Pageant Trouble: An Exploration of Gender Transgression in *Little Miss Sunshine*

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Abstract:

Little Miss Sunshine is a recent (2006) film that was popular among various audiences within the United States. Because of its popularity, this film serves as an important representation of cultural norms and ideals since it is through popular culture we learn lessons about gender and race. The plot centers on a dysfunctional white family making a cross-country journey in order to enter their elementary school aged daughter into a beauty pageant. Utilizing Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity, we investigate the relationships between beauty pageants and gender. We also use the film as a site to explore interpellations of femininity and sexuality. We explore how the main character, Olive, disrupts normative gender expectations and behaviors by performing her gender in transgressive ways at the pageant.

1 *Little Miss Sunshine* is a recent (2006) film that was popular among various audiences within the United States. The screen-play was written by first-time writer Michael Arndt and was directed by Jonathon Dayton and Valerie Faris. It was nominated for four Academy Awards and received two, one for Best Original Screen Play and the other for Best Supporting Actor.

2 We argue that *Little Miss Sunshine* is an important text that needs to be theorized for its messages about normalized subjectivities and gendered expectations. Because of its popularity, this film serves as an important representation of cultural norms and ideals since it is through popular culture we learn lessons about gender, race, class, and sexuality. We begin our analysis by outlining Judith Butler's theory of gender performance. We then review the cultural significance of beauty pageants, paying specific attention to feminist critiques of beauty pageants and the cultural norms that they represent. Next, we explain our methods of film analysis that informed our interaction with the text of the film. We follow this with a brief synopsis of the film. Finally, we provide our analysis of the film and explore the implications of the gender representations and interruptions present within the text. Using Butler's theory of gender performance, along with a discussion of post-feminism, we offer our interpretation of the film, arguing that Olive's final performance illustrates important cultural ideals and expectations about gender.

3 It is important to note the social and political climate in which this movie was created and consumed. Many scholars have asserted that the turn away from critiquing and engaging with political power structures (including patriarchy) has created what has been termed post-

feminism. We argue that *Little Miss Sunshine* was produced within a post-feminist climate in which popular discourses about feminism assume that it is no longer necessary and relevant; these assumptions assert that social critiques of sexism and patriarchy are unnecessary. Angela McRobbie is one of the leading scholars who challenges and critiques post-feminism. Although this term has wide variation depending upon discipline (and even within disciplines), McRobbie defines post-feminism as:

> An active process by which feminist gains of the 1970s and '80s come to be undermined. It proposes that through an array of machinations, elements of contemporary popular culture are perniciously effective in regard to this undoing of feminism, while simultaneously appearing to be engaging in a well-informed and even well-intended response to feminism. (258)

Post-feminism suggests that the goals of feminism have been attained and, thus, there is no need for further collective mobilization around gender. As McRobbie argues, in order for feminism to be "taken into account," it has to be understood as having already passed away (259). Women are presumed to be free to articulate our desires for sex, power, and money without fear of retribution. The notion of choice discussed in terms of post-feminism takes the stance that women are free agents in their lives thus they are able to make choices free from sexist constraints and institutionalized oppression. The focus remains on the individual (the personal as split from the political) instead of how the individual is located within a heteropatriarchal culture (the personal is political). Arguing against notions of "victimization," post-feminism assumes that women are now equal to men, and can therefore make agentic, rational decisions unencumbered by sexism (Hua 68). These discourses about gender, freedom, and individualism are present throughout the film, and an understanding of post-feminism is important when engaging theoretically about the social significance of the film.

Theoretical Framework

4 Judith Butler has made substantial contributions to constructivist understandings of sex, gender, and sexuality. Utilizing her framework for gender performativity, we will examine how youth pageants are constitutive of gender norms and disciplined bodies. In her various texts on sex and gender, Butler seeks to reveal the socially constructed nature of binary sex categories. Interrogating the potentially constructed nature of biological sex points to the tenuousness of gender and gender categories. It has been assumed that gender and gender categories have been founded upon binary sex categories that have been based in essentialized, biological differences. Butler points out that the instability of gender and

gender categories is a natural consequence of questioning the constitution of binary sex categories. If gender is no longer thought to be reflecting biological essences, then gender itself is a performance that "regularly conceals its genesis" and is highly unstable (Butler, *Performative Acts* 903). This leads to her conceptualization of gender performance.

