Reality Gendervision

Sexuality & Gender on Transatlantic Reality Television

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To Alexander M. Doty • *Colleague, Mentor, Friend*

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Freaky Five-Year-Olds and Mental Mommies

Narratives of Gender, Race, and Class in TLC's Toddlers & Tiaras

KIRSTEN PIKE

Reality TV shows featuring children have come under fire as shows such as *Kid Nation* (2007) and *The Baby Borrowers* (2008) have positioned children in problematic—and often vulnerable—situations, thereby prompting heated debates about their well-being and place in the genre of Reality TV.[1] Part of the programming emphasis of The Learning Channel (TLC) on unusual families, such as *Little People, Big World* (2006–10) and *Kate Plus 8* (2010–11), *Toddlers & Tiaras* (2009–) follows child beauty pageant contestants (who typically range from two to eleven years old) and their families. The US series, which also airs in Europe and Australia, has been consistently slammed by critics and viewers for exploiting youngsters, especially little girls. For instance, Jane Ridley suggested in a *New York Daily News* article in 2009 that the "warped" culture depicted on the series, wherein young girls "dress like a cross between a street-walker and a '50s housewife and perform moves you'd expect to see in a strip joint," was "tacky," at best, and "one step removed from child abuse," at worst. In a similar vein, Mark Perigard of the *Boston Herald,* noting that "it's hard to see what kids [on the show] will pick up beyond eating disorders," asked: "[d]oes TLC stand for Torturing Little Children?" For a majority of the individuals who have posted comments on TLC's message boards, not to mention the more than 4,600 people who have joined the Facebook campaign to ban the show, the answer to this question seems to be a resounding "yes!"[2]

While *Toddlers & Tiaras* has always had critics, controversy surrounding the series escalated in September 2011 following the broadcast of two episodes featuring tiny tots in risqué attire. "Hearts and Crowns" (season 4, episode 11), which aired in the United States on 31 August 2011, featured four-year-old Madisyn dressed as Dolly Parton in a shimmery, skintight jumpsuit complete with faux breasts and padded butt enhancement. The following week, the series aired footage of three-year-old Paisley outfitted in a miniature version of Julia Roberts's hooker getup from *Pretty Woman* (1990), complete with a belly-baring cut-out dress, knee-high boots, and blonde wig ("Precious Moments Pageant" [season 4, episode 12]). The Parents Television Council quickly denounced *Toddlers & Tiaras* and called for its cancellation,[3] and an array of media outlets weighed in on the wrangle—from *OK!* and *People* magazines to *Good Morning America, The Joy Behar Show,* and *The View.* Several programs aired interviews with the mothers of Madisyn and Paisley, and on the cover of its issue dated 26 September 2011, *People* featured Madisyn in "full glitz" pageant attire (including heavy makeup, fake tan and hair, and extravagant gown) next to a large heading that asked, "Gone Too Far?" The debate also extended beyond US borders as media outlets in the United Kingdom, Ireland, New Zealand, and Australia covered the controversy and criticized the show. The swirl of heated media discussions indicated that *Toddlers & Tiaras* had re-ignited fears about the seamy side of child beauty pageants made famous by the (still unsolved) murder of six-year-old pageant star JonBenét Ramsey in 1996, as well as by popular films such as *Living Dolls: The Making of a Child Beauty Queen* (2001) and *Little Miss Sunshine* (2006), both of which offer productive critiques of children's pageant culture. Not unlike the public outcry that surfaced in the wake of the Ramsey tragedy, wherein "overbearing mothers" were blamed for "the abuse children suffered" in pageants,[4] debates centered on the degree to which children's pageants in general, and pageant moms in particular (especially those featured on *Toddlers & Tiaras*), promote the hypersexualization of little girls, thereby putting them at risk for harm by pedophiles.

From the orangey spray tans and caked-on makeup to the itsy-bitsy bikinis and provocative dance moves, the pageant rituals depicted on *Toddlers & Tiaras* are undeniably unsettling. However, what much of the public criticism of the series seems to miss, and what this chapter explores, is how the show reinforces myriad stereotypes about gender, race, and class while seeming to celebrate spectacular cultural difference. With critics and viewers fixated on the show's sexualized images of girls, the broader ideological work of the series (which, I would argue, is even more insidious) largely goes unchecked. Ultimately, then, this chapter offers a close analysis of TLC's popular "freak show" to demonstrate how "a twenty-year-old face on a five-year . . . seven-year-old body," as one slightly befuddled father described the typical glitz pageant girl contestant in "American Regal Gems" (season 2, episode 4), is not the only freaky thing

going on in this series. Freakiest of all, in fact, is how *Toddlers & Tiaras* depicts mothers—many of whom appear to be living out their own dreams of stardom through the polished routines of their preteen daughters. Not unlike sitcoms of the 1950s such as *I Love Lucy* and *The George Burns and Gracie Allen Show*, *Toddlers & Tiaras* pits wacky, fame-seeking, money-spending moms against sensible, down-to-earth, breadwinning dads—a strategy seemingly designed to thwart women's rebellious impulses and highlight how fathers *still* "know best." Indeed, the consistent juxtaposition of male sanity with female lunacy (which is achieved through a combination of casting, mise-en-scène, camera work, and editing) materializes the metonymic relationship between patriarchs and patriarchy, thereby naturalizing a "father knows best" mentality on the show. Along the way, children learn problematic and often painful lessons about heteronormative gender roles and competitive individualism, while nonwhite girls and women learn to conform to the pageant world's norms of white, middle-class femininity. As we shall see, the overall effect of this formal architecture is that *Toddlers & Tiaras* looks and feels much more like a retrograde, patriarchal sitcom from a bygone era than a hip and modern reality show that "document[s] what's happening in the field," as Tom Rogan, the producer of the series, claimed in an interview in 2011.[5]

A Rainbow of Similarity?

