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"Baby, I wish we could get you some lips for Christmas": investigating cultural disregard for girls through the promotion of hegemonic and sexualized femininity, and celebrity in *Toddlers & Tiaras*

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**“Baby, I wish we could get you some lips for Christmas”: Investigating
Cultural Disregard for Girls through the Promotion of Hegemonic and
Sexualized Femininity, and Celebrity in Toddlers & *Tiaras***

A Thesis Presented by

Corrinne N. Connolly

to

The Department of Communication Studies

**in partial fulfillment of the degree of
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**Northeastern University
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ABSTRACT OF THESIS

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ABSTRACT

In American society, girls' culture has become increasingly concerned with notions of beauty and appearance, as well as the display of sexualized femininity. This thesis utilizes a cultural studies perspective to examine the controversial reality TV program *Toddlers and Tiaras*, which profiles young girls in their journeys through the child beauty pageant circuit. Following from Henry Giroux's theories of exploitation and indifference towards children in American society, I argue that *Toddlers & Tiaras* functions ideologically as a cultural object that reinforces a moral disregard for girls through its depiction of hegemonic notions of feminine girlhood and its positing of fame and celebrity as the ultimate goal for the female child. I examine how *Toddlers & Tiaras* functions in the same way as reality TV makeovers to promote discourses of post-feminism and neoliberalism as a means for constructing girls' identities. I also explore how these discourses contribute to the construction and positioning of girls as what Foucault termed "docile bodies" or individuals under invisible systems of surveillance and regulation which causes them to lose power and agency. I rely on Leo Braudy's and David Marshall's work on celebrity culture to explore how *Toddlers & Tiaras* exemplifies the quest for fame and celebrity status within contemporary American culture. As part of a larger cultural studies project, this thesis hopes to encourage thinking about the construction and positioning of girls in American society.

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Introduction

In a bustling salon in Oklahoma City, a young girl anxiously awaits the start of her makeover. However, this is not an example of anxious excitement; it is more like terror-induced anxiety as the girl in wait is only five years old and has arrived at the salon for her pre-pageant eye brow wax. As she has already experienced one waxing session where she was painfully burned by the beautician, she is terrified and pleads with her mother not to make her go through with it. Her mother, however, assures her that all will be fine and instructs the beautician to proceed, which she does despite the girl's heart-wrenching screams of "Don't tear it!" Although this scene seems like it could be out of a Hollywood movie, unfortunately it is not. The little girl at the salon is a real five year old child named Alexis, who underwent this procedure while featured on the popular reality television program *Toddlers & Tiaras* as part of her preparation for the Oklahoma City Fabulous Faces Pageant.

Alexis' eyebrow wax exemplifies a trend in US society towards a lack of concern for the welfare and future of girls in America. Although male children are also at risk, girls are at greater risk than boys because they already occupy a subordinate position which sets them up for bleaker prospects in the future. Girls today are provided with limited options on how to be a proper female and are socialized to perform within hegemonic modes of femininity which place them in subordinate positions. They are taught that beauty and appearances are directly related to future success, and celebrity is the ultimate success. American girls are sold sexualized versions of girlhood by the media and consumer industries and are encouraged to display their bodies to garner attention. Girlhood has become sexualized and girls are expected to mature in childhood.

This thesis utilizes a cultural studies perspective in order to investigate these changes in girl culture. Cultural studies provides an ideal avenue for research on this topic, as it emphasizes an exploration of everyday life processes and interactions in an effort to understand how meaning is made. A cultural studies perspective seeks to investigate how these shifting trends in girlhood become normalized within the culture. My research employs a cultural studies perspective to read *Toddlers & Tiaras* as a cultural text that produces and disseminates meaning about girlhood and girl identity.

Numerous cultural critics have noted these shifting trends in girlhood and the emphasis on beauty, appearance, and sexuality in girl culture. Journalist Peggy Orenstein documents the trend towards hyper-girliness in her book *“Cinderella Ate My Daughter: Dispatches from the Front Line of the New Girlie-Girl Culture”* (2011). Orenstein argues that narratives of girlhood present limited options for young girls today in terms of identity construction, and that much of girl’s popular culture is socializing them to be hyper-feminine. Girls are taught that “looking hot or at least hoesque—at concerts, or Halloween, after school, in your dance routines—[is]the way to express femininity, to ‘be true to you’” (Orenstein, 2011:125). Although Ornstein admits that girls have always been attracted to traditionally “girlie” culture, she argues that the current generation of girls is being pursued more aggressively by marketers than ever before, which encourages girls to grow up faster.

M. Gigi Durham, author of *The Lolita Effect: The Media Sexualization of Girls and What We Can Do About It* (2008) similarly argues that popular culture and the media encourage limited definitions of girlhood that encourage girls to flaunt their bodies and be sexy. The constant flow of sexualized images that are sent to girls influences the way that they conceptualize their identities. Much of girl’s popular culture, including toys, fashion, and media

is filled with images and allusions to sex that contribute to the establishment of female children as sexual subjects. This new culture has been referred to as “prosti-tot”, one which “re-packages porn as mainstream “sexy” and posits “hotness”... as a girl’s highest attainable goal” (Harris, 2010). Young girls fashion has come to include choices such as baby high heels, graphic T-shirts with phrases such as “Hottie” emblazoned on the front, leading critics to refer to it as “hooker-chic”(Harris, 2010). Short skirts, knee-high boots, halter tops, bikinis, thong underwear and padded bras are sold in children’s sizes at popular retailers like Abercrombie. Toy companies such as Mattel and MGA also sell sexed up images to young girls in the form of Moxie Dollz, Bratz, and Monster High dolls who wear fish-net stockings, mini-skirt, tube tops, and heavy make-up, as well as describe their hobbies as “shopping and flirting with the boys” (Monsterhigh.com). These examples help to illustrate the sexualized versions of girlhood that girls are encouraged to accept.

These sexualized versions of femininity are sold to girls as part of the “girl power” discourse, which posits women and men (and girls and boys) as equals and encourages bodily display as an empowering choice. However, these versions of “girl-power” are actually dis-empowering. As cultural critic Susan J. Douglas argues, this version of femininity is “especially targeted to girls and young women and emphasizes that now that they ‘have it all’, they should focus the bulk of their time and energy on their appearance, pleasing men, being hot, competing with other women, and shopping” (Douglas, 2010:10). Instead of being concerned with political and economic power, girls are taught that power comes from buying things and looking good. In order to be a “proper” feminine subject and look good, it is necessary to buy things: “While they are the ‘girl power’ generation, the bill of goods they are repeatedly sold is that true power comes from shopping, having the right logos, and being ‘hot’” (Douglas, 2010: 6). Products are

sold to women and girls as a means to help them find their “true selves” and bring out their inner beauty by making their outer beauty apparent. Girls are repeatedly told that they need certain products in order to fit in and be popular. They are sold unattainable versions of femininity and told that products will enable them to achieve it (Durham, 2008:191).

As exemplified by Alexis’ eyebrow waxing and this discussion of girls’ popular culture, girls are growing up faster and adopting the beauty practices of grown women at ever-younger ages. The distinction between adult women and girls becomes blurred as the separation in the categories of childhood and womanhood shrinks. Current trends in girls’ popular culture and fashion work to sexualize girls and contribute to the shrinking of the gap between grown women and young girls in terms of sexuality. According to Durham, “age compression or “KGOY- kids getting older younger is blurring the line between adults and children, especially with regard to sexuality” (Durham, 2008:126). All of these factors contribute to the increasing acceptance of the sexualization of girls in our culture and create a one dimensional picture of girlhood. Durham insists, “from the peek-a-boo pole dancing kit to the sexy French maid Halloween costumes sold in toddler sizes to the playboy bunny motifs on children’s accessories, an overtone of sexuality is shaping girlhood, and its specific, regressive version of sexuality—one that ties female sexuality to sex, and establishes that connection as part of childhood” (Durham, 2008:56).

The new phenomenon of pageant television appears to exemplify this emphasis on beauty and appearance in girl culture. Three reality television programs depicting child beauty pageants have emerged in the last few years including *Toddlers and Tiaras* and *King of the Crown* on TLC and *Little Miss Perfect* on WE. Although other documentaries such as *Painted Babies* (1995) and *Living Dolls* (2001) have depicted the world of child beauty pageants, the new pageant reality shows are different because they use video footage of real child beauty pageants

as a means of entertainment. They are not offering cultural critique. The new reality programs are much more profitable than previous pageant documentary videos and are viewed by a wider, more mainstream audience on a more frequent basis. On these shows, the girls are depicted embracing stereotypical female roles and behaviors, where they are portrayed as sexualized mini-adults, dressed in scanty outfits and posed seductively for the camera. These shows also celebrate the attainment of celebrity status and physical perfection. This depiction of girls represents a lack of concern towards girls in society, as it allows limited options for establishing varied female subjectivities. This representation of girls is problematic and deserves critical analysis to investigate how these shows function at an ideological level and why they flourish.

Overview of Project: Childhood Innocence, Feminist Theory and Beauty Culture, Reality Television, and Beauty Pageants as Cultural Phenomenon

Research regarding the cultural indifference towards American children has been considerable. Cultural critic Neil Postman wrote extensively on the topic of childhood. His book *The Disappearance of Childhood* (1982), focused on the concept of childhood itself disappearing, and merging seamlessly into adulthood. One particular chapter, “The Disappearing Child”, examines what he terms the “adultification” of children. Postman argued that as a concept childhood was becoming obsolete. He points out that the tastes and styles of adults and children are similar. Children no longer dress as children, but wear much of the same styles of clothing as adults, just in miniature versions. Adults and children also share the same taste in media and television shows: “What now amuses the child, also amuses the adult” (Postman, 1982:131). Children’s play has also been appropriated into the adult world. The Little League Baseball tournament has become a more serious athletic event each year. The emphasis is placed on winning instead of having fun: “What we have here is the emergence of the idea that play is

not to be done for the sake of doing it but for some external purpose, such as renown, money, physical conditioning, upward mobility, national pride. To adults, play is serious business” (Postman, 1982:131). Instead of enjoying play, children are forced to grow up faster. This is not to suggest that no children’s play exists. Rather, there is an alarming trend in society towards making children’s activities increasingly serious and turning them into arenas for profit making.

Postman also writes that children have disappeared from the media, arguing that when children are depicted in the media, they act like miniature adults: “an attentive viewer of situation comedies, soap operas, or any other popular TV format will notice that the children on such shows do not differ significantly in their interests, language, dress, or sexuality from the adults on the same shows” (Postman, 1982:123). In the past, children on television were presented as different from adults. Portrayals of childhood have also disappeared from commercials. When kids are shown in advertisements, they are equated with adults. Postman cites one commercial where the children in a classroom are all sexually attracted to one another because of the Jordache jeans they are wearing. At the end of the commercial, it is revealed that the teacher is wearing the same brand of jeans. This commercial seems to suggest that “no distinction need be made between children and adults in either their sexuality or the means by which it is stimulated” (Postman, 1982:124). Media representations of children position them in the same categories as adults, meaning that children are becoming “adultified” at young ages. The adultification of children is evident in advertising and on television programming where children share many of the same behaviors, gestures and language as adults. These representations are problematic because they lead children to be perceived as miniature adults. If children are seen as miniature adults, yet they have no actual decision-making power, who will be looking to protect their best interests?