> Because there is neither an 'essence' that gender expresses or externalizes nor an objective ideal to which gender aspires; because gender is not a fact, the various acts of gender create the idea of gender, and without those acts, there would be no gender at all. (Butler, *Performative Acts* 903)

Gender performance is a necessary fiction that naturalizes sex and gender. Butler does not believe that gender performance is a "singular deliberate act" (Gilbert 130). Rather, it is a "reiterative practice by which discourse produces the effects it names" (Butler, *Bodies that Matter* 2). Gender identity is an imitative process whereby certain gender performances are socially sanctioned, while others are not. The imitation of certain gender performances reinscribes the seemingly naturalness of gender categories, again upholding the fiction of binary sex/gender systems. "Gender is a kind of imitation for which there is no original" (Butler, *Imitation* 643). The constant imitation/reiteration of gender through socially sanctioned performances perpetuates normative views and beliefs about binary gender systems.

5 According to Butler, the fact that society has so many regulatory regimes that dictate and/or encourage certain gender performances points to the tenuous and unstable nature of these very same categories (*Performative Acts* 903). If these categories were natural and innate, no regulation would be necessary in order to maintain the distinctions. Because gender performance regulation is present in various institutions, social structures, and relationships, this shows that the categories themselves are socially constructed and not easily maintained. The instability of the categories suggests possibilities of agency and resistance. If gender is a performance and must constantly be imitating and repeating socially sanctioned performances in order to be read as natural and innate, resistance is possible by interrupting different forms of imitation or performing gender differently.

6 We utilize this theoretical framework about gender performance and transgression in our analysis of the film *Little Miss Sunshine*. We look to the film in order to better understand which gender performances are socially sanctioned and why. By examining Olive's gender (mis)performance, we can begin to investigate one of the many socially sanctioned gender regimes that perpetuate certain ideals and embodiments of gender. We approach the text asking, why was Olive's final performance so disturbing to both pageant officials and

audience members? How did Olive transgress traditional conceptualizations of gender, and what does it mean to interrupt normative gender expectations? How are girls and women simultaneously complicit and resistant to normative gender expectations and practices? By utilizing Butler's frameworks, we hope to examine how gender is regulated and performed within the culture of beauty pageants as represented by the film *Little Miss Sunshine*.

The Cultural Significance of Beauty Pageants

7 Different variations of the modern day beauty pageant have been in existence for centuries, and the roots of the pageants can be traced to medieval Western Europe. Within the United States, the Miss America pageant is clearly the most significant beauty pageant currently in existence. Originally constructed as a tourist attraction in Atlantic City, New Jersey, the Miss America pageant has been a cultural event since 1921. Since its inception, the nature of the pageant has shifted according to its historical context. or example, following World War II, the pageant was wholeheartedly embraced for its role in upholding certain traditional norms of gender and femininity. Arguably the most significant change in the pageant structure and ideology followed the 1968 feminist protest of the pageant. Feminists protested the objectification of women at the Miss America pageant, and they drew attentio to the ways in which women were oppressed by beauty standards and expectations. After the feminist protest, the pageant focused more attention on intellectual ability, individual talent, and civic responsibility. Currently, Miss America pageant contestants are judged on a numerical score based on several categories: the off stage interview, the spontaneous on stage interview, and the talent, swimsuit, and evening gown competitions. Since the feminist protest, the pageant has adapted an arguably liberal feminist[1] framework that facilitates meritocratic understandings of success, beauty, and individuality which seeks to counter the pageant's reputation that the competition only involves physical appearance (Banet-Weiser 88).