Like other reality television programming, *Toddlers & Tiaras* adheres to a strict format, following families through stages of pageant preparation and competition, interspersed with interviews and moments of conflict. Usually one of the three featured contestants is new to the pageant circuit, while the others are very experienced, and often, the new contestant is nonwhite. Although traditional, nuclear families appear to be the norm, the series also features lesbian parents, gay stylists, single moms, and young male contestants from an array of racial and socioeconomic backgrounds.

Despite these apparently progressive markers of inclusivity, however, the series also reinforces conservative ideologies by repeatedly showing contestants and family members assimilating to or espousing heteronormative gender roles. Thus, although five-year-old Zander gets his nails done and refers to himself as a "pageant diva," on stage he appears as a cute and active little boy, variously modeling a western suit and a Spiderman costume, complete with assertive, superhero-like kicks and punches ("Director's Choice Pageant," [season 3, episode 2]). Likewise, young female contestants—whether girly girls or tomboys—transform themselves into pageant princesses through sparkly

"cupcake dresses" and painted faces. Not unlike the gender conformity demanded of pageant participants, in footage of families, nonnormative gender representations are often paired with more conventional images, thus mitigating their transgressiveness. For instance, in the pilot episode we are introduced to African American sisters Brionna and Aja Purvis and their lesbian parents, Nicole and Ellisha. Although Nicole points out that she and Ellisha are "great parents," she also conveys her belief that "little girls should live a glamorous life and be pretty." Her discussion continues as the camera cuts to footage of her daughters playing in their bedroom. Six-year-old Aja feeds her baby sister with a bottle while four-year-old Brionna plays "house" with an elaborate kid-size kitchen set. Taken together, the images and voice-over suggest that while the Purvis family may be "a little different from the usual pageant family" (as Nicole puts it), this will not prevent Aja and Brionna from learning to explore conventionally feminine interests and activities (as their performance in the Universal Royalty Pageant also attests).

Toddlers & Tiaras regularly highlights disruptive moments. Especially pleasurable to watch are the rambunctious contestants and offbeat parents who flout convention by rejecting pageant norms. Children, for instance, sometimes willfully disobey adults, such as when a six-year-old black contestant named Kiannah rolls her belly on stage despite her aunt's warning not to dance "hoochie" ("Darling Divas" [season 1, episode 9]), or when a six-year-old white contestant named Isabella performs her own wacky western jig instead of the routine choreographed by her coach ("Outlaw Pageant" [season 2, episode 8]). Similarly, a white mother named Christina (one of the few mothers identified on the series as a professional—in this case, a dentist) fashions her daughter in a "high glitz" dress for a "low glitz" pageant against the advice of pageant personnel ("America's Best Pageant" [season 3, episode 4]). And a black mother named Sabrina breaks with pageant tradition when she opts to outfit her daughters in dresses that are "over-the-top and kinda drag-queen-like"—complete with enormous angel wings and feather boas ("America's Trezured Dollz" [season 3, episode 3]). Despite the fact that *Toddlers & Tiaras* frequently features tempestuous tots and feisty moms who upset beauty pageant decorum, these moments of resistance are typically contained within each episode's broader narrative framework, which highlights the benefits of conformity. Indeed, at the end of every episode, the contestant who best performs traditional gender roles walks away with the coolest crown, tallest trophy, and biggest stash of cash.

The conformity demanded of pageant participants raises challenges for nonwhite contestants. As Sarah Banet-Weiser valuably argues in her work on

he Miss America Pageant, "The appearance of the black body corresponds ıot with a morality and respectability considered appropriate to a Miss Amer-ca contestant, but rather serves as a signal for the unknown, the threatening, nd the chaotic. The job for black contestants thus becomes one of 'proving' o the audience and to the abstract category of 'American womanhood' that hey are indeed the moral 'sisters' of the white contestants."[6] Although the Miss ımerica Pageant features adults, Banet-Weiser's point also applies to the pag-ants depicted on *Toddlers & Tiaras,* since nonwhite contestants must embrace ıe rituals of the (mostly) white pageant and beauty world to be competitive. ven in urban pageants known for their multiculturalism (e.g., Darling Divas), :andards of beauty and comportment are typically enforced by an all-white or nearly all-white) panel of judges. Thus, when Sabrina's six-year-old daugh-:r, Iyana, shimmies aggressively in pink angel wings and, later, does the "Chi-ese splits" while modeling a bright yellow bikini, we get the sense that she as not fully assimilated into a pageant subculture that seems to prefer cutesy ıoves such as "sassy walks" to unusual moves such as "Chinese splits." This lea is reinforced at the crowning ceremony, when Iyana receives a small tiara ır her participation in the pageant—not her mastery of it.

