynoldsburg Tomato Pageant which was forced off of the festival grounds and therefore not staged as originally planned.
The performance was an odd mixture of traditional pageant categories, such as the interview and the evening gown competition, and the less traditional (although somewhat similar to the talent competition), such as a self-written and solo improvisational skit. The latter category required each young woman to compose a “live” commercial for her pageant sponsor. Thus, not only were the contestants vying to represent the community of Gevena and the Grape that serves as a symbol of prosperity for the community, they were also promoting individual businesses by performing a commercial in the pageant itself. The performance, while entertaining to some degree, also aided in the acknowledgment of each contestants’ sponsor through the embodied promotion of their business and/or product. While at the Milan Melon Festival the contestants simply wore the sashes with their sponsor’s name printed upon them, and at the Reynoldsburg Tomato Pageant we were informed, with the absence of the parade, the lack of sponsors available; at the Miss Grapette Pageant the contestants were given judging points for an affective and entertaining self-written commercial for their sponsor. Sponsorship, then, through the pageant contestants embodied performance remained in the forefront of the audiences’ minds. The commodification of the young women as “salesgirls” for their supporting sponsor, the Geneva community, and the Grape JAMboree was undeniably evident at the Miss Grapette Pageant.

Before the “commercial” portion of the pageant commenced, however, the structure of the Miss Grapette Pageant varied only slightly from the previous two pageants I have described. The space, as I noted, did lend itself to a formal atmosphere. Upon entering the auditorium I noticed the “set” on the stage which reflected both the femininity engrained in the pageant performance and the celebration of the grape harvest. Lining the stage were eighteen potted plants overflowing with flowers of a purple variety. Two shelf structures served as bookends on
Each side of the stage and each shelf was adorned with artificial plastic grape bunches. A royal purple robe was displayed on a dress form far stage left as if keeping watch over the trophies, tiaras, and sashes that sat on a table below it.

FIG. 6. The royal bounty – trophies, sashes, tiaras, the queen’s robe on display at the Miss Grapette Pageant. Photograph by Heather Williams, 2007.

As I took my seat in the auditorium I noticed Megan Volpone, the 2006-2007 Miss Grapette, wandering throughout the theatre and greeting audience members before the pageant began. Ms. Volpone also remained seated in the audience through most of the pageant, which was quite unusual (in most cases, the outgoing Queen and her court are seated on stage to be looked at during the pageant). Ms. Volpone’s place in the audience was somewhat informal but it granted her, in my opinion, more of a presence as she interacted with the audience rather than becoming a statue on stage until it was time for her to say her farewells. In fact, most of the
“official” members of the festival and pageant committee were seated in the audience. Again, this followed the National structure more closely. Much like the format of the Miss America Pageant, where the audience is introduced to executive committee members, CEOs of the pageant system, and the judges while the television camera pans for a close-up of each individual seated among the lay audience members, the Miss Grapette Pageant began with the introduction of the festival president and committee who stood up from their seats in the auditorium to wave when their names were called by the master of ceremonies from the on-stage podium. Still, the local flavor of the performance was confirmed when the light board operator failed to turn up the house lights during the introductions. From my seat, I could barely make out the faces of each of these vital festival volunteers. The same problem occurred with the introduction of the judges who were seated directly below the front of the stage. Although the Miss Grapette Pageant, in many ways, attempted sophistication in its structure, many of the unplanned “snafus” reminded me that this was, indeed, a homegrown event. In stating this, it is not my intent to favor the national structure over the local; quite to the contrary. I believe the Miss Grapette Pageant, even while taking place outside the festival atmosphere, retained its playful nature while at the same time it featured its contestants, in their performance of the varied competitive categories (interview, self-written and performed commercial, and evening gown), as intelligent, creative, and poised young woman. An article from a festival supplement, “Pageant Draws 16 Young Ladies for Miss Grapette Title,” confirms my claim:

Contestants are judged on a number of qualities, including personality, poise and appearance. The focus of the contest is not physical beauty; however contestants are expected to have a clean, well-groomed appearance. The judges look for a person who is articulate and speaks clearly – someone who is comfortable in front
of people, since Miss Grapette represents the festival around Ohio. (Gazette Publications: 2007 Grape Jamboree, 9)

The pamphlet’s anonymous author’s assertion that “the focus of the contest is not physical beauty” could be read as suspect, especially when considering the immediately following disclaimer of “a clean, well-groomed appearance.” Yet, by incorporating judging categories that did focus on “articulation” and performance presence, the structure of the Miss Grapette Pageant appears to support its organizers’ intentions. In fact, the audience didn’t even get to see the young women in the traditional evening gown until the end of the first segment of the pageant. It was the last category all sixteen contestants were evaluated on before the judges narrowed the competition by choosing the top six finalists.

The pageant began with “Meet the Contestants,” a self introduction from each of the young women. In this category each contestant stated her name, her age, her grade in school, and her sponsor. She walked to the center of the stage and stood at a microphone dressed in a purple Miss Grapette tee-shirt and khaki pants. After all sixteen contestants had completed this first task, they were asked to return to the stage and stand before the audience in a straight line apparently so the spectators and judges could take note of their “well-groomed appearance.” As we “gazed,” the master of ceremonies, a middle-aged gentleman in a tuxedo, shared with us how the contestants had been preparing for the pageant and for the Grape JAMboree. The contestants then left the stage to prepare for their two-minute skit/commercial – which involved a change of costume. The audience has seen the contestants express themselves in “casual” wear and next, gets the opportunity to see them play “dress-up” in order to perform a character that they believe would be suitable to promote their sponsor’s business. Yet, the contestants needed a small
amount of time to make this transformation. Thus, the pageant organizers arranged for a
performance from local talent to fill this gap.

The local talent consisted of a young woman from the Geneva Show Choir and her
accompanist. Much like the “time fillers” in the two previous pageants I have already discussed,
this moment, too, became somewhat improvisatory and awkward. The problem was not with the
performer, she was rehearsed and ready. However, the electric keyboard which was needed for
her “act” did not have a long enough cord to reach the off stage electrical outlet. After a few
uncomfortable minutes and the retrieval of an orange extension cord, the problem was resolved
and the show commenced. The young singer performed two selections from the Broadway
musical *Wicked*, “I’m Not that Girl” and “Popular.” In the context of the pageant these two song
choices bear particular meaning.

The first selection, sung in Stephen Schwartz’s musical by the young wicked witch
character, Elphaba, expresses both longing and independence. In “I’m Not that Girl,” Elphaba,
with her green skin and plain clothes, realizes that she does not fit into the stereotypical model of
beauty. Yet, the song does not offer a resolution – there is a sense of not knowing what will
happen next – will Elphaba, as she is, be enough? The last verse of the ballad reads: “Don't
wish, don't start. Wishing only wounds the heart. I wasn't born for the rose and the pearl.
There's a girl I know. He loves her so. I'm not that girl...” (Schwartz, *Wicked*).

Conversely, the second selection, “Popular,” is sung in the musical by the other lead
female character, Galinda. In the catchy and upbeat song, Galinda serves as a “mentor” to
Elphaba teaching her all the ways and means to become “popular,” which, for the most part,
require a making over of Elphaba’s physical appearance. Galinda belts: “I'll show you what
shoes to wear. How to fix your hair. Everything that really counts...” (Schwartz, *Wicked*).
Perhaps I am reading too much into this “entertainment” selection and more than likely, as trendy as the musical *Wicked* is currently among high school students, the song selection had less to do with the message it sends within the context of the pageant, and was probably chosen based upon what the young performer enjoys singing. Nevertheless, the performance was stunningly pertinent given the nature of the pageant and the juxapositional claim of the pageant organizers that it is *not* a competition based upon physical appearance, but yet, the category is undeniably still present.

After the featured entertainment had ended, the contestants began the sponsor promotion/commercial portion of the pageant. While I have already described this in part, here I want to further detail the notions of performance, commodity, and entertainment value situated in this unique presentation and how these elements aid in firmly positioning the local pageant queen, particularly in Geneva, Ohio, as community representative. For specific requirements of this category, I, again, refer to the article, “Pageant Draws 16 Young Ladies for Miss Grapette Title.” The article states: “Next, [after the private interview with the judges] contestants put their creativity to work. Each girl is given a topic from the judges, then six days to prepared a two-minute skit that they later perform for the judges [and the audience]” (Gazette Publications: 2007 Grape JAMboree, 9). Hence, the “topic” this year was developing an advertisement for promotion of the contestant’s sponsor.

The sponsorship that the contestants’ procured included a wide range of businesses. The young women were financially supported by local and independent grocery stores, pizza parlors, medical practices, industrial processors, a credit union, a hair salon, a golf course, and, perhaps most fitting given the festivals celebrated fruit, a vineyard. The contestants used costumes, music, and props to aid in the creation of characters and enhance their performances. Supporting
the varied differences among each sponsor/business products or services, the commercials were uniquely individual. I assume that the contestants used this portion of the competition to not only convincingly sell their sponsor’s product, but also to showcase their distinctive personalities and talent skills. Therefore the skits ranged in performance styles, from contestant number one sporting a bumble bee costume and using cue cards to promote the Bilicics Busy Mart, to contestant number eleven, who dressed in a business suit and taught the audience how a plastic bottle goes through the recycling process at her sponsor’s, PET Processors, plant. Constant number seven, who was sponsored by Gruber’s Lakeview Vineyards, was dressed as a California Raisin and danced briefly to *I Heard It Through the Grapevine* before explaining the tourisy activities guests could participate in when visiting the vineyard. In keeping with the dancing theme, contestant number five, sponsored by Colleen’s Studio of Dance, performed a routine on Pointe while describing the many classes offered at the studio. Perhaps the most creative of the commercials, at least in regard to performance style, was contestant number six who was costumed as “an old woman,” sat in a rocking chair, and read a historical story about her sponsor’s family owed pizza restaurant. Additionally, another contestant used her vocal skills and asked the audience to sing along with her as she lead “If you’re hungry and you know it clap your hands, etc.” while she advertised for the Chestnut Food Mart. While what I am presenting here is only a small sample of the commercials, it is nonetheless clear the competitive category was full of imaginative performances.
FIG. 7. Contestant number one advertising for Bilicics Busy Mart. She is “busy as a bee.” Photograph by Heather Williams, 2007.

FIG. 8. Contestant number six reads the story of the Caurso’s family history in her commercial for Caurso’s Pizza and Spaghetti House. Photograph by Heather Williams, 2007.
So what do these performances reveal? While I have spoken, thus far, in depth regarding the local pageant queen as a representative commodity for her community and its agricultural food product, the “Commercials on Sponsors” section of the Miss Grapette Pageant not only confirms this notion, but also requires the young women to, in essence, exhibit their selling tactics (or lack there of) by literally performing a commercial for a community business in front of the audience and for points in the competition. Whereas in the two other pageants I have discussed, the “selling” point required of the contestants appears to be contained in the feminine presentation of the young women as they walk the stage or answer questions with their hands neatly placed behind their backs dressed their evening gowns, at the Miss Grapette Pageant the contestants are able to put their creativity and performance skills to work and provide an entertaining and active expression of their abilities. In stating this I do not mean to suggest that the commercials did not contain some of the tropes of femininity – many of the “roles” that the contestants choose to portray were clearly gender based (a ballerina, a grandmother, a cosmetologist) or inhuman characters (a bumble bee, a raisin) – yet, in the inclusion of this competitive category the young women were, to my mind, able to express themselves creatively, with a sense of playfulness, and demonstrate how they might be a suitable salesperson for the community and the festival. Still, while certain contestants are performing their pitch for their sponsors, the young woman who have already completed their “skit” are back stage changing into their prom dresses in order to prepare for the evening gown competition that immediately follows. Therefore, the last category that all the contestants compete in, before the judges narrow the competition to the top six finalists, is one that encompasses the feminine poise that is most often expected of and associated with the role of pageant queen.
In keeping with the formal presentation of the Miss Grapette Pageant, for the evening gown competition the stage lights were dimmed and romantic muszac – I believe I recognized several selections from the movie “Titanic” – was played softly. As each individual contestant entered through an upstage drape, and a subtle spotlight hit her frame, the master of ceremonies read a biography (this one more detailed than the one given by the contestant in the opening introductions). During the reading, each young woman walked downstage right, turned, and posed. She then proceeded downstage left, turned, and posed. Finally, the young woman ended center stage where the audience was privy to a final look before she turned upstage and exited back through the drape. It is, I believe, essential to note that in this segment of the competition the woman’s voice is, again, absent. Whereas we, in the audience, have just witnessed the vitality, energy, and playfulness of each of the contestant’s personalities and individuality in the “commercial” category, the evening gown competition proves to be a stark contrast. I, again, refer to Stoeltje. She notes:

Focusing the competition on the contestant’s dress and appearance as she walks about the stage not only draws attention to the female body, but appearance and dress specifically serve to define gender…Certainly the more formal a dress is, the more it distinguishes the female from the male, calling attention to the subordination of women, especially in the formal gown which limits movement.

(23)

While I agree that the formal dress or evening gown does “serve to define gender,” I argue it is too easy to equate the dress, as Stoeltje’s claims, with subordination of women. The dress, to my mind, is a symbol of femininity, which, one could argue, is innately subordinate. The evening gown competition, I do not deny, does indeed function to support gendered notions of proper
feminine display and pleasing appearance. Yet, when the dress is worn by the young women in a local pageant, particularly in the Miss Grapette Pageant, the femininity that is expressed and embodied becomes an act of performance: “A woman with a closetful of clothes for different moods and occasions is an amateur actress and a wily practitioner of the visual arts. A grand sense of theater reposes on that rack of hangers, offering a choice of imaginative roles…” (Brownmiller 79). Thus, because we in the audience have just witnessed the contestants in different costumes and performing characters in the commercial skits, the evening gown competition, too, becomes likened to a performance, the women reminiscent of a costumed actor.

The inclusion of so many categories in the Miss Grapette Pageant enabled the spectator to view and witness several performances of the young women, the informal (the tee-shirts and khakis), the playful/creative (the commercials) and the formal (the evening gown). Too, all of these performances are celebrated with the reward of the opportunity to represent one’s entire community throughout the state for the coming year and, in this way, I argue, function, in part, to perpetuate female confidence, creativity, and agency.

**Miss Grapette Pageant Finale: The “Best” of the Bunch**

The evening gown competition concluded the first act of the Miss Grapette Pageant and the audience was given a twenty minute intermission. The evening gown presentation was also the last category that all the contestants were given a chance to compete in, and after the brief break the top six finalists were announced. Although the audience still got the opportunity to see all the contestants on stage several times following the announcement, ten of the young hopefuls no longer had the pressure of competing. The second act brought the announcement of Miss Congeniality and an explanation of the preliminary interview process with the judges, which
occurred earlier in the day and was part of each contestant’s overall score. This is a usual
category of the local and national pageants; however, it was appropriate to be reminded of this
fact, lest the audience assume that all the judging was based only upon what was witnessed on
the stage. The master of ceremonies finally announced the top six finalists who were escorted to
a “sound-proof” room while the non-finalists remained on stage.

Next, one of the judges gave the master of ceremonies a question on a slip of paper. All
six finalists would be asked the same question and the answer they gave would be their last
opportunity to impress the judges. The question was similar in content to the Reynoldsburg
Tomato Pageant question. The finalists were asked, “If you were judging next year’s Miss
Grapette Pageant, what are the two most important qualities that you would look for?” I believe
this is a suitable inquiry, as the question asks the contestant to rely qualities that she believes are
necessary in order to represent the Grape festival and, one would assume, are also qualities that
she possesses. Not surprisingly, the answers that the contestants provided contained a
perpetuation of feminine traits. Responses included, “a great big smile,” “poise, everyone has to
have poise so you look pretty when you do it,” and “confidence and kindness.” The last answer
was given by the winner of the Miss Grapette Pageant, Lauren Wright, and seems to encompass
what the community would desire in their festival representative: Someone who would be
confident in the presentation of the community and kindly welcome all guests to the festival.
Therefore, Ms. Wright, with her simple, yet straightforward answer, perhaps captured what both
the judges and the community value in their new representative.