8 Although many believe that beauty pageants are outdated and consequently of little social significance, we argue that pageants are important and uphold critical ideals that are central to our cultural beliefs and practices. “Beauty pageants are a singularly unique site in which to study the production and representation of culture and power” (Mani 718). Socially

[1] Liberal feminism seeks to equalize rights and opportunities between men and women. This branch of feminism focuses on equality within the home, workplace, and legal system. Liberal feminists often focus on the individual and individual rights and believe that women deserve the same rights and opportunities as men. Liberal feminists often focus on the importance of choice and autonomy. They have their roots in the second wave of feminism (for more, see Brown 2002).

sanctioned gender performances are legitimated through particular representations of ideal femininity at beauty pageants. As Sarah Banet-Weiser convincingly argues in her ethnography of the Miss America beauty pageant entitled *The Most Beautiful Girl in the World*, beauty pageants represent a very deliberate and particular version of femininity, one that upholds a nationalized identity, which serves to symbolize the cultural core of the nation (2). As Angela Latham shows, beauty pageants aren't just about physical beauty; instead, they also seek to construct and perpetuate "an image of the ideal attitude of femininity" (164). Beauty pageants in general, and the Miss America pageant in particular, serve to represent an ideal femininity that embodies very specific classed, raced, and sexualized gender performances. Banet-Weiser illustrates that diversity is represented in very superficial ways, and that white, middle class femininity still controls which gender performances are socially sanctioned, and which are excluded (19).

9 Beauty pageants are culturally significant because they teach us a number of highly contested lessons about gender and femininity, and child beauty pageants in particular have sparked a number of debates in feminist and academic arenas. The 1996 murder of JonBenet Ramsey put child beauty pageants in the national spotlight, complicating national understandings of childhood, innocence, femininity, and parenthood. The murder of JonBenet Ramsey highlighted the contradictory attitudes and practices surrounding the culture of child beauty pageants. As mentioned above, a number of academics have critiqued these pageants using feminist and cultural studies frameworks. Patrice Oppliger asserts that the main concern feminists have with child beauty pageants is that they sexualize young girls. She argues that little girls are being taught that they can and should be judged on their looks, and that their natural beauty is not good enough and must be enhanced by a variety of beauty products (Oppliger 77). She points to the beauty rituals enacted by girls in beauty pageants to illustrate the superficial and objectifying messages that beauty pageants perpetuate. Similarly, Henry Giroux argues that child beauty pageants sexualize and commodify children and become pedagogical sites "where children learn about pleasure, desire, and the roles they might assume in an adult society" (36). Pageants are sites where young girls are informally educated about gender roles and expectations; this includes lessons about being sexually attractive and complicit, and it also involves the objectification of the young female body. He further argues that child beauty pageants mimic liberal feminism when they utilize notions of self-esteem and autonomy when justifying the existence of beauty pageants (41). Like Banet-Weiser, Giroux points to the ways in which the second wave of feminism influenced the culture of beauty pageants.

10 Although she does not write specifically about child beauty pageants, Susan Bordo's work on Westernized notions of femininity is a useful critique of Westernized body practices and ideals that are present within pageant culture. Bordo argues that Westernized discourses surrounding gender serve to create disciplined bodies that, although agentic, conform to socially situated norms and ideals (166). She asserts that gendered norms and practices serve to homogenize bodies while simultaneously normalizing the very same practices (Bordo 25). The child beauty pageant is an overt way in which young girls are taught to discipline and control their bodies. The pageant offers emotional, social, and economic rewards to the girls who are able to control their bodies and present them in normalized and homogenized ways.

Methods

11 Popular culture texts are important sites that teach us about ourselves and the social norms of society (Esposito and Love 33; Kellner 3). From engagement with these texts, people learn what it means to live particular identities (Kellner 263). For example, popular culture texts inform viewers on social norms involving race and gender. These texts are therefore educational and must consequently be analyzed, critiqued, and questioned. As Stuart Hall ("New Ethnicities" 200) has argued, popular culture texts are constitutive. These texts simultaneously reflect and create understandings about the world. Consequently, popular culture texts are an important influence that can have tremendous power over how people privilege certain ways of knowing and acting in their social worlds. The influence popular culture has over how people think and act points to the importance of critiquing popular culture texts, especially those that have mass appeal to young people.

12 The popular culture text and its meaning do not stand alone; there is no inherent meaning that the text contains (Fiske 1). Rather, the relationship between the consumers of the text and the text itself is an active process (Hall, "Notes on Deconstructing the Popular" 447). Popular culture texts both reflect and construct our understandings of our worlds (Schildcrout 823). Viewers of popular culture texts are not passive; instead, viewers are engaged in a constant negotiation in which they posit how they view the world against the view of the world presented in the popular culture text. We viewed the film alone multiple times and noted instances of "gender trouble." Each author made a list of these instances in the film. We came together and discussed the significance of these moments and what we each had learned about gender, race, class, sexuality and beauty. These conversations formed the bulk of our analysis of the film.