To be successful, then, nonwhite contestants learn to embrace a version of mininity that downplays their difference and accentuates their sameness to :her (white) girls. For instance, the episode titled "American Regal Gems" .entioned earlier features Victoria, a light-skinned African American contes-nt, getting a spray tan in preparation for her first glitz pageant. As Victoria's om, Kim, explains, "I just want her to be as natural as possible . . . in the glitz ıgeant." Although Kim's hearty laugh at the end of her sentence suggests that ıe realizes the contradictory nature of her statement, at no time does the epi-de (or any other that I have seen) comment overtly on racial politics. Rather, nning is depicted as a beauty ritual, which, not unlike wearing a wig or false elashes, supposedly makes little girls (regardless of race) more attractive un-:r the lights. The glitz pageant makeover of girls of color thus conforms to e representational bind that Brenda Weber has importantly identified in TV akeovers of women of color. As she explains, "The TV makeover's homog-ızing gesture, which codes all women as universally similar, thus purport-ly disallows for the particularities of racial and ethnic experience, even as aspires to offer women access to their unique selves."[7] In the end, Victoria's similation is more successful than Iyana's, earning her a "Sapphire Supreme" le (i.e., second place) in the America's Regal Gems Pageant.[8] Ultimately, in ıturing both white and nonwhite contestants winning coveted prizes, the ies constructs an image of what Herman Gray might call a "color-blind"

pageant world wherein children of all races compete "equally" on a seemingly even playing field.[9]

Yet *Toddlers & Tiaras* reveals numerous other details that belie this fantasy. In fact, many episodes seem preoccupied with minority parents and contestants who just don't fit in. In the episode "America's Trezured Dollz," for instance, black mom Sabrina comes across as extremely witty, sassy, and fun. "Hell-to-the-no!" she exclaims when faced with paying more than $1,000 for two swanky pageant gowns at a local boutique—opting instead to buy more reasonably priced dresses on eBay. The fact that she encourages her two daughters to "luxuriate across the stage" in their drag queen-esque ensembles also underscores a fabulously free-spirited sensibility that seems to be missing in many of the more competitive pageant moms. Despite the appeal of Sabrina's persona, however, the episode implicitly connects a cartoonish quality to her cultural difference. For instance, when Sabrina enlists the help of her daughters in "glitzing up" their dresses, she dons a "fairy wig" of orange braided pigtails for the occasion, which, she explains, puts her in a creative "character's mode." As the three sit around a table gluing sequins to the gowns, Sabrina wonders aloud whether her kids will turn her in for "child labor" violations and then confesses, "I'm feeling kind of buzzed because the glue I was told to use is just like . . . I'm gettin' a contact high!" While some white moms featured on the series also reveal that they buy dresses on eBay or make their daughter's clothes, scenes such as this one do not unfold in their homes. White and black moms might both shop for bargains, but it is black moms who get "high" on glue fumes (or reveal their involvement in a same-sex partnership, like Ellisha and Nicole). These representational distinctions matter, of course, because they indicate deeper, systemic inequities. As Kimberly Springer wisely notes, "Seemingly harmless cultural representations of black women are incorporated into institutional enactments of discrimination, including racist, sexist, classist, and heterosexist social policies."[10]

While Sabrina's representation may appear "seemingly harmless" on the surface,[11] the episode "America's Trezured Dollz" trades more explicitly in stereotypical imagery through its villainous representation of a young black woman named Lisa, who, unlike the fashion-forward pageant directors depicted in many other episodes, dons sweatshirts and billed caps and forgoes typical feminine accoutrements, such as makeup and styled hair. In an interview segment early in the episode, Lisa explains that her reason for starting the America's Trezured Dollz pageant was that she felt it was time to have a pageant system that "took less and gave more to the contestants." Paradoxically, however, she fails to honor a registration discount that she advertised, and later

she apparently ditches the pageant and disappears with all of the prize money (after handing out IOU letters to some participants). Clips of outraged parents, stylists, and contestants complaining about Lisa's reprehensible behavior and "hot mess" of a pageant (as Sabrina describes it) are repeated frequently throughout the episode. Aside from Lisa's lone and censored, yet creatively subtitled, snipe at pushy pageant moms ("These people drive me #@*&ing crazy!"), the episode does not feature Lisa's side of the pageant-mess story.

Although contentious moments are a staple on *Toddlers & Tiaras*, "America's Trezured Dollz" stands out from other episodes for its fervent demonization of a (black) woman's character. The forty-three-second opening teaser alone depicts four different adults complaining about Lisa's shady business practices and poorly run pageant and ends with black pageant tot Iyana hollering into the camera, "Gimme the crown, witch!" Like a matching bookend, the episode's conclusion also reifies Lisa's villainous status; in bright white letters emblazoned over an image of the day's winners, we learn, "Three months after the pageant, [a contestant named] Chloe is still waiting for her cash prize. Pageant contestants have been unable to reach Lisa Fulgham." In addition to the broader ideological structure that frames the story of the wicked "witch," the episode uses other formal devices to highlight Lisa's deviance. For instance, when a male stylist complains that the director "skipped out in the middle of crowning" and "didn't pay her bills," the camera cuts to a shot of Lisa exiting the pageant ballroom with two adults. While it is obvious which one of the three is Lisa (she is the only one with dark skin), the footage is inconspicuously shaded—presumably to make it look as if it were captured from a surveillance camera—with a gauzy white light superimposed around Lisa's body, spotlighting her movements as she walks out the door. Despite the fact that it is impossible to know whether this shot has any relationship to Lisa's alleged disappearance during the crowning ceremony, it is used as verifiable "proof" of her deviance, while the digital modifications in light and color made during the editing phase mark Lisa as an aberrant criminal fleeing the scene of her crime. Footage of Lisa collecting money at the pageant is also used repeatedly throughout the episode to solidify her narrative of corruption, even though it does not reveal evidence of theft or wrongdoing.