Before Ms. Wright was crowned, but after all six finalists were given the chance to
sufficiently answer the final question, there was a last intermission. This second break was taken
so that the judges could tally their scores. Because the intermission was structured into the
pageant, there was not the awkward moment contained in the previous two pageants where the outgoing queen and court attempted to fill time. After about ten minutes, the pageant resumed, but it would be a bit longer before getting to the “moment we all had been waiting for.”

Act three began with the Grape Festival President taking the stage and acknowledging the community members who had made the festival and, specifically, the pageant possible. He then introduced the festival mascot who was a small middle aged man costumed in lederhosen who held the title of the “Lil’ Ole Wine Maker.” His task at the pageant was to help award the tiaras, trophies, and sashes to the winning contestants. After the introduction of the festival mascot, the President extended his gratitude to the 2006-2007 Miss Grapette, Megan Volpone. Ms. Volpone walked onstage to the podium to say her farewells and thank yous: “Tonight is bitter sweet for me. I could be Miss Grapette forever…” Her speech reflects the sentiment of many of the pageant winners I have observed and spoken with: That the experience of representing their hometown and community is extremely enjoyable and rewarding.

The juxtaposition of the two “characters” on the stage, the displayed pageant queen (who represents the grape and the community) and the productive winemaker (who makes the grape useful for the community), provided a striking contrast. Similar to the gendered performances at the Milan Melon Festival, the two figures embodied very different presentations of community value: The female femininely poised in her lilac floor length gown and light catching tiara; the male comically masculine suited in his earthy tan shorts (lederhosen), cotton knee socks, and scruffy beard.
FIG. 9. Miss Grapette 2006-2007 adjusts the new Miss Grapette's robe, while the “Lil’ Ole Winemaker” prepares to present the queen’s trophy. Photograph by Heather Williams, 2007.

These two representatives, Miss Grapette and “Lil’ Ole Winemaker,” give embodiment to one element of my argument. Indeed, the community festival requires both feminine and masculine representation; however, those performances, one not more important than the other, are clearly gendered. The feminine performance of queen maintains a certain element of youthful, elegant, and passive appearance, whereas the masculine representation is viewed as productive, older, wiser, and active.

The traditional gender roles are further exemplified, as I have explored in my discussion of earlier pageants, in the family affair that is local pageantry. A Star Beacon online newspaper article, published shortly after the 2007-2008 Miss Grapette pageant occurred, paraphrases a section of Ms. Volpone's farewell speech and highlights this notion:
Volpone said it was a fantastic experienced [sic] that helped her realize how much her family means to here [sic]. ‘I was able to spend priceless time with my family,’ she said. ‘I had the chance to travel all over the state, going to other festivals,’ she said. Volpone reflected on dressing room time with her mother, Natalie, fixing her hair and time waiting for parades to start with her father Dave [who she noted pulled her float]. (www.starbeacon.com)

Thus, again, it appears that the feminine and masculine roles are not only perpetuated by the local pageant, but also remain firmly planted in the parental “duties” that are required once a daughter wins her crown. These gendered roles mimic the feminine and masculine positions put in place by the festival, as well. The men serve as the producers and harvesters of the agricultural commodity and the women act as the caregivers providing nourishment through the incorporation of the harvest into homemade food items. As is the case with Miss Grapette, Volpone’s mother helped attend to her “hair” establishing that her femininity would be properly displayed and her father pulled her float in order to feature this display. Too, the feminine role of the mother is enacted in private and behind the scenes, while the masculine role of the father is performed in public in front of the large parade crowds. In both instances, however, the parental roles operate in order to celebrate the femininity of the pageant queen which is, in turn, celebrated by the larger community.

After Ms. Volpone completed her speech, the winners of the 2007-2008 Miss Grapette pageant were finally announced. The Geneva Grape JAMboree has only three representatives: a first attendant, a second attendant, and the Miss Grapette Queen. The master of ceremonies announced the winners and they stepped out of the line of the six finalists to accept their sashes, tiaras, and trophies. It was then announced that the court would remain on stage for ten minutes
at the conclusion of the pageant in order to greet and have their pictures taken with the children from the audience. Already, only minutes after the court was crowned they began to fulfill their feminine role by posing as princesses with community children, all of whom were little girls.


As I left the auditorium of the Geneva High School, I attempted to weigh the differences and similarities between the three pageants I had witnessed thus far. The performance structures of the pageants are clearly distinct even while the categories required of the contestants are strikingly similar. My preliminary assumptions regarding pageantry in general, had thus far in my fieldwork been partially dismantled. Far from the formal structure and organization of the National and state pageant systems, the local pageants like the festivals they are a part of are, in a word, homegrown and therefore contain certain moments of spontaneity. As Donelle R. Ruwe,
in her article “I Was Miss Meridian 1985…” notes, “Because local pageants…are organized by nonprofessionals to meet the demands of the audience, the community, the organizers, and the contestants, they reveal the ways in which performances of gender, even within a standardized system such as the Miss America Pageant, are always contextualized, local, and in excess of system” (141). Thus, even though the categories contained in the Miss Grapette pageant resemble those present in the Miss America Pageant – self-introduction, interview, evening gown, and even talent (in the sponsors’ commercials) – they are clearly performed in such a way that is reflective of local values. Too, like in the National pageant, situated among these values are the feminine notions of appearance and poise. When I returned to participate in the Geneva Grape JAMboree the following weekend, the homegrown ideal of femininity was presented in the “Welcome and Introduction of Festival Queen from all over Ohio.” Before describing this event in more detail, I relate the atmosphere of the Geneva Grape JAMboree as a whole.

Femininity Transplanted to Festival Grounds: The Geneva Grape JAMboree

The organizers of the Geneva Grape JAMboree made every effort to prominently feature the prosperity and usefulness of the grape. The festival food booths sold homemade grape pies and baskets of handpicked grapes. At one stand you could buy grape ice cream, or at another see homemade grape juice made right before your eyes. Visitors could wander through the arts and crafts section and feast on a plethora of grape themed household items and apparel. The arts and craft booths were geared, for the most part, toward the female customer. Shoppers might buy wine glasses with painted grapes, grape patterned kitchen towels, grape tee-shirts or sweatshirts, hats festooned with grapes, grape earrings, necklaces, or pins. If it is true that, “the festival is constructed toward female interests” and “the major festival events are geared toward women…”
(Proctor 144), the Geneva Grape JAMboree was a prime example of this theory. As I strolled through the arts and crafts section of the festival, I gave into my own consumer temptation and purchased a handmade grape pin for a mere dollar. I couldn’t resist the shiny and tiny bunch of grapes to add to my own jewelry collection. Happy with my purchase, I made my way to the parade route to once again “stake” out my spot.

The Geneva Grape JAMboree parade was similar to the Milan Melon Festival parade, although smaller in its inclusion. The parade featured the high school marching band, city officials riding in cars, the Miss Grapette Queens, past and present, and several visiting queens riding upon their own festival floats or in convertibles. The visiting queens were present not only to participate in the parade, but would also get the opportunity, immediately following the parade, to further promote their own hometown festivals.

As soon as the parade was finished, anticipating a substantial crowd, I hurried to the “main stage” to watch the “Welcome and Introduction of Festival Queens from all parts of Ohio.” Compared to the formal atmosphere of the Miss Grapette Pageant, this introduction ceremony was disorganized and chaotic. All of the young women were dressed in their feminine evening gowns, tiaras, and sashes, yet as they gathered on the small outdoor stage they had no place to sit. The members of various royalties stood with their backs to the audience in small clumps while the surprisingly tiny audience waited for the presentation to begin.
FIG. 11. The disarray displayed before the “Introduction of Visiting Queens” at the Grape JAMboree. Photograph by Heather Williams, 2007.

The disorganization of the event appeared unnerving to at least one visiting chaperone. She commented: “Why don’t they have chairs for them? This is very unorganized. They [referring to the Miss Grapette Pageant committee] better get it together.” This comment is telling of the expectations put in place for each host festival and also suggests that each individual community assumes a proper standard of protocol in the opportunity for representation. The sight of the various queens standing on stage with their back ends to the audience was, for all practical purposes, quite unladylike and although perhaps usual young female behavior, it was not, at least in some of the audience’s perceptions suitable for feminine representation. The display was, in a word, unladylike. The introductions, finally, officially began and the young women formed a semi circle (facing front) across the stage. Each queen
was given the hand held microphone to introduce herself and advertise her hometown festival by stating its dates and highlighting some of the featured events. The occasion ended with the introduction of the 2007-2008 Miss Grapette Queen and her court. The informality of the presentation was in stark contrast to the Miss Grapette Pageant that I had witnessed the weekend before. In addition, and to my surprise, the audience was small and for the most part was composed of the chaperones of the visiting queens. By holding the performance of the pageant competition off of the festival grounds, as the Geneva Grape JAMboree did, the value of the pageant decreased within the immediate festival events. While holding the pageant before the festival commences allowed for a more formal atmosphere and structure at the time of the event, many of the festival goers did not audience the pageant and therefore might feel a separation from the event and perhaps even from the young woman who was chosen as their representative.

This “detachment” was certainly not an outwardly existent element at the last pageant I attended and will discuss presently: The Circleville Pumpkin Show Queen Pageant, featured in the Circleville Pumpkin Show, the oldest and largest Ohio festival I attended. This pageant serves as a fine example to conclude this chapter because of the ways that the pageant and the festival play with notions of feminine representation in surprising, disturbing, and expected ways.

Size Matters: The Circleville Pumpkin Show

The Circleville Pumpkin Show is held annually in mid-October in the small town of Circleville, Ohio (population 13,000) which is located south of Columbus. The festival is dubbed “The Greatest Free Show on Earth,” which is, of course, a play on the catch phrase used in the promotion of the famous Ringling Brothers and Barnum and Bailey’s circus. The four day
event certainly does have a distinct carnival atmosphere. According to a “Circleville Pumpkin Show Fact Sheet:” “The streets are filled with 25-30 Amusement Rides and over 300 Food Booths, Games and Craft Vendors” (4). The festival, enormous by Ohio festival standards, claims eight blocks of downtown Circleville and the day that I attended, the streets were so packed with visitors that it was difficult to stroll freely. In addition to the carnival rides and food and craft booths, the festival features seven parades, two pageants – the Little Miss Pumpkin Show and the Miss Pumpkin Show – a pumpkin pie eating contest, a largest pumpkin contest, as well as musical groups and band concerts.

Compared to the previous Ohio festivals I attended, The Circleville Pumpkin show was both amazing and overwhelming in its inclusion of events. Still, the festival’s beginnings were humble and based, like the other festivals studied, in the promotion and celebration of the bounty of the agricultural harvest: “The first Pumpkin Show was held in 1903. George Haswell, Mayor of Circleville at that time, decided it would be a great idea to try to get the country folks and the city folks together. So he invited the country folks to bring the best of their produce to town on designated dates and display them on the streets of Circleville so that the city folks would be able to appreciate their efforts” (“Circleville Pumpkin Show Fact Sheet” 4). The Circleville Pumpkin Show, then, provides an historical example of the then newfound prosperity granted to the farmer in social life. I again note Elizabeth H. Pleck’s study. She states:

By the end of the nineteenth century, urban workers had come to believe that real wages for ordinary working families, boosted by WW I wartime industry and American postwar prosperity, made consumer dreams a reality for ordinary folk, not just the urban middle class. Rising farm incomes during the postwar years closed the urban-rural gap, except for pockets of regional racial poverty. It
became possible for rural people to consume in the manner of their city cousins.

(55)

The appreciation of the harvest was still plentiful at the 101st Circleville Pumpkin Show and the consumption made available by the festival has grown. An entire block of the festival was dedicated to agricultural bounty. A tower of pumpkins could be seen above the crowd and served as a beacon calling visitors and community members to the unusual shrine. Countless tables of pumpkins and gourds of all shapes, sizes, and colors lined the sides of the street. The farmer’s presence, in the display of plenty, is surely recognized and admired.

FIG. 12. The tower of pumpkins calls the visitors to view the bounty of the harvest. Photograph by Heather Williams, 2007.

Volunteers served as keepers of the vegetable patch which was contained by a fence, encouraging visitors to look, but not to touch. Securing a place at the head of the table of
celebrated vegetables was the winning gourd of the largest pumpkin contest. The record-breaking victor this growing season beat out 21 other pumpkins topping the scale at 1,524 \(\frac{1}{2}\) pounds and was raised by Robert Liggett (Tullis, The Columbus Dispatch 18).

In relation to the subject of my study, I find it intriguing that the large, almost grotesque pumpkins are “crowned” as winners. The inanimate object (although one could argue, it was once living as it grew to its enormous size) symbolizes the king of the festival, whereas the queen will be represented by the young female high school student. She, in essence, will be judged at least in part, on her feminine (and therefore, smaller) appearance. In this we can see the juxtaposition of the feminine and masculine symbolic representation that is always present at the festivals I have attended. Yet, the feminine representation in this instance bears the ability to
speak for and of the community, while the enormous and inanimate pumpkin, in keeping with
the spirit of festival time where ordinary life becomes suspended in favor of an imagined ideal of
the host community, becomes a symbol of the prosperity and skill of the Circleville farmer. The
winning pumpkin is judged solely on its size which is vastly different from vegetable
competitions at a fair where “judges evaluate vegetables and fruits on edibility, which subsumes
other criteria like size, quality, uniformity, freshness, texture, and color…Largest does not imply
best at all. Largest, in fact, often indicates that the edibility would be lessened because the taste
and texture are not as fine as in the smaller produce” (Prosterman 160). The smaller produce is,
in fact, judged at the Circleville Pumpkin Show, as was evident from the scattering of blue
ribbons on some of the vegetables on the fenced in tables. However, these tinier varieties do not
earn the prestige that the largest pumpkin holds, nor do they receive the thousand dollar prize
that accompanies winning the largest pumpkin contest. As far as being edible, I am not aware
how such a pumpkin of this enormous size would taste, but that does not appear to be a criterion.
If spectators want to feast upon pumpkin, they can do so in a plethora of different forms at other
venues of the festival. In fact, at the Circleville Pumpkin Show, the novel pumpkin was
employed as the main ingredient in recipes that might have been better left to more “traditional”
flavors.

As one might imagine, the pumpkin was used as an ingredient in several sweet treats.
Visitors could feast on pumpkin donuts, pumpkin bread, pumpkin ice cream and milkshakes,
pumpkin fudge, pumpkin waffles, pumpkin cookies, and pumpkin blossoms. They could pair
any of the latter with a steaming cup of pumpkin coffee. If festival goers were looking for more
of a complete meal, unusual though it may be, they could select from pumpkin chili, pumpkin
pizza, or a pumpkin burger.
Of course, when I think of the pumpkin as an edible food item, the first thing that springs to my mind is pumpkin pie. At the festival, there was an ample amount of the traditional Thanksgiving treat to go around. Approximately 23,000 pies are sold yearly at the festival and one particular pie is displayed purely for visitors to admire. Along with the largest pumpkin, the festival also features the “World’s Greatest Pumpkin Pie.” Deemed as one of the Pumpkin Show’s “biggest attractions,” it is prepared by a local bakery and measures “six feet in diameter and weighs over 400 pounds” (“World’s Greatest Pumpkin Pie,” 38). I did have the opportunity to sneak a peek at this second monstrous attraction of the festival. It sat in the front window of the bakery and visitors waited in a long line to see it and have their photograph taken next to it. Like the largest pumpkin, this pie is not physically consumed, at least not by humans. This is probably not because it wouldn’t be tasty, but perhaps because the pie would be deemed unsanitary after sitting out and being viewed by so many visitors. Yet, the delicacy doesn’t go to waste: “At the end of the four day event, the giant pie is donated to area hogs who look forward to a real treat!” (“World’s Greatest Pumpkin Pie” 38).