13 We approached our reading of the film *Little Miss Sunshine* as feminist identified women. The term “feminist” is complicated and has been defined, contested, and redefined in a variety of ways. Yet, “we use the term *feminist*, with an acknowledgment of its troublesome history and usages, because we need it” (Pillow and Mayo 155). In our method of film analysis, we define feminism as a way of critiquing how regimes of gender, race, class, sexual orientation, and beauty structure the lives of all of us. We also recognize how privilege and oppression are relational. One can be simultaneously privileged and oppressed based on varying subjectivities and how these subjectivities are interpreted at a given moment in time.

14One author is White while one is Latina. Although we grew up in very different environments, we are both academics with similar interests and epistemologies. By divulging this information, we do not wish to essentialize or fix meanings or our identities (hooks 373). Our identities are not stable nor do they denote consistently particular ways of viewing the world. We divulge this information in order to suggest that our reading of the film have been shaped by our multiple subjectivities, and we acknowledge that our reading of the film is but one (Blair 244). Although it is difficult to know exactly how being a particular age, race, gender, or sexual orientation structured our meaning making of the film, we know that these identities have exerted some influence. For example, youth may make entirely different interpretations of the text thus, as Buckingham suggests, there are limitations to adult readings of youth culture (10). We recognize, however, that this reading is still crucial in an attempt to understand the power of popular culture texts and the ways in which gender regimes are constructed, negotiated, and maintained.

Film Synopsis

15 The cast of the film centers around a lower-middle class “dysfunctional” white family who is determined to get their daughter from their home in Arizona to a beauty pageant in California. The story revolves around Olive Hoover (Abigail Breslin), a seven-year-old girl who finds out that she qualified for the Little Miss Sunshine beauty pageant after another contestant was disqualified for taking diet pills. Olive is not traditionally beautiful; she wears glasses, unfashionable clothing, and she is shorter and heavier than other pageant contestants. Richard Hoover (Greg Kinnear) is the father of the family and is a mediocre motivational speaker; he is constantly making references to being a winner and not giving up. Throughout the film he is ironically unsuccessful in trying to land a book deal for his self-help book. Sheryl Hoover (Toni Collette) is the mother of the family and is over-worked and over-stressed with her familial and economic duties. Because of her husband's lack of professional

success, she is the breadwinner of the family and she is also in charge of the emotional and physical work it takes to keep her family together. Dwayne (Paul Dano) is a teenage boy who has taken a vow of silence until he is accepted into pilot's school. He is Sheryl's child from a previous relationship or marriage. He communicates through writing notes, hates his family, and is an avid Friederich Nietzsche follower. Olive's grandfather, Edwin (Alan Arkin), lives with the family because he was kicked out of his retirement community for his heroin use. Although he is foul mouthed and constantly talks about sex, he loves Olive and is the one working with her on her pageant routine. At the beginning of the film, Sheryl's brother, Frank (Steve Carell) comes to live with the Hoovers after attempting to commit suicide. He is a leading Proust scholar and fell in love with a younger man who did not return his love thus propelling him toward an unsuccessful suicide attempt.

16 Early in the film, after bringing Frank home from the hospital, the family learns that Olive has qualified for the Little Miss Sunshine pageant. Edwin immediately begins working with Olive on her routine for the pageant. Because the family does not have the money to fly to California, they decide to drive their Volkswagen T2 Microbus. The whole family, including Frank and Edwin, leave for California. During the road trip, the family encounters a series of substantial problems. Richard finds out that he did not land his book deal, Dwayne finds out that he is colorblind and consequently unable to go to pilot school, and Edwin overdoses on heroin in a hotel room on the way to the pageant and passes away. After his death, the family decides to continue on to the pageant because that is what they think he would have wanted for Olive.