Although I agree with Postman in his assessment of child and adult tastes merging, his concern for the disappearance of childhood is based not on a concern for childhood innocence but rather nostalgia for the past. The debate is informed by the work of Henry Giroux who argues that:

Postman's lament represents less a concern with preserving childhood innocence than with bemoaning the passing of a world in which high culture is threatened by popular culture, and the culture of print loses its hold on a restricted notion of literacy and citizenship training. The loss of childhood innocence in this scenario registers the passing of a historical and political juncture in which children could be contained and socialized under the watchful tutelage of dominant regulatory institutions such as the family, school and church (Giroux, 2000:32).

Postman's distress over the disappearance of childhood appears to be related to concern over the loss of power by institutional authorities instead of the concern over the welfare of children.

Henry Giroux focuses much of his research on the cultural disregard for the well-being of children and their lack of empowerment. His essay *Nymphet Fantasies: Child Beauty Pageants and the Politics of Innocence* (2000), focuses specifically on beauty pageants as sites for culturally sanctioned child exploitation. Giroux argues that the notion of childhood innocence is designed to keep adult and children's worlds separate and serves to alleviate adults of their responsibility towards children:

Within the myth of innocence, children are often portrayed as inhabiting a world that is untainted, magical, and utterly protected from the harshness of adult life. Innocence in this scenario not only erases the complexities of childhood and the range of experiences different children encounter, but it also offers an excuse for adults to evade responsibility for how children are firmly connected to and shaped by the social and cultural institutions run largely by adults. Innocence in this instance makes children invisible except as projections of adult fantasies—fantasies that allow adults to believe that children do not suffer from their greed, recklessness, perversion of will and spirit, and that they are, in the final analysis, unaccountable (Giroux, 2000:32).

By relying on notions of innocence, adults can pretend that they know what is best for children and that their choices do not have negative consequences for kids.

Giroux begins to explore the complex notion of childhood innocence by addressing the media fascination with the JonBenet Ramsey case, where five year old beauty queen JonBenet was found murdered in her home in 1995. This case drew national media attention, with the news media repeatedly airing tapes of JonBenet competing in pageants while acting and posing like a miniature adult. The case caused a backlash against the Ramsey family because of the way JonBenet was portrayed and created discussions about the danger of beauty pageants. JonBenet's death illuminates that not all of the cultural practices that we consider to be acceptable are necessarily safe or beneficial for children. "Writ large across the media coverage of the JonBenet case was the disturbing implication and recognition that childhood innocence is assaulted when children can no longer expect from adults 'protection... consistency and some sort of dignity'"(Giroux, 2000:38). Although the case started to highlight some of the problems associated with beauty pageants, it mainly focused on issues with the parents themselves and failed to raise crucial cultural questions concerning pageants, thereby inviting cultural studies analysis.

Within beauty pageants, children are equated with adult women: "the line between children and adults is blurred; all of the images depict the cool estrangement of sexual allure that has become a trademark in the commodities industry" (Giroux, 2000:49). Children are made to wear adult clothing and pose provocatively as agents of selling. The gender roles in pageants model themselves after those in adult beauty pageants. This sexualization of young girls is easily found in advertising, which often features children in scantily clad outfits: "It becomes clear that the processes at work in the sexualization and commodification of young children are not altogether different from the social relations that take place in other sites in which the bodies and body parts of young girls are used to market desire and sell commodities" (Giroux, 2000: 45).

Unlike advertising however, pageants manage to escape societal condemnation because they are presented as family entertainment and fun for kids: “what often makes such connections untenable in the public eye is that innocence as trope for doing what is best for the children is appropriated by beauty pageants in the name of dominant family values even though it is precisely in its name that practices that might be seen in other context as abusive to children are defined within the dominant culture as simply good, clean, family entertainment” (Giroux, 2000:45). Even though pageants are spaces for adult pleasure, they hide behind a screen of family entertainment which allows them to continue to thrive.

Giroux argues that most of the discourse surrounding pageants and child abuse is concerned with voyeurs and sexual predators and ignores the larger cultural institutions that fail to protect children:

The most disturbing threat to innocence may be child abuse, but it is not a form of abuse that can only be assessed through the horrible behavior of sexual predators. Such abuse needs to be situated within a broader set of political, economic, and social considerations, considerations that probe deeply into the cultural formations that not only make children visible markers of humanity and public responsibility but also see children as a menacing enemy, or as merely a market to be exploited (Giroux, 2000:34).

Pageants are largely ignored as a form of child abuse because they are seen as wholesome fun:

“As American as apple pie, child beauty pageants are often embraced as simply good, clean entertainment and defended for their civic value to the community” (Giroux, 2000: 44).

However, beauty pageants should not be considered innocent because they are already part of the dominant structures that commodify and objectify children (Giroux, 2000:37). Not only do pageants objectify their contestants onstage, pageants are also a billion dollar a year industry (Orenstein, 2011). Pageants make money by charging the contestant competition fees through the

use of advertising and promoters. The children are being sold to audiences for adult pleasure in a commodification turn, where their bodies are given meaning by the media market.

Giroux asserts that children are no longer protected by adults and have dismal hopes for the future. While often indifferent to the plight of youth, US society is concerned with subjecting them “to social and economic forces that exploit them through the dynamics of sexualization, commodification, and commercialization throughout vast segments of the culture” (Giroux, 2000:34). Giroux believes that in order to move forward with society, we need to renew our moral responsibility towards children and train this generation to be citizens: “surely if democracy is to carry us forward into the next century, it will be based on a commitment to improving the lives of children, but not within the degrading logic of a market that treats their bodies like a commodity and their future as a trade-off for capital accumulation” (Giroux, 2000:49). According to this logic, failure to account for children, as suggested by Giroux, the future of society will indeed be dismal.

Extending Giroux’s approach, researchers Robinson and Davies believe that the concept of childhood innocence serves the needs of adults instead of children. Within the hegemonic discourse of US television, “adulthood and childhood become mutually exclusive polarized worlds with the child becoming the powerless ‘other’ in the world of adults, a world in which adults become the ‘gate-keepers’ of knowledge and experience in an effort to preserve the perceived essence of childhood; that is, ‘innocence’” (Robinson and Davies, 2008:343). Children are viewed as existing in a space beyond, a magical realm that is somehow impermeable by the tough adult world. Yet, the strict binary this creates between adult’s and children’s worlds prevents children from being in a position to become active citizens. Concerns of exploitation arise when failure to educate children and train them how to be proper citizens.

Although children are depicted as unknowing innocents in US culture, Robinson and Davies argue that this notion of childhood innocence is a misconception that has been carefully constructed, “a concept that is manufactured by adults for adults and consequently has critical impacts on children’s agency in their lives” (Robinson and Davies, 2008:343). Children are able to be exploited by adults because adults occupy positions of “cultural power”. They continue:

‘Cultural power’ in childhood innocence operates to maintain adult-child power relations, distinctions in what is constituted adult knowledge and appropriate children’s knowledge, but it also acts as a convenient excuse for adults not to address difficult knowledge with children (2008: 345).

Robinson and Davies describe “adult knowledge” as a form of ‘difficult knowledge’, with “difficult knowledge” being “sites in which many adults experience great discomfort in dealing with their own understanding, values, prejudices and fears; they are points at which the discursive locations of subjects can become challenged and troubled” (Robinson and Davies, 2008:345). Because adults are uncomfortable sharing “difficult knowledge” with children, children are not privy to certain forms of “adult knowledge” which leaves the power in the adult hands.

Since children are offered limited power in society, they are easily preyed upon, manipulated, and exploited by cultural institutions such as television. Robinson and Davies assert that beauty pageants are one such institution which highlights the imagined separation between the world of adults and that of children. They examine the 1995 documentary *Painted Babies*, as well as the 2006 Fox Searchlight film *Little Miss Sunshine* to compare two competing discourses regarding child beauty pageants and the concept of childhood innocence.

Painted Babies, much like today’s reality pageant shows, follows two five-year old girls, Brooke and Asia, as they prepare for and compete in the Southern Charm beauty pageant. The

documentary highlights the imagined separation between the world of adults and children. The girls in the documentary are aware of how to use their bodies in order to solicit desired reactions from the adults who judge them. They are made to perform as adults one moment and then to transition back into innocent children the next. *Painted Babies* “portrays the way in which the child beauty pageant disrupts the adult-child relationship. It achieves this by showing how the girls must behave as adult females while on stage but, once off-stage, are expected to become children once again. In this way, the child is expected to move unproblematically across the supposedly mutually exclusive worlds of the adult and the child” (Robinson and Davies, 2008:347). The worlds of adults and children cannot be as mutually exclusive as conceived in the discourse of childhood innocence if these girls are expected to understand and inhabit both worlds at different times. The contradictory messages that pageants promote are confusing. As argued by Robinson and Davies, the notion of childhood innocence is based on rigid conceptions of childhood that fail to account for children’s actual lived experience as children, not to mention their mental and physical development.

Unlike the pageant professionals on *Painted Babies*, *Little Miss Sunshine*’s protagonist Olive is a charmingly chubby seven-year old who desires to be a beauty queen but lacks the proper training and know-how. During the talent portion, Olive unknowingly performs a striptease choreographed by her grandfather. Illuminating the hypocrisy of child beauty pageants, Olive’s dance is judged as wholly inappropriate and far more risqué than the other contestant’s routines, even though many of them perform similar moves, such as the removal of clothing, and wear outfits that are far more revealing during the pageant. *Little Miss Sunshine* “cleverly deploys competing discourses of childhood innocence in order to critique adult constructions of childhood” (Robinson and Davies, 2008:343). Olive is not shielded in a false cloak of childhood

innocence and is able to navigate issues in the adult world when the adults in her life are willing to give her the information to do so. In this way, the film “is both powerful and effective because it positions the child protagonist as a critical subject who learns to effectively negotiate the ‘difficult knowledge’ because some of the film/s adult characters guide, support, and teach her to ethically respond to issues of diversity and difference, enables Olive to operate as a competent and informed citizen” (Robinson and Davies, 2008:350). As demonstrated by Olive, children are not naïve innocents who are incapable of making decisions. When the shield of innocence is removed, children can be empowered to make informed decisions when they are provided with the necessary knowledge to do so.

As argued in the above literature, the conception of childhood innocence is inherently connected to issues of power and control, where children are constructed as the powerless “other” in contrast with the “knowing” adults. Similarly, feminist theory argues that culturally sanctioned notions of beauty, which contribute to the construction of hegemonic definitions of femininity, are also intrinsically linked to power dynamics between men and women. Feminist theorists including Naomi Wolf and Wendy Chapkis have argued that beauty culture is socially constructed and serves to position women as subordinate to men. In *The Beauty Myth* (1991/2002), Wolf argues that beauty culture “would have us believe that beauty exists objectively and universally” and is inherently connected to issues of power (Watson and Martin, 115). Similarly, Wendy Chapkis’ *Beauty Secrets: Women and the Politics of Appearance* (1986) situates beauty culture as part of a politics of oppression. In this oppressive system, the body can be understood as a “primary site for understanding how power operates” (Davis, 2006:563). The body is used to keep women out of positions of power and beauty rituals are used to “control or discipline women”, she argues (Davis, 2006:565). “By linking the beauty practices of individual

women to the structural constraints of the beauty system, a convincing case was made for treating beauty as an essential ingredient of the social subordination of women. Beauty was seen as an ideal way to keep women in line by lulling them into believing that they could gain control over their lives through continued vigilance over their bodies” (Davis, 2006:565). Chapkis argues that beauty culture is mandatory for all women and that beauty rituals are used to maintain gender differences. “Appearance is a central way that gender difference is constituted in a sexually, racially, and economically divided society” (Davis, 2006:567). Standards of beauty have been naturalized in our culture so much that we fail to notice them. For instance, Chapkis brings up the example of women shaving their legs. There is no physiological necessity for shaving however, women do it anyway because it is associated with femininity. Foucault’s notion of “docile bodies”, from his seminal work *Discipline and Punish*, is useful for understanding how beauty culture functions to construct women as objects to be “subjected, used, transformed, and improved”(1977). In this discourse, women are unacceptable in their natural state and made to feel shame, and somehow less of a woman, when they fail to comply with beauty standards. My research applies Foucault’s notion of “docile bodies” to explore how children become “docile” in this beauty system, specifically within the child beauty pageant circuit, and how this docility is established through the techniques of shaming and surveillance found in reality makeover programming. These “docile” child bodies are then exploited by the media system as entertainment.