Two of the “main” attractions at the festival, then, incorporate the symbolic pumpkin, but do so in a way that suggests novelty rather than usefulness. The largest pumpkin and the “world’s great pumpkin pie” are on display to be looked at, but remain static in this display. In stating this it is not my intention to dismiss or discredit the labor that goes into the tending to and growing of the largest pumpkin or the time and care it requires to bake a four hundred pound pie, but rather to point out how the community of Circleville promotes its festival through larger than life abundance. The symbolic pumpkin representative of Circleville and celebrated at its annual festival suggests that the community is one of prosperity, innovation, and wealth; for there is never a shortage of the large vegetable. It is present in every moment of the celebration, not only
in the festival displays and contests, but in the food spectators can purchase and clothing
community members chose to wear. As these few examples prove, The Circleville Pumpkin
Show, of all the festivals I attended, is quite amazing in its breadth of symbolic inclusion. I now
turn to a discussion of the Miss Pumpkin Show Queen Contest which is also a display.
However, the young women who compete in the pageant while representing the symbolic
pumpkin do so in an active and dynamic manner.

Community or Competition: The Miss Pumpkin Show Queen Contest

In comparison to the abundant size of the majority of the festival events, the Miss
Pumpkin Show Queen Contest had only twelve contestants. This is a modest number, as the
Little Miss Pumpkin Show Contest, held in the afternoon before the evening’s queen contestant
had 183 first grade girls as participants. As one might imagine, the Little Miss Pumpkin Show
provides the majority of the entertainment for that particular afternoon – all 183 little girls ride in
a parade atop of cars promoting their sponsors and then proceed to the main stage for the
judging. This Little Miss Pumpkin Show Pageant is beyond the scope of my project, but I note it
here because I believe it serves as a precursor to the Miss Pumpkin Show pageant that follows
shortly after it. This day of the festival is, to my mind, dedicated to feminine representation and
begins in the early afternoon with the display of the very young female body and extends late
into the evening with the crowning of the new teenaged Miss Pumpkin Show Queen. The
community members take the representation very seriously and the event is, as the following
discussion notes, peppered with a competitive spirit.

In her book, *Here She Comes…Beauty Queen*, Elissa Stein describes the differences
between state and National pageantry and festival pageants and claims that festival contests are
“less competitive than a beauty pageant, and not requiring a swimsuit, evening gown or talent competition, many of these events select a girl based on her poise, personality, and good looks” (56). While Stein’s claim concerning the local competition’s categories, from my experiences, appears to be valid, I disagree that they are “less competitive” than “beauty pageants.” Perhaps the competition is considered friendly as opposed to “cut throat” but the local pageants certainly perpetuate the spirit of winning. Furthermore, because the community has a vital stake in securing the representative they believe would be most worthy of holding the local title, the competition extends to include the audience members. The Circleville Miss Pumpkin Show Contest was, of all the pageants I attended, the prime example of the community’s competitive nature and their demonstrated stake in the competition. The following instances further explore this communal competition.

On the day of the Miss Pumpkin Show Contest, as I wandered through the festival grounds, I noticed people wearing identical tee-shirts. The wearers of the apparel stood out in the large crowd because the shirts were a striking contrast from the orange and pumpkin embellished attire that many of the community festival goers were donning. The tee-shirts were brightly colored, often of a neon hue, and had pictures of smiling young women plastered across the chest. I soon realized that the tee-shirts were a form of advertising for the wearer’s favorite Miss Pumpkin Show Queen contestant. The shirts also displayed in bold type the young woman’s name and a quote encouraging support for her success: “Kimberly Jean 4 Queen,” “Everybody Yell For….” and “Doin It With Love for the One Up Above” are a few examples.

The community members sporting these tee-shirts were, for the most part, the same age of the queen contestants with the exception of what I assumed to be family members of the young women. I couldn’t help but wonder what happens to the tee-shirts once the pageant is
over and the new winners are crowned. Surely one could not wear the shirt again if their “favorite” young woman did not win? The dedication of the queen pageant “fans” through the production of and donning of the tee-shirts seems an expensive, but supportive event. Unique to this festival pageant, the contestants of the Miss Pumpkin Show Queen Contest did not have sponsorship from businesses, but were elected by their high school class. The tee-shirts, then, serve as a symbol of sponsorship. Yet, the wearing of the shirts also points to a division with the community, as least when it comes to pageant competition. The reasoning behind this division became apparent to me once I got to the actual event of the pageant: there appears to be a distinct rivalry between the local high schools, and that, in essence is who each contestant is representing, that is, until she is crowned the Miss Pumpkin Show Queen.

The pageant, in actuality, began with the “Miss Pumpkin Show” parade. This event took place late in the evening on the first official day of the festival beginning after dark at eight p.m. The main feature of the parade was the twelve candidates who rode perched upon of the hoods of cars. The sides of each contestant’s vehicle displayed a magnetic plaque that announced the young woman’s name as well as the name of the high school she attended. In most cases, it is normal to include the name of the contestant’s sponsor. Here, that norm was evident at the Little Miss Pumpkin Show parade, but not in the senior pageant. While riding in the parade, the young women were dressed in business suits rather than in evening gowns. This choice of attire again works against convention. As is typical, however, they waved at the crowd as they made their way to the outdoor main stage to begin the pageant festivities.

The “Miss Pumpkin Show” parade also includes several marching bands, a man dressed as a pumpkin on roller blades, and numerous church group sponsored floats. I have never heard so much Christian rock in one setting. One of the church group’s float was particularly alarming
given the current political situation. The float held six, seven and eight year olds who were
dressed in fatigues and dancing to Christian hip-hop style music. Needless to say, I found this
particular performance jarring set as it was against the deceptively secular festival. Yet, this
festival does conclude on Saturday night enabling the community to return to “normal” everyday
life in time for Sunday worship. In addition, there were several indications that Circleville
values religion in their community not only in the parade and queen fan tee-shirt quotes, but as
will be discussed, also in the crowning of Miss Circleville Pumpkin Show 2007-2008.

FIG. 14. A supportive fan in the audience of the Miss Circleville Pumpkin Show Queen

The parade lasted approximately one hour and by nine p.m. revelers made their way to
the main stage to audience the pageant. The arrangement of the main stage in relation to the
spectators made viewing difficult. There was no seating, so the lucky audience members who
arrived at the stage first got the best view. The gathered crowd was extremely large and stood shoulder to shoulder with bodies hugged close to one another. I was only able to secure a place about mid-way back in the large mass of spectators. In addition to the sheer number of bodies blocking the view of the stage, audience members also brought homemade signs supporting their favorite contestant which provided another obstacle. While the closeness of the crowd might suggest companionship and community, the competitive nature of the event took precedence. In fact, I witnessed a verbal fight between two audience members before the pageant even began. A gentleman had his small child on his shoulders which completely blocked the view of the stage for a woman standing directly behind him. She politely asked: “Can you put him down? I can’t see.” He responded: “Well he’s [referring to his child] a lot shorter than you and he can’t see either.” The gentleman proceeded to yell sarcastically into the crowd: “Hey everybody put your kids down!” The “kid” remained securely upon his shoulders and the woman moved to another area of the designated audience space.

The competitive (if not hostile) spirit again surfaced as the crowd began to chant the names of their favored contestant. The cheering developed into a yelling match between rival high schools. As I noted before, the Miss Pumpkin Show Queen contestants are representing their high school classes. As such, a female junior and a female senior are elected from each of six area schools (which explained the small number of contestants.) With the chanting and the homemade signs, the event was more reminiscent of a rival pep rally than a queen pageant. The comparison was further confirmed as spectators waited for the contestants to take the stage and “Cotton-Eyed Joe” was suddenly blasted through the speakers as several audience members shot silly string into the crowd. The Miss Pumpkin Show Queen Pageant provided an extreme contrast in both structure and audience behavior from all of the pageants I had thus far attended,
however, the pride that the community holds for the contest is clearly expressed in the dedicated, yet rowdy display. The value that the Miss Pumpkin Show Queen retains for the community of Circleville, if the behavior of the audience was any indication, is vested in a very personal commitment to each individual contestant. In his article, “It’s Not a Beauty Pageant!: Hybrid Ideology in Minnesota Community Queen Pageants,” Robert H. Lavenda remarks:

The audience [of the pageant] is also invited to make the leap of taking these young women to stand for all young people in the community, a much trickier but important transformation, given what the pageant is about. After all, by extension, the achievements of the candidates are the achievements of the community itself, for it is the community that has formed them and has given them the opportunities to excel. (36)

While I believe that Lavenda’s theory could be applied to all of the pageants I witnessed, the “standing in for all young people in the community” is best represented by the Circleville pageant in the audiences’ commitment to each of the selected contestants. The audience was, indeed, competing as well – by attempting to out shout each other or holding their signs of support higher than the others in the crowd. Much to my surprise, there were even voiced “boos” when non-favored contestants were introduced by the master of ceremonies. The divisions in the rowdy audience were in strong contrast to what was taking place on the stage where the contestants appeared poised, cheerful, friendly, and feminine.

As a precursor to the pageant, the master of ceremonies had to literally “scold” the crowd. He reminded them to keep their signs down until “their” candidate came on stage so everyone in attendance could see the young women. Shortly after this disciplinary announcement, the Miss Pumpkin Show Queen Pageant contestants came out onto the
performance space individually and introduced themselves. Each contestant told us her name, what high school she attended and the grade she was in. The young women also took a moment to state that they were “proud to represent the class of 2008 or 2009 from…high school.” This last remark of each contestant’s introduction made certain sections of the crowd go wild. They showed their appreciation by cheering so loudly that when the master of ceremonies read each young woman’s biography over a microphone I couldn’t understand a word of it. Of course, with my outsider status, I was perhaps one of the few spectators who would not be familiar with this information. Presumably, given the personal commitment that most of the audience exhibited to “their” candidate, the reading of each young woman’s biography would not be as important as showing verbal support once she appeared on stage. It was at this moment of the competition that the contestant walked from one end of the stage to the other waving and smiling at her boisterous fans. After all twelve contestants had been granted the opportunity to take the stage and introduction themselves, the audience was asked to be patient while the judges decide upon the top six finalists. Again, the crowd competed with each other by chanting the names of their favorite participants. I felt as if a riot might start. It was an intriguing, if jarring, juxtaposition: the feminine young woman looking pristine seated on the stage waiting for the judges’ results, while directly below her the equally youthful crowd yelled and forcing their signs high into the air as if at a protest march. Finally the master of ceremonies announced the results. Some of the members of the audience cheered like crazy and others began to leave the pageant.

The next and final portion of the competition was the familiar question and answer section. The six finalists earned the opportunity to answer a single question posed by one of the judges. All of the questions and answers were different and ranged from “If you could be any
color what would you be and why?:” “red because it represents passion, the human heart, and it’s the color of our school,” to “How do you feel you have benefited by growing up in a small community?:” “I wouldn’t change it for the world.” The winning answer came from Circleville Junior, Andrea Turner. She was asked: “If you could change something about yourself, what would it be?” Ms. Turner’s answer reflected the religious values of the community that were also present in the Queen’s parade. She said she would change her selfishness so she could help serve Jesus Christ.

Clearly, this seemingly secular festival is colored by the Circleville community’s Christian values. At many of the festivals I attended certain events and food booths were sponsored by church groups – as well as by youth and civic organizations – without the overt presence of Christian doctrine. At the Circleville Pumpkin Show, however, the religious influences were ever present in very public events of the parade and the Queen pageant. Perhaps this overt Christianity should not have surprised me. After all, the nature of pageantry requires in its contestants traditional feminine, and one might argue Christian, characteristics of modesty, virtue, and chastity: “As a by product of western patriarchal society, female beauty is a normalizing standard signifying, not merely beauty, but wholesomeness. Beauty, as reified through pageantry, is over determined by its construction of femininity in relation to the societal markers of modesty, domesticity, and delicacy” (McGregory 128). Ms. Turner’s winning response contained all three of these “markers” while at the same time exhibiting the societal value of her community: She wished she was less selfish (delicacy and modesty) so she could serve (domesticity) Jesus Christ. Thus, in the chosen winner of the Circleville Miss Pumpkin Show the social values of the community were properly embodied and represented. Ms. Turner, as well as the other eleven contestants, provided a strong contrast to the “unChristian like”
behavior of the rowdy and competitive crowd. Thus, the unruly and chaotic audience and the
demure and controlled contestants encompassed their given roles of festival time. The audience
was allowed to suspend the rules of “proper” behavior for a momentary instance, while the queen
contestants, because they might be representing their community beyond the festival, performed
in a manner that would be appropriate throughout the year.

Before Ms. Turner and her two attendants were crowned, the 2006-2007 Circleville Miss
Pumpkin Show Queen, Kristen Walters and her court said their thanks yous and told the
audience that they have been to thirty festivals throughout their reign. Ms. Walter’s “Farewell”
speech was printed in the 2007 Circleville Pumpkin Show Souvenir Edition publication. In an
effort to point out the community value of the Circleville Pumpkin Show Queen as well as the
rewards it holds for the young woman who is crowned I refer to Ms. Walter’s words at length:

I’d like to give a special thank you to my family and friends. Your love and
support is something that will never be forgotten. To Circleville High School and
my class of 2008, thank you for not only giving me the chance to represent you,
but also making the night I was crowned an unforgettable night. Your support
and your faith in me were much appreciated. Lastly, this year and this
opportunity was truly a blessing, which is why I’d like to thank God for the
miracles and blessings he gives all of us everyday. I have lived in Circleville my
entire life…to be the Queen of the 100th Pumpkin Show has been the highlight of
my life so far, and a dream come true for me. (2)

I find Ms. Walter’s remarks a suitable conclusion to this chapter. While her speech does not
 overtly expresses the feminine requirements of winning a local festival Queen title, it does, in
addition to the community values represented by holding the title, suggest the community
support and celebration of her reign. Furthermore, Ms. Walter’s proclamation that “to be Queen …has been…a dream come true” implies that, indeed, the experience of local pageantry for the young women who chose to compete can be and very often is a rewarding and positive experience.

As such, the final chapter of my project will explore what local pageantry holds for the young women who participate by featuring personal interviews I conducted with several local pageant queens and attendants. Through the one-on-one interviews, I was able to gain a nuanced understanding of the world of pageantry as well as a knowledge of how that world is constructed and perceived by the young women who live it. Thus, in keeping with a feminist methodology, I employ the final chapter of my project to provide further insight into the cultural phenomena of local queen pageants by favoring the voices of the women who choose to participate in them.
[Feminists] assume that pretty girls get up there and stand and walk around onstage and get judged for it. And I think that’s the worst part – you’re being judged on how you carry yourself. The swim suit, how good you look in a swim suit and I could see why, you know, major feminists would be completely against it because you are being judged, um, with the way you look as a woman. And whether or not you carry yourself well and whether or not you have a small stomach and a small butt and stuff like that...but I think contestants who have been in the pageants and know that it’s not so much about that would probably have a good argument against it. (Respondent C)

Donelle R. Ruwe, in her article “I Was Miss Meridian 1985: Sororophobia, Kitsch, and Local Pageantry,” asserts, “My understandings of the body, gender performance, and sisterhood were shaped in surprisingly positive, perhaps even feminist ways by my experiences in the local and state levels of the Miss America Pageant system” (137). As I accounted in chapter three, my own pageant experiences may have not always been positive from a feminist prospective. Yet, my experience is only one of many. In speaking to and with the other women who actively participate in queen pageants, my preconceived notions concerning feminist thought and pageantry were challenged in exciting and inspiring ways. To my mind, there is an influence in the display of femininity that can be, for the women performing the display, highly powerful; especially if, as I argue, this display is a performance that is consciously enacted. I, again, refer to Banet-Weiser who astutely asserts, “beauty pageants, rather than operating as simple showcases for displaying objectified bodies, are actually a kind of feminist space where female identity is constructed by negotiating the contradictions of being socially constituted as ‘just’ a
body while simultaneously producing oneself as an active thinking subject…” (24). With regard to Banet-Weiser’s theory, I employ this chapter to feature the voices of the pageant contestants I interviewed and acknowledge the ways in which the young women who chose to participate in local pageantry are certainly “active thinking subjects.”