Considering the low prize money and exorbitant entry fees associated with children's pageants, which, according to *People* magazine, typically run about $1,000,[12] it could be argued that most pageant directors today are financially exploiting girls and their families. Despite the inequity of the system, however, *Toddlers & Tiaras* does not police the collection and handling of money by other pageant directors. Given that the series favorably treats African American pageant directors who embrace the normative codes of traditional middle-class femininity (including, for instance, the peppy and preppy pageant organizer and series regular Annette Hill), it seems that Lisa's blackness, along with her casual and unkempt blue-collar look, combine to justify and normalize her surveillance. Not unlike Laurie Ouellette's assessment of *Judge Judy*, then, "America's Trezured Dollz" operates, as does *Toddlers & Tiaras* more generally, like "a 'panoptic' device to the extent that it classifies and surveils individuals deemed unsavory and dangerous."[13]

Obviously, if we believe the version of events put forward by the creators of *Toddlers & Tiaras*, Lisa's behavior appears ethically questionable and possibly unlawful. Nevertheless, it is important to remember that Reality TV constructs reality as much as, or more than, it reflects it. As L. S. Kim suggests in her analysis of race on Reality TV, "Editing, promo teasers, even the very unreality of the set-ups . . . mean that the personae we see depicted on our screens may or may not be accurate facsimiles of the contestants in real life."[14] Indeed, numerous scholars, including Susan Douglas, Jon Kraszewski, and Grace Wang, among others, have critiqued how, as Wang puts it, "reality TV repackages difference into comfortingly familiar stock characters and stereotypes."[15] With these ideas in mind, it seems likely that the authenticity of Lisa's image matters less to the creators of *Toddlers & Tiaras* than the dramatic weight that her black, lower-class, criminal representation brings to their sensational version of her story.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, "America's Trezured Dollz" fails to consider any systemic inequities that may have shaped Lisa's seemingly wayward appearance on the show; as a result, the series implicitly attributes her faults to a flawed moral fabric as opposed to a defective government whose neoliberal social, political, and economic policies oppress women—especially women of color. In the end, Lisa's villainous representation resembles the "evil black bitch" stereotype that circulates widely in contemporary Reality TV. As Springer argues in relation to this debilitating cultural category, "By denying the fabricated nature and ensemble-cast character of reality TV, producers can recast their blatant use of racist, sexist, heterosexist, and classist iconography as creating an ensemble that represents one version of a diverse America. In the post-civil-rights vision of the world, inclusion means merely having a presence, not empowerment in terms of self-definition."[16] Despite its seeming banner of liberal tolerance, then, *Toddlers & Tiaras* draws on familiar gender, race, and class stereotypes in the service of compelling entertainment. In the process, the particularities of cultural and economic difference, along with claims to reality, equality, and truth, are constantly (and suspiciously) elided.

Father Knows Best: Unruly Moms and Stable Dads

While Lisa Fulgham may stand out as the most rebellious and notorious pageant director on the series, there is no shortage of unruly moms on *Toddlers & Tiaras*. They appear in nearly every episode, and their antics seem to escalate with each new season—a clue, no doubt, to the carefully constructed nature of the program's winning formula. Indeed, the casting application for *Toddlers & Tiaras* suggests that finding captivating parents is a priority, given that the parent/personality question ("Describe your personality at the pageant. Are you competitive?") is listed before the child/personality one ("Describe your pageant kid's personality on and off stage at the pageant"). The application also asks parents, "Have you seen *Toddlers & Tiaras*?"—a question that interestingly moved from the third position on the casting form for the third season to the more privileged first position on the form for the fifth season.[17] Judging by the over-the-top moms selected for the fourth season, including a religious zealot who constantly prays about pageants ("Halloween Bash" [season 4, episode 2]) and a modern-day court jester who uses a real-looking infant doll to trick people into thinking that she's a delinquent baby mama—by leaving the doll alone in the car, for instance ("International Fresh Faces Missouri" [season 4, episode 15])—it seems that pageant moms not only have seen the show but also are keenly aware of the kind of performance it demands. Whether trying on their daughters' crowns, hiding the amount of money they spend on pageants from their husbands, or pushing Red Bull on their tots to elicit pageant-perfect peppiness, moms are made to seem markedly mental, a strategy that is repeated on TLC's *Toddlers & Tiaras* website, which showcases video clips of outrageous mothers in categories such as "Mommy Knows Best" and "Most Controversial Parents" (the majority of whom are women).

