

# BEAUTY PAGEANTS AND THE SELF

Beauty Pageants And The Self: An Autoethnography

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### Abstract

Beauty pageants are widely accepted social institutions that exist throughout contemporary, global society. Historically and up to present, they have received little attention in the realm of formal research, yet they continue to perpetuate certain feminine ideals that have negative implication for the young women who participate in them. The esoteric nature of these organizations allows them to impose hegemonic values of femininity onto young women. The author uses her own experience in a pageant by using autoethnography as her method. Her purpose in using this method is to show how the institution of beauty pageantry acts as a site that perpetuates the hegemonic values of beauty onto young women, while also objectifying contestants during the process. The narrative created from her research situates the reader into her consciousness during the situated experience as a candidate during beauty pageant training. This process allows the reader to understand the esoteric life world of the beauty pageant context. The narrative alludes to the objectification of beauty pageant candidates during participation in the program. By showing the reader into this life world, the researcher reveals how the experience has shaped her personal values of beauty, femininity, and propriety. Ultimately, the research process created through autoethnography allows the audience to engage with the experience of being in a beauty pageant, thus revealing insights about the nature of these organizations which bears the potential to instigate social change.

*Key words:* beauty pageants, autoethnography, femininity, objectification, hegemony, esoteric.

### **Beauty Pageants and the Self**

Leading up to each January, a beauty pageant program publishes advertising in local newspapers of the Canadian town, Cape Bridgefar.<sup>2</sup> The program seeks young women who wish to participate in their training program, which leads to the annual pageant in July. The young women who seek to participate in such a program must endure formal interviewing to ensure their favourable attributes and aptitude for the program. Another requirement of the young women is to acquire a business sponsor who will fund their participation for candidate training. At the naïve age of seventeen, I was introduced to the “prestigious” Miss Cape Bridgefar program. I received praise from family, friends, and community members for meeting all required qualifications to participate as one of twelve “privileged” young women.

The City of Cape Bridgefar is not alone in its hosting of beauty pageant training and events for young women. Beauty pageants exist at a multinational level. In fact, the beauty pageants have existed globally for many generations, in various ways (see Mattsson & Pettersson, 2007). These social contexts are esoteric and can be evaluated from several perspectives; however, one characteristic they have in common is that they continue to operate over, and influence the lives of impressionable young women.

After gaining insights about sociological theory (C.W. Mills, 1959, p. 24) and qualitative research (see Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2011), I began to identify the unique nature of my personal experience in a pageant as a topic for further investigation. The process initiated from my choice to analyze my pageant experience in a sociological

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<sup>2</sup> This is a pseudonym used to protect the privacy of the actual town represented in this research. The reason for disguising the name, here, is to alleviate focus from the geographical location, and draw more attention to the topic of the research.

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theory paper. The experience of writing the paper lead me to expand on the introspection of my participation in a community organized beauty pageant competition. I then formed a link between qualitative research methods and my theoretical interpretations to achieve a deeper understanding of the ways in which this experience affected me. I chose to use autoethnography as a research method, which has allowed me to learn about myself, and realize how my experiences were situated in a specific cultural context.

Applying the use of a feminist, critical perspective on my situated-experience has enabled me to evaluate the negative consequences associated with pageantry that effect how I value beauty, and also for the other young women who participate in them. I believe that the nature of these organizations, that coordinate young women to actively engage in beauty pageant events and training, is problematic. The program evaluates young women on their performance of several tasks throughout the experience. Most of the evaluations are applied to the candidates' embodiment of a certain aesthetic and public presentation. The evaluations are then used as a measure to calculate the winner of the pageant at the end of candidate training. I would like to identify how the institution of beauty pageants perpetuates hegemonic femininity by deconstructing the ways in which beauty is valued in them. The hegemonic femininity that I discuss throughout is defined by a Western, normative ideal that is generally perpetuated in media, mainstream magazines, and advertising (Wolf, 1992, p. 61).

Business sponsoring, which funds the operation of most beauty pageants, enables programs to use well-rounded young women as objects for advertisement. In my own experience as a candidate for this type of program, I was required to wear a banner with a business sponsor's title to every event. During those instances, I was embodying the

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representation of that business and a certain cultural aesthetic. By representing another's business, I became disconnected from myself, objectified as an advertisement, and thus dehumanized (Mattsson & Pettersson, 2007, p. 237).

Wearing a banner was one of the many tasks I performed in order to complete the program successfully. My experience in the pageant is a part of the institutional use of well-rounded young women to perform in various social situations that benefit a third party for advertising purposes. The social dynamic created has several negative implications for dehumanizing young women, also negatively defining their internal value of beauty.