In the oppressive beauty system, women and girls are restricted by the limited definition of ideal femininity, as “the ideal American female citizen is defined in terms of white, heterosexual and subordinate femininity” (Banet-Weiser and Portwood-Stacer, 2006:267). Clearly issues of race arise then since white women are considered the model for beautiful in our

society. Other ethnic groups are marginalized and feel pressure to conform to standards of white beauty: “those designated by the dominant culture as “Other” become imprisoned in their bodies” (Davis, 2006:566). In order to fit into the mold of ideal femininity, all women must absorb the beauty practices of white women. All women are encouraged to engage in beauty culture as a means of controlling their own bodies, however, beauty culture functions to eliminate choice through its emphasis on compliance. Rita Freedman argues, “The real issue has nothing to do with whether women wear makeup or don’t, gain weight or lose it, have surgery or shun it, dress up or down, make our clothing and faces and bodies into works of art or ignore adornment altogether. The real problem is our lack of choice” (Watson and Martin, 2001:123).

Later, I explore how discourses of post-feminism have emerged as the dominant ideology for women and how these discourses promote beauty practices as a means for identity fashioning and empowerment, especially for young girls.

Beauty pageants present an ideal site for the investigation of cultural ideals of beauty. Much research has been undertaken to investigate the cultural phenomenon of the beauty pageant. Specifically, the Miss America Pageant has been researched extensively as a site for the reflection of cultural politics. Elwood Watson and Darcy Martin (2001) examine the history of the Miss America Pageant as “a microcosm of change in American culture” and provide a brief history in order to exemplify how pageant changes correspond with cultural changes (106). First organized in 1921 as a marketing strategy to extend the tourist season in Atlantic City, NJ, the Miss America Pageant has evolved dramatically from its humble beginnings. There have been innumerable changes to the pageant in its seventy-nine year history that correspond with changes in American society. During the 1920s and 1930s, the pageant was just beginning and trying to find a place within American culture and to properly define women’s roles within it. There were

many issues related to morality and propriety during this period and the pageant struggled to construct a clean image while relying on the female body for entertainment. During World War II, the pageant continued even though its main stage was transformed into a military headquarters, as it was viewed as a “positive moment in an otherwise sad time” (Watson and Martin, 2001:109). In 1945, academic scholarships were introduced to the pageant in order to entice college women to join the pageant and help improve its image. In 1954, the pageant was televised live on ABC to more than 27,000,000 home viewers (Watson and Martin, 110). Watson and Martin describe the 1950s as the pageant’s “peak,” as there was a growth in the scholarship fund and continued high ratings when the pageant moved over to CBS in 1958 (Watson and Martin, 2001:110).

Unlike the 1950s, during the 1960s and 1970s the pageant was subject to scrutiny and public criticism due to the radical cultural changes during this period including the women’s and civil rights movements, the Vietnam War, “hippie” counter culture and the sexual revolution (Watson and Martin, 2001:111). The Miss America Pageant became a national symbol for the degradation of women and was viewed as inherently racist, as only women of white ethnicity competed in the pageant. Martin and Watson describe the 1980s as an “altruistic” period for the pageant, as the 1984 crowning of the first black Miss America, Vanessa Williams, which helped to lessen racial concerns, and the introduction of social platforms for pageant winners, put the pageant in a positive light. The 1990s attempted to modernize the pageant by appealing to public desires. In 1995, the public voted to keep the swimsuit portion of the competition and in 1997, the two-piece suit was allowed in the pageant. In the year 2000, the pageant began allowing participants who had been divorced or had an abortion to enter the competition (Watson and Martin, 2001:117). As is evidenced by the Miss America Pageants’ extensive history, “the

pageant... reflects the values and beliefs of the greater American society, particularly in its views of women” (Watson and Martin, 2001:106).

Researcher Sarah Banet-Weiser’s work (1999 and 2004) has helped to establish the beauty pageant as a “ripe subject for academic inquiry” by critically examining beauty pageants as a site for the reinforcement of femininity and American nationalism (Watson and Martin, 2004:5). Banet-Weiser argues that the Miss America Pageant exists as a model of ideal American femininity: “The Miss America pageant takes its claim of national representation quite seriously. Indeed, the pageant sees itself as a forum for promoting a kind of eternal feminine code for the “typical” American woman- a woman living in a nation that prides itself on the coherence of its internal differences –even as it defines typicality in terms of white, middle-class norms and even as those norms change” (Banet-Weiser, 2004:69). Following this logic, Banet-Weiser examines how identity politics function within the Miss America Pageant in relation to its privileging of whiteness. Pageant contestants as individuals are intended to be representative of the cultural difference found in America, yet lose their sense of individuality when described in terms of their typicality. As Banet-Weiser describes,

The ‘typical’ women, as represented by the Miss America Pageant, largely lacks apparent identity markers and appeals to a liberal rhetoric of personhood. The space of the Miss America Pageant thus becomes one in which we are all, simply ‘persons,’ flattening out of the varying political characteristics. Within this space, traditional markers of identity—race, class, and ethnicity—are reshaped so that they better accommodate the politics of whiteness that structure the entire event (Banet-Weiser, 2004:70).

Banet-Weiser argues that pageant contestants who are in any way different from the white ideal are intended to “‘prove’ the diversity of the American public, representing both the promise and the fantasy of citizenship” (Banet-Weiser, 2004:72). She provides examples of two former Miss America’s, Jewish American Bess Myerson in 1945 and deaf Heather Whitestone in 1995, to

demonstrate how the pageant relies on its winner to reinforce dominant US ideology of the time. Bess Myerson's crowning during the time of World War II reassured the nation that it "possessed a coherent identity" (Banet-Weiser, 2004:73). "Myerson... provided both U.S. soldiers and the broader America public with a model of femininity that fit perfectly with dominant U.S. national ideology of the day. Her white ethnicity did not threaten the national vision of white femininity, and her Jewish identity justified and legitimated the presence of U.S. soldiers overseas" (Banet-Weiser, 2004:75). Myerson provided symbolic evidence of the cohesion of the United States during a time of incredible upheaval. Similarly, Whitestone's deafness served as a reminder of the cultural tolerance during a period of "increasing national anxiety about marginalized communities, an anxiety fueled by the potential threat these communities pose to dominant society and culture" (Banet-Weiser, 2004:83). American ideology in the mid-1990s promoted a rhetoric of liberal personhood, where individuals can achieve their dreams if they work hard. Whitestone's crowning as Miss America, and her whiteness, "represented the triumph of a reactionary, anti-affirmative action and anti-immigrant 'multicultural' US society in the mid-1990s (Banet-Weiser, 2004:81). Both examples of these former Miss America's provide evidence that the Miss America Pageant reflects cultural ideology.

Banet-Weiser and Portwood- Stacer (2006) examine how beauty pageants have lost their cultural relevance in terms of defining ideal femininity in America. They argue that beauty pageants were once the most prominent site for the display of ideal beauty. As described above, pageants help to diffuse and promote ideas about what is considered beautiful in a particular society. Today however, makeover television shows, which promote discourses of post-feminism, have become the dominant site for articulating notions of ideal femininity. This

replacement of the beauty pageant by makeover television as a site for defining femininity is examined in depth in chapter two.

Unlike adult beauty pageants, little research has been done to explore the complex world of child beauty pageants. Child beauty pageants can be described as “an event with the purpose of rewarding children based on their appearance and personality” (Levey, 2009:199). Child beauty pageants emerged in America in 1960 with the *Little Miss Universe* pageant in Miami, Florida (Pageant Center, 2007, 4). Numerous children’s pageants exist today on the state, national and international levels: for example the Universal Royalty Beauty Pageant, America’s Fabulous Faces, National Gold Coast, Tiny Miss USA, Little Miss America, and the Southern Celebrity pageant.

Pageants for children are similar to adult pageants where the main purpose is to crown one girl as the most beautiful. There are different types of child beauty pageants as well. According to hubpages.com, “there are glitz pageants, natural pageants, semi-glitz pageants, face pageants, online pageants, online photo contests, scholarship pageants, and coed pageants. Each type of pageant has its own rules and guidelines. And then there are the unwritten rules that you must know in order to be successful”. The competitions in child beauty pageants are remarkably similar to adult pageants. Girls are divided into groups by age categories. They are generally composed of four stages: beauty, talent, outfit of choice and even swimsuit. There are also additional categories including best smile, best hair, most photogenic, and prettiest dress. This appears to be the general set-up of child beauty pageants. Cultural studies, with its emphasis on how meaning is made in contemporary society, offers an avenue for research into the complex world of televised child pageants.

Television exists as a cultural medium that assists in the promotion and spreading of ideology. Reality television, with its emphasis on the “real”, presents a unique example for the examination of cultural ideologies. Reality TV programming has become a popular feature on television screens across America. Most television channels air some sort of reality TV programming and many including Discovery ID and TLC appear to be almost entirely composed of reality TV shows. Today the category of reality television spans a wide range of programming that includes competition shows like *Survivor* or *Top Chef*, “self-help” programs like *the Biggest Loser* and *What Not to Wear* and even “real-life dramas” such as *The Real World*, *Teen Mom* and *The Jersey Shore*. Because of the prevalence of reality TV, the genre has become a popular object for cultural studies research. Cultural studies research investigates how the genre of reality television should not just be considered trivial entertainment, but rather as programming that serves an ideological function within the culture.

Numerous studies explore the cultural meanings found within reality television programs and establish reality programming as more than a “representational vehicle” (Bratich, 2007:7). Researchers including Clissold (2004) and Andrejevic (2004) have explored the surveillance aspect of reality programming and how reality TV helps to normalize surveillance in everyday life. Multiple scholars (Andrejevic and Colby, 2006; Dubrofsky, 2006; Shugart, 2006; Dubrofsky and Hardy, 2008) have investigated constructions of race and the prevalence of racial stereotyping on reality programming. These studies have analyzed the operation of color blind ideology and the invisibility of race, as well as the privileging of whiteness on reality programs such as *The Real World*, *The Bachelor* and *Flavor of Love*. Much research (Matheson, 2007; Brancato, 2007; Banet-Weiser and Portwood –Stacer, 2006; Davis, 2009) has been done to analyze gender representations on reality TV and the ideological implications of such

representations. These studies have investigated topics such as the representation of ideal femininity, the reinforcement of stereotyped gender roles and the domestication of women. Many scholars (Clarkson, 2005 and Tropiano, 2009) have also examined reality television programming in relation to the normalization of heteronormativity and hegemonic gender roles.