Of course, a certain pleasure is associated with watching unruly women buck feminine norms and pageant conventions. Not unlike Kathleen Rowe Karlyn's assessment of actress and comedienne Roseanne Barr, unruly pageant moms "push at the limits of acceptable female behavior" and thus "point to alternatives."[18] However, *Toddlers & Tiaras* also tends to depict mothers as being extremely competitive, controlling, irrational, or just plain loony—often juxtaposing an unflattering image of a pageant mom with an image of her calmer, quieter, and more reasonable husband. Take, for instance, Jamie Sterling, a white mother of five who appears to play favorites between her six-year-old twin daughters, AshLynn and BreAnne, both of whom are vying for the supreme title in the Universal Royalty Pageant (season 2, episode 1). After describing how BreAnne—who, Jamie explains, "does look a lot like mommy"—is prettier, more fun, and more "full of life" than her twin sister AshLynn, the camera cuts to an image of dad, Barry, calmly explaining how concerned he is about his daughters competing against each other in pageants. The footage that follows highlights Jamie scolding AshLynn and praising BreAnne while Barry tries to be equally helpful to both girls. Ultimately, in juxtaposing images of an unfair and mildly delusional mom with those of a calm and concerned dad, the episode creates sympathy for dad and contempt for mom, thereby bolstering his credibility and diminishing hers. Indeed, when Barry later decides (against Jamie's wishes) to pull BreAnne out of the pageant for acting out and AshLynn goes on to win the "Director's Choice Award" for being a model pageant contestant, patriarchal authority is legitimated as we are treated to the "proof" that fathers know what's best for their daughters. Unruly behavior, not unlike that which Jamie exhibits, must go unrewarded, while little girls who conform to daddy's rules and model "proper" feminine behavior get to take home a crown.

A similar structuring pattern emerges in episodes that address the financial burden involved in keeping children competitive on the pageant circuit. Some episodes, such as "Royal Essence" (season 3, episode 9) and "Universal Royalty, Texas" (season 3, episode 11) pair images of benevolent fathers with those of manipulative mothers who teach their tots the feminine art of yoking money from daddy. Other episodes contrast mom's lavish expenditures with dad's concerns about excessive consumption. For instance, in "Viva Las Vegas" (season 3, episode 13), a zany white mother named Julie admits, "I would go as far as spending every last penny I had to buy her [Cassidy, Julie's eight-year-old daughter] the best I could. My husband gets a little upset sometimes." After a brief shot of Julie surveying Cassidy's extensive pageant wardrobe, the camera cuts to an image of her husband, James, soberly explaining how "pageants can cause problems with paying an electric bill, or gas for our vehicles, or food." The camera then cuts back to Julie, who exclaims with a throaty chortle, "But, I figured, I worked my butt off for it. . . . [Y]ou shut up, I'm doin' this!" As with the footage of Barry and Jamie, the juxtaposition of James's calm and reasoned assessment of his wife's expensive hobby with Julie's animated, devil-may-care attitude pits male rationality against female lunacy. The fact that Julie appears to selfishly privilege pageant purchases over such basic family needs as food and electricity heightens the impact of this contrast.

The shot compositions of interviews with Julie and James also carry gendered meanings. Delivered from a chair in her cramped living room, Julie's outrageous remarks, which are made to seem even more extreme by the close-up of her face, position the home as a site of feminine excess, frivolity, and con-

tainment. In contrast, James, shot in medium close-up, stands rather than sits, and he offers his thoughts outdoors in front of an expansive backdrop of grass and trees. Not only is James positioned outside the domestic realm of feminine folly, then, but he also appears literally and figuratively to be taking a *stand* against it. This shot configuration, which appears routinely throughout the series, suggests an association between working-class fathers and "masculine" outdoor labor (e.g., farming, ranching, and logging), despite the fact that the actual occupations of these men are not often identified. Intriguingly, the series does tend to reveal when a father works in a profession deemed "authoritative," such as a doctor, police officer, or military personnel, again, perhaps, reinforcing ties to conventional codes of masculinity.

Hollis Griffin has thoughtfully suggested that the youthful contestants on *Toddlers & Tiaras* "symbolize the class aspirations of people whose economic opportunities are increasingly limited."[19] When watching Julie inside her modest home in rural California excitedly unveil her latest labor of love for Cassidy—a glittery, hot-pink showgirl costume with the name of her daughter's next pageant, "GOLD COAST," sewn in silvery letters on the front—it seems that she, like many moms on the show, does aspire to a better life with, perhaps, finer things. Yet the series encourages viewers to place the blame for families' economic woes solely on mothers who seem senselessly to squander their money on pageants. In keeping with other patterns on the series, then, parents' "anxious attempts to plan for the future via the labor of children," as Griffin puts it,[20] are crucially coded as the delusions of foolish and undisciplined *women*.