### **Autoethnography: A Way Of Showing**

The autoethnographic research method that I draw upon for this project will expose readers to the innermost thoughts and feelings I had during my gendered experiences in a Canadian beauty pageant. My choice to employ autoethnography as a method entails the use of myself as a subject of my own research (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2011, p. 210). Using autoethnography is a research production that attaches meaning to my personal experiences and provides me with the gift of telling (Giorgio, 2009, p. 162).

The journey will express the thoughts and feelings I had during my training in the pageant program, while identifying their relation to the social roles, relationships, and structures to the context of beauty pageants in Canada (Bochner & Ellis, 2002, p. 378). Based on the interpretation of my experience, I critically assumed that beauty pageants perpetuate Western hegemonic values of beauty and objectify young women for advertising. The standpoint I use is derived from my personal values and background in

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sociology, and in no way renders my interpretations about the nature and effects of beauty pageants as universal.

Autoethnography is a useful method for this project because it situates the audience into my personal subjectivity as they witness my storytelling. My purpose in using autoethnography is to teach about a specific state or state of affairs, specifically related to the experience of participation in a beauty pageant (p. 380). The insights I have gained through evaluating my experiences in the beauty pageant gain meaning through my expression when my audience engages with the “lifeworld” of my lived experience (Van Manen, 1990). The research method purposefully introduces my self-experience with a sociocultural connection, and applies it to the research process (Reed-Danahay, 1997). It provides the audience with a clear lens through which to see and feel the topic of the research.

This method is a recently developed qualitative mode of inquiry that challenges conventional ways of doing research by incorporating a focus on the self (Bochner & Ellis, 2002). Its method has emerged into a world of knowledge and research that was founded during the Enlightenment by an empirical philosophy of science that privileged positivism as valid scientific inquiry (Ramazanoglu and Holland, 2002). Positivism has shaped science and research, and also poses challenges to qualitative rationale, especially in feminist research practice. It rests on the claim that “there is a knowable reality that exists independent of the research project” (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2010, p. 8). Positivism denies the researcher the ability to focus on the ‘self’ for research. Not only does autoethnography challenge positivism, it also challenges Western discourses of individuality (Amit & Dyck, 2006). It challenges these discourses by granting the

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researcher agency to make claims about personal lived experience, also allowing the creation of ethnographic data without having to depend on others (2006).

Narrative portrayals of my personal insights, related to training seminars on how to apply makeup and how to stand, are used as analytical sites. The autoethnographical method allows me to display information that delves into my consciousness. This is achieved when an audience reads my personalized descriptions of my experience in pageant training. The audience is granted the ability to discern with my struggle to define my feminine identity and feel the impact of training on my self-esteem. The narrative doubly functions as a channel that shows the pageant experience, and also provides specific indicators as data to support my criticism of the institution of pageants.

Narrative excerpts conveying the innermost thoughts and feelings I had during training in a contemporary beauty pageant expose readers to my vulnerable consciousness. These passages pose as evidence to support the notions that these social institutions perpetuate western aesthetic ideals of femininity, hegemonic influence, and the objectification of young women for advertisement.

The training process and duties that I had during my experience in a beauty pageant-training program have stuck with me, marking a significant period in my life. To convert these instances into ethnographic data I have created a narrative to display my experiences from the beauty pageant training process. In a way, I am forming a map of my experiences and including myself in the political process of representing evaluative claims about pageantry (Etherington, 2004).

I have chosen to use my own experience as a tool to reveal the multiple truths that exist about beauty pageants and their administration. My experience in beauty pageant

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training has shaped my definition of what it means to be beautiful, and also grants me the ability to reflect and destabilize those definitions. It is important to me that others understand the process of my lived experience in beauty pageant training. I hope to create awareness about the detriments of beauty pageantry for young women through my research. From this process, I gain personal liberation while also providing the opportunity to promote conversation among others who may be affected by experiences similar to my own.

### **Beauty Pageants As Social Institutions**

My research is based in a feminist epistemological framework. It is concerned with the gendered experiences I had during my training in a beauty pageant. Feminist approaches to research vary according to the method and research topic. According to Ramazanoglu and Holland (2002) “there is no universal definition of what is or what is not feminist,” (p. 146). Rather, the approaches to research that consider the multifaceted nature of gender relations are the ones considered most “feminist” (Beetham & Demetriades, 2007). My approach is feminist because it delves into my experiences during candidate training as the specific context constructing gendered styles of social practice. According to Judith Butler, “gender is an identity... instituted in an exterior space through a stylized repetition of acts.” (in Banet-Weiser, 2006, p. 89).