The neoliberal function of reality television programming has been explored by numerous researchers (McCarthy, 2007; Holmes and Jermyn, 2004; Ouellette and Hay, 2008; Ouellette and Murray, 2009; Heller, 2007; Palmer, 2008; Weber, 2009). This research highlights how reality programs, especially lifestyle programming, serve a “helping” function as a new form of welfare and seek to replace previous forms of government assistance. These shows promote discourses of labor and improvement on the self as a means of acquiring citizenship. Later, I examine the makeover program in relation to discourses of neoliberalism and how such programs rely on narratives of transformation and work on the self as a means to finding the “real you” as an extension of neo-liberal ideology. *Toddlers & Tiaras* can be considered within this discourse of the makeover because of the transformations that the children undergo before each pageant, which are treated as if they are in the best interests of the child. I also examine how reality makeover programs such as *Toddlers & Tiaras* employ techniques of shaming and surveillance to create docility in their participants and to ensure compliance with the makeover.

Although reality TV has become popular, little research has been done that specifically focuses on children’s role within reality television programs. As reality shows have begun to become more popular, children have become an important component in the reality television landscape. Popular shows such as *Jon and Kate Plus 8*, *Wife Swap*, *Nanny 911*, *Table for Twelve*, and *19 Kids and Counting* are just a few of the current programs that rely on children for their storylines. Cultural studies research would benefit from investigation into children’s positioning

within reality programming in order to examine how children are constructed in the reality TV landscape and the ideological impact of such constructions.

It is clear from this summary of relevant literature that televised girls' beauty pageants present an important subject for cultural study. Scholarship in media and cultural studies presents a strong critique of the apparent widespread indifference to and disregard for the well-being of children within U.S. society. Giroux especially has been outspoken in illuminating the exploitation of children and the need for a renewal of responsibility towards the nation's youth. Scholarship cited here has revealed that the exploitation takes place in political circles, on film, on television and also through beauty pageants. I agree with Giroux that "the beauty pageant is an exemplary site for examining critically how the discourse of innocence mystifies the appropriation of children's bodies in a society that increasingly sexualizes and commodifies them" (2000:36). Given my acceptance of Giroux's critique, I will use his approach to explore how combining the two mediums of television and beauty pageants serves to position girls as subordinate. I will argue that *Toddlers & Tiaras* functions ideologically as a cultural object that reinforces a moral disregard for girls through its depiction of hegemonic notions of feminine girlhood, its construction of sexualized subjectivities for girls, and its positing of fame and celebrity as the ultimate goal for the female child.

Research Method

The following analysis examines the popular reality TV program *Toddlers & Tiaras* in order to assess the cultural implications of the program for girls. I asked three main research questions to undertake my analysis. First, how does *Toddlers & Tiaras* function ideologically to maintain regressive notions of idealized and hegemonic girlhood in relation to its construction of

the hyper-feminine and sexualized child? Second, how does *Toddlers & Tiaras* employ the narrative of transformation and the makeover to normalize hegemonic notions of femininity for girls? Finally, how does *Toddlers & Tiaras* encourage the branding of girls as commodities and star-seeking behavior? I situate my analysis of the program within three main categories including:

hegemonic femininity and reality makeover television,

sexualization and commodification of children,

fame and celebrity status

To explore my research questions, I performed a qualitative, textual analysis of *Toddlers & Tiaras*, utilizing episodes from multiple seasons of the program. In his article *The Joy of Text?: Television and Textual Analysis*, Glen Creeber notes that David Tripp and Robert Hodge “helped to pave the way for this interdisciplinary, explicitly combining textual analysis with other methodologies, so that they were able to produce greater insight into how meaning might be generated by television”(2006:84). I use this interdisciplinary approach in my own study for the same reasons and situate my analysis within the disciplines of cultural studies, feminist studies, and media studies. The cultural studies standpoint allows me to examine an everyday object for cultural meaning. The feminist studies viewpoint is used to explore the positioning of girls and the construction of femininity within a politics of gender. A media studies perspective allows me to critically analyze *Toddlers & Tiaras* as a cultural object with ideological meaning.

To undertake my research project, I watched approximately 25 episodes from season one through season five of *Toddlers & Tiaras*. These episodes were either found on YouTube or through OnDemand or Tivo and were watched on the computer and television respectively.

Creeber states that “textual analysis on its own is rare enough, but when it combines with the wider contextual or ‘extra-textual nature of the subject, it can still offer insight and inspiration” (2006:84). Herman Gray’s article *Television, Black Americans, and the American Dream* (1989) presents an example of a textual analysis that uses the wider cultural context to offer insight on societal discourse. Gray situates *The Cosby Show* and nonfiction documentaries of poor blacks during the 1980’s within the larger cultural context in order to examine how these television representations function in society to reinforce dominant discourses of “middle class success and urban poverty” (1989:376). By examining *Toddlers & Tiaras* within the larger cultural context, I was able to utilize Gray’s focus on dominant discourse concerns to connect the show to contextual cultural issues such as the cultural trend of exploiting and sexualizing young girls. I seek to examine the text of *Toddlers & Tiaras* as a TV medium that I am seeking to read. Through critically analyzing the narrative themes of *Toddlers & Tiaras*, as well as analyzing the positioning and construction of girl subjectivities within the program, I explore how the program encourages the subordination of the female child.

Background Information on *Toddlers & Tiaras*

Toddlers & Tiaras airs on The Learning Channel (TLC) on Wednesday nights at 10:00 PM. The TLC network is owned and operated by Discovery Communications and is primarily targeted at adult women aged 18-49. According to the Discovery Communications website, TLC is “one of the 20 most widely distributed cable networks in the U.S., features high-quality docu-series and reality based programming that engages the heart and mind by transporting viewers into the lives of real-life extra-ordinary characters.” *Toddlers & Tiaras* fits on this station format as it is both a reality program and is targeted towards women.

Toddlers & Tiaras aired its first season in January of 2009 and finished the fifth season in February of 2011. So far, there have been 44 episodes. The show is produced in the United States by Authentic Entertainment (Imdb.com). According to Howard Lee, Vice President of Production and Development for TLC, *Toddlers & Tiaras* began as just a one hour special about a child beauty pageant. The audience reaction was so strong however that the executives at TLC decided to turn it into an episodic program. Lee insists, “We were so surprised at how fascinated people were by this world and so we realized there was an opportunity to go further. We didn't realize there were so many amazing, passionate mothers, daughters, sons and fathers in this world. Doing one episode was not going to do it justice since there is such a wide spectrum of people to cover” (Halterman). Lee appears to have been correct in his assessment of the child pageant world as one rich with possibilities, as *Toddlers & Tiaras* has emerged as a “mega hit for TLC” (Orenstein, 2011:75). The show consistently attracts audiences with an average of about 1.1 to 1.4 million viewers per new episode in February 2011 and is currently casting for the sixth season (insidetvratings.com).

Aside from attracting viewers, the show has been successful at eliciting reactions within the larger media landscape. Numerous media outlets including television shows, newspaper articles, websites, blogs and social networking sites have covered the program and expressed mixed feelings towards it, that amount to a controversy about the treatment of children on television. A wide variety of television programs including news and talk programs, late-night talk shows, and comedy programs have all noticed the *Toddlers & Tiaras* controversy and have weighed in on the topic. One particularly memorable critique of the program was an elaborate parody featured on the *Jimmy Kimmel Live* program where Tom Hanks was depicted as a dedicated pageant dad whose on-screen daughter Sophie is preparing to compete in The Miss

Ultimate Sexy Baby Nevada competition. Although the show has been controversial in the public eye, producer Tom Rogan is “clear that the world of babes in bikinis is one worth exploring and understanding... even if his audience doesn’t always agree” (Dawn).

The show follows children (almost exclusively girls) on their journey through the pageant cycle. Each week, a different pageant in one of the fifty states is spotlighted. The pageants can range from small, hometown celebrations, to state-wide pageants, to massive nation-wide affairs that draw thousands of contestants. Each episode of *Toddlers & Tiaras* follows the established narrative format or pattern. First, the pageant director provides a brief introduction to the week’s pageant, noting the name and the location, as well as the pageant theme if there is one. Then, the audience is introduced to three different families who have a daughter who is competing in the pageant. Usually, there is one girl who is a seasoned pageant professional, one who is a pageant beginner, and one who has participated in a few pageants but has not won many titles yet. This is the formula. Occasionally they show three girls who have a lot of pageant experience on the same episode. After the families are introduced, the TV audience watches as the girls prepare for the pageant. This includes watching them practice their routines at home, going to dance class, going to the hairdresser, going to the spa for a facial, going tanning, getting their nails done, buying their pageant dresses, in some cases sewing the dresses, having their flippers (teeth) made at the dentist or getting their eyebrows waxed. Very rarely are the girls depicting participating in an activity that is not directly related to the pageant.

After the girls have been groomed and prepared for the pageant, the family packs up the necessary cases and trunks of makeup and clothing and leaves the house to travel to the pageant. The next time the audience sees the girls, they are unloading their cars and arriving at the hotel for pageant check-in. As they arrive at the pageant, the camera always cuts to the pageant

director who makes a comment about each of the three girls featured on the show who are competing in the pageant and their previous pageant experience. The girls are then transformed by their mothers, make-up artists, and hairdressers before they perform a last minute routine rehearsal or deal with any problems that arise before the pageant.

Finally, the girls take to the stage for the evening wear/ beauty, swimwear and talent portions of the pageant. During this phase, the girls are presented in various states of anxiety or excitement before taking to the stage. Their mothers or guardians either watch from their chairs in the audience or stand directly behind the judges and feed their girls reminders and tips as they perform such as “sparkle!”, “sassy”, or “be flirty!” Some mothers even act out the entire routine. This is perhaps the most entertaining part of the show for viewers. After the girls finish all of the pageant competitions, the judges tally the scores as the parents (and sometimes the girls) anxiously await the announcements. The crowning ritual is separated into age divisions, with runners-up and winners in each age. Then there are the “supreme” titles which designate that girl as the winner of the entire pageant. After the winners are announced, each family is given time for departing words. Generally, at least two of the girls featured win some award. There are usually comments from unhappy parents about the contest being rigged or judges cheating their daughters. Then there are the happy parents who claim that it was all worth it and they are just happy their daughters had a good time.

My research represents part of a larger cultural studies project, a discipline which seeks to “examine the everyday and the ordinary: those aspects of our lives that exert so powerful and unquestioned an influence on our existence that we take them for granted. The processes that make us ... are cultural processes that work precisely because they seem so natural, so unexceptional, so irresistible,” (Turner, 2003: 2). Specifically, my research aims to contribute to

the literature on girlhood by examining the meaning of *Toddlers & Tiaras* as a televised event and the moral terrain that it navigates in relation to the construction of girls as subjects. I explore how the program relies on surveillance and the media to contribute to changing notions of girlhood and the acceptance of this new girlhood within the larger culture. I argue that *Toddlers & Tiaras* exemplifies an object of the mass media that undermines and subordinate girls through its construction of hegemonic and sexualized notions of girlhood and the emphasis on celebrity.

Chapter Two: “Girlie-girls”: *Toddlers & Tiaras*, Makeover TV, and the Promotion of Hegemonic Femininity

In American society, individuals are encouraged to obey a strict gender binary. For women and girls, the expectation is that they will behave as proper feminine subjects. Certain beliefs and conceptions about femininity have been naturalized within our culture and are systematically ingrained in the minds of women and young girls. These rules apply to all facets of women’s lived experience including their appearances, attitudes and behaviors, and come together to constitute a larger ideology about ideal womanhood. This ideology helps to reinforce hegemonic notions of femininity that pervade society.