17 Once at the pageant, Frank and Dwayne realize that Olive is significantly under-prepared for the culture of the pageant. They realize the time and effort necessary for the particular kinds of gender performances that are expected, and they leave the pageant to avoid witnessing Olive's embarrassment. Richard slowly realizes that Olive does not fit into the pageant culture, and he struggles with deciding how to make sense of the pageant and his daughter's obvious upcoming “failure”. Sheryl is busy helping Olive prepare and does not seem to acknowledge the potential problems that Olive is bound to face surrounded by the thin girls who are applying spray tans, shaving their legs, and putting on make-up. She defends Olive's right to perform when confronted by Frank and Dwayne, who come back to help “save” Olive before Olive takes the stage for her final performance. She believes that Olive should be able to decide to perform even if she does not fit in.

18 The final scene of the movie consists of Olive performing a dance that is read by the audience as a strip tease. Her grandfather had taught her the dance and the rest of the family

was unaware of what she had planned. The pageant officials are infuriated and try to remove her from the stage. The audience initially is unsure of how to react, but many of them eventually leave, disgusted by Olive's overtly sexualized performance. Olive, however, is unaware of how controversial her final performance is, and she keeps dancing. Eventually her family joins her on stage in a final act of solidarity with Olive. The movie ends with the family sitting outside of an office where pageant officials are talking with the police, and the police let the Hoovers leave as long as they promise to never again enter Olive into a beauty pageant in the state of California.

Analysis

19 The film opens with Olive studying the reaction of Miss Kansas when she was crowned Miss America. She studiously watches the clip over and over again, watching and re-watching the joy and excitement of Miss Kansas winning the crown. Olive finally sets down the remote, and she slowly and deliberately imitates the woman on the screen. Olive imitates her facial expression, her body posture, and the ways in which Miss Kansas flails her arms with excitement. This opening scene serves as an uncovering of gender performativity in that it shows Olive intentionally imitating a highly gendered performance. In this clip, we are shown the ways gender and race are interpellated through cultural practices, taught, and then lived. The Miss America pageant functions as an educative space for Olive as she learns appropriate and culturally sanctioned practices of femininity. As Lesko has suggested, a curriculum of the body exists for young girls. They learn how to become feminine through multiple teaching tools. “Becoming feminine involves learning sets of attitudes and actions conceived and completed upon and through the body” (Lesko 123). As viewers, we witness a seemingly very influential and educative experience for Olive as she learns how to perform femininity by imitating Miss Kansas.

20 Televised beauty pageants are, of course, just one educative space about gender. Throughout the movie, Olive is taught, often through social interactions, covert and overt lessons about gender and gender performance. For example, on the road trip to the Little Miss Sunshine beauty pageant, her family eats at a diner for breakfast. Olive orders waffles a la mode. Her mother asks incredulously, “for breakfast?” Olive, like the rest of the family, has been given a monetary limit to spend on breakfast, and she replies, “Yes, it’s under four dollars.” As viewers, we are not sure why Sheryl (Olive’s mother) questions her daughter’s breakfast choice. We know, however, based on Richard’s (Olive’s father) response that he attempts to manage her choice in order to manage her gender performance:

> Richard: Olive, can I tell you something about ice-cream? Ice-cream is made from cream, which comes from cow's milk. And cream has a lot of fat in it. Sheryl: Richard…
> Richard: What? She's gonna find out anyway. Right?
> Olive: Find out what?
> Richard: Well, when you eat ice-cream, the fat in ice-cream becomes the fat on your body.
> Sheryl: Richard, I swear to God.
> Olive: What? What's wrong?
> Sheryl: Nothing, honey. Nothing's wrong.
> Richard: So if you eat lots of ice cream, you're gonna become big and fat. But if you don't, you'll probably stay nice and skinny.
> Grandpa: Olive, Richard's an idiot. I like a woman with meat on her bones.

This dialogue is complicated for multiple reasons. Most noticeably is Richard's interruption of Olive's breakfast choice. He tries to use the moment to "teach" Olive about the dangers of eating too much fat. Yet, he does not explain why fat is not culturally acceptable and skinny is. He just tells her that if she does not eat a lot of ice cream she will stay "nice and skinny," thereby letting Olive know that being skinny is the privileged position. It appears Richard is trying to help discipline Olive's body so that she performs a femininity that is sanctioned by the dominant culture. In this clip, there is evidence that Richard's teaching of his daughter helps support Sandra Lee Bartky's argument that, "In contemporary patriarchal culture, a panoptical male connoisseur resides within the consciousness of most women: they stand perpetually before his gaze and under his judgment" (72). In this situation, Richard is the literal panoptical male connoisseur using his gaze to teach Olive about the tyranny of slimness, and it is assumed that eventually Olive will internalize this information as she learns to regulate her own choices in the name of hegemonic femininity.