The critical assumptions I apply to my experience in pageant training pertain to the ways in which I embodied a certain gender identity. The training was systematic in its pursuits to maintain surveillance over my embodiment of a gender identity that replicated the feminine ideal of a contemporary pageant contestant. McGregory (2004) asserts that the dynamic in North American beauty pageants becomes the institutional site of



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reproduction for idealized femininity, fulfilling “the western aesthetic of beauty,” (p. 127).

### HEGEMONY

The common justification for beauty pageant training is that it empowers and builds self-esteem in young women. The prospect of learning how to “beautify” myself through training seemed positive; many women engage in beautification as a form of pleasure and bonding (Cahill, 2004, p. 44). The sense of community and affiliation that develops from the engagement with beautification is far less than negative. Nonetheless, common ideological understandings of beauty pageants are limited due to the esoteric nature of these organizations.

*The end of my first speech night is moments away—so I think. The relief after completing such a task makes me proud of myself for making it through. Before I can even begin to taste my pride, Ingrid and Lori remind me of the anxious feelings I had before the speech. The evening turns grey as I begin to hear grim murmurs from program coordinators. With parents and sponsors in attendance, the room starts to overflow with seriousness and attentive eyes.*

*The program treasurer clears her throat to draw attention from the room. I notice the wrinkles and veins showing in her hands as she clasps a formal document. She wears reading glasses that magnify the thick shimmering eye shadow and clumped eyelashes on her face. Slowly and monotonously, she describes the list-like parameters of the expected commitment to the program.*

*The lists. The limits. They are daunting and uninviting. My life will be very constrained by this. I will carry the responsibility to act as a representative, not only for my sponsor, but also for the program. No bikinis? What about the beach in summer? What about my social life? Pivotal thoughts creep up my neck and into my mind. At the same time, eager supporters of my participation surround me. My focus is shifted to figuring out how to please them.*

*I glance at my sponsor, who is sitting two seats down from me. He shoots a grin back at me. We’ve already made it through one speech. I’m pretty much committed. I would be letting him down after all of the interest he has put forward in my ability to complete this program successfully. He knows best, he is an adult. He’s mature and smart. I don’t question his advice to commit because I know he is an experienced and successful person.*

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*At my side, I feel the warmth of my mother's shoulder. She squints at me and presses her lips into a half-smile of excitement. I can't tell if she realizes the uncertainty in my thoughts. I can't let her down, either. She wants a daughter who is competent. She wants to brag to her friends about the great things I am doing with my life. She wants to feel secure about a bright future for me, and she sees it in this program.*

Despite the limited knowledge of the internal nature and institutional climate of beauty pageants, they continue to receive wide acceptance by society. It appears that most young women enter into the pageant voluntarily.

Critics of my initiative to complete my autoethnography for this project include my own family and friends. They try to remind me that I “volunteered to join the pageant.” And there is no denying this fact. I willingly entered the pageant, with enthusiasm, too. But I would like to prod the parameters of my decision.

Leading figures in my life, such as my parents and employer at the time, strongly encouraged my participation in the pageant. This encouragement constitutes the hegemonic influence that was imposed onto me to make my decision (Gramsci, 1989, p. 118). Dominant ideologies within society value beauty pageants as a site of self-improvement, as manifested by family and community members. These symbols functioned to persuade my decision for entering the pageant. If it were not for the dominant imposition of these values, I may not have chosen to enter the pageant. The training to actively engage in self-improvement practices and community events is a valued component for young women's development.

## FEEDBACK LEADS TO SUCCESS

Beauty pageants train young women on certain aesthetics and public presentation. They are part of the mass cultural production of western feminine ideals in North

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American society (Wolf, 1992, p. 65). This is problematic because it revolves around an “obsessive pursuit [as] the central torment for many women’s lives,” (Bordo, 1993, p. 167). The repercussions of such training can potentially bear in the minds of young women for the rest of their lives. Bordo’s discussion of these ideals, as learned through bodily discourse, acknowledges severe eating disorders that have become part of western constructions of femininity (p. 170). Beauty pageants systematically facilitate these constructions of femininity.