Women and girls are constantly bombarded with images and ideas about what ideal beauty is. These images are part of the larger “beauty culture” that we live in. Appearance is articulated as the most important component in establishing an appropriate female identity. From an early age, girls are socialized to believe that in order to be feminine they must abide by certain beauty norms that pertain to how they look and how they dress. Compliance is ensured by making women feel “un-feminine” when they choose to ignore these ideals. Women will go to extremes to meet the requirements of femininity because beauty is considered to be worth time, money, and pain (Davis, 2006:558). Beauty culture is not a novel concept, as Davis notes, “Historically, both sexes went to great lengths to beautify and decorate their bodies” (2006:557). For instance, in the eighteenth century, both men and women would powder their faces, wear lipstick, and don wigs. As demonstrated from this example, beauty standards evolve over time.

Although beauty culture is not a new concept, I argue that it has never been as stringent in its definitions of ideal femininity as it is today. Within the new media and technology

landscape, there is greater exposure to idealized versions of femininity. “The flood of visual images about ideal bodies and behaviors through television, advertising, the internet, and other forms of popular culture means that both men and women experience greater demands to work toward, if not to fully achieve, perfect bodies” (Weber, 2009:26). This emphasis on beauty and appearance-based conceptions of femininity are influencing young girls as well as older women. Although past generations of girls have been consumed with their body image, Angela McRobbie argues that “girls, including their bodies, their labor power and their social behavior are now subject to governmentality to an unprecedented degree” (Robinson and Davies, 2008:346). Girls are increasingly more concerned with their appearance and looking good. As Susan J. Douglas notes “the number one wish of girls between the ages of eleven and seventeen is to lose weight” (2010: 217). The most important lesson for a girl is to learn how to look good, as they are taught that their self-worth is inherently connected to how good they look: “Though appearance shouldn’t dictate how they are treated by others—let alone their own self worth—it does. Talent? Effort? Intelligence? All are wonderful, yet by middle school, how a girl feels about her appearance –particularly whether she is thin enough, pretty enough, and hot enough—has become the single most important determinant of her self-esteem” (Orenstein, 2011:137). This beauty ideology influences the way that girls conceptualize femininity.

Beauty Pageants as the Stage for Ideal Femininity

In American society, organized beauty pageants were once the most prominent site for the display of ideal beauty. Beauty pageants judge contestants based on both their outer and “inner beauty” however, it is clear the outer beauty is the determining factor. Pageant contestants are considered to be the epitome of ideal beauty in American society, therefore, pageants help to disperse and promote ideas about what is considered beautiful in a particular society. Pageants,

such as The Miss America Pageant, resonated with audiences and ordinary women, attracting 85 million viewers in the year 1960 (Banet-Weiser and Portwood Stacer, 2006:258). Miss America promised some sort of American dream and a place as part of a national community. “The Miss America contestant’s body, through her disciplined physique, her commitment to virtue, and her testimony to stability, represented a well-managed collective American body” (Banet-Weiser and Portwood-Stacer, 2006:258). The bodies of the pageant contestants articulate liberal ideology and use notions of equal opportunity to render social conditions and technologies invisible and rely on the “illusion of the liberal subject” (Banet-Weiser and Portwood-Stacer, 2006:258). Beauty pageants then represent a strange position where they both support and resist mainstream feminist ideals such as advocating for citizenship and voice while still adhering to masculine ideals of power and the disempowerment of women.

In recent years, beauty pageants, such as Miss America, have begun to lose popularity with audiences and have declined in the ratings, attracting only 10.3 million viewers in 2003 (Banet-Weiser and Portwood-Stacer, 2006:257). The decrease in popularity in recent years perhaps reflects an “identity crisis” when it comes to “constructing ideal femininity”, as the Miss America pageant has failed to reinvent itself and notions of ideal femininity in the new media landscape of today (Banet-Weiser and Portwood Stacer, 2006:256). Instead, reality TV makeover shows have surpassed traditional beauty pageants and become the most prominent sites for defining ideal femininity: “televised performances of gender have shifted focus, then, from the intensely scripted, out-of-touch Miss America to reality makeover shows that normalize cosmetic surgery as a means to become the ‘ideal’ woman” (Banet-Weiser and Portwood-Stacer, 2006:256). Makeover shows such as *Extreme Makeover*, *The Swan*, and *Bridalplasty* have incorporated some of the themes from beauty pageants and have been successful with audiences.

Reality TV Makeover Shows

Reality TV makeover shows help to reproduce the ideas found within American beauty culture. These include shows such as *The Swan*, *Extreme Makeover*, *The Biggest Loser*, *I Want A Famous Face*, *Bridalplasty* and *Shedding for the Wedding*. Makeover TV programs are fundamentally concerned with transformations. These transformations are meant to occur both outside and inside the body. American makeover shows are mostly concerned with issues of the personal, bodily transformation which is connected to US cultural beliefs “around the power of rebirth” (Lewis, 2008:453). Self transformation shows are very much connected to American ideals and values of choice, freedom and individuality and the power to transform yourself into whomever you want. Both pageants and makeover TV promote ideals about choice; however the choices they support in relation to femininity and citizenship are quite different (Banet-Weiser and Portwood-Stacer, 2006:256).

I argue that there is a direct link between beauty culture, makeover TV and *Toddlers & Tiaras*. Although *Toddlers & Tiaras* does not have all of the traditional components associated with a makeover TV program, I would argue that it can be considered as such. *Toddlers & Tiaras* focuses on child beauty pageants, a cultural site in which children undergo drastic physical transformations. The young girls featured on this program are essentially being trained to become perfect neoliberal citizens who abide by the rules of makeover TV, especially as concerned with beauty culture. In the process of the reality TV makeover, children become what Foucault termed in *Discipline and Punish* as “docile bodies”, or individuals under invisible systems of surveillance and regulation which causes them to lose power and agency. I rely on a cultural studies perspective to investigate *Toddlers & Tiaras* in order to examine how ideologies about child beauty are produced and disseminated.

Makeover TV as Post-Feminine Discourse

Makeover shows promote a discourse of post-feminism that allows for new definitions of femininity associated with “personal transformation, celebration of the body, and female empowerment” (Banet-Weiser and Portwood-Stacer, 2006:257). Unlike Miss America which spoke to traditional liberal ideals or femininity located in morality, reality TV makeover shows are based on post-feminist ideals such as individualism and freedom of choice. Women abide by the rules of beauty culture and submit to changes in their body because of discourses of female agency. Women are perceived as having the power to decide how to represent femininity, without male interference. However, post-feminist representations are embedded in marketing strategy instead of social change: “Post-feminism boldly claims that women possess active political agency and subjectivity, yet the primary place in which this agency is recognized and legitimated is within individual consumption habits as well as within general consumer culture” (Banet-Weiser and Portwood Stacer, 2006:260). Post-feminism relies on women to remain docile bodies and accept the practices of femininity, all within a discourse of personal choice defined by consumption. The personal transformations promoted within the makeover discourse require endless shopping in order to maintain ideal femininity. Clothes, shoes, handbags, make-up, and hair products are promoted as necessary expenses for the post-feminine subject, as these products help to empower women by leading them to their “authentic” self.

On makeover shows, participants must remain as docile bodies in order to benefit from the makeover: “Participants are what Foucault has termed “docile bodies” to be ‘subjected, used, transformed, and improved’. Though seemingly they must authorize the process of transformation for it to take place, participants are not depicted as actors in their own transformation, but as flawed canvases on which doctors, stylists or mechanics work” (Weber,

2009:124). Women who resist the makeover process are problematized as unruly because they do not adhere to the proper gender dynamics, or the notion of women as subordinate. Fear tactics are used to remind them that if they do not comply with the rules, they will remain ugly: “if women resist the experts, even if that resistance is expressed as merely being less than enthusiastic, we are told that these women have put their transformations in danger” (Weber, 2009:112). Therefore, “The requirement for surrender figures as critical to success. Failure to comply is punished by shaming and threats of the worst possible outcome...There will be no new self” (Weber, 2009:113).

Makeover shows also help to normalize cosmetic surgery through post-feminist rhetoric. Participants on reality shows are chosen because they are representative members of the audience. Makeover shows comment on ideal female beauty then by taking these “regular” people and removing their flaws in order to be more consistent with dominant beauty ideals. This gives makeover shows a sense of realism and depicts the belief that changing your body can actually lead to pleasure for real people. Feminist critiques situate cosmetic surgery as part of the culture of masculine power and oppression. Post-feminism, which is disconnected from questions of power, frames cosmetic surgery in terms of women’s choice. Cosmetic surgery is supported as just another way to “free yourself” and find your “authentic” identity that is hidden under the ugly person (Weber, 2009:263). Because real people are depicted getting cosmetic surgery on these programs, it has helped to normalize the idea that changing your appearance in the name of feminine beauty is normal.

Reality makeover shows that transform the physical body and attempt to “renew” outward appearances follow the logic of post-feminism. On these programs, a variety of beauty techniques are performed in the logic of a style makeover in order to “fix” the subject’s

perceived problem areas. This style renovation usually includes a fashion makeover where the subject is given tips on how to improve their “look” through the use of fashionable clothes, shoes and accessories. Often, the makeover show even furnishes the subject with a new wardrobe or a new outfit for “the reveal”, the dramatic moment when they are finally introduced to their “new selves”, generally in front of a crowd or a mirror. After the style makeover, participants move on to more bodily transformations including new haircuts, waxes, spray tans, manicures and pedicures, facials, makeup applications, and teeth whitening. In some shows, the physical transformations go even further and the participants receive cosmetic surgery including breast augmentation, liposuction, nose job, chin lift, eyebrow lift, tummy tuck and many others. These beauty techniques are meant to bring the subjects closer to “ideal” beauty norms.

The “authentic” and ideal version of femininity that is promoted within post-feminine discourse and makeover programs emphasizes youth and sexuality. In order to be an ideal female, looking youthful is necessary. “America is consumed with the insatiable desire to be viewed as young. Collectively, the nation worships at the altar of youth. The media provide constant reminders of the importance of maintaining a youthful appearance and stress that youthfulness is next to godliness” (Watson and Martin, 2001:121). The makeover attempts to renew youth to bodies that have lost it over time. Regaining a youthful appearance is articulated as one of the primary goals of the makeover, as looking younger is seen as being more desirable. The show *Ten Years Younger* purports to make participants look ten (or more) years younger through the transformative process of the makeover. According to post-feminine rhetoric, cosmetic surgery functions as a way to restore youthfulness and find your inner self.

Ideal femininity, as articulated through the post-feminine makeover, is inherently connected to sexuality. Although the makeover is supposedly undertaken as a means to empower the

subject and make them love their inner self, it is actually about making the subject more desirable to others. This is why the makeover encourages women to embrace “sexier” clothing and pay close attention their appearance. Dressing sexy is articulated on makeover programs as a form of empowerment because it contributes to women being admired by others.