21 The Grandpa's role is less clear. He remains supportive of Olive as he dismisses Richard's insinuation that fat is a bad thing. Yet, because the film has positioned him as sexist and vulgar (he told his grandson to "fuck a lot of women"), his support of Olive is suspect. That he likes a woman with "meat on her bones" is a testament that he is also a panoptical male connoisseur and it is Olive who is left to negotiate between their desires for how her body should look and her own desire for ice-cream. Both of these conflicting opinions are driven by the physical/sexual preferences of arguably the two most important men in Olive's life.

22 Sheryl's response in this scene is the most difficult to read. She has been "pro-honesty" in terms of Olive up until this point, opposing a common stance in this society that childhood innocence must be protected from the "harsh realities of the adult world" (Jenkins

2). For example, when Olive saw the bandages around Frank's wrists (where he slashed them in a suicide attempt) she inquires about what happened. While Richard says that Uncle had an "accident," Sheryl, instead, asks her brother to tell Olive the truth because she believes seven year old Olive is old enough to know what really transpired. Thus, Frank tells Olive about his suicide attempt and his failed love affair with another man. Yet, in this scene, while Sheryl certainly "advocates" for Olive in that she interrupts her husband's paternalistic attitudes about weight, she does not afford Olive the honesty she had been previously entitled. Instead of teaching Olive about dominant beauty norms in relation to weight, Sheryl merely silences Richard but tells Olive that nothing is wrong. She could have, instead, utilized the moment as Richard tried to do to teach Olive what the culture often requires of the White female body.

23 In other instances, Sheryl is less than honest with Olive. She appears to be unable to critique dominant gender norms herself, or, an alternate reading could be that she embodies post-feminist beliefs and ideals. This would explain why she privileges Olive's desire and agency to make choices over a critical engagement with institutionalized oppression. She seems to suggest that Olive's happiness in her own self-expression is the absolute. Sheryl's attitudes about the pageant itself, and Olive's role within the pageant, are an embodiment of post-feminism. Sheryl believes that Olive has the right to make her own individual choices about the pageant, and she does not engage Olive with any discussions about the gendered and class dynamics obviously present at the pageant. Even though it is obvious Olive does not fit into the pageant's culture, Sheryl refuses to acknowledge this and instead believes Olive's individual rights and choices should be protected and honored regardless of the emotional costs. Embodying post-feminist ideology, Sheryl does not engage in political or cultural analysis of gender relations and norms because ultimately she believes if Olive is able to express herself then that is all that matters. Sheryl relies on tropes of post-feminism which posit individual choice and autonomy as more important than critiques about institutionalized oppression. In other words, post-feminism helps create the situation whereby gender is discussed in terms of individuals, choices, and freedom instead of institutions, oppression, and patriarchy.

24 It is important to note that Sheryl looks traditionally feminine in the sense that she was of average weight, had long hair, and dressed in form fitting clothing. So, while she acquiesces to gender norms, she does not expect her daughter to as long as it is her "choice". Yet, this lack of attention to a critique about gender norms ultimately serves male interests and perpetuates patriarchy. This is because Olive's eventual consumption of the ice cream (encouraged by all of her family members except Richard) could have material consequences

on her body and, thus, her status in heteropatriarchy. By not equipping Olive with the tools to understand gender oppression, Sheryl remains complicit within the system[2]. By not teaching Olive about how fatness and other hegemonic beauty standards are socially constructed, she helps create a situation where Olive may later view her own "fatness" as an individual problem instead of a problem with how gender oppression has created hegemonic standards of beauty. It is, however, when Olive asks the current Miss California if she eats ice cream that the post-feminist trope is reified. She tells Olive that she does, in fact, eat ice cream and we learn that even beauty queens make the "choice" to indulge in ice-cream. Though, in keeping with hegemonic beauty standards, Miss California goes on to tell Olive that technically the ice cream she likes is actually frozen yogurt. While the adults understand that frozen yogurt does not have the same fat content as ice cream, the point is lost on Olive who just feels validated that a beauty queen enjoys ice cream.