In her research on the postwar suburban sitcoms *Father Knows Best* and *Leave It to Beaver*, Mary Beth Haralovich reveals how the architectural design of the Anderson and Cleaver families' homes, as well as the placement of products and people within them, naturalized middle-class privilege and women's role as homemakers.[21] Despite the more than fifty-year gap in production, the mise-en-scène and editing of at-home images on *Toddlers & Tiaras* appear to serve a similar ideological function. While the series displays a much greater range of homes than do its counterparts of the 1950s—from the small apartments of working-class families to the more spacious houses of the middle- and upper-middle class—it nevertheless keeps the gender-specific areas of postwar sitcoms (e.g., dens and yards for men, kitchens for women) largely intact.[22] When men and women do "trade spaces," the images almost always reinforce traditional gender associations, such as when harried mothers chase disobedient tots around the lawn ("Miss Georgia Spirit" [season 1, episode 2]) or reasonable fathers espouse wisdom while positioned next to a status object, such as a military uniform ("Viva Las Vegas").

Where sitcoms of the 1950s and *Toddlers & Tiaras* might seem to diverge is in their representation of preteen girls. After all, Kathy Anderson (Lauren Chapin), the pigtail-sporting tomboy on *Father Knows Best*, didn't don a hooker outfit or faux breasts when she got made over by her mother, Margaret (Jane Wyatt), and her older sister, Betty (Elinor Donahue), in the classic episode "Kathy Becomes a Girl" from 1959. Although Kathy's frilly dress has morphed into Paisley's slinky working-girl ensemble, mothers on *Toddlers & Tiaras* nevertheless continue to champion their daughters' sexualized appearance, though now with heightened forms of male criticism. For example, when a white mom named Brandie creates a belly-baring costume for her daughter Morghan in the "American Regal Gems" episode, her husband accuses her of creating a "dominatrix outfit." As he explains worryingly, "It definitely reminds me of something out of a medieval show: whips and chains and dragons, maybe a PG-13 movie. I don't know if we'd go R-rated, but definitely PG-13." While dads also frequently protest glitz pageant practices—from heavy makeup and spray tans to false eyelashes and flippers (fake teeth)—mothers' efforts to sex up their daughters almost always prevail. (Morghan does, indeed, wear her "dominatrix outfit" on stage.) Thus, *Toddlers & Tiaras* not only celebrates conservative gender norms by relentlessly showcasing the extreme femininity required to be a queen, but it also implies that women are (still) the primary, corruptive force behind our culture's hypersexualization of little girls. Perhaps nowhere is this point made more clearly than in "Gold Coast California Grand State Finals" (season 2, episode 17), which features a busty blonde and self-professed "hot" mom named Melissa who exercises in high heels on a stripper pole in her living room while her young daughter and mother look on.

Of course, some episodes do feature hard-core "pageant dads," such as Chuck in "Show Me Smiles Fantasy Pageant" (season 3, episode 8), who describes himself as "dad, gopher, bank, and biggest fan" of his eight-year-old daughter, Haley. Although Chuck's interest in Haley's pageants may seem unconventional, his support is framed as fun and healthy, with pageants providing opportunities for him to bond with his daughter. In fact, Chuck even competes with Haley in the father-daughter talent competition at the Show Me Smiles Fantasy Pageant in Bernie, Missouri. Proving that dads can strut their stuff, the duo's dynamic dance routine brings down the house and takes home the top prize.

While Chuck and Haley's polished performance is undoubtedly fun to watch, it contrasts sharply with the talent "performances" in the series by mothers who are repeatedly shown mimicking, off stage, the on-stage dance moves of their dolled-up daughters. As episodes cut between shots of tiny

FIGURE 12.1
Honey Boo Boo strikes a pose.

FIGURE 12.2
Mama June mimics Honey Boo Boo's pose.

tots wobbling on stage and shots of moms in the audience wildly jiggling and gyrating, the compositions and juxtapositions make mothers seem, well, like lunatics (see figs. 12.1–12.2).

Here again, then, *Toddlers & Tiaras* promotes an image of patriarchal competence and stability—variously modeled, in Chuck's case, through his love, support, and financial backing of Haley, as well as by his own show-stopping performance. Mothers, by contrast, are not depicted as capable pageant participants. Rather, like Lucy Ricardo on *I Love Lucy,* they are characterized as untalented, out-of-control tricksters who yearn for the limelight but fail to achieve it. Despite the mild rebelliousness of shaking it like they just don't care, the starry-eyed moms on *Toddlers & Tiaras* do not escape their traditional roles—a point emphasized at the end of many episodes, when the camera follows them to their cars and shows them heading, not to Hollywood, but home.

The camera's focus on the exaggerated moves and mugging of mothers ultimately works to distort any appearance of normality, thereby aligning their off-stage antics with the carnival "freak show." In her research on television of the 1950s, Lynn Spigel has shown how conventionally attractive comedians

such as Lucille Ball "distorted their femininity with grotesque disguises" to make their performances less threatening.[23] A similar containment strategy appears to be at work on *Toddlers & Tiaras,* albeit with a somewhat different political agenda. Here the cameras play up the "grotesque disguises" of inept moms to render them ridiculous (if not hideous) in relation to the seemingly natural, talented, and composed appearances of dads—a move that not only tempers any resistant politics at the heart of women's gendered rebellions but also relegates mothers to the role of laughable clown.

