

elimination of their job as an aim, these unfortunately come across as personal opinions rather than worked-out positions sustained throughout the book.

The authors maintain that there are similarities, on the one hand, between the tourist and the prostitute and, on the other hand, between the tourist and the prostitution client. Both these are important to the extent that they help us to regard prostitution not as something unique in society, but rather as an activity sharing features with other social and symbolic activities.

The idea of de-differentiating the prostitute and the tourist, both understood as occupying liminal spaces in contemporary society, is carried on through the analysis of identity in a socio-psychological frame (Chapters 2, 3 and 4). While this does not emerge as being a very productive argument, the comparison between the tourist and the prostitute client leads to more specific conclusions. For instance, the same motivations for taking a holiday, it is argued, also emerge as relevant in visiting a sex worker. In the tourist industry what is sold is often a mixture of assault on and confirmation of sexual and relational identity – the tourist is already a potential sex tourist. Interesting examples are taken from travel companies' advertising campaigns. They show the construction of a holiday as a dense space for relational and sexual experiences.

Contemporary forms of holidays and contemporary forms of prostitution are considered within the tradition of social spaces of licentiousness – spaces that constitute some sort of 'safe' assaults on the normal order. The authors offer an historical overview, paying interesting attention to colonial representations, in order to reveal the attitudes on both sides of the relationship between tourists and women in the destination countries.

On the whole, a number of interesting suggestions emerge from the book but they are not fully carried through. This is particularly regrettable in the debate on sex work which is already quite confused, to the political disadvantage of the workers.

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The most beautiful girl in the world: beauty pageants and national identity

Sarah Banet-Weiser; University of California Press, California, USA, 1999, ISBN: 0-520-21789-6
£32.50, 0-520-21791-8, £12.95 (Pbk)

In *The Most Beautiful Girl in the World: Beauty Pageants and National Identity*, Sarah Banet-Weiser argues that the beauty pageant is a central site for ideologies of gendered citizenship and racialized national subjectivity. Primarily focusing on the annual Miss America pageant, Banet-Weiser's monograph is an important

contribution to gender studies, cultural studies, and American studies. Combining archival analysis with ethnography, Banet-Weiser's interdisciplinary examination of the Miss America pageant expands upon feminist scholarship in the field of popular culture.

As a 'civic ritual', a 'mass-mediated spectacle', and an instance of commodity culture, Banet-Weiser notes that beauty pageants have often been discussed in one of two ways. First, by many feminist scholars, beauty pageants are trivialized as sites of spectacular commodity culture, within which women's bodies are displayed, exchanged, and consumed by an (inter)national audience. Second, by conservative supporters of the pageant, the contests are arenas for the production of narratives of autonomy and patriotic national subjectivity. In contrast to these dominant discourses on pageantry, Banet-Weiser argues for a more complex analysis of agency and subjectivity. Drawing upon interviews with pageant contestants and organizers, Banet-Weiser demonstrates how the Miss America pageant (which, importantly, functions as a major educational scholarship fund) engenders multiple narratives of the national body.

Banet-Weiser analyses three critical moments in the history of the Miss America pageant: the nomination of Vanessa Williams as the first black Miss America in 1984; the crowning of Bess Myerson as the first (and only) Jewish Miss America in 1945; and the selection of Heather Whitestone as the first Miss America with disabilities in 1995. The crowning of these three contestants, Banet-Weiser suggests, articulates profound disjunctures in nationalist representations of the United States. If the seemingly democratic selection structure of the pageant epitomizes the virtues of American liberalism, then these three winners are ostensibly demonstration of the fact that America, and Americans, triumph over differences of race, ethnicity, religion, and disability. Yet as Banet-Weiser demonstrates, the selection of these contestants, and their treatment by the news media thereafter, makes visible the failure of US multiculturalism. As the story of Vanessa Williams makes amply clear, race and queer sexualities occupy an especially difficult location at the pageant, as such differences are simultaneously elided by, and made explicit within, the rhetorical organization of the pageant.

While Banet-Weiser delineates the contradiction between 'strategies of assimilation' and 'eroticizing difference' (p. 135) that inform the Miss America pageant, her reading is limited by her insistence that Williams, Myerson, and Whitestone merely reinscribe the 'primacy of whiteness celebrated within the pageant' (p. 125). Rather than confirming whiteness as the primary ideological discourse of Miss America, how else may we theorize the importance of Myerson, Williams, and Whitestone as representative figures of the nation? In what ways do their incorporation and eventual selection as winners of the Miss America pageant demonstrate the primacy of 'difference' – racial, religious, and physical – as a constitutive feature of US liberalism? Are there modes of performance that enable

us to understand how the pageant can simultaneously identify and disidentify with nationalist ideologies of America?

Banet-Weiser's discussion of the talent show and question-and-answer session provides one way of rethinking the equation between Miss America and national narratives of whiteness. Far from being a rote dialogue between pageant organizers and contestants, the question-and-answer session is in fact critical to providing 'the architecture for the construction of the contemporary ideal female subject ... she is intelligent, goal-oriented, independent, feisty, and committed to individualism' (p. 88). Enunciated within a patriarchal (and paternal) liberal discourse of individual subjectivity, the contestant who participates in the question-and-answer session is both encouraged to speak, at the same time that her speech is regulated by what Banet-Weiser calls 'rehearsed spontaneity'. The pedagogical inculcation of contestants into dominant discourses of taste (and therefore class) illustrates the manner in which Miss America attempts to consolidate middle-class narratives of American selfhood. At the same time, the contestants' insistence on their capacity for *choice* in these two segments of the pageant implies that contestants actively negotiate their own desires and pleasures *vis-à-vis* the demands of pageant organizers, thus embodying contestatory notions of agency. In this reading of Miss America, the pageant does not hegemonically reproduce, or succeed in disciplining, representations of gender, race, and sexuality. Rather, the contestants re-inflect these narrative structures in order to realize new forms of embodied agency. As contestants actively re-make themselves and the meaning of the pageant, Miss America proves to be an ambivalent site on which the 'national dilemma' (p. 9) of American multiculturalism and femininity remains unresolved.

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Action chicks: new images of tough women in popular culture

Sherrie A. Inness (editor); Palgrave, London, 2004, ISBN: 1-4039-6396-7, £12.99 (Pbk)

Action Chicks is the latest in an impressive list of books in girls' studies edited by Sherrie A. Inness, Professor of English at Miami University, USA. It picks up on themes of some of her earlier works, especially *Tough Girls* (1999), by investigating the latest action heroines of (mainly US) popular culture. As with other Inness-edited texts, *Action Chicks* brings together a diverse group of contributors, mainly emerging academics, to provide fresh and engaging commentary on the meanings of women as action heroines in TV, film, comics and toys. The key concern of this