25 Throughout the movie, Olive receives and negotiates various messages about gender and socially sanctioned gender roles and performances. As mentioned earlier, Butler's theory of gender performance offers a way to conceptualize gender interruptions and gender norm resistance. Because our society is so intent on constructing and maintaining very specific forms of gender performance, there is space for resistance that is determined by social, historical, and personal circumstances. Gender is an imitative process that must be constantly negotiated and regulated, and this allows for gender interruptions that highlight the socially constructed nature of traditional gender regimes. We argue that Olive's final performance in the pageant is an example of one such gender interruption. For example, when her family arrives at the pageant, it is obvious that Olive's body does not "fit" in with the rest of the girls. She is heavier and shorter than the other contestants, and her outfits do not fit appropriately because of her weight. As viewers, we see immediately that Olive and her family are outsiders to the pageant culture that exists to represent femininity in particular ways. As girls are being prepared for performances, we witness the incredible amount of work and time invested in their femininity. Little girls are having makeup applied, hair done, and even getting their almost hairless legs shaved. It becomes obvious that Olive did not have the same training for the pageant as the other girls. Instead of a professional pageant coach, Olive relied on her drug-addicted grandfather to help prepare her routines for the pageant; thus, she arrives at the pageant with very little preparation.

[2] We do not mean to engage in "mother blaming" that occurs all too often within patriarchy. We recognize that ALL of Olive's family members have a role in teaching her about gender oppression not just her mother. It is Sheryl, however, who has the "pro-honesty" stance and so it is Sheryl who we believe would be the most capable of engaging in honest dialogue with Olive about the system.

26 Upon her arrival to the pageant, Sheryl does not immediately recognize the type of work and time required for a socially sanctioned (and class specific) performance of femininity. The other family members, however, are made aware of the types of femininities that get privileged. Olive's uncle and brother leave because they cannot bear to watch Olive embarrass herself. They eventually come back to the pageant to try to stop Olive's performance. Olive, however, remains oblivious to her family's concern. It is not clear to viewers whether or not she overhears her brother demanding that Sheryl intervene:

> Dwayne: I don't want Olive doing this.
> Sheryl: Oh, my God!
> Richard: See?!
> Dwayne: Mom, look around. This place is fucked. I don't want these people judging Olive. Fuck them.
> Richard: Exactly. Fuck them.
> Sheryl: No, Dwayne. It's too late.
> Dwayne: It's not too late. You're the mom. You're supposed to protect her. Don't let her do this. She's not a beauty queen mom. I'm going to tell her.

This dialogue positions Sheryl as potentially sacrificing her daughter's dignity in the name of autonomy and choice. While Richard and Dwayne recognize the cultural norms demanded of beauty queens and that "beauty pageants are not only places where queens are chosen but where they are *made*" (King-O'Riain 75), Sheryl is determined to prove that it "doesn't matter." She believes that her daughter should have the right to attempt to be a beauty queen even when the rest of the family understands that Olive has not been adequately educated in how to do it. In addition, for all of Olive's and Sheryl's other honest dialogues, they have not, to viewers' knowledge, engaged in conversation regarding the meaning of beauty pageants and the cultural norms and hegemonic performances of femininity expected of beauty queens. As such, Olive cannot truly make an informed choice about whether or not she wants to participate.

27 During her final performance, Olive puts on a top hat and takes off her glasses. She dedicates her performance to her late grandfather who taught her the moves. The DJ plays "Can't Touch This" and Olive performs a dance that is basically a strip tease. Olive spanks her butt and throws her hat off. Her long hair tumbles down. She then pulls off her pants and twirls them around. Her smile is huge and it is clear she is enjoying the dance. She becomes increasingly more sexual with her moves as she removes her tie and places it in her mouth. Her father, standing in the audience, looks on in disbelief (as does everyone else) and mouths, "No, no." When some of the audience members leave in disgust, her father and uncle stand up and slowly start clapping. One of the pageant officials asks Richard what his daughter is