*Some candidates and I share pleasant conversation in the lobby that is lit by an orange glow, reflecting from the setting summer sun. It’s an open area with modern furniture, situated just outside of the dining area where we will be enjoying tonight’s etiquette dinner as part of our training. I have to remind myself that I am not looking in the mirror. Each of us wears our tailored appearance outfit, different but the same, even down to our matching black high heels. These outfits have become a regular part of our routine attire. The eyes of people who walk by are drawn to our collective appearance. It’s fun to notice the glances.*

*Catherine enters the lobby hastily as the last attendee. My eyes are drawn to her flat shoes as they deviate from our standard appearance. She walks toward our group with a casual step. I realize that I am not the only one who notices, when all eyes turn to her shoes. Without explanation, Lori and Ingrid whisper into her ear and remove her from the area for what seems to be a private meeting.*

*A moment later, the three of them re-enter the room where we have begun receiving instruction from a flamboyant elderly lady with white hair, wearing an outfit that is entirely sunshine-yellow. Among the discussion of the rules of conduct associated with dining, I can’t help but notice the flustered expression on Catherine’s face. She stands, shrugging her shoulders, staring down at the floor.*

*Before we commence eating for the etiquette meal, Catherine’s father arrives at the building to pick her up from the venue before dinner is served and she is sent home. In an attempt to cloak the situation as menial, Lori and Ingrid clasp Catherine’s shoulders to shuffle her out of the room. I glance around the room and lock wide eyes with fellow candidates.*

*Ingrid initiates a word with us before we begin eating. “Girls, I’m sure you all saw Catherine’s shoes earlier. This is unacceptable. Not only has she*

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*offended the program, but she has also offended the establishment that hosts us for this dinner event. We can't stress it enough how important your appearance is throughout this process, for the representation of this program, but also for your business sponsors. Please remember to adhere to the standards we have taught you, here. You will increase your chances of winning at pageant by doing so. Everyone is always watching and the details stand out to us."*

In this described instance, the receptive feedback of the pageant coordinators negatively inflects into the minds of candidates. They remind the candidates about the importance of adherence to the standards of training in order to succeed. The end result ends is the candidates' internalization of specific social practice that is tailored with certain feminine propriety and aesthetics.

### APPEARANCE

I have identified specific instances from my experience in training within a pageant that parallel with the cultural production of western ideals of femininity. By presenting my audience with a personal narrative, I am showing readers how I my thoughts were affected by the seminars that focused their topics around feminine aesthetics.

*Lori and Ingrid take pride in their delegation of the other girls and myself. They examine each of us with constructive intention. Sizing us up. They both squint one eye when looking us over. It's as if they are mixing ingredients for baking, verifying whether the milk aligns with the "one cup" line in a measuring glass. They both cleverly point their fingers at us with lacquered nails, and clasp my shoulders to adjust where I'm standing. My steps are forced sideways, and backwards. As I lean on my heels, I reach out with my arms to restore balance.*

*I realize my final designated spot when Lori and Ingrid are no longer shuffling me around. My right shoulder touches another girl, who is slightly taller than I am. On my left, there is no one. Looking further to my right, I notice that all twelve of us are standing side-by-side in a line.*

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*Lori and Ingrid clap and shriek upon their examination of us as we stand. We are a product of their delegating and shuffling. They are proud to see the alignment between each candidate and the next.*

*I don't always think of myself as a "short" person at five feet plus two inches "tall", but I am reminded of this when they offer an explanation of my placement. I feel cold on my shoulder when I realize the emptiness of no person to my left. The aesthetic we've created with this standing order "benefits my deficient tallness because it creates the illusion that we are gradually increasing in height." Glad I can be cured this way.*

*We must "get comfortable in this standing-order, and remember who we are next to, because we will be using this for standing on stage, and for photos at various public events." Lori and Ingrid are relieved after completing the enduring task of the appearance order formation. They express pride in their efforts by congratulating each other on their perceptions of what looks good.*

*They are both anxiously reminded of the next step to this process after returning to their schedule of events for tonight's training seminar. Ingrid quiets the room to by clearing her throat. With a smirk, she warns us of the usefulness to this new technique, as if she is donating the information for a good cause.*

*I feel as if I was born yesterday as I try to follow the instructions for how to coordinate my body to stand in this way. Awkwardly, I put my left foot forward, and my right foot perpendicular to that. It makes a "T". The posture is unnatural; I arch my back and raise my shoulders. I then point my elbow out to my side at a 90-degree angle. "Make sure there is a gap between your waist and elbow, it's called the 'skinny hole'."*

*While Lori and Ingrid give us these instructions on how to stand with an "S-Curve", they constantly allude to the notion of it being a favour. "You'll be surprised at how well you look in photos. And there will be lots of photos taken of you throughout this experience in the program. We all know it's better to look good!"*

During pageant-training experience, a younger version of myself became acquainted with a regimented routine that consisted of beautifying techniques and public presentation. My time spent in the program was filled with hours of seminar instruction for how to style hair, apply makeup, properly stand, and cross my legs. Essentially, my body became subjugated to "an external regulation, subjection, transformation,

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‘improvement,’” (Bordo, 1993, p. 166). The social institution of the pageant functioned as an external force that regulated my behaviour and feminine appearance to perform as the ideal pageant contestant. The regimen was presented to my former impressionable self as a valuable means to improve my capabilities at being a proper woman.