I conducted the majority of the interviews after I had attended the festival pageants included in my study. Thus, before the interviews, I had witnessed and recorded much of my research from the status of an outsider. In essence, I was looking at rather than looking with my participants. In stating this I am not disclaiming my personal experience and observations at the festivals, however, if I maintain that mine is a feminist methodology, I believe that multiple voices should be recorded and shared. Again, I refer to Gesa E. Kirsch’s study, Ethical Dilemmas in Feminist Research: The Politics of Location, Interpretation, and Publication. She reminds, “no single methodology is feminist in itself, nor have feminists invented new research methods. Rather, it is a feminist perspective, including a commitment to improve women’s lives and to eliminate inequalities between researchers and participants that characterize feminist research” (5). “Eliminating inequalities” between myself, the researcher, and the respondents, the participants, may be somewhat of an utopian ideal, however, I believe my project is surely enriched by the experienced and personal voices of the young women I had the privilege to interview. After my attendance at the festivals, the insights and information from each respondent surprised me and encouraged me to think anew. Speaking to and seeking knowledge directly from the pageant contestants further confirmed the notion that pageants are not purely about objectifying women.

As I pursued my field work, I met more and more pageant participants, organizers, and chaperones. Most of these women are very proud of their performances on the pageant stage and
what they represent for their community. The respondents are, as Banet-Weiser claims, “active thinking subjects.” The subjectivity of the pageant contestants was further solidified in speaking one on one with the young women. What follows is a brief description of the interview process I employed as delineated by the Human Subjects Review Board at Bowling Green State University. In this description I discuss some of my personal struggles as a researcher new to field work.

One of my biggest challenges in employing the interviews as part of my research was recruiting respondents. In my recruitment flyer, I asked the contestant to contact me via phone or email to set up the interview at a time and location of their choosing. Initially, I attempted to employ my attendance at the festivals to speak with the respondents. It was almost impossible to interview them at that time as they were naturally too busy attending various events as the “official” spokesperson for the festival. I vigorously handed out my recruitment flyers and, much to my dismay, I did not have one person contact me. I began to doubt my approach: Was I too aggressive? Did the term “research project” intimidate the young women? I presumed when I was introducing myself to the pageant participants and/or their chaperones I was “selling” myself in a non-threatening way. At least that was my hope. If, as Kirsch reminds, “it is important to realize that participants and researchers usually do not share the same level of interest in and commitment to the research project” (36), how was I going to pique an interest in my project? How was I going persuade these young women to speak with me? Persuade?

Perhaps I was implementing the wrong approach?

My initial struggle stemmed from a desire to remain respectful of the participants’ duties during the festival. I soon realized that my recruiting efforts might be more successful outside of the festival activities. Karen O’ Reilly, in her book Ethnographic Methods, discusses the

16 See Appendix A.
interview process. She contends, “Whether your approach is less or more formal, setting up an appointment is usually easier if the person has seen you face to face, or if they know someone that has met you before and can vouch for you on a personal level” (142). In my experience, O’Reilly’s words ring true. My first interview was conducted with a young woman who I had worked with in the classroom and on the stage, however, I didn’t know at that time was that she was a pageant participant. After I secured an interview with her, she provided me with the name of a second woman to contact for an interview. I breathed a sigh of relief. All of the interviews I secured, then, came from referrals and word of mouth and not from my “recruitment brochure.”

To that end, I interviewed four young women. I spent approximately an hour to an hour and a half with each woman. The interviews took place in various locations: Two in a classroom, one in my on-campus office and one in my living room. I recorded each interview on an audio tape recorder for later transcription. All of the respondents were local pageants participants: Three had participated in their communities’ local festival pageant and one had participated in local pageants that were part of the Miss America System. Thus, I was afforded with a prospective of several levels of local pageantry. Certainly, I am not claiming that the insights that these four young women provided are speaking for all pageant participates. To that end, I was concerned that I was only able to secure four interviews in the time allotted for this project. Yet, O’Reilly contends:

[T]he qualitative researcher places less importance on how many people he or she interviews and is more concerned with the quality of the interview itself. The approach may well not be standardized in terms of approach or questioning, but this is not worrying because we understand that different techniques and different approaches will elicit different responses. What we would like to understand is
what the different responses tell us about the groups we are studying and about
the social world more widely. (115)

Thus, I reconciled that the focus of including the interviews should not be strictly “numbers.”
Rather, my attention could favor listening to the responses of each young woman and
acknowledging how their individual voices contribute insight and depth not only to my project,
but also to preconceived notions of pageantry and the performance of femininity contained in
such.

The questions I developed and asked I believe are, in keeping with a feminist
methodology, “research questions which acknowledge and validate women’s experiences” and
enable me to “analyze how social, historical, and cultural factors shape the research site as well
as participants’ goals, values, and experiences” (Kirsch 4-5). I divided the questions into
categories and attempted to create an ordered flow beginning with personal experience and
ending with public experience. As such, the categories in sequential order are general
knowledge, the art of pageantry, Miss America Pageants, community, and festivals. What is
more, I endeavored to remain open to the spontaneous nature of the interview by not always
“sticking to the script.” If a respondent posed an element of pageantry that I had not considered
in my original questions, I was “pleased to let the interviewee wander off the point” (O‘Reilly
117). I cannot deny that my questions are structured in a specific manner, yet I made a concerted
effort to approach the interview as a conversation rather than looking for the “correct” answer.
The questions are located in Appendix B.

I composed the interview questions for the women who receive the title of Queen or
attendant as well as for the women who participate as contestants without obtaining a crown. I
did not feel the need to limit my interviews strictly to the females that win the titles. Often all
the constants are involved in representing the community at least throughout the time of the
festival. For example, all of the 2007-2008 Milan Melon Queen contestants rode in the parade.
Although there was a clear hierarchy present – the Queen and her attendants rode on the float,
complete with the Melon Slice that served as the Queen’s throne. The Reynoldsburg Tomato
Festival provides a second example: all of the Reynoldsburg Tomato Queen contestants helped
set up the festival. Additionally, because the Tomato Pageant was the last event of the Tomato
Festival, the contestants were also required to “volunteer” their time at several events throughout
the week. In short, all of the contestants of the festival pageants, once they fill out their entry
form, are committed to representing their community at least for the duration of the festival. For
this reason, along with the desire to remain open to multiple perspectives, I feel that interviews
with all pageant contestants are valuable to my research.

The following pages, then, explore the phenomena of pageantry from the participants’
prospective. I employ the respondents’ words liberally and include lengthy quotations. What is
more, I have utilized very little editing of the responses. It is my hope that the reader may be
able to “hear” the young women’s voices on the page. Finally, in an effort to maintain the
respondents’ anonymity, I have adopted the letters A, B, C, and D in place of the respondents’
names for citation purposes.

I begin by addressing the categories included in the Miss America Pageant structure in an
effort to note the second-wave feminist disdain for pageantry in general and how this standpoint
is perceived by the women who actively participate in the pageants. In this discussion I also note
some of the major differences in National and local pageantry. Next I tussle with notions of
“pageant girl” stereotypes and identify the acute awareness of such imaginary constructions by
the pageant participants. I then examine many of the positive and pro-woman aspects garnered
from pageant participation such as the female community that is create through the venue and the rewards obtained, both tangible and otherwise. I also include a discussion of the notions of the performance of femininity and how such a performance is consciously enacted by the contestants. Finally, I conclude with an interpretation of pageantry and feminism from the prospective of the contestants I had the opportunity to interview.

Local Misses: Borrowing and Adapting Miss America

The competitive category in the Miss America Pageant that I find is most vilified by feminist theorists is the swimsuit competition. The disdain, as I noted in chapter two, can be traced to the very beginnings of the pageant’s history: “In trying to replace images of flappers and suffragists with a more traditional vision of American femininity, the promoters of the Miss America Pageant also eased the way for the commodification of American women and reified the importance of the bathing suit contest, both literally and figuratively, for generations to come” (Hamlin 45). True, the category is still included in the Miss America Pageant despite some meager efforts in the 1970s to eliminate the swimsuit from the National competition. Of all of the categories in the Miss America Pageant, the swimsuit competition can be almost effortlessly read as an ultimate act of feminine bodily display, yet this interpretation ignores the agency of the woman who is presenting such a display. The self-confidence required to walk a runway in (by today’s standards) a modest swimsuit, to my mind, should not be dismissed. One young woman, who is involved in the Miss America Pageant system, aptly stated:

*I don’t think you could ever be truly confident in your body unless you walk around the stage in a swimsuit. That has taught me so much. I’ve always been

---

17 In 1970, “after years of complaints from feminist,” the pageant director, Albert Marks considered “replacing the swimsuits with ‘play clothes.’” As a result, he received a “deluge of mail and telephone calls” from viewers upset about the decision and, thus, the swimsuit category stayed (Bivens 72).
confident in what I look like and who I am, but this is just like: 'here I am, family, grandma, in a swimsuit.' So it’s a different experience because you can’t really hide anything, that’s you and I’m very comfortable doing it. I have no problem doing it. (Respondent B)

The confidence that the respondent relates, both her body and her mind, was a common theme expressed in the interviews. Hence, for the women who take the pageant stage, the performance is not simply contained in the physical or bodily display for an audience. Rather the performance is a self-aware presentation of confidence, intelligence, and individuality. The swimsuit competition is just one opportunity in the National pageant’s structure in which to present the performance. In addition, in an effort to calm criticisms of the most traditional and oldest category of the competition, the Miss America Pageant organizers have reduced the total points of the swimsuit competition to a mere fifteen percent of the total score, “making it one of the less significant phases of competition” (Bivens 64).

Significantly, most local pageants do not include the swimsuit competition in the pageant’s structure. I have noted that none of the local festival pageants I attended contained the category. The elimination, according to one respondent, provides many young local pageant contestants with justifiable relief. Unlike the respondent quoted above, one young woman did not see any redeeming aspects of the swimsuit competition. She asserted, “I just, I just really didn’t like the swimsuit thing. I never understood why a girl had to walk around in a bikini in order to see how physically fit she is. I mean, that’s just silly” (Respondent C). The inclusion or exclusion of the swimsuit competition, I have found, is one primary structural difference between National and local pageantry. The difference is perhaps fitting given that the local
Pageant contestants are representing their hometown and its values rather than National beauty standards and ideals.

A second category that was often excluded in the local pageants that I attended was the talent competition. On the National level, the talent portion of the Miss America Pageant figures greatly in the contestant’s overall score constituting forty percent of the total points (Bivens 49). The young women I interviewed expressed that the talent portion (when included on the local level) was a favorite element of the competition. One respondent, a college theatre major who had participated in several local pageants as a small child and through her teen years, identified the “chance to sing” during the talent portion as her main motivation for initially entering pageantry. She recounted that her performance in the talent competition had procured several additional performance opportunities in her community and proudly stated:

*I get offers to perform at little things around [the community] a lot. If I didn’t get the opportunity to go out and sing all the time, because of the pageant, you know, they wouldn’t know [that I sing] and they wouldn’t just randomly call me and ask me to come sing. So definitely the [pageant provides] opportunities to perform, but also just the confidence boost that it gives you. You’re up onstage and people clap for you, I mean, it’s just like being in a show.*

The talent category, for this particular young woman, was a vital part of her enjoyment of and success in the pageant. She also told me that she won the talent competition every time she participated.

Still, of the local pageants I attended, The Miss Grapette Pageant was the only one included a “talent” portion. As I stated in chapter four, the category was less traditionally “theatrical” as it was composed of self-written commercials for the young woman’s sponsor
rather than a performance of a song or a dance number. Perhaps the lack of “talent”
competitions in local festival pageants speaks to the notion that “any hometown girl” can
represent the festival – from the cheerleader to the basketball player to the class president to the
drama club member – one does not have to have “professional” training for a “traditional” talent
such as singing or dancing. Jerrilyn McGregory, in her study of one particular local pageant,
comments on the “professional” notion of the category: “The talent competition promotes a
unitary and elitist view of culture. State and local pageants resent it because they recognize, too,
that the requirement is exclusionary and serves only to enhance the nationally televised pageant,
weeding out many local hopefuls” (130). Reiterating McGregory’s claim, Banet-Weiser
suggests that the talent portion of the pageant is included to create viable and “cultured”
entertainment for the national audience. She contends:

[T]he talent competition presents to the pageant audience the cultured self – an
identity or persona that is realized only after disciplining one’s self in the pursuit
of a genteel aesthetic. The talent competition produces itself in direct opposition
to kitschy mass culture, seeing itself as on a par with symphony orchestras,
refined Broadway musicals, and the ballet… (13)

I believe the exclusion of the talent portion in the local festival pageant grants local organizers
and participants to disassociate from the Miss America System and, in essence, the “elitist view
of culture” that the Miss America Pageant talent competition, according to McGregory and
Banet-Weiser, appears to promote. In this way, the local pageant organization maintains a
commitment to homegrown values and community.
The category included almost in every pageant I attended, directly modeled from the Miss America Pageant, was the evening gown competition. As I explored in chapters three and four, the requirements of this judging category varied, but the elegant costume that defines the category was ever present. Of the young women I interviewed, the evening gown competition appeared to be quite low on their list of favorite pageant categories. The somewhat stifling performance that is required of the gown was generously noted by one respondent:

*It makes me feel awkward because I feel that if people are looking at me, I should be entertaining them some how and walking isn’t very entertaining to me...Like you can show a bit of your personality but not so much because it is expected that you do a certain pattern. And I actually, you know, as much as everyone wants to dress up and feel like a princess I want to say that evening is almost worse than casual. Just because with casual you’re allowed to have a bit more fun with it, like the music’s upbeat, you can, you know, dance along with it a little bit and no one’s going to look at you funny, but with the evening wear, you know, it’s slow music, you have to be proper, you’re suppose to be pretty. And I’m like okaaay [sic]. I’ll try.* (Respondent A)

Clearly, the performance of femininity – “you have to be proper and pretty” – expected of the contestants in the evening gown competition is noted. The traditional category, like the swimsuit features physical display. Based upon the young woman’s answer it appears that donning the evening or prom gown in the pageant, even on the local level is an ultimate act of traditional femininity. Still, the respondent is acutely aware of the enactment and claims that “everyone wants to dress up and feel like a princess.” Striking a balance between active display and passive objectification, according to this particular respondent is one of careful consideration. Yet, one

18 The Circleville Pumpkin Queen Pageant was an exception.
respondent noted that in the local pageants in which she competes the organizers are incorporating contemporary changes to the category, “And then evening gown they’ve made it more upbeat...They just really want to see you and your style. So it’s really neat, which I personally like because I, sometime I don’t fit into the mold of ‘stand still and straight’ you know, and I like to walk around and have a little more fun on stage” (Respondent B).

Expressing one’s personality on the pageant stage, even in the evening gown competition, is important to the contestants. Thus, the performance of femininity put in place by the pageant can be individualized by each contestant. One pageant category where the contest’s individuality is thoroughly embraced and appreciated, according to the respondents, is the interview competition.