Makeovers on *Toddlers & Tiaras*

On *Toddlers & Tiaras*, the children are subjected to makeovers that are similar to those found in reality TV makeover shows; however, it is the parents who “make over” their children. Child beauty pageants rely on certain conceptions of ideal beauty which generally are the same rules for young girls as for adults. As Robinson and Davies argue, “within the beauty pageant, the body of the child makes transparent the processes of hegemonic narratives of gender, that is, the trappings of femininity, that we have become accustomed to seeing on the adult female body” (Robinson and Davies, 2008:349). The girls are given mini-makeovers including hours of hair and makeup preparation in order to prepare for their brief moments on the stage. On *Toddlers & Tiaras*, it is common to see girls wearing copious amounts of makeup including eye-shadow, lipstick, blush, concealer, mascara, eyeliner, and even fake eyelashes. Many of the children are taken to get spray tans before the pageants as well as use fake front teeth, called flippers, if they have lost their own. Some of the girls also get hair weaves and most do a practice run of their hairstyle before the pageant, which means that they have to sit and have their hair pulled for an hour or more, just to see how it should look on pageant day. Many of the parents who can afford to hire hairdressers and makeup artists who essentially perform the same duties as the resident experts on makeover programs. The camera often depicts the girls undergoing their transformation and enduring “brutal” beauty tactics. In season five, episode three, five year old Alexis complains, “Ahh I don’t like those. I don’t like eyeballs! I don’t like them, they hurt.”

“Eyeballs” actually means fake eyelashes, which Alex’s mother is trying to put on her before the pageant. Even though Alexis pleads, her mother believes they are necessary: “fake eyelashes for Alexis, I would say we have to have them. Her eyes are just naturally little and closed and they really help open her eyes up.” The pageant makeover is so important then that her mother ignores her pleas and uses the eyelashes anyway. Similarly, on season five, episode one, eight year old Danielle is seen getting her eyebrows tweezed and then waxed because her mother thinks they look “like a woolly mammoth”. Danielle complains, “I think you’re taking off some of my skin”, but her mother continues to wax anyway. In some cases, the girls even have to go on diets before the pageant so that they will fit into their outfits on the big day. In one episode, Alyssa Privett’s mother makes her go on a fruit diet the week prior to the pageant because she is worried that Alyssa will not fit into her custom made gown.

During the makeovers on the program, the separation between children and adults begins to shrink and girls begin to resemble women. As Robinson and Davies argue about child beauty pageants, “in this process of hegemonic gendering, these young girls are constructed as sexual subjects. Their appearance is sexualized through the clothing that they wear, their movements, gestures, facial expressions, the application of make-up, and their representations of self through the music and dance styles that are chosen for them” (2008: 349). This is evident on *Toddlers & Tiaras* as many aspects of the makeover serve to sexualize the girls. Many of the pageant outfits insinuate deeper levels of sexuality than the girls can understand. Although the dresses for the evening wear component are generally short and frilly with bows and sparkles, the outfit of choice, the outfit for the talent portion, and the swimsuits for the swimwear contest often reveal young bodies, the owners of which are innocent and unaware of the sexual nature of exposed flesh. There are numerous examples from the show where girls are seen in sexualized clothing as

they perform their dance routines. Eight year old Alyssa for example wears high heels with her bikini in one episode. In other episodes, there have been girls dressed as cowgirls wearing chaps, Las Vegas showgirls and even one contestant who dressed as Madonna, complete with the iconic “cone bra”.

Although many parents appear to be aware of the sexualized nature of these outfits, the results of the makeover are expressed as worth the making of a sexualized child. For example, during season three, Ariana’s grandmother Pam stated that she is outwardly opposed to Ariana wearing a bikini. “I’m having a little problem in my mind of wearing a two piece bathing suit on Ariana because I don’t want her to be exposed, for creepy people thinking about things. She’s only four years old.” However, she decides to have her wear it anyway on the advice of her male pageant stylist and is happy that she chose to do so: “Like I said, I really didn’t want to use the bikini but it does really look cute. I’m very happy that I did use it. I looked around and almost every child in here has a bikini on.” Pam is influenced by her desire for Ariana to win the pageant and because the other contestants were equally sexualized in their bikinis, the bikini was viewed as acceptable for Ariana. Stage parents try to fend off criticism about their daughters being over sexualized by adhering to unwritten pageant rules about what is acceptable and what is not. Daisy’s mother in episode one of season two assures the audiences that “Daisy is a little more mature than most six year olds” in order to avoid the problematic connotations associated with Daisy’s dance lessons where she learns to shake her behind, while simultaneously stripping off the cape of her little red riding hood costume. Daisy’s mother states, “It’s fun, its dress up -- not sexualizing them. It’s appropriate”. Daisy’s mother makes explicit reference to the sexualization of her child but dismisses it because the sexualization takes place within the acceptable site of the beauty pageant.

Just as in the makeover shows for adults, girls receive praise and attention from males after they are made over into their more adult selves. For instance, Jordyn's father states, "My favorite part of the competition is always when she's dancing. Kind of shaking her rump a little bit. That's always the best part for me". On another episode, Aubrey's uncle Chad says, "When Aubrey's onstage, I think she's gorgeous up there. She looks a lot older than she should be but she's gorgeous." These comments highlight the fact that these girls are praised for embracing sexualized versions of femininity that appeal to males.

As another example of the make-over process on *Toddlers & Tiaras*, the girls submit head shots at the pageant that the judges use to award "most photogenic." In these glamour shots, the girls are dressed in full pageant gear and makeup. According to some of the pageant mothers, these photos are very important because it is the first thing that the judge will see. This concern over the head shot led Lindsay's mother to have her photos professionally retouched, just as they do in magazines. The retouching process included a freckle enhancement, additional eyelashes, making her nose look smaller, and the whitening of her teeth. On season three, episode two, Victoria Gaddy also has her photos retouched. Victoria comments, "Is that my teeth?", when looking at her head shots. Her mother Diana replies, "They're all fake teeth, they enhanced it with their magic... In essence, it's like a fake picture". This re-touching of the photographs insinuates that the child is unacceptable, even in their "made-over" state, and needs to be "touched-up" in order to become the best looking in the pageant photo contest.

After their makeovers, many of the children are unrecognizable, as we see them practicing at home and they appear to look like normal children as opposed to when they are on stage in their full makeup. The show now includes before and after photos of the girls in the time before they take the pageant stage to document their transformations, almost like a "reveal"

moment. The “before” photo shows the girls in their everyday clothes and without any makeup in comparison to the “after” photo where the girls are in full hair and makeup, as well as their glitzy gowns. The TLC website also features these before and after photos of the girls so that audiences may take a longer look at the transformation. These “before” and “after” pictures are remarkably similar to the photos that makeovers programs proudly display to show the comparison between the contestant’s before and after bodies and again reinforce the idea that the after-body (in the context of the pageant) is more desirable than the before-body.

Although most of these beauty techniques are not permanent fixes like plastic surgery, they still alter the outside appearance in order to “highlight” the girl’s inner beauty. In the beauty pageant world, children are held to much the same standards of beauty as adult women however it is often masked in a discourse of “cuteness”. These makeover techniques are used in order to bring the child closer to “ideal” beauty. These makeovers are problematic because they use the traditional standard of beauty to transform these children into “mini adults”. There are also racial concerns, where minority children are underrepresented on the show. In all of the episodes that I watched, there were only four children featured who were not white, except for the episode in Hawaii where there were a considerable number of Hawaiiin children featured. The invisibility of minority children on the program suggests that white children are more beautiful than children of other ethnicities who are not being featured on a program about beauty pageants, or that the audience is predominantly white and resists any ethnicity other than “white.”

This concept of whiteness as the most beautiful is evinced in one episode of *Toddlers & Tiaras* where one of the mothers was upset after her daughter went tanning because the tan came out too dark and therefore her made her skin look “too dark”. Clearly, this notion of being “too dark” implies that she did not want her daughter to be mistaken for black or any race other than

white. Even though almost every episode featured a white child going tanning, there is clearly a thin line between being white and looking tan and being ethnic. On the Fabulous Faces Hawaii episode, Lindsay's mother says, "tan looks better than white. I'm sorry... If it's white, that ain't right". But clearly, if it is too far from white, it isn't right either. These makeovers are problematic for children because they reinforce traditional notions of beauty and do not allow for beauty to exist outside of the dominant look of tanned "whiteness."

The makeover show posits consumption as important to the maintenance of ideal femininity and *Toddlers & Tiaras* demonstrates that consumption is a necessary component of the pageant makeover. Pageant makeovers are extensive and therefore can be very costly. Many of the pageant parents comment on the extreme costs associated with participating in pageants. For instance, Isabella's mother believes that "the biggest mistake is on trying to short cut on attire and hair and makeup. We came out from the beginning full glitz--\$35,000 in past six months on pageant stuff". Kelly, mother of twin Isabella and Scarlett notes, "everybody spends what they can afford. We can afford it, so we spend it. We've spent well over \$250,000, so you're talking a quarter of a million to get the girls started." Clearly, consumption is seen as necessary to the makeover and therefore necessary for winning the pageant.

The expense associated with the makeovers on *Toddlers & Tiaras* raises questions about the motivation for participating in pageants. In many cases, it is barely affordable for the parents to enroll their children in these competitions. In season one, episode one, Madison's mother Rebecca admits, "because we are so committed to Madison and doing the pageants, it really costs a lot of money. The dresses are expensive, the entry fee for the pageant, so it adds up to a lot of money quite quickly. So I've actually taken a second job. My part time funds go to pay for Madison to do pageants. I think Madison realizes the sacrifice I make for her to be able to do all

these pageants but I'm not sure she appreciates it yet". As evidenced by Madison's mother's need to get another job, the pageant is extremely costly. The fact that she would get another job to support her child's participation in pageants implies that the potential of having your child be crowned as the most beautiful is worth the money. This example demonstrates the emphasis and importance that is placed on girls being beautiful and the lengths that parents will go to attain it for their children.

Makeover TV as Neoliberal Guides

Although the outward physical transformations of participants on makeover programming are obviously the most apparent, the process is actually more concerned with transformations on the inside. Reality makeover shows promote not only a change on the outside, but more importantly, a change to the person on the inside through "psychological growth and personal transformation" (Banet-Weiser and Portwood-Stacer, 2006:264). One of the founding principles of inward change is concerned with providing the participants with neoliberal reasoning. At the core of makeover TV programs is the belief that individuals must learn to properly govern themselves in order to flourish as ideal neoliberal citizens. According to Ouellette and Hay, Foucault's concept of governmentality "refers to the process through which individuals shape and guide their own conduct- and that of others- with certain aims and objectives in mind" (2008: 473). They argue that ideas of governmentality are dispersed through many "social and cultural intermediaries and the institutions that authorize their expertise", including television, in order to assist individuals in governing themselves. Reality shows provide guidelines for conducting behavior as a way of regulating the "conduct of conduct", which plays a large role in shaping citizens. By attempting to regulate the "conduct of conduct" reality shows assert themselves as holding a position of power. Governmentality is

fundamentally connected to issues of power where one party always wields power or authority over another party. In the case of reality television, it is usually the resident expert who is exercising power over the show's participants. Reality makeover shows especially are concerned with providing guidelines for conducting behavior that will help to create ideal neoliberal citizens: "the impetus to facilitate, improve and makeover people's health, happiness and success through television programming is tied to distinctly 'neoliberal' reasoning about governance and social welfare" (Ouellette and Hay, 2008:471).

Within reality makeover shows, individuals are encouraged to take control over their own social welfare and are pushed towards the neoliberal subject position. The intervention makeover shows are concerned with teaching individuals to care for themselves, since neoliberal citizens are measured by their capacity for self care: "what unites the life intervention as a politically significant strand of makeover television is a concern to facilitate care of the self as a strategy of freedom and empowerment" (Ouellette and Hay, 2008:475). This discourse of freedom and empowerment is a technique of governing used in reality TV to promote engaged citizenship: "...television does not represent or distort welfare as much as it produces new formations of welfare by providing citizens with the resources that currently valorize their freedom and empowerment" (Ouellette and Hay, 2008:481). When a citizen fails to "take advantage" of the opportunities of "freedom" and "empowerment" that are presented to them, they are constructed as having failed themselves.