The purpose of training young girls to properly groom and present themselves is also a mechanism that objectifies beauty as part of an advertising tool. McGregory (2004) discusses the dynamic of pageants as pertinent to a certain “cultural literacy” that constitutes itself in the role of contestants and their relation to the role of the sponsors as coexisting with a set of objectives and rewards (p. 127). These objectives and rewards extend beyond the improvement of the pageant contestant, for if it were not for sponsors, the programs would not operate. Program administrators rendered the skills I learned during the training process as practical and useful for my success in the future, outside the program. What I have come to realize is that the skills I practiced and used during attendance to seminars, speeches, and presentations were used strategically to achieve advertising for sponsors and adequate representation of the program itself.

This mechanism is similarly identified as an oxymoronic “rehearsed spontaneity” in the Miss America pageant (Banet-Weiser, 2006). “The director... advised the contestants to remember what ‘it means to be a representative—you can’t think only about yourself’” (p. 98). The objective of the training is to equip young women with the ability to adhere to certain standards for public appearances that extend beyond their personal benefit. This form of instruction and/or training is a common way that North American pageants administer themselves. In my personal experience, I was required to prepare and perform speeches pertaining to the excellence of my business sponsor. I was

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not given the choice to decide whether or not my sponsor was a good person. Rather, I was told to administer a public presentation that would exemplify his favourable attributes to the community.

In accompaniment to these requirements, the situation demanded that I wear certain formal attire, including a branded silk banner that delineated my “personal” title. The banner was embroidered with large blue letters that spelled my sponsor’s business name. By wearing the banner, I was embodying the representation of that business and became disconnected from my personal identity (Mattsson & Petersson, 2007, p. 236).

The mysticism attached to the meanings behind the symbols within these cultural practices can be expressed through Karl Marx’s theory of commodity fetishism (Marx in McIntosh, 1997). Young women become mediated into social relations that accord with the objective of business sponsors’ want for advertisement (otherwise, why would he/she donate money into such an organization?). Thus, the young women’s interactions with persons at events become material relations. The objectification of young women through these interactions has negative implications for how beauty is valued. A problematizing aspect of this objectification is that it is based in the cultural production of young women who are trained to internalize feminine ideals of beauty as a form of success. The young women internalize this dynamic as a constitutive part of their success as a “proper” woman.

### **Conclusion**

The ideas presented through my autoethnographic data and interpretation shed light on the objectification of young women that occurs in contemporary beauty pageants. I allow my audience to see how and why beauty pageants operate the way that they do

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through my personal descriptions. Creating the narrative provided me with an effective means to convey the answers to my research questions. It demystifies the common esoteric conceptions of beauty pageants by exposing the reader to my experience with the inner-workings of their administration.

The employed use of autoethnography as a method requires me to acknowledge my positionality in this process of knowledge-creation. My participation in this research is inseparable from the social contexts from which I attempt to analyze data. My experience in the pageant did not happen by chance. I must acknowledge that my cultural identity as a researcher in the social sciences have oriented me to document and analyze of my experience, while purposively engaging in it (Anderson, 2006, p. 380). The standpoint I use is derived from my personal values and background in sociology, and in no way renders my interpretations about the nature and effects of beauty pageants as universal. I acknowledge this limitation and recognize that it confines my interpretations to a singular perspective.

I suggest that future researchers combine autoethnography with other methods to broaden their ethnographic perspective. An efficient way of doing this could be achieved if a researcher were to cumulate and interpret autoethnographic data with in-depth interview transcripts of individuals who have experience in pageants. This would be interesting to compare and contrast, as it could potentially lead to substantive parallels that would expand the formal knowledge and understanding of beauty pageants.

Despite these limits encountered from my singular perspective, I can assure my audience of my prolonged participation in the pageant setting, lasting for nineteen



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consecutive months in my life. These factors create a standard upon which I am warranted to evaluate data.

My personal expression of feelings associated with my experience functions as my tool to show the objectification that occurs in these settings. Autoethnography has provided me with a foundation upon which I can address the need for ideological change. Not only do I want my story to be heard and recognized, I want my audience to feel a human relation to my emotional descriptions and acknowledge the existence of injustice in beauty pageants. The message I wish to communicate to my audience is one of emancipation. By identifying with pageant discourse, knowledge is expanded about the objectifying patterns that young women internalize as a result of their participation in beauty pageant training.

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