The opportunity to represent the community by placing in the local pageant is, based upon the pageants I attended, decidedly determined in the interview category. Indeed, the young women I spoke with expressed that performing astutely in this particular category was vital. One respondent reasoned: “The interview was always worth the most points and so they do appreciate someone who can speak well...Somebody who sounds intelligent when they [sic] talk” (Respondent C). A second respondent declared, “My favorite part would have to be interview. Because that, I can just go in and be myself and I’ve always decided that there isn’t a question that they couldn’t ask me and that I wouldn’t...I wouldn’t be a hundred percent honest with them” (Respondent B). The interview category, then, is the place in the pageant where “they can be themselves,” expressing their individuality and their knowledge about their community and the world. Banet-Weiser notes, “Within the talent and interview competitions, contestants constitute themselves as active, self-possessed, and most of all, deeply embodied” (88). Among the young women I interviewed, the notion of participating in the interview category as an “active subject” was certainly in place and prevalent, even when, at times, the contestants were
not always aware of the “correct” answer to a judge’s question. One respondent explained thusly:

   I’ve always just been real with them, you know, there’s been a few times in my interview where they ask me a political question. Because in [a particular pageant] they’re allowed to ask you a person and what their job is in government? And I just said, you know, ‘I don’t know. I’m sorry, but I’ll look it up.’ I always just want to be honest with them because that’s their opportunity to see who I am and what I am all about. (Respondent B)

This particular answer could be read as a perpetuation of the well-worn stereotype of the “dumb, self-involved, unaware of the world surrounding her” beauty queen (which was, at the time of this writing, unfortunately propagated by Miss South Carolina in the 2007 Miss Teen USA Pageant when her response to why Americans can’t locate the United States on a world map created media frenzy.) Yet, to my mind, the later half of the response is more telling. The “opportunity” to express one’s self on a public platform enables the young women to speak of and about personal goals, ambitions and accomplishments. Furthermore, on the local pageant stage the question and answer category serves as an opportunity for contestants to speak for and about their community. As a result, the inclusion of the category encourages the young contestants to pursue knowledge of the qualities that make her community unique in order to represent the community within and outside of her hometown. Thus, I read through the stereotype that could be perceived in the respondent’s answer.

I’m Not a Pageant Girl: Stereotypes Re-Examined
To be sure, the idea of the stereotypical “pageant girl” is strongly acknowledged even among the young women who participate. The stereotype is constructed, as I have discussed throughout my project, through the performance of the feminine ideal: The imagined ideal suggests a “perfect” version of beauty and poise or a Barbie Doll image of the young female body. Yet, as Donelle R. Ruwe, a former local pageant participant and a feminist scholar asserts, “there is a significant gap between the imaginary and troubling ideal and the lived experience of a quarter of a million real women who perform the Miss America version of femininity in thousands of local and state pageants…Imaginary, hegemonic ideals (such as Miss America) are fairly stable, but actual subjects (the pageant participants) are active, fragmented, and unpredictable” (149). The respondents I interviewed noted the qualities of this “beauty queen” ideal while at the same time soundly rejected any desire or expectation to achieve it. Indeed, the ideal is, in a word, imaginary.

All of the women I spoke with responded with great specificity regarding the unfortunate stereotypes associated with pageantry. They asserted that even though they participated in pageants (all but one of the young women had competed multiple times) they were not your “typical pageant girl.” When I asked one respondent to describe for me a “pageant girl,” she replied in vivid detail:

Okay, okay, okay, it sounds so bad, it sounds so bad, but to me, have you ever seen the movie “Drop Dead Gorgeous?”...it’s almost like the typical pageant girl gets that rap because, to most people a pageant is a beauty contest. So when I do [sic] say “typical pageant girl,” I actually don’t even know very many of them, but they’re the ones who, you know, are superficial and fake and only say things that they think people want to hear and so like appearance based and, you know,
care more about their hair spray then, you know the person sitting next to them and I’m NOT that at all. (Respondent A)

The young woman also noted that the other contestants that participate in her festival pageant were not “pageant girls” either. She continued, “They’re like such sweet girls and their so sincere and they’re, I mean, they’re just so much fun to be around” (A). The imagined ideal of the pageant queen, according to this respondent, then, would “not be fun to be around.”

Furthering the notion that the ideal is imagined, a second respondent commented upon the differences between the perception of the pageant queen and the reality of the actual women who participant, particularly on the local level. When explaining who took the crown at her festival pageant, she noted:

My friend who won last year, she’s nuts. Her dress was like bright orange and purple, I mean crazy looking and she was not your typical, what everyone assumes to be a pageant queen. She didn’t have like the big curly hair or anything like that. So, I mean, you see her when she won and you’re just like ‘She’s not what you think would be a pageant queen’ but, that’s why, you know, there really isn’t a stereotype. Well, there is a stereotype, but not everybody fits it. (Respondent C)

A final reiteration of and discomfort with the negative stereotypes associated with pageantry was expressed by the respondent who explained to me what a typical pageant girl was. Throughout our interview, she articulated that her experience in her local community’s festival pageant was positive and rewarding, yet she admitted to me she felt somewhat uncomfortable talking about her title to people outside of her community. The young woman explained how she presented her title to “outsiders” – mainly her college friends – at length:
I am perfectly fine with representing the community. Telling people that I was in a pageant, however, not so okay with just because people have the misconception of, you know, ‘pageant girl.’ …This is actually, I feel really guilty now in saying this. Last year, see, and this is why I had to stop and think about what place I got, because last year when I was third runner up I would call myself fourth place pretty. Just because it kind of poked fun at…I’m like ‘I’m just poking fun at myself.’ It seemed too formal to me to say like, ‘I was third [runner up].’ It almost seemed kind of pompous, like you know kind of hoity toity saying I was like, you know, third runner up and blah, blah, blah, so like if I kind of poke fun at it and say like you know, fourth place pretty, YEAH! Then, it pokes fun at the stereotype that it is a beauty contest and it also makes me feel like I’m not taking myself too seriously, I guess. Because taking yourself seriously in a beauty pageant? Yeah, it has the connotations that you know, everyone thinks of and I can’t do it (laughs). I can’t do that. (Respondent A)

I find her answer telling. The feminine performance required of the pageant contestant has not been regarded highly in certain sects of culture and society, especially in the academy. The respondent feels compelled to acknowledge this. Yet, despite the fact that this particular respondent doesn’t want to “take herself too seriously,” she had entered her festival pageant for two consecutive years. Further, she stated that she would possibly enter again next fall, but she was unsure of the “cut off” age and stated that she might be too old to participate a third year. Clearly, she enjoys the experience of the pageant. In fact, she informed me that if she could not enter the pageant as a contestant, she would go back and serve the other contestants as a “pageant
mom,” a position that, like the chaperone role discussed in chapter four, aides in creating a female community.

Do You Have a Bobby Pin? Creating Female Community

The position of chaperone is usually filled by a winning contestant’s parent. The role is assumed throughout the young woman’s year long reign. Unlike the chaperone, pageant moms, I was informed, are volunteers who help the contestants with their costume changes and make up as well as provide morale for the particular young women that they are “assigned” to during the actual pageant performance. Having never heard the term before, I inquired about the specific details of this duty and the respondent explained thusly:

“Oh, it’s like the chaperone for backstage. They, basically their job is to keep you sane. Which is (laughs) a task, for some of them, let me say. But, um, like they’re there to help you get your hair how you want it and they hand you your clothes, if you want them to. They’re there to accommodate you for the pageant, not so much all day, because them being there all day would just get really tedious, but, yeah, they’re at your beck and call, they’re like, you know, if you need anything...I was like ‘I could use a bobby pin’ and she comes back with like a box, ‘here.’ And I mean, they’re just like volunteers. If I can’t do [the pageant] next year, I’ll definitely go back and be a pageant mom. I’ve already had girls from last year be like ‘So are you going to do this, because I would like to put in a request for you’ (laughs). (Respondent A)

Despite the previous pageant girl stereotypes she noted, given the above statement, it appears that the young woman is proud of her accomplishments within her local pageant system and
desires to continue in the system even if she cannot herself compete. I have found in my research of pageantry in general, that the women who participate often continue to remain active in the pageant and/or pageants long after they have decided to stop vying for the crown. I reason, then, that pageantry, especially on the local level is upheld and continued by the women who were once participants. Therefore, it is difficult to state without hesitation that the pageant is a demeaning and objectifying event for the women who participate.

From an outsider’s standpoint, one could simply view pageantry as a perpetuation of the unabashed display of femininity which only encourages competition among women. However, I believe that the fostering of female companionship and encouragement is another aspect that some feminist scholarship neglects to acknowledge when considering the pageant system. Throughout my experience at the festivals and in the personal interviews with the contestants, I found that pageants create a unique female community that provides and promotes confidence, knowledge, and collaboration among its members. What is more, these qualities are pursued and achieved not only on the pageant stage, but behind the scenes as well.

The creation of a female community through participation in pageantry was noted in many of my respondents’ answers. When I inquired why the young women chose to enter a pageant, several related that they were encouraged by a female family member or female mentor. Two of the respondents noted that they were urged by a female teacher and another, that their mother or grandmother suggested they try it. While one might read this encouragement as a perpetuation of traditional femininity from one generation to the next, the women who participate certainly do not interpret it as such. The preparation required for the pageant is often practiced with an older female who serves as role model the contestant trusts and admires. To my mind, the female role models that encourage and aid the young contestants should not be
dismissed. The “support system” enacted by the female mentors is highly regarded by the contestants.

For example, one respondent remarked that her preparation for the pageant was greatly aided by the assistance of her mother. She proudly stated:

    Um, I had my mom ask me a couple questions…she asked me my answer. And we did like that kind of a thing. We did like a mock interview. Um, when I wrote my essay, I think that really like helped me too…I wrote it out and then I had my mom like look at it. And if she thought maybe a word or two would look better, that’s kind of what we did. And my mom and I just kind of talked about, you know, like ‘why do you want to do this?’ (Respondent D)

The preparation for the pageant was an opportunity for this particular mother and daughter to discuss not only the elements required for the pageant, but also to determine if the pageant might be a positive experience for the young woman to pursue. Another respondent, when speaking about her lack of experience with interviewing, sought the help of a former pageant contestant and winner who was also a personal friend. She explains:

    And actually a friend of mine…she was Miss Ohio 1982, I think? And, um, she was a HUGE help with me. She would do mock interviews with me. And would help me with, just kind of like the whole poise aspect of it, you know, how to stand, how to walk, all of that. And then she would also listen to my talent piece...I got a lot of help from people who were there already. (Respondent C)

    From a feminist standpoint, one might argued that the women who are aiding in the preparation with the contestants are simply positing and perpetuating the feminine stereotypes required for pageant participation. In chapters three and four I noted the gendered roles that the
parents of the contestants fulfilled and here, too, the female role models also serve a feminine role. Yet, the women who I interviewed highly valued their mentorship, not only within the boundaries of the pageant performance, but also in their every day lives. After speaking with the women in person, my own perceptions were expanded upon.

Thus, peering in from the outside, one can simply view pageants as a competitive display which positions female against female fighting to gain male approval. Yet, the young women I spoke with expressed sincere support and genuine respect for the other women who they competed with even when they did not place in the pageant themselves. Perhaps on the National level the competition is more “fierce,” but the women who enter the local pageants appear to have a true appreciation and respect for their fellow competitors. One respondent remarks: “I love the girls who win, like, at least for the past two years when I’ve done it, because, like their not your pageant girls either...They’re wonderful, wonderful girls” (Respondent A). In stating this I am not suggesting that the young women I spoke with enter the pageant lacking the desire and drive to win or at the very least place. However, the collaborative spirit presented at both the festival and in the festival pageant was acknowledged by the young women I interviewed. The acknowledgement seems fitting as the festival and the festival pageant serve to celebrate community.

Rewards of Representation

Celebrating and promoting the community, as I have noted throughout this project, is one of the primary functions of the local pageant contestants. In addition to representing their hometown and festival commodity, the contestants often reap tangible rewards upon winning a queen or
attendant crown. The rewards, some substantial and others small, are also a contributing
motivation for entering the festival pageant. For example, one respondent delightfully declared:

We [the queen and court] always joked that our favorite part was all the free stuff
that we got on festival weekend because if you walk around with a crown and
sash on, everybody, like everybody wants you to be at their booth. So if you go to
their booth, they like, you know [say], ‘oh, here’s this and let’s take a picture.’
So we take pictures with their stuff and then they let us keep it. We get [sic] free
food, free drinks, everything. It was fun. (Respondent C)

The royalty receives the free goodies, but the respondent’s example also suggests the young
women are employed as salespeople for the vendors “stuff.” As such, the less tangible accolade
of “celebrity” status is awarded to the winners. They are the people “everybody wants at their
booth.” The public lauding granted to the local festival royalty was noted by the respondents in
numerous examples.

In addition to the pageant and the festival grounds, a third venue where public adoration
for the festival royalty is presented proves to be the festival parade. One respondent joyfully
remarked, “Like Thursday you go do the parade which is always fun, because, like I said, [in my
community] you know everybody. So you’re like riding through downtown…and everybody’s
like yelling your name…it’s crazy fun” (Respondent C). A second respondent proudly claimed,
“And then we had like a parade after the pageant and we all rode around in these cars. I had a
very, very nice convertible….I had my moment, it was the best time. Yeah, I led the parade, it
was a good time. It was called the parade of queens” (Respondent D). The “moment” the
parade grants to the queen and her court, although somewhat fleeting, is empowering for the
young women. Based upon the respondents’ replies, the festival royalty certainly do not
interpret themselves as displayed objects. Clearly, the young women enjoy this “moment in the spotlight” and take a great deal of pride in the representation.

Another reward sometimes procured by participating in a pageant is scholarship money. The monetary reward in the form of a college scholarship is one of the aspects that the Miss America System prides itself upon. Miss America’s biggest competitor on the National pageant circuit is The Miss USA Contest which is owned by Donald Trump and tends to completely favor appearance over intelligence. The winners of the Miss USA Pageant and subsequent Miss Universe Pageant are awarded prizes in the form of jewelry, cars, clothing, modeling contracts and film schools lessons. This is not to say that Miss America is not provided with many of these items, but a substantial prize is awarded in the form of scholarship money that is sent directly to the college that the young woman will attend or is attending.¹⁹

In the local pageants that are a part of the Miss America System, the awarding of scholarship money proves a substantial drive for young women to compete. Conversely, in the local festival pageants the monetary rewards, depending on the community, vary. However, many of the local pageant contestants I interviewed expressed that the monetary awards were definitely a positive aspect of competing. In speaking about her community’s festival pageant, one respondent noted, “Everyone who enters, at least my first year, everyone who enters gets a hundred dollars. And I was like, worst case scenario, I have a good time hanging out with my roommate. Parade around on stage for a little bit at my old high school, by the by, and get a

¹⁹ Using beauty standards as a driving force in their competition, The Miss USA pageant was established due to a conflict of interests between the Miss America Organization and the Catalina Swimsuit Manufacturers. When Yolande Betbeze was crowned Miss America 1951, she refused to participate in the “annual swimsuit style-show tour of the United States…prefer[ing] to be scheduled for appearances where her extensive operatic training could be utilized.” In keeping with the support of their winners and contestants, “The pageant [organizers] backed Yolande’s conviction that Miss America should be presented with the dignity befitting her title, and ruled that future queens would not appear in swimsuits during their reigns. Catalina promptly withdrew its sponsorship…and formed its own contest as a promotional vehicle for its swimwear fashions” (Bivens 21). Thus, the Miss USA Contest was born. Both competitions continue today but with very different audiences and agendas in mind.
hundred bucks! I’m like….not too shabby…not too shabby at all” (Respondent A). The young woman informed me that the monetary awards, not only increase as one wins more categories, but also that the checks are mailed directly to the college she attends. She continued:

*It’s all scholarship…it’s not even, like ‘here’s a check to you,’ its ‘you send us a bill from a scholasticism like something or other and then we send out the check made out to them’...I got I think about 450 [dollars] last year. And this year...I think I got like 650 [dollars]. I mean, even with all the running back and forth I did with the festival, I stood on stage for like an hour, hung out with fun girls and I got paid 650 dollars. I mean, it’s not bad.* (Respondent A)

Although the monetary reward granted to this contestant was relatively small considering the cost of a semester’s tuition, the “hourly pay” is somewhat substantial (if one does not consider the hours of preparation contributed). On the National level – and in the local pageants leading up to a spot at the Miss America Pageant – the money awarded increases significantly. A respondent maintained, “It’s definitely all about the scholarships for most girls who enter. A lot of my friends who have done continuous Miss Ohio programs have won so much scholarship money and that’s why they keep doing it, so they can get through school” (Respondent C).