Makeover shows offer individual's advice on how to improve their brand through self improvement. The body is viewed as a site that can be improved through work. Just like beauty culture then, makeover TV is a pervasive system that promotes work on the self as a means of identity fashioning. "The gaze is always present, and shame falls on those who do not work hard

enough to be pleasing to the gazer' (Weber, 2009:85). The makeover can be considered a form of labor that will ultimately benefit the individual in the end, helping them to become an ideal citizen. Ouellette and Hay argue that "reality TV presents work on the self as a prerequisite for personal and professional success" (2008:100). Reality TV offers a form of instruction on self fashioning that is different from any previous instruction because of its pervasiveness and connection to everyday life. Makeover TV then acts as "a more regularized and ritualized technology for 'governing at a distance'" in a deregulated society where organized labor counts on the will of the individual (Ouellette and Hay, 2008:100). Ouellette and Hay use the example of the show *Extreme Makeover* which promises its participants to fix their outside which will in turn fix their inside, and therefore make them more marketable: "*Extreme Makeover* presumes that the right outward appearance ... can bolster an individual's advantage in an unstable, youth-oriented labor market" (Ouellette and Hay, 2008:106). In today's society, workers need to be flexible and willing to change in order to keep up with the work market, and *Extreme Makeover* capitalizes from this connection between work and appearance for entertainment purposes. Subjects must learn all of the techniques for makeover success and bring them home with them, taking on the personal responsibility to make themselves marketable (Ouellette and Hay, 2008:110). After the makeover has been completed, subjects are generally joyous and overwhelmed by their transformations. "Included in the construction of the self as citizen is the makeover subject's new appreciation of being looked at, basking in a visuality she or he once avoided, the gaze no longer perceived as objectifying but as a tool for empowerment" (Weber, 2009:82). Through laboring on the body, individuals are able to enjoy surveillance and the gaze. The after-body helps redeems the subject as an ideal citizen.

Toddlers & Tiaras presents a clear example of the concept of surveillance as work. Like many other child reality stars, the children on this program perform normal tasks of their everyday lives under the watchful gaze of an audience. Although it may not be in the traditional sense the word, children on reality shows perform work similar to those on *Extreme Makeover*. They must change their bodies in order to improve their brand and attract attention on the show. Parents on the program ignore the fact that being on a reality TV show is actually a form of labor. Like the subjects of the makeover who complain throughout the process, the children are often pleased with the results of their makeover after the process is complete. For example, Alyssa Privett, the girl who was put on the food diet, concludes that the diet was worth it in the end because she felt beautiful: “When everyone was cheering for me, it made me feel beautiful”. Other girls featured on the program express similar sentiments, especially when they win the crown. As evidenced by *Toddlers & Tiaras*, children are socialized to perform within the neoliberal logic expressed as self-management.

Makeover shows use visuality as a technique of governmentality. Surveillance is one particularly effective visual technique that is used to guide individuals on their journey towards neoliberal citizenship. Makeover shows surveil participants in order to show them their own flaws so that they may be improved. Style gurus “encourage participants to accept the truism that one must endure painful scrutiny to be transformed, or that one must invest greater time in and attention to appearance, through the currencies of self- efficacy and self-esteem, in order to reap greater social dividends” (Weber, 2009:98). On these shows, subjects become the object of the gaze of both the experts and the audience. Numerous makeover programs rely on surveillance of the pre-made over or “before-body” in order to prove that there is a problem: “Makeover subjects are often left with the unsettling realization that their internalized invective pales in

comparison to what others think of them. These shows announce: the world is watching, and it is not pleased with what it sees (Weber,2009: 84). In this surveillance footage, subjects are depicted as being non-compliant with well-known beauty norms. For instance, in *What Not To Wear*, makeover subjects are surveilled going about their everyday lives without being aware that they are on camera. The subject is later clued in to this secret footage, where they observe themselves looking sloppy in horrible outfits, bad hair-dos and little or no makeup. This secret surveillance footage of the before-body is provided to prove that the pre-made over body is shameful and rationalizes the need for a makeover intervention (Weber, 2009:83).Therefore, shaming and surveillance are used to make the subject self-sufficient. If subjects are aware that their appearance needs to be improved, then they will make themselves look better and therefore will rely less on outside assistance.

Reality makeover shows always present the intervention as if it is in the best interest of the individual. The family and friends of the participant are brought in to assure them that the makeover is necessary, and the style experts are there to provide support. Shame therefore becomes a “spectator sport” where, “the dynamics of gazing position these shows as caring authorities rather than as exploitative paparazzi” (Weber, 2009: 90). In this way, shame, humiliation and surveillance perform a “caring” function. By providing the participants with visual evidence of their mistakes, the camera works “as not only an agent of authoritarian oversight but as a critical tool for self-visibility and awareness” (Weber, 2009:96). Weber refers to how “the makeover relies on both shaming and love-power to accomplish its transformation” as “affective domination” (Weber, 2009:82). This technique of “affective domination” can be considered a “disciplinary tool” that is used to establish compliance and docility in the participants. Once docility has been established through shame, the experts can then begin to

provide support and “love” for their participants in order to guide them through the transformation.

On *Toddlers & Tiaras*, the parents employ techniques of affective domination similar to those used by the style guides on makeover programs. The young girls are transformed “for their own good” so that they may win the pageant and bring home the crown. Parents often claim on the show that participating in beauty pageants is actually in the best interest of the child since they help to build self-esteem and friendships. On reality makeover shows, style guides are depicted as enforcers who get angry when the participants do not want to agree to their demands. However, by the end of the episode, everyone is happy and smiling because the experts have got what they wanted and the participant now has a new body. This is similar to *Toddlers & Tiaras* where the mothers are seen throughout the episode criticizing their children when they complain about undergoing invasive beauty rituals; however they always end up happy at the end of the episode, especially when their child wins. Being under surveillance and undergoing the invasive transformations are always disguised in a discourse of love and care.

In conclusion, there is a clear connection between *Toddlers & Tiaras*, beauty culture and the genre of reality TV makeover programming. Makeover programs rely on the notion of docile bodies to complete their narratives of transformation. Discourses of post-feminism pervade on makeover shows where women are taught that fixing their bodies is a way of fixing their lives. Neoliberalism is also promoted as a means of empowering oneself and becoming a “better you”. Although *Toddlers & Tiaras* is not a traditional makeover show, the young girls on the program are still subjected to mini-makeovers that are intended to showcase ideal beauty and reinforce hegemonic notions of femininity. Through the use of the makeover, *Toddlers & Tiaras* promotes an oppressive American beauty system that flourishes from the production of docile child bodies.

Chapter Three: “A Star is Born?": *Toddlers & Tiaras and Celebrity*

History of Fame

American society has long been pulled in by the allure of fame. In a society founded on the principles of individualism and competition, those who manage to stand out from the crowd are rewarded with celebrity status: “...celebrity status operates at the very center of the culture as it resonates with conceptions of individuality that are the ideological ground of Western culture” (Marshall, 2006:x). Celebrities are the icons of our culture and embody the American Dream of being noticed: “the dream of fame promises a place where private dreams of recognition triumphantly appear in public” (Braudy, 1986: 6). Those who are famous occupy a privileged place in our society which is succinctly described by Marshall:

In the public sphere, a cluster of individuals are given greater presence and a wider scope of agency and activity than are those who make up the rest of the population. They are allowed to move on the public stage while the rest of us watch. They are allowed to express themselves quite individually and idiosyncratically while the rest of the members of the population are constructed as demographic aggregates. We tend to call these overtly public individuals celebrities (Marshall, ix).

Individuals are enamored with celebrities because celebrities have a “star” factor which allows them to be perceived as more ‘special’ than the rest of society. Indeed, “Celebrity status also confers on the person a certain discursive power; within society, the celebrity is a voice above others, a voice that is channeled into the media systems as being legitimately significant” (Marshall, 2006: x). Therefore, an individual’s desire for fame can also be connected to a desire for power and voice in a democratic society. Or even a sense of freedom, as Braudy describes: “The dream of fame in Western society has been inseparable from the ideal of personal freedom. As the world grows more complex, fame promises a liberation from powerless anonymity”

(Braudy, 1986:7). Essentially, fame is perceived as providing the freedom to do as you please while being rewarded for acting like yourself.

Unlike “regular” individuals in society, celebrities manage to transcend the realm of “normal” individuals and enter into their own separate sphere. In his analysis on star images, Richard Dyer explains how celebrities, or stars, acquire symbolic importance. This symbolic importance can be described as how stars become associated with particular values and meaning within the culture. This symbolic importance is then transposed onto the celebrity body and creates a certain star image, which is ultimately more important than the actual body itself (Dyer, 1998:34). These star images function as ideological phenomena that reflect the values of a particular status quo in society. The symbolic meaning associated with a star text is transmitted to audiences in order to claim celebrity and foster a connection. Although stars are granted special status within society, they still need to be socially relatable in order to appeal to audiences. Therefore, they must balance audience identification and idolization. Individuals are enamored of celebrities only if they perceive a connection with them. Dyer argues that people seeking to be stars have to maintain a tenuous balance of the ordinary and the extraordinary to attain star status (1998:21). Once people become celebrities they must, he claims, preserve the balance between being an ordinary citizen and having extraordinary talents or qualities. In doing this they seek to uphold their star image. The star must stay somewhat connected to the ordinary or no one would be interested in them. Star images explain how audiences connect with celebrities. It is essentially this connection that keeps audiences involved in celebrity culture. While celebrities can be considered public individuals, celebrity culture is the system that supports and celebrates celebrities. Individuals live in a celebrity culture and want to become a part of it and seek celebrity status.

In the past, those who occupied the position of celebrity were usually admired and revered for their talents (Braudy, 1986: 6). However, in contemporary American culture, the distance between audiences and celebrities is dissolving and celebrity status appears much easier to attain than in the past. Unlike previous generations, the celebrities of today are less likely to be famous for possessing any actual talent. Instead, as Marshall argues, due to the constant production of visual media, fame is much more deeply connected to images and presentation (Marshall, 2006:634). Therefore, a celebrity's image is often perceived as more important than their actual talent, which is why many celebrities tend to spend so much time being photographed for magazines and discussing their personal lives. Being a celebrity today does not necessarily mean that one is revered or admired by the public. In fact, many celebrities maintain their fame by offering the public an interesting story about their personal lives, even when they have done nothing memorable. Not only has the attainment of celebrity status become easier, reasons for wanting to be famous have evolved as well, where "the desire for fame used to imply that you wanted to do something that was really memorable in the long parade of human nature and history... Now the desire is to be on television, to have your pictures in the papers, and to admire those who have done so, not for what they have done, but for how they're seen" (Braudy,1986: 603).Therefore, the emphasis today is less on the traditional US approach to admiration for "talent" and more on the ability to be seen and be liked.