doing and he replies, “She’s kicking ass, that’s what she’s doing.” At this point Olive crawls on the floor growling with her mouth open. The Emcee of the pageant tries to pull Olive off the stage. Her family rush to the stage and Richard tackles the Emcee so that he cannot interrupt Olive. Richard then pretends as if he will remove Olive and, instead, he starts dancing with her mimicking some of her sexually suggestive moves. Uncle Frank joins in and defiantly stares at the pageant official. Soon, her brother and mother are dancing as well. More audience members leave and eventually the family ends up dancing in a circle, solidifying their love and support for Olive. Olive’s final performance can be read as an ironic commentary on the sexualization of girls in pageants. The audience and pageant directors, as gender police, resist her performance and try to discipline both Olive and her family for their overt interruptions of gender performance. What is sinister about the pageant officials “policing” the sexualization of Olive’s performance is that the sanctioned femininity relied on sexual undertones as well. Little girls were made-up to look like adult women. They wore make-up, had their hair done, and wore revealing outfits (including a swimsuit). They stuck out their butts and their non-existent breasts when they posed. Yet, this conception of femininity as “good girl” beauty queen was allowed. Olive’s performance exposes the sexual undertones of the pageant by exploding them. She interrupts the sanctioned performance of femininity by hypersexualizing her performance and acting as the (ironically unknowing) “bad girl.” It is this interruption that effectively exposes all of gender as a performance, especially as a socially and culturally mediated performance.

Conclusion

28 As feminists, it is important we utilize theoretical frameworks that help explain the complexity of gender in application to real life situations. Beauty pageants have been a source of contention within the feminist movement. It was a protest of the 1968 Miss America pageant that earned 2nd wave feminists the titles of “bra-burners.” Yet, these pageants have been an enduring part of life and culture within the United States. As such, they are in need of gendered and racialized critiques. The text, *Little Miss Sunshine*, teaches us (and all viewers) about femininity. Beauty pageants have seen an increase in popularity as evidenced by the TLC reality show *Toddlers and Tiaras* (a look at beauty pageants for young children). Studying beauty pageants in general, and children's beauty pageants in particular, is important because “children's ideas about gender, sex, and sexuality develop gradually and are greatly influenced by information that their environments provide” (Levin 78). Because popular culture is one of the main sites in which young people form their raced, classed, and

gendered identities, it is important for feminists to investigate ideologies being encouraged or at least represented in popular culture texts.

29 The *Little Miss Sunshine* text satirizes gender performances in general and beauty pageant performances in particular. Throughout the film we are witness to the immense work and time invested in the process of "becoming feminine." We watch as mostly mothers help discipline their daughters' bodies to be socially acceptable. The film illustrates through visuals and dialogue the ways gender is a performance. Yet, we also learn what are socially acceptable and sanctioned versions of femininity. We learn that femininity has been defined in narrow ways and that the punishment for transgressions and interruptions of femininity is severe. In fact, the family faced the police after Olive's performance was over. They were allowed to leave on the condition that they were never to enter Olive in a beauty pageant in the state of California.

30 *Little Miss Sunshine* exists as a satirical examination of the tyrannies of beauty standards upheld by beauty pageants. Yet, the film ultimately reifies hegemonic notions of femininity because it does not engage in honest dialogue about the ways these notions are informed and shaped by heteropatriarchy. We see this as an effect of the social and political climate of post-feminism in which the film was created and consumed. Yet, our interest in the film remains because it provocatively illustrates gender interruptions in performances of femininity. Olive's performance was a literal performance (i.e. she was participating in a beauty contest and thus performing on stage). Yet, her literal performance also allowed us to see the ways gender is figuratively performed in everyday lives. We were witness to the ways Olive learned about femininity and how multiple players (popular culture and family) participated in her education about femininity. Olive interrupted hegemonic norms by not constructing a normative "body project" (Brumberg 98). We know this because, throughout the film, Olive was positioned in opposition to the young women who were disciplining their bodies and creating body projects that enabled them to be properly surveyed by the panoptical male connoisseur as well as the beauty pageant judges. We hope that feminists will continue an exploration of how gender is negotiated, lived, and transgressed in literal and figurative ways.

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