The financial drive to compete was further reiterated by the respondent who was involved in several local pageants that were a subset of the Miss America System. Although she had yet to win the crown that would advance her to Miss Ohio, she had won several awards that aided in the advancement of her college education. She explained it to me thusly:

*There’s a lot of money involved. And that’s helped me. My first year I didn’t have to take out any bank loans because of pageants, so that’s huge for me...I have won over seven thousand dollars doing pageants. I’ve won three interview*
awards so that...when you win a preliminary you get more money so I like to focus on interview because that’s something I can win. Even if I don’t win the title, that’s something I can still win....So you can win money even if you don’t place. (Respondent B)

Thus, depending upon the system that the pageant is situated within, the financial gain from competing can be somewhat considerable. As the above quotation reminds, using pageants to aid in the financing of a college education can create financial independence for young women. One of the goals claimed by many pageant organizers is to encourage the development of women not only based upon physical appearance, but also based upon intellect. As the Miss America website suggests: “Some see a beauty queen, we see a scholar” (MissAmerica.org). The scholarship seemingly perpetuated by the Miss America System is certainly acknowledged by contestants. Yet, so is the construction of beauty put in place by the Miss America System. In reference to the mind/body dichotomy contained in the National pageant, one respondent reasoned thusly:

Their[the pageant systems’] main goal is to give scholarship money to women who are intelligent [and] who are students. That is one of our requirements: that we have to be a student. Or a grad student can do it as well if they’re still paying off loans from their undergrad. They can use that money towards that. So that’s a main focus, but also, you know, we do have swimsuit and evening gown. And all you do is you walk around in it. And it’s how you look and how you’re confident in it. So the beauty aspect is a part of it. But I think they are looking for someone who is well rounded and not just the beauty, but somebody who is
The “well rounded person” the respondent speaks about suggests a balance between the mental and physical characteristics of the contestants. Again, the feminine performance required of pageantry cannot be dismissed, yet in listening to the respondents’ answers, I was continually reminded that pageantry is not only concerned with beauty and feminine ideals. Still, upon hearing about the substantial financial gain available for the pageant contestants, I had to pose the question: “How much money do you spend to compete?”

Pricing Femininity: The Cost of Competition

I recall my own pageant experience began with a minimal monetary investment. I wore my prom dress for the first pageant. The recycled formal was the one and only costume required. As I moved to bigger venues, however, I remember my mother spending over five hundred dollars for a navy blue sequined floor length gown. The figure, of course, didn’t include the matching shoes or rhinestone jewelry. Then there were the additional purchases of an interview suit and the “professional looking” – substitute plain – one piece swimsuit. I would venture to guess that my family invested, at the very least, one thousand dollars (in the early 1990s) for me to compete. These initial items, of course, were reusable depending on the competitive categories of a particular pageant, but the money I won did not even come close to matching the total amount of money that was contributed.

Perhaps my mother and I were extravagant, because the young women I interviewed noted they received more money than they spent. One respondent phrased it thusly: “You can buy a lot of things. Or you can find a girl who is just about the same size as you and borrow
her prom dress. Like, it’s not required that you buy anything. I mean you have to have the stuff, but you can find ways around [purchasing] it” (Respondent A). To borrow articles of clothing from former contestants appears to be the most significant way to relieve the financial burden of competing. A second respondent, when describing the costumes needed for each category, confirmed, “We have swimsuit and I’ve borrowed that…Talent outfit which I also borrowed...And an evening gown, which I use the same one throughout” (Respondent B). I read this recycling, if you will, of either ones own clothes or the clothes of other competitors in two different ways. Firstly, the borrowing of a pageant costume from a previous contestant is not viewed as wearing a “hand me down.” Rather, the “handing down” of costumes to a fellow competitor is a sisterly exchange that provides for the two women involved in the exchange a shared sense of taste and success. The pageant crown, of course, is the symbol of the ultimate exchange, as the current queen places it upon the head of her successor in a gesture of royal tradition. Conversely, when a current contestant “puts on” the costumes of a previous competitor, the enactment of the femininity required of the pageant performance is repeated and upheld.20 Susan Brownmiller contends, “The struggle to approach the feminine ideal, to match the femininity of other women, and especially to outdo them, is the chief competitive arena…in which the American woman is wholeheartedly encouraged to contend” (18). In citing Brownmiller’s claims, I am not suggesting that the contestants who borrow gowns and swimsuits are motivated to do so in order to “outdo” the women who graciously lend the articles. Yet, I do agree with Brownmiller’s assertion that they are attempting to “match the femininity” put in place not only by the “other women” but by the pageant system as a whole. So the borrowing of pageant costumes is cost efficient, encourages sisterhood and collaboration between the women

20 See Butler, Judith. Gender Trouble, (185).
involved in the exchange, and confirms the repetition of the feminine performance. On the local pageant stage, the performance is highly valued.

**Promotional Speaker: The Queen Contestant as Community Spokesperson**

For many contestants the pageant, as I have noted, is a venue in which to be recognized by the community in unique ways. What is more, in many cases, this recognition extends beyond the borders of their local hometown as they travel throughout the state in fulfillment of their royal duties. One respondent, expressing her awareness of the possible limitations posed by growing up in a small town, credited the local pageant with providing opportunities that encourage young women to find their own voice:

> I would say that [the pageant] is important to get [young women] involved with the festival because it kind of, you know, it almost makes them think outside of [the community]. As awful as that sounds, because you know it is a pageant and it is a festival about the community, but it almost empowers the younger girls. Because, you know, like I was saying earlier, it gets them in front of people, it gets them talking, it gives them experience with stuff like that. (Respondent A)

The empowerment the respondent notes is one of the positive and I would argue, feminist, aspects of pageantry. Competing in the local pageant can and often does provide a young woman with the opportunity to share her knowledge of the community and hone her presentation skills on a very public stage. The pageant stage, than, gives each young woman an individual platform in which to shine while speaking for and about her community.

The significance of the role that the pageant contestants fulfill as community spokesperson was confirmed throughout the interviews. Furthermore, the respondents
highlighted the dedication and preparation that goes into taking on such a role. One respondent detailed the aspects the pageant event and the pageant contestants contribute to the promotion and success of her community festival:

[The pageant] kind of just reminds us that [the festival] is important to us and we have these, you know, bright young women out there to greet people and promote the festival which is such a huge ordeal. And we have like a whole month to get things ready and to start planning things for the pageant and to really promote the festival and just get the word out. It’s really funny how many people not even from [the community] have heard of the [food] Festival. And [they do hear about it] mostly because of the pageant. I mean, the queens go out and we really talk about the festival. And we bring all kinds of other people in. We bring in other queens....yeah, it’s huge, but, yeah I think having the girls there just kind of reminds us all that it is a really big deal to [the community]...we have the girls there to represent [the community] in a good way and the festival in a good way.

(Respondent C)

The respondent is aware of and takes pride in the impact that the pageant has on her local festival. The notion of the pageant queen and courts as walking advertisements for the festival and the community, in general, remain in place. Yet, as spokesperson for her community, its commodity, and the festival, the young woman’s performance is celebrated “in a good way.”

As part of this celebrated performance of community representative, in many instances throughout my study, I read the food festival pageant queen symbolically – as the human harvest of the community. When I asked the respondents about representing the community, as partially noted above, their answers where rich and filled with an abundance of personal stories.
However, when I asked what it means to bear the title of “Miss Insert-Crop-Here,” the responses were less specific. The respondents did have an extreme knowledge of the food they were representing. In fact, many of the pageants require the contestants to learn more about the history of crop than, perhaps, even the farmer who is harvesting it. One respondent recounted:

*Just from being involved in the festival for so long, um, I’ve had to learn a lot about it... A lot of the questions in our interview, we had a whole sheet of questions that were about, like, the history of [the crop]. So we had to go and look up the answers to that and make sure we knew them because they would occasionally throw in [a question]...like we had to know what makes [the food edible]...and stuff like that. And we had to know about the brands that were manufactured at [the company in the community]...so I’ve learned a lot about it over the last ten years and maybe that’s why it’s my favorite food. I don’t know.*

Acquiring knowledge about the cash crop, then, provides the opportunity to represent the food. According to the respondents, in most cases, “wearing” the title is akin to standing for the community itself, rather than the symbolically “becoming” the specific food. The respondents’ associations with the commodity, like the one quoted above, claimed an enjoyment for eating the food and an awareness of the celebratory nature of the food, but the acknowledgment of the qualities of the food as a symbolic embodiment was a moot point. Only one of the contestants I interviewed expressed a “literal” reading of the food festival queen title. She stated:

*I like [the festival food] (big laugh)...all of the little food festivals, you know, you’re representing a food. It’s strange either way, I mean, no matter which way you look at it...you’re like[the food], yeah! I mean, it could be worse, it could be*
a lot worse. I mean, especially since I like [the food]. If I didn’t like [the food] it would be awkward. (Respondent A)

The “awkwardness” that might be experienced if the local festival contestant did “not like the represented food” could also extend to the representation of the community. In other words, if the young women does not share the pride in her community or her hometown and what the community represents, wearing the crown and traveling about might seem “awkward” or at the very least, undesirable. Too, many of the activities that the queens and court must participate in during the festival days involve the food they are representing – whether it be eating the food, preparing the food, or selling the food (many times it is all three). Even if the contestants do not regard the pageant title as a symbolic embodiment of the festival food, they are still asked to perform with and for the food they are representing, and by extension, with and for their community.

Swimsuits, Evening Gowns and High Heels: A Performance of A“wear”ness

When I asked the respondents if pageants were a type of performance, for the most part, they interpreted the term similar to the ways I have used “performance” throughout this project. That is, the young women accounted the theatrical performance indicated by scripted pageant and its categories as well as the feminine performance of “queen contestant” and the gendered expectations inscribed in such. What is more, I contend that the contestants are acutely aware of both performances. The respondents, to a great or lesser degree, acknowledged that their performance on the pageant stage is an extended or perhaps refined version of their “everyday” self. I quote one young woman who touched briefly on the multiple performance elements the pageant requires:
I would say it’s a type of performance, but when I do them [the pageants] I’m always just me. I think I’m an excited person about anything, so when I am in an interview, I’m not just being excited and bubbly because that’s what I want to show them. Um, that’s how I am normally, so I just talk to them in my interview. When I am onstage, I am used to being onstage so my talent is strictly my own. You know, how I want to move. Um, but I guess, you know, swimsuit and evening gown, I mean that’s a type of performance I guess you could say because when I am normally in a swimsuit I’m just walking to the pool and going to jump in. (Laughs). Not in heels, you know. And evening gown, I don’t ever wear evening gowns on a normal basis, so I do, you know, check my posture and things like that ...it’s a performance in a way, but I would never sacrifice me or who I, who I am and what I want to show them. I’m just me in a different outfit. (Respondent B)

Although the women who I interviewed may not label their performance in the pageant as one of femininity, they are seemingly conscious of the feminine enactments required to complete. The respondent’s assertion, “I’m just me in a different outfit,” suggests the act of adorning the female body with feminine prescriptions which include high heels, long elegant gowns, and a “posture check.” Still, I argue, the enactment of these elements is a conscious choice. Taking the pageant stage requires certain feminine prescriptions that, from what the respondents’ relayed, are embraced and willingly enacted by the contestants. The young women I interviewed expressed an awareness of the feminine requirements needed to compete and with this awareness they “play” them to the best of their ability. In other words, they are not the stereotypical bubble headed Barbie doll walking about a stage with little knowledge or control of their performance. Instead, to again employ Banet-Weiser’s terminology, they are “active, thinking subjects.”
The performance of femininity is certainly not regulated to the pageant stage. The script of the pageant performance may be quite specific, requiring contestants to “be able to do your typical performy [sic] things…speak in front of a large audience…walk around…move…,” (Respondent C) while wearing the “proper” feminine costume, but some respondents’ noted that pageant performances could be compared to several enactments that occur in front of an audience. One young woman, who was aware I was a theatre instructor, compared her experience in the pageant directly to my own occupation, “Like a lot of times, teachers consider what they do performing because they have to maintain face and they have to keep composure even if they’re scared to death or whatever. So in a way I would say that [the pageant] is a performance but, not a showy performance just a performance as a representation of yourself” (Respondent A). Granted, this “representation,” as many feminist scholars argue, may contain criterion that is directly related to controlling the female body.

During my research, I have read numerous “how to win your pageant” guides which I have referenced to a greater or lesser extent throughout these pages. The ongoing theme in every instruction book is body maintenance. The advice contained in these books is not just focused upon proper “grooming” tips – although there are pages filled with these as well – but also the physical control of the limbs and muscles of the body. For example, How to Win Your Crown: A Teen’s Guide to Pageant Competition, gives a “lesson” in sitting on a chair for the interview portion of the competition:

[F]rom a standing position, sit. Without looking behind you or feeling for the place to plant your rear. Gracefully and smoothly gliding into the chair, remaining upright and looking totally at ease and comfortable…Plopping down
won’t do…You must be cognizant every time you sit until you can do it without thought, until it becomes second nature to you. (Bordenkircher 37)

I use this example to reiterate the extreme lengths of bodily control certain pageant systems propagate. Another feared area of the body, according to pageant literature, is the hands which “must be at ease and not wiggle around. They must not be clenched or pulling at clothes or picking at the chair arm. They may be used for emphasis or expression when talking but not too much” (Bordenkircher 37). The instructions to physically stiffen and stifle the female body contained in the “how to win” books were quite disturbing to me. To my mind, the instructions suggest a physical binding of the female body and deny freedom of expression. I assumed the prescriptions were somewhat exaggerated by the guidebook authors in an effort to stress the importance of body maintenance (or to scare young women away). Yet, one respondent stated that an awareness of the seemingly innate movement of the body is needed for some pageant competitions. She explained:

*For interviews we are usually standing behind a podium that is either skinny or clear so they can see if you are fidgety. And even how you stand, they say, says something about you, you know, if you have your hands on your podium or by your sides or if you use them to talk... I just look at it as a certain type of performance.* (Respondent B)

The young woman has, to my mind, a healthy perspective about her performance of the prescribed femininity of the pageant system. In my experience during the interview portion of my research I found that all of the women embraced this approach. Furthermore, participating in the pageant was a performance that they enjoyed enacting, “I just basically set out to have a good time...It’s about going in and it’s about having a good time, at least that’s what’s it’s about
for me” (Respondent A). The respondents I interviewed were not blindly and unknowingly lead into the “antifeminist strictures” of the feminine pageant, but active and aware participants.

The Question: Are You a Feminist?