While *Toddlers & Tiaras* packages women's off-stage antics as the series's ultimate freakish performance, it should be noted that some episodes do show moms participating in pageants with their daughters. Unlike the episode featuring Chuck and Haley, however, these installments, such as "Universal Royalty National Pageant" (season 1, episode 1) depict middle-aged mothers competing aggressively against their daughters for crowns. Other episodes, such as "Gold Coast California Grand State Finals," highlight the triumph of daddy-daughter duos over mommy-daughter pairs. When spotlighting competitive pageant moms, the series predictably dwells on tensions among female family members, and through a combination of catty comments and clever editing, women's desire for pageant royalty is made to look insane. Several episodes in the fourth season also point to a new, worrisome trend wherein young girls complain about their moms' seeming craziness (e.g., "Circle City Stars and Cars" [episode 3], "Gold Coast Las Vegas" [episode 10], and "International Fresh Faces Missouri"). While the trope of the catfight is rampant across Reality TV, its appearance on *Toddlers & Tiaras* is especially troubling because it implies that female solidarity exists nowhere, not even in the family. The war among women also helps to naturalize male authority on the series. As Douglas has written, "When the producers [of Reality TV] deliberately put females in situations that require solidarity, what happens? Brawls, rivalries, conflicts, feuds, tiffs, contention. On reality TV, female alliances are impossible; these are the ties that will hurt you, and will break your heart. So who can women really trust, really bond with, really get true support from, and ultimately throw in their lot with? Yep, only one other choice: men."[24]

Episodes that depict the pageant aspirations of mothers highlight what Diane Negra has importantly identified as a broader preoccupation in contemporary media with "womanly girls and girlish women."[25] When postfeminist discourses constantly encourage women to retain markers of girlhood—from youthful skin to girlish clothing—perhaps the appearance of pageant-bound moms on *Toddlers & Tiaras* is not surprising. What is absent from these narratives, of course, is the role that the beauty and media industries play in en-

couraging women to seek empowerment through commodified forms of girly consumption—which, in the pageant world, might mean shopping for a bejeweled gown or installing a stripper pole in the home. Ultimately, as a result of the highly formulaic and exceedingly patriarchal production practices used in *Toddlers & Tiaras* that locate women's choices in the realm of the personal instead of the political, we are left watching a seemingly endless stream of ridiculous female characters, from silly Sabrina dancing in her "fairy wig" to mental Melissa spinning absurdly on her slippery pole.

Conclusion

Despite the fact that more than fifty years have passed since the creators of *Leave It to Beaver* juxtaposed the knowledge of Ward Cleaver (Hugh Beaumont) with the ineptness of his wife, June (Barbara Billingsley), and "fathers came into their own as authorities" on television,[26] *Toddlers & Tiaras* suggests that little has changed in TV land. Although women on the series may not defer to their husbands as frequently as June deferred to Ward, white, middle-class male authority is nevertheless sewn into the structural fabric of the show—a potent reminder of the gender, race, and class disparities that continue to structure contemporary television and, through it, our everyday cultural and political experiences. When considering *Toddlers & Tiaras* within TLC's broader programming context, which includes series such as *19 Kids and Counting* (2008–), *Sextuplets Take New York* (2010), and *Sister Wives* (2010–), all of which celebrate huge families and father-centered households, it seems that the network's widely circulated claim that it "knows family" is rooted in fairly retrograde ideas about contemporary family life.[27]

Patricia Mellencamp has argued that Lucy's and Gracie's expert, show-stealing comedy on *I Love Lucy* and *The George Burns and Gracie Allen Show* offered female viewers in the 1950s a "weapon and tactic of survival," which helped ensure their sanity and provide respite from the era's repressive social and political conditions.[28] While women on *Toddlers & Tiaras* might also be seen as "stealing the show,"[29] the humor they provide functions not as a "weapon and tactic of survival" for female viewers but, rather, as a divisive "weapon and tactic" that annihilates their cultural diversity and feminine credibility. Unlike Lucy and Gracie, then, the wacky women of *Toddlers & Tiaras* are represented in a way that invites our disdain rather than our sympathy—a phenomenon that highlights contemporary culture's ongoing fears and anxieties about rebellious women, especially those who are not conventionally feminine, straight, white, or middle class.

Notes

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1. For an analysis of children's exploitative labor on *Kid Nation* through "the work of being watched," see Mark Andrejevic, *Reality TV: The Work of Being Watched* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2004).

2. Jane Ridley, "Pageant Momzillas and Crass Reality," *New York Daily News*, 22 March 2009, 19; Mark A. Perigard, "Trophy Baby: TLC's Child Beauty Pageant Show Is No Winner," *Boston Herald*, 27 January 2009, 29; ""Facebook Campaign Gaining Momentum: Teens Want *Toddlers and Tiaras* Banned," *Welland Tribune* (Welland, Ont.), 26 February 2009, A5.

3. Charisse Van Horn, "Parents Television Council Calls for Cancellation of *Toddlers and Tiaras*," 13 September 2011, accessed 24 September 2011, http://www.examiner.com.

4. Henry Giroux, *Stealing Innocence: Corporate Culture's War on Children* (New York: Palgrave, 2001), 49.

5. Randee Dawn, "'Toddlers and Tiaras' Producer Explains Pageant Moms," 2 February 2011, accessed 17 October 2011, http://today.msnbc.msn.com.

6. Sarah Banet-Weiser, *The Most Beautiful Girl in the World: Beauty Pageants and National Identity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 130.

7. Brenda R. Weber, *Makeover TV: Selfhood, Citizenship, and Celebrity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2009), 132.