I conclude this chapter by admitting one of my biggest concerns about interviewing the young women for this project. As a self proclaimed feminist, I was aware that my own “agenda” would color my work. In structuring the interview questions, would I only “discover” what I desired to find? In his book, *The Art of Fieldwork*, Harry F. Wolcott discusses the hierarchical arrangement contained interview process. He explains the distinction between field observation and interviews thusly:

> It is the difference between passively accepting whatever comes along –
> information that is virtually handed to us – and aggressively seeking information by getting nosy. In the simple act of asking the fieldworker makes a 180-degree shift from observer to interlocutor, intruding into the scene by imposing onto the agenda what he or she wants to know. That does not mean questioning is a sinister business, but there is a quantum difference between taking what happens to come along and taking charge of the agenda. (95)

Thus, in my “taking charge of the agenda” by interviewing in addition to observing, my fear was that my own agenda would be favored. Rather than hide behind my politics, one of my committee members suggested that I come “out” and ask the respondents if they thought that pageants were feminist, and further, if they themselves embraced the term. The answers were, perhaps, not surprising given second-wave feminist disdain for pageantry. What is more, given my positioning as an academic researcher and the respondents awareness of such, their answers
may have been influenced by this arrangement. The respondents were seemingly comfortable claiming female “equality,” but not feminism. The responses to the question “are you a feminist?” sum up the contestants’ view on the movement. In consideration of the multiple perspectives contained in feminist thought, I quote all four respondent’s answers below. The first respondent suggests:

*Um, I never really have thought much about it one way or the other. I mean I can’t say that I think all women should be able to play all sports and that they should be able to play with the big boys because if that’s what they want to do, then that’s what they can do and women are equal to men and blah, blah, blah. But at the same time, I’m not the one who’s like ‘A women’s place is in the kitchen’ (laughs). I don’t get caught up in any, well I can’t say any, but many of the issues that a lot of feminists seem to get caught up in. But at the same time I kind of take notice, when something doesn’t seem fair or doesn’t seem right. So I would say I’m a quasi feminist. It’s like the diet coke of feminism.* (Respondent A)

The hesitancy to claim the term, but not completely deny it was also expressed in the second respondents answer. She states:

*Ummmm, I don’t think so…I, I guess I wouldn’t think so because, ummm, you know, I’m me and I’m confident in what I look like but I wouldn’t ever define myself as…about my beauty or being a lady or girly, you know. In my interviews one thing they asked me about once is…you know…about clothing and I was like, ‘well, today you’ll see me in nice clothes, but usually when you talk to me I’ll be in jeans and a sweat shirt.’ So I, I won’t consider myself that, you know, just an*
average girl who just happens to like winning money doing beauty pageants.

(Respondent B)

A third respondent resolutely denied her association with feminism:

No. Not at all and I’m...I...I don’t know. Some of the things that, you know, really strong feminists say I, I just kind of laugh because, you know, I guess things are only feminist if you make them that way, in my opinion. And, um, I don’t know, like, I think the people who are just super strong [for] women’s rights and ‘women aren’t getting enough rights’ really? Like now a days, like I don’t feel so much [sic]. (Respondent C)

The final respondent suggests a dualistic approach to her feminism:

In some cases, probably yes because, you know, I consider as a woman today I think I should be able to do and be treated like as a man should be treated.

Within the working world, I think I should be treated just as good as anyone else. Um, I would say I want to be considered equal. Um, but there’s always that thing that, I think yeah men should be chivalrous, so I don’t know. I don’t know if I consider myself a FEMINIST, but I consider myself that I like us to be equal, but I don’t know if I consider myself a feminist. So, I think every woman is, though, a little bit. (Respondent D)

The respondents’ answers concerning feminist thought and practice, to my mind, succinctly identify the struggle I have been tussling with throughout the project. In the performance of femininity does one have to deny the performance of feminism? I believe the pageant stage, as I hoped to have argued, is a space to practice both roles.
To conclude, in claiming a feminist methodology, I realize the necessity of including the interviews in my project and, moreover, the richness the respondents’ voices have added to my research and perceptions. The young women I spoke with both challenged and confirmed my thoughts about the feminine construction that is pageantry. To use a theatrical metaphor, I believe my attendance at the festivals provided me with a view from the house, and, in agreeing to the interviews, the contestants granted me a backstage pass. Both perspectives were surprising, enlightening, and equally compelling.
CHAPTER SIX: CONCLUSION

Restatement of Major Research Question/s and Methods

I have approached my study using an ethnographic and feminist lens. The seed for the project was planted by my own participation in pageantry as a teenager. The study was further shaped by my embarrassment of and subsequent attempt to deny my pageant queen history as I moved from high school to undergraduate college and pursued a women’s studies class. Granted, my participation in pageantry was not the only aspect of my past performance that I attempted to deny. As a direct result of that first women’s studies class, I stopped wearing dresses, threw away my curling iron and minimalized my makeup. I “tried on” another performance, one my friends and I liked to term hippie chic. To construct the latter costume, I traded the mall for Goodwill. True, I was still performing, but I believed I was now performing for myself rather than for others. I am now aware that this was false thinking on my part. Of course, I was still performing my gender, but in this instance I was not highlighting my femininity. Still, I cannot forget the intellectual enlightenment that first class on feminism provided. The women’s studies class opened my eyes to a whole new way of envisioning the world and I was fascinated. As such, my participation in pageantry persistently haunted my memory. As I continued to deny or suppress my participation in the various pageants and embrace second-wave feminism, the binary contained in such thinking picked at my brain like an ever-present gnat – just small enough to disregard, but large enough to be troublesome. As such, I have employed personal narrative in my study to cite and identify my own experience, past and present, with the feminine pageant performance.

Part of this personal narrative is composed from my venture into fieldwork. I traveled to various food festival celebrations in the state of Ohio. I chose the festivals I attended specifically
given the time allotted for my research and the scope of my project. My selection criteria focused upon the community celebrations that featured the bounty of the fall harvest and the representation of such by a local pageant queen. I endeavored to discover how the performance of femininity required by the participants in local pageants granted the young women an opportunity to represent their community and, in such, become celebrated by their hometown. What is more, I also read the food festivals as a celebration of the local farmer and his production of the agricultural commodity. Therefore, the queen contestant, in her representation of the particular food, symbolically becomes an additional commodity - the human harvest of the local community.

The honors bestowed by bearing the title of “Miss Homegrown” were presented, in the various community festivals and pageants, in particular and distinctive ways. My participation as a spectator at each of the individual festivals was unique – obviously no two festivals or, for that matter, pageants were alike. Although the celebratory nature of the food festivals was repeated, the structural characteristics of each festival were individualized dependent upon the communities social, economic, and, even, religious values. Thus, in seeking my research from the festival “field,” I attempted to examine how the festival celebration served to define a communal identity and, further, how that identity was constructed through and represented by the pageant queen and her feminine performance.

The perpetuation of the feminine performance required by pageantry often renders a dismissal of the subject as a viable area of feminist academic pursuit. In an effort to tend to the development of such thinking, I briefly traced the historical construct of the iconic Miss America Pageant. Although the focus of my study is on local pageants that are situated outside of and apart from the Miss America System, the National pageant has undoubtedly set the standard for
the construction of the “beauty” queen as she is socially envisioned today. Therefore, I included in my project an examination of the inception of the Miss America pageant on the Atlantic City boardwalk in 1921. I recounted how the birth of pageant was an attempt by organizers to increase tourism for the New Jersey city after the Labor Day holiday, as well as served to keep Victorian womanhood in place. In relation to the performance of femininity set by Victorian morals, I briefly noted the responses of the first-wave suffragette movement. Additionally, I also considered the responses of the second-wave feminist movement to the “beauty” pageant. In doing so, I made an effort to identify what I believe are problematic and binary constructions contained in vilification of the performed femininity of pageant participants.

Finally, I concluded my fieldwork by interviewing young women who are and have participated in local pageants, festival and otherwise. The inclusion of their voices aided in my discovery that the performance of femininity is, indeed, put in place and upheld by the pageant system. However, the young women who enact the performance do not envision the role as one of objectification. Speaking with the contestants, I undoubtedly learned of the unflattering stereotype associated with pageantry in popular culture, but also discovered what the young women gain, tangible or otherwise, from their active participation. Through the interviews, I also was granted a deeper understanding and further examples of how and why the community celebrates the performance of femininity in their given festivals. As such, based particularly on the responses from my interviews with contestants, I was able to re-examine the value contained not only in the performance of femininity, but also in pageantry. I maintain both are a worthy and vital area for feminist scholarship.

Summary of Findings
In tussling with the notion of the feminine ideal and the performance of femininity contained in pageantry, during my initial research for this project, I naturally looked to books on pageants. I found that, for the most part, these studies could be divided into three categories: “how to win your crown” guidebooks, picture and coffee table books capturing the full color history of the Miss America Pageant, and scholarly anthologies composed of articles about the cultural construction of the iconic pageant figure. In my project, I utilized all three references in a range of combinations. Of course, I found, in the varied publications, a widely different approach to the phenomena of the queen and the pageant that celebrates her. On one hand, the authors and contributors to the scholarly studies were, to some extent, “defending” their decisions and desires to research the pageant as an academic pursuit. Conversely, the authors of the picture books presented an unabashed and unapologetic celebration of “America’s Oldest Scholarship” pageant filled with glorious full-color pictures of smiling and sequined women. The authors of the guidebooks, of course, wrote manuals containing detailed, extreme, and to my mind, impossible instructions explaining enactments of femininity that would “help” one to win a crown. With such varied studies and viewpoints at my disposal, I determined I would have to first approach the pageant from a historical perspective in an effort to clarify how pageantry aided in the establishment of the feminine ideal through the perpetuation of the performance of femininity. Furthermore, I was interested to note why scholars, when they did tackle the phenomena as a worthy academic pursuit, felt the need to defend, not their subjects, but their interest in such.

My efforts to read the Miss America Pageant from a historical and feminist prospective proved challenging. While I identified very specific moments in feminist history, notably the 1968 “No More Miss America” protest and the work of the suffragettes, which aided in the
vilification of the pageant as a feminist pursuit, I was continually struck by my own admiration and identification with both movements. Numerous instances throughout my research and writing of this study, I found myself re-thinking my own agenda. Given the pageant requirements that perpetuate female display, second-wave feminist scholarship would vilify pageants and the performance of femininity ingrained in such. Still, I continued to question, like many feminist scholars who study pageants, what the phenomena holds for the women who choose to participate. What is more, in looking at the historical construction of the Miss America pageant and its inception on the Atlantic City Boardwalk as a part of the Fall Frolic, I was able to render a direct connection between the very first pageants and the local festival pageants. Not only did I find that both pageants employed the queen pageant contestants as a sales tool for the community and festival, but that the performance of femininity contained in the pageant was a celebrated enactment. I contend, then, that the pageant stage provides contestants, past and present, a public sphere wherein they are an active subject. While the prescriptions of the pageant performance were inscribed with the notions of Victorian womanhood, the early Miss America Pageant provided a space set apart from the domestic sphere. Too, in the local festival pageants, the contestants are featured in the public space of the pageant and honored outside of the traditional and gendered role of homemaker. They are, in essence, celebrated as much, if not more, than the farmer’s commodity. The local pageant queen is a spokesperson representing the whole community both during festival time and throughout the year. Thus, in the comparison of the early Miss America Pageants and the local festival pageants I attempted not to reclaim the history as “feminist,” but renegotiated the interpretations of the historical pageant utilizing a feminist lens. I hoped to analyze the historical and societal implications
implied by pageant performance with a consideration of the women who have, do, and will choose to perform in pageantry.

The primary foci of my research were the case studies of the four Ohio Food Festivals I attended. Throughout the project I have maintained that I cannot deny my own background, education, social, and cultural stance. Thus, in audiencing the festivals and experiencing them from an “outsiders” viewpoint, my “story” affected the story I told in these pages. My experience of growing up in a small and agricultural community as well as participating in pageants all colored my fieldwork. Additionally, as I my research included travel small Ohio communities I had never before visited, I would be amiss not to confirm my self proclaimed outsider status. Even as one of the functions of festival celebration is to promote tourism in each small town, the purpose is achieved by honoring the hard work and social values of the people of each individual community. Festival celebration is, among many things, a time of homecoming. As such, attending the festivals for my research alone and with my notebook in hand often signified, for me, a sense of disbelonging. In stating this, I am not suggesting that the communities did not “welcome” my attendance. I am simply acknowledging my perception that the field can be a lonely place. Yet, this solitary experience has advantages. As I researcher, I was able to “take in” the activities, events, and participants of the festival celebration without comment or discussion from companions. All but one of the festivals, the Milan Melon Festival, I attended singularly. Given my self proclaimed outsider status, I found that one of the festival’s functions, serving as a homecoming for residents and former residents alike, was ever present.

A second function of festival celebration is to present an ‘ideal” vision of community. At the festivals I attended the ideal was perpetuated, in part, through the presentation and admiration of each community’s agricultural and economic accomplishments. I was struck by the novelty
and playfulness contained in the ways in which the food was presented. What is more, I was also surprised by the sometimes lack of the celebrated food in its “original” form during the festival event. Certainly, this was not the case at every festival. Still, and for example, the Milan Melon Festival presented one lone melon stand as compared to the Circleville Pumpkin Show which featured blocks and blocks of colorful gourds in all shapes and sizes. Given both examples, a commonality of all of the festivals, with regard to the celebrated food, was how the community incorporated the commodity in useful, yet novel (and sometimes inedible) ways. From muskmelon ice cream and grape stomping contests – to sweet tomato fudge and a gigantic pumpkin pie – the celebrated food suggested not only economic prosperity, but also insider status. The knowledge of how to create, incorporate, perform, and promote the festival food remained an indication of communal identity. Therefore, with regard to the festival food, it wasn’t necessary what was being celebrated but how the community maintained the crops’ usefulness and novelty.

In celebrating the harvest, the community festival, in turn, celebrates the accomplishments of the male producer. The food item then is “made” useful by the female caregiver through incorporation of the food into edible treats which are sold at various community sponsored booths throughout the town’s designated streets. Finally, the food is represented by the “Miss Homegrown” pageant queen whose status is confirmed by both her knowledge of the food and its history as well as through her performance of femininity. In her symbolic representation of the celebrated food, the local pageant queen promotes the agricultural successes and furthers the values maintained by her community. As such, the performance of femininity maintained by the local festival pageant is a celebrated performance.
The characteristics of the performance of femininity presented and incorporated on the local festival pageant stage were unique to each festival. Similarities were existent, but for the most part, the structures and requirements of the pageants were as different as the celebrated food itself. Therefore, throughout the case studies, I noted my experience and highlighted the aspects, including pageant structure and requirements of the contestants, in an effort to identify the individual social values presented by the performance of femininity in each community. From the pageant to the parade, the festival queen incorporates the performance of femininity in a representative display to promote her community.

The promotion of the festival is, to my mind, the primary function of the local pageant queen. Miss Homegrown promotes her community at her own festival as well as throughout the state of Ohio. The construction of femininity required to win this opportunity to promote, however, differs from community to community. As I noted, at the Milan Melon Festival, the contestants were silent in their presentation—walking and smiling from one end of the stage to the other. At the Reynoldsburg Tomato Festival, the pageant consisted solely of questions posed to the contestants. Furthermore, at the Miss Grapette Pageant, the participants were engaged in a variety of performance categories including causal wear, evening gown, and a self composed sponsor commercial. Thus, through the different structures of the festival pageants and the subsequent feminine performance enacted in the presented categories, I argue, the values of community were presented. The feminine performance is always maintained, but how it is enacted through the pageant structure is undeniably unique.

What is more, in comparison with the Miss America pageant, the local festival pageants, to a greater or lesser extent, tend less to mediated beauty standards. This is not to state that the feminine performance is not evident or required in the local pageants, but the stereotypical and
appearance focused elements of such a performance (flawless skin, perfect hair, thin and waiflike bodies) are granted less importance on the local pageant stage. The contestants of the local pageants (and for that matter the winners) were of all shapes and sizes. Still, as was confirmed by the Milan Melon Pageant, because the local pageant queen is publicly representing her community, the audiences of the pageants are deeply invested in the selection of the winner. As I revealed, certain community members blatantly, but anonymously, noted their views concerning the “inability” of the 2007-2008 Milan Melon Queen to “fit” the mediated “beauty” standard. Thus, I cannot deny, the traditional feminine expectations put in place by pageantry, even on the local level, at times, remain consistent.

I also witnessed the inability to “properly” execute the enactment of the feminine performance at the Reynoldsburg Tomato Festival luncheon. In this case, the food that was being celebrated by the host festival seemingly posed a threat to the visiting queens and attendants. The “messy” tomato sauce contained the possibility to mar the feminine costumes of the young women. As such, an accidental spill would certainly ruin the public display that was expected of the winners and the group photograph that was to follow. The requisite bodily control put in place by the performance of femininity was acknowledged in various examples through my project: From mannered eating habits; to standing up straight, turning and posing properly; as well as keeping ones’ hands securely behind the back when speaking all proved examples of the regulated body maintenance mandated by the local pageant stage.

Still, the performance of femininity enacted on the local pageant stage is not only is valued by the community at large, but also creates community among the pageant participants and their chaperones. The “insider” information shared in the establishment of the feminine community presented itself in both public and private settings. The advice from the outgoing
queens on the public pageant stage at the Milan Melon Festival and the sharing of chaperone “tips” on travel and grooming at the private luncheon are just two examples of the shared experience of that creates a female community through local pageantry.

Consequently, in this intimate community, I found that traditional gender roles were upheld. In the role of chaperone, the mothers of the young women were responsible for the private domestic duties of aiding the proper presentation of their daughters’ appearance. They selected and purchased gowns, curled hair, and applied makeup. The fathers’ duties included the construction and pulling of the parade float in order to display their daughter in the public arena. Much like the gender roles upheld at the festival, the farmer as producer of the harvest and the farmer’s spouse as the caregiver providing nourishment from the harvest, the gendered roles of the chaperones remain in place in the human harvesting of pageant queens. Too, the burdens of the community representation fall upon the shoulders of both parents as they invest their time and money into maintaining the feminine performance.

Perhaps this required parental commitment is one of the reasons that family is honored and acknowledged in the pageant. An inclusion that was present at every local festival pageant I attended was biographical information about each young woman. Sometimes the biography was related by the contestant herself and at other times it was read by a master of ceremonies, but the information contained in each instance was, for the most part, consistent. The biographies surely featured the importance of community values and family. Through each contestant’s biography, the audience was informed of the young women’s contributions to her community including her participation in high school activities and community organizations. The recognition of her parents and, sometimes, siblings also contributed to the public lauding of her parents as producers of a proper and successful young woman. Finally, the biographies noted the higher
education that the contestants would soon pursue attributing each representative as a scholar and
citizen of the world outside of her hometown. The community, indeed, has “grown” upstanding young women: “the achievements of the candidates are the achievements of the community itself, for it is the community that has formed them and has given them the opportunities to excel” (Lavenda 36: 1996). In light of these few examples, and the examples of case studies throughout my study of the local pageant performance, I maintain that community value is embodied, inscribed, upheld, and celebrated through the performance of femininity enacted by the pageant queen.

Upon the conclusion of my travels to the local festivals, I completed my ethnographic research with interviews of local pageant contestants. In keeping with a feminist methodology, I realized the necessity of including the voice of actual participants. As my own pageant experience and, too, my experience in the field at the festivals was singular, I attempted to enrich my project by speaking to women who lived the pageant performance and include a multiplicity of female voices. This technique was challenging. Initially, I had a very difficult time recruiting contestants who would allow me to speak with them. Naturally, but unforeseen by me at the time of my attendance, the local festivals were not the venue to speak with the respondents as they were much too busy attending to their festival duties. Admittedly, my first recruitment efforts were an utter failure. I eventually discovered that, at least in my experience during this project, if a respondent is familiar with your work outside of your project she might be more likely to speak to you in an interview setting. What is more, once I secured one interview, it led to a second, and so on. Therefore, the respondents I interviewed were all local pageant participants, but not necessarily competitors of the pageants I audenced. If I was to continue to research this subject, this is an element I would like to change. Nevertheless, I am not
discrediting the knowledge and opportunity afforded me by speaking to the young women I was able to recruit. What I found through the interviews with the respondents regarding the pageant performance was surprising, enlightening, and, at times, predictable.

In my interviews I employed, feminist and pageant scholar Sara Banet-Weiser’s theory. She notes that pageant participants are certainly aware of the feminine performance required of pageant competition and in their enactment of the performance are “active thinking subjects” (24). Based upon the respondents’ words, I noted the ways in which this active subjectivity is manifested and perceived by the women themselves. I was informed that the feminine performance on the pageant stage is a conscious, skilled, and even enjoyable enactment. The young women I spoke with did not deny the femininity required to compete on the pageant stage, they willingly embraced it. The respondents cited several of the opportunities it granted them. For example, a public platform in which to “sing” for an audience and the celebrity status they gained during festival celebration. The young women also noted the numerous rewards of the performance, tangible and otherwise, remarking that the monetary rewards to be won at some pageants were primary motivation for many to compete. In short, the respondents identified their performance of femininity on the pageant stage as one of agency. What they were adamant to dis-identify with, however, was the construction of the beauty queen as an ideal.

All of the young women I spoke with commented upon the stereotypical pageant girl: The perfect and flawless “Barbie doll” figure with nary a thought in her mind. Perhaps the American popular cultural proliferation of the negative and purely bodily construction of the beauty queen ideal inspired the respondents to set themselves apart from such without my prompting. In their denial of the expectation put in place by the ideal, the notion that the ideal is ever-present, yet still imaginary was further confirmed. This, however, does not suggest that
portions of the constructed ideal are present on the pageant stage. The performance femininity through the constant’s donning of evening wear and heels firmly remains in place. What is more, the contestants oft pointed how the performance is taught and aided by older female mentors. Thus, the pageant stage in an arena where the performance of femininity is not only enacted, but also upheld and repeated. The repetition is enacted from the tips and advice given by the female mentors (many who had participated in pageant themselves) and through the borrowing and/or sharing of the feminine costumes required to compete. The female community that is created out of the system of pageantry, I learned from interviewing the respondents, while perpetuating the tenets of femininity, is also highly regarded and valued.

The value situated in the performance of femininity in the local pageants, then presents itself in a variety of different ways. While I found that contestants do not literally, or even symbolically, identify their representation with the festival food, the young women certainly note their role is to speak for and about their community. While most of the respondents did not claim feminism as a practice they willingly embraced, to my mind, the opportunities put in place by participating and winning a local pageant crown provides tenets that feminism propounds. Therefore, as I have done throughout this project, I believe that pageants can be a feminine and feminist space. A space that, despite its deep seeded historical and pop cultural associations with the traditional feminine ideal, deserves scholarly and feminist attention. In my efforts to examine the local food festivals and the pageants featured within them, I have hoped to contribute to previous and future academic efforts that privilege the performance of pageantry and the women who participate in such.
Expanded Interpretive Research

While I touch upon several aspects of pageantry in my project, I do not confront the constructions of class and/or race inherent in the pageant system. The local pageants I attended, for the most part, maintained the construction of whiteness. While I endeavored to explore the performance of femininity present in the pageants, I do not deny that this performance is, too, assembled from white, middle-class values. A further area for research could contain an examination of how the small and somewhat rural communities of my study uphold standards of whiteness through the selection and celebration of the pageant queen.

Furthermore, in relation to my positioning within the narrative of my study as related through my experience of attending the festivals and my construction of the responses from the interviews with pageant contestants, my project could explore more completely my status as a researcher. With regard to the interviews, in my attempt to privilege the voices of the respondents, I, at times, understate the reasoning for my approach thereby unintentionally removing myself from the conversation on the page. My construction of the interview questions, my reasoning for including the specific responses, and my status as “academic” researcher in relation to my respondents provides an opportunity for further exploration.

Concluding Thoughts

In this dissertation I have considered the performance of femininity as a conscious enactment on the pageant stage. The feminine performance has been and continues to remain a point of contention for feminist scholarship. True, participation in pageantry, I do not deny, asks young women to adorn their bodies in traditional evening gowns and modest swimsuits and walk basic and simple patterns displayed before an audience to be judged. Yet, I have argued
throughout these pages, that the performance of femininity in local festival pageants is one celebrated by community, rather than a purely a displayed objectification of the female body. In doing such, I believe the possibility to read and experience the local pageant performance as one of empowerment and opportunity for the young women who chose to participate is presented.
Bibliography


“About the Festival.” Geneva Grape JAMboree. 22 Aug. 2007

<http://www.grapejamboree.com/about.html>.


---. “Melon Festival Fun Last Through Monday.” Sandusky Register 2 Sept. 2007. 3 Sept. 2007


Lavenda, Robert H. Corn Fests and Water Carnivals: Celebrating Community in Minnesota.


<http://www.missamerica.org/>.


Respondent A. Personal Interview. 16 Nov. 2007.


*Looking For Volunteers *

- You are invited to be in a research study on local Ohio Queen Pageants.

- My name is Heather Williams. I am a graduate student at Bowling Green State University. As part of my work on my Doctor of Philosophy degree in the Department of Theatre and Film, I am conducting a research study of food festivals and the pageants that are featured in the festival.

- This study is being conducted for my dissertation: *Miss Homegrown: Food, Festival, and Femininity in Local Queen Pageants*.

- The purpose of this study is to determine the ways in which you, as a pageant contestant, are celebrated by your community. I am also interested in the details involved in participating in a local pageant. And additionally, what it means to you to represent your community as a festival pageant participant.

- This study involves answering a series of interview questions that I will ask you. I would like to set up a personal interview with you. This interview can take place at the location and time of your choosing.

- If you are interested in being a part of my study or have any additional questions, please contact me, **Heather Williams at 419-308-7576 or via email: williah@bgsu.edu**.

- Or, provide me with your and (if you are under the age of 18) your parent or guardian’s contact information below and I will get in touch with you directly. **NOTE: This does not mean you have agreed to participate in the study.** Please provide name(s), email(s) and or phone number(s):

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>(name)</th>
<th>(email)</th>
<th>(phone)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>(name of parent/guardian)</th>
<th>(email)</th>
<th>(phone)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

- Thank you very much. Your time is greatly appreciated.
APPENDIX B

Interview Questions
Dissertation: Miss Homegrown: Food, Festival, and Femininity in Local Queen Pageants

A. General Knowledge

1. How would you describe yourself?
2. What are your interests and hobbies?
3. How would you describe your community?
4. How long have you lived in this community?
5. How would you describe the festival that the Miss_______Pageant is a part of?

B. The Art of Pageantry

1. How did you get interested in pageants?
2. How many pageants have you participated in?
3. If you have participated in more than one pageant, can you describe the differences, if any, of each of them?
4. Why did you decide to enter the Miss_______Pageant?
5. What did you have to do to enter the Miss_______ Pageant? In other words, what, if any, where the qualifications to participate?
6. How did you prepare for the Miss________ Pageant?
7. What categories were included in the Miss_______ Pageant?
8. How did you prepare for each of these categories?
9. What is your favorite part of the Miss__________ Pageant? Why?
10. What is your least favorite part of the Miss__________ Pageant? Why?
11. What qualities do you think the judges’ looked for in the winning queen and runners up?
12. What, if any, awards did you win in the Miss__________Pageant?
13. Would you consider the Miss _________ Pageant a beauty pageant, a scholarship pageant, or both, or neither? Will you explain your answer for me?

14. Was your participation in the Miss_______ Pageant a rewarding experience for you? Why or Why not?

15. (If this is the case) why do you think that males are not allowed to compete in the Miss ______ Pageant?

16. Do you believe that pageants are a type of performance? Why or why not?

17. Do you believe that pageants can be considered feminist? Why or why not?

18. Do you consider yourself a feminist? Why or why not?

C. Miss America Pageants

1. Do you/have you ever watched the Miss America pageant?

2. What do you think about the Miss America pageant?

3. How do you think the Miss America pageant is different or similar from the one you participated in?

D. Community

1. What values do you think are important to your community?

2. Do you think it is important to include the pageant as a part of the _________ festival? Why or why not?

3. How do you feel about representing your community as Miss _________ or as a Miss-__________ contestant?

4. How do you feel your individuality is valued within the festival and the pageant?

5. Can you tell me a little about the food that is celebrated during the festival?

6. Describe what it means to you to represent this food as Miss__________ or as a Miss_________ contestant.

7. How important do you feel is that food to your community?

8. Do you associate yourself with the celebrated festival food? How so? How not?

E. Festival
1. Other than the festival pageant, what other activities do you participate in at the festival?

2. What is your favorite part of the festival? Why?

3. Other than the__________ festival, what other events do you have to attend during the year as Miss________ or as a Miss________contestant?

4. Is their any other aspects of the festival, your community, or the pageant you would like to share with me?
Informed Consent Form

I. Purpose/Benefits

A. You are invited to be in a research study on local Ohio Queen Pageants. I am a graduate student at Bowling Green State University. As part of my work on my Doctor of Philosophy degree in the Department of Theatre and Film, I am conducting a research study of food festivals and the pageants that are featured in such festivals.

B. This study is being conducted for my dissertation: Miss Homegrown: Food, Festival, and Femininity in Local Queen Pageants.

C. The purpose of this study is to determine the ways in which you, as a pageant contestant, are celebrated by your community. I am also interested in the details involved in participating in a local pageant. And additionally, what it means to you to represent your community as a festival pageant participant.

II. Procedure

A. This study involves answering a series of interview questions that I will ask you. I will also be using an audio tape recorder to record the interview for later transcription. The tapes will only be heard by me, will be secured in a locked box, and will be destroyed at the end of one year (in August of 2008).

B. This study will ask you to meet with me in person at a location of your choosing.

C. You have been recruited for this study because you have participated as a contestant in a local festival Queen pageant.

D. I anticipate that I will interview, including you, approximately 12 – 15 pageant participants. These subjects will be recruited from several different festival pageants throughout the state of Ohio.

E. Your participation in this study is completely voluntary, and you can refrain from answering any questions without penalty or explanation. Additionally, if you decide to participate and change your mind later, you may withdraw your consent and stop your participation at any time without penalty or explanation.
III. Time required

A. I estimate that your participation will take approximately one – two hour’s time. We will only meet once.

IV. Risks

A. The anticipated risks to you by participating in this study are no greater than those normally encountered in daily life.

V. Benefits

A. This study may provide new scholarly research regarding pageantry, especially pageants that are termed “local” rather than National (for example, The Miss America Pageant). By participating in this study, you can provide me with an insider’s view of what it is like to be a contestant in a local festival pageant. Although you may not get any direct benefit from your participation, you will be helping to add to the scholarly/academic research about local pageants by describing your individual experience. This is very important to me because often times this personal voice is left out of scholarly/academic research.

VI. Participant’s rights as a subject

A. I will protect the confidentiality of you as a respondent and your responses throughout the study and possible publication of study results. I may quote your interview answers within the text of my study, but I will not use your real name. I may, however, discuss the pageant in which you were a contestant in conjunction with your quoted answers.

B. Again, the audio tape of the interview will only be viewed by me and will be destroyed at the end of the study.

C. You may withdraw from the study at any time or refuse to take part in any activity in which you feel uncomfortable. There are no consequences associated with withdrawal from the study.

D. You have the right to ask me any questions concerning the study.

E. You may request a summary or a copy of the results of the study.

F. You will be provided with and should retain a copy of the consent document for your records.

VII. Contact information of the researcher and advisor for questions about the study

A. If you have any questions or comments about this study, you can contact me, Heather Williams at (419) 308-7576 or williah@bgsu.edu or Dr. Jonathan Chambers, my dissertation advisor, at (419) 372-9618 or jonathc@bgsu.edu.
VIII. Contact information for HSRB for questions or concerns about rights as a research participant

A. If you have questions about the conduct of this study or your rights as a research participant, you may contact the Chair of Bowling Green State University’s Human Subjects Review Board at (419) 372-7716 or hsr@bgsu.edu.

IX. Signature and date lines

A. By signing this form you and your parent or guardian (if participant is under the age of 18 years) have read the document, had all of your questions regarding the study answered, and agree to participate in the study.

B. By signing only the signature of the participant, you are stating that you are 18 years of age or older, have read the document, had all of your questions regarding the study answered, and agree to participate in the study.

_____________________________________________________________________________
(Signature of participant)        (Date)
_____________________________________________________________________________
(Signature of parent/guardian)        (Date)