8. Although the episode is titled "American Regal Gems," the name of the pageant is America's Regal Gems.

9. Herman S. Gray, *Watching Race: Television and the Struggle for Blackness* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004 [1995]), 85.

10. Kimberly Springer, "Divas, Evil Black Bitches, and Bitter Black Women: African American Women in Postfeminist and Post–Civil-Rights Popular Culture," in *Interrogating Postfeminism: Gender and the Politics of Popular Culture*, ed. Yvonne Tasker and Diane Negra (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007), 250.

11. Springer, "Divas, Evil Black Bitches, and Bitter Black Women," 250.

12. Charlotte Triggs, "*Toddlers and Tiaras:* Too Much Too Soon?" *People Magazine*, 26 September 2011, 165.

13. Laurie Ouellette, "'Take Responsibility for Yourself': *Judge Judy* and the Neoliberal Citizen," in *Reality TV: Remaking Television Culture*, 2d ed., ed. Susan Murray and Laurie Ouellette (New York: New York University Press, 2009), 234.

14. L. S. Kim, "Race and Reality . . . TV," *Flow*, 19 November 2004, available at http://flowtv.org (accessed 8 October 2011).

15. Grace Wang, "A Shot at Half-Exposure: Asian Americans in Reality TV Shows," *Television and New Media* 11, no. 5 (2010): 405. See also Susan Douglas, *Enlightened Sexism: The Seductive Message That Feminism's Work Is Done* (New York: Times Books,

2010); Jon Kraszewski, "Country Hicks and Urban Cliques: Mediating Race, Reality, and Liberalism on MTV's *The Real World*," in Murray and Oullette, *Reality TV*, 205–22.

16. Springer, "Divas, Evil Black Bitches, and Bitter Black Women," 268.

17. "*Toddlers and Tiaras* Casting Application: 2010 Season 3," TLC, 11 September 2010, accessed 17 September 2011, http://tlc.howstuffworks.com; "*Toddlers and Tiaras* Contestant Application: 2011–2012 Season 5," TLC, accessed 15 October 2011, http://tlc.howstuffworks.com.

18. Kathleen Rowe Karlyn, "Roseanne: Unruly Woman as Domestic Goddess," in *Critiquing the Sitcom: A Reader*, ed. Joanne Morreale (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2003), 261.

19. Hollis Griffin, "Le Petit Mort: *Toddlers and Tiaras* and Economic Decline," *Flow*, 3 September 2011, accessed 17 October 2011, http://flowtv.org.

20. Griffin, "Le Petit Mort."

21. Mary Beth Haralovich, "Sit-coms and Suburbs: Positioning the 1950s Homemaker," in *Private Screenings: Television and the Female Consumer*, ed. Lynn Spigel and Denise Mann (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1992), 111–41.

22. *Toddlers & Tiaras* also frequently shows mothers in their children's bedrooms or in a hobby space coded as feminine, such as a sewing room.

23. Lynn Spigel, *Make Room for TV: Television and the Family Ideal in Postwar America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 153.

24. Douglas, *Enlightened Sexism*, 212–13.

25. Diane Negra, *What a Girl Wants?: Fantasizing the Reclamation of Self in Postfeminism* (London: Routledge, 2008), 12.

26. Susan Douglas, *Where the Girls Are: Growing Up Female with the Mass Media* (New York: Random House, 1995), 51.

27. "TLC Knows Family," TLC, "Family" page, accessed 15 October 2011, http://tlc.howstuffworks.com/family.

28. Patricia Mellencamp, "Situation Comedy, Feminism, and Freud: Discourses of Gracie and Lucy," in *Feminist Television Criticism: A Reader*, ed. Charlotte Brunsdon, Julie D'Acci, and Lynn Spigel (Oxford: Clarendon, 1997), 73.

29. Mellencamp, "Situation Comedy, Feminism, and Freud," 70.

13

Legitimate Targets

Reality Television and Large People

GARETH PALMER

In this chapter, I argue that programs such as *The Biggest Loser* (2004–), *Downsize Me!* (NZ 2005–2007), *Honey, We're Killing the Kids* (UK, 2005; US, 2006) and *Fat Families* (UK, 2010) promote the value of discipline as a way to make the self. Each of these formats is representative of the drive behind weight-related programming to bring about change for maximum emotional effect for contestants and viewers alike. I look at how each program puts slightly different degrees of emphasis on discipline, surveillance, and the centrality of the nuclear family in remaking the self. What all formats share is the project of narrowing down identity formation in favor of a homogenization that ill serves those people who are chosen as subjects for treatment. It is notable that the sex of the subjects is predominantly female and that the treatments that are often recommended reinforce classic standards of the feminine. By adopting a caring rhetoric to intervene in the private space of the usually female body, these formats guide subjects into choices that have more to do with the dictates of consumerism, the demands of television to maintain market share, and producers' class status and anxieties than with the needs of the individual contestant for happiness and self-acceptance.

I begin by pulling together information to help explain how it is that formats featuring such aggressive bullying tactics may have been so readily accepted by contestants and viewers. My first frame considers the connections between the rise of individualism and the growth of the food industry. The close connections between advertising and lifestyle programming are also significant on the economic plane, but they bear analysis here because they share stylistic fea-