In this age of new media and evolving technology, "the symbiotic relationship between media and celebrity has been ruptured" and traditional notions of celebrity have given way to newer forms (Marshall, 2006:634). Changes in the television industry, including the introduction of reality programming centered around ideas of media convergence, such as *American Idol*, have allowed audiences more opportunity to gain fame and notoriety for

themselves and to vote for whom they wish to become celebrities (Jenkins, 2006:71). Audiences now have the capability to engage more interactively with media content through the use of the internet, mobile phones, PDA's, and MP3 players (Marshall, 2006:634). The tabloids and paparazzi also play a large role in determining who is eligible for celebrity status because they are the image makers in this new celebrity world. New media has made it easier for “regular” people to join the ranks of celebrities. Braudy questions the shrinking of the gap between these two worlds: “Through the technology of image reproduction and information reproduction, our relation to the increasing number of faces we see every day becomes more and more transitory, and “famous” seems as devalued a term as “tragic”. If these are famous, we may wonder, then what is fame?” (Braudy, 1986:5).

It seems clear that fame is something that is deeply desired in America. The fact that becoming famous is easier now than in the past only appears to propel more individual's to pursue fame, as “the field for ordinary, untalented people vying for potential fame is virtually inexhaustible “(Collins, 2008:97). For example, thousands of hopeful individuals audition each year for *American Idol* in hopes of becoming the next music superstar. Although the traditional notion of celebrity as someone who possesses spectacular talents and deserves admiration may be dissolving, celebrities still hold power and occupy privileged positions within society, as evidenced by celebrities who are asked to act as global ambassadors or crusaders for particular charity causes because they have real influence over audiences. Celebrities also still have the ability to earn copious amounts of money. I would argue that these factors of money and power play a significant role in creating the current obsession with becoming famous. As Braudy states, “not everyone can be famous, but much of our daily experience tells us that we should if we possibly can, because it is the best, perhaps the only, way to *be*” (1986:6). Contemporary popular

culture dictates that fame is the ultimate triumph, and "...where success is imagined primarily through possessions, it represents what is still intangible in the urge to "be someone". Fame may bring wealth, but wealth is insufficient cause for fame. The tangible power of the money that runs the world is to a great extent invisible, while everyone clamors for the reputedly greater spiritual power of fame" (Braudy, 1986:591). Contemporary celebrity culture is concerned with the attainment of fame and celebrity status.

Toddlers & Tiaras provides a prime example of the quest for fame and celebrity status within contemporary American culture. The following section interrogates how the show speaks to these twin constituents of celebrity and the examination of them will be undertaken through a detailed analysis of the TV text of *Toddlers & Tiaras*.

Toddler Pageants as Celebrity Machines

According to TLC's (The Learning Channel) website for *Toddlers & Tiaras*, the show "follows families on their quest for sparkly crowns, big titles, and lots of cash". These three desires, "sparkly crowns, "big titles" and "lots of cash", undoubtedly speak to notions of celebrity and elevated status. Given my comments above and the prevailing academic analysis of celebrity, *Toddlers & Tiaras* positions fame and celebrity as a central component within the program through the claims made in the show's tagline. After watching the program, the connection to celebrity is even more pronounced.

I argue that the centralized role of celebrity in *Toddlers & Tiaras* is problematic because it represents a cultural sphere in society that has failed to protect children. The push towards celebrity means that children spend less time being children and more time performing the 'work' of reality television. Children who star in reality programs like *Toddlers & Tiaras* are

socialized to believe that celebrity is the ultimate means of success and achievement in our society.

Reality Celebrity

The first connection between *Toddlers & Tiaras* and celebrity culture lies in the reality TV format of the program. Reality TV programs provide an outlet for creating celebrities and *Toddlers & Tiaras* is no exception, as it offers a new site for individual's to attain fame and perhaps stardom. Although reality television has been around for many years, I would argue that it has never been as successful as a platform for launching celebrity careers than it is today. There are obvious exceptions to this such as the children of *The Mickey Mouse Club* like Justin Timberlake and Britney Spears or pop artists who got their start on *Star Search*. However, these shows did not directly result in immediate success unlike many of the reality stars of today. For instance, *The Jersey Shore* managed to launch the careers of eight young "guidos" and "guidettes" in a matter of months. Also, the stars of *The Hills* and *Keeping Up with the Kardashians* have earned monetary success as a result of their reality programs, with Lauren Conrad and Kim Kardashian earning upwards of \$70,000 per episode. Conrad and Kardashain have also had success in other entertainment related sectors such as writing and fashion, profiting from their teen book series and clothing and perfume lines respectively.

This notion of reality television as a platform for stardom adds another dimension to the discussion, namely the reason that "ordinary individuals" appear to be willing to be surveilled in order to become celebrities and then reap the potential benefits of celebrity status. In *Rediscovering Reality (2003)*, Marc Andrejevic explores the relationship between new digital technology and the increasing obsession with anything reality based. Reality television has

emerged as a means of “restoring the real” in a time where people were becoming wary of the tricks of technology. Reality TV and total surveillance provide a glimpse at the “real action” that happens behind the scenes. The voyeuristic and surveillance elements associated with reality TV are appealing to audiences who crave transparency: “reality TV programs attempt to create meaning through the illusion of transparency: the attempt to capture life ‘as it happens’, unedited and unmediated” (Clissold, 2004: 45). *Toddlers & Tiaras* uses this surveillance format to present viewers with a view of “the real” process of preparing for and competing in a child beauty pageant.

It has been argued that new media technology has provided audiences with “access to the means of media production” that “promises to empower the people” (Andrejevic, 2003: 62). Blogs, social networking sites, YouTube, and the iPhone have all contributed to audience participation in the capacity of producer. The abundance of social networking sites where individual’s can display facts about themselves and post information about the mundane moments of their everyday lives also points to this power of self production and a yearning for recognition. Reality TV shows also “empower audiences’ by allowing individuals to market themselves for their own benefit and transition from ordinary people to household names. For example Nicole “Snooki” Polizzi of *Jersey Shore* fame was previously unknown and now can commission \$32,000 from Rutgers University, just for participating in a Q & A session about her rise to stardom (Foxnews.com). “Reality TV is, in many of its incarnations, a lottery of celebrity; it invites viewers to submit tapes and apply to be on shows with the promise that they might find themselves transformed instantaneously into TV stars” (Andrejevic, 2003: 68). The lure of celebrity and the potential to escape anonymity lead to a new media landscape where audiences are able to become more actively involved in the production process. In relation to fame, this

new “active” audience is willing to use the technology provided by new media forms in order to get a chance at celebrity status.

Many reality shows are based on the “comprehensive surveillance of the daily lives and unscripted interactions of people who agree to participate in making their private lives public” (Andrejevic, 2003: 63). *Toddlers & Tiaras* employs this type of surveillance to provide viewers with an inside look at the child beauty pageant process. The participants on *Toddlers & Tiaras* “willingly submit to comprehensive forms of commercial surveillance” because of their desire to be on television and be perceived as somehow “more special” than the average person (Andrejevic, 2003: 64). Surveillance programming encourages people to want to get a share of the American Dream for themselves during a period where cultural and social inequalities are becoming even more pronounced (Andrejevic, 2003: 64). This class inequality can be seen as one of the reasons why the people of today are so eager and willing to be on reality TV, in order to get their own chance of “making it”. As Braudy explains, “societies always generate a number of people willing and eager to live at least part of their lives in the public eye. The larger, more heterogeneous, and democratic a society is, the more such people there will be aiming for the security of such a secular eternity. In a society committed to progress, the seeking of fame, the climbing of the social ladder of renown, expresses something essential in that society’s nature” (1986: 5). Essentially, in an American cultural climate where individualism and competition reign, celebrity is viewed as the ultimate means of success and individuals are willing to have their private lives surveilled in order to attain it.

Andrejevic points out that there has been a cultural shift in attitudes towards surveillance. Individuals are increasingly more open to inviting the public into their private lives because nothing is off-limits in the quest for fame. People voluntarily sign up to be under constant

surveillance because it can possibly lead to a better life through gains in both capital and notoriety. Allowing yourself to be watched is presented as a personal choice that is done for your own benefit instead of as an invasion of privacy (Andrejevic, 2003: 76). However, in this type of surveillance society, individuals who allow themselves to be surveilled benefit less than the corporations who profit off our willingness to be watched. All of the corporations connected to the celebrity machine, including television and movie studios, tabloids, advertisers and talent agencies benefit from individuals who choose to subject themselves to surveillance, while the reality stars often have a time limit on their success.

In relation to the potential profit to be made from celebrity, Collins argues that celebrity can be considered the “commodification of fame”, as fame is more of a theoretical construct while celebrity can actually be manifest (Collins, 2008: 91). Celebrities are “cultural commodities” that are transmitted by corporations and received by audiences. They also have the ability to be easily reproduced because there are numerous eager individuals who desire the celebrity spotlight: “Thus, celebrity needs to be seen as a cultural product that is born out of a vast “reservoir” of cultural workers who are ready to work without wage retainers in which very few “make it” and whose success is not predictable nor necessarily sustainable.” (Collins, 2008: 92). Individuals are prepared to subject themselves to the trials of celebrity and fame even though there is no guarantee that they will succeed in their quest or even be reimbursed for their efforts.

In the world of celebrity, there are huge disparities in both prestige and earnings between those considered to be “A-List” and those who do not rank so highly on the scale. A-listers are catered to and paid well for their services while others who are perceived as more easily replaceable are given a measly pay check and essentially cast aside when they are no longer

needed. Most reality TV celebrities (with a few exceptions) fall into the later context, as they are extremely easy to replace. As stated above, there are myriad individuals who are eager to join the ranks of reality TV celebrity and numerous shows that provide them with the opportunity to do so. Therefore, reality TV stars provide studios with cheap and dispensable labor. As Collins argues,

Herein lies the economic beauty of reality TV for cultural producers: a new level of celebrity stratification produces novelty that is easily and cheaply produced, while circulation, the key to creating scarcity as a measure of value, intrinsically limits access to higher values of celebrity because ordinary people in reality television, ironically, are not “real” actors with accumulated intertextual capital. They do not have access to wider circulation by which to accrue sustained symbolic and economic value. They do earn value, however, as a form of dispensable celebrity that pleases audiences for its novelty and self-reflexivity, and producers for its financial and temporal expediency (2008: 96).

Given this perspective, reality TV stars are valued mostly because they provide studios with dispensable labor.

In the unsteady world of Hollywood, reality TV celebrities provide producers and studios with endless enthusiastic participants for shows that generally do not require actors with any special talent. Popular reality shows such as *Big Brother*, *Survivor*, and *The Amazing Race* cast individuals with no previous acting experience to participate in their competition based programs. Other shows such as *The Biggest Loser*, *Say Yes to the Dress* or *16 and Pregnant* cast individuals who fit the needs of the program, such as individuals looking to lose weight, people who are getting married, and sixteen year olds who are having a baby. Reality stars are also cheaper to hire than traditional A-list stars and still manage to attract audiences (Collins, 2008: 96). Corporations depend on individuals like reality TV stars who are willing to be surveilled without receiving any guarantees of capital or success. As long as reality TV stars are cast to “play themselves” then they are not eligible to join any sort of actors union and therefore,

corporations get more out the deal than do the reality TV stars (Collins, 2008: 97). The participants on *Toddlers & Tiaras* exemplify this type of dispensable celebrity. They perform for their particular episode and are very rarely called on again to perform since each week chronicles a new pageant and three new girls. The potential for this show to act as launching pad for celebrity appears to be enough to propel the parents to sign up to participate in the show.

Individuals are encouraged to take on an entrepreneurial spirit and market themselves in order to be happy and successful: “We load ourselves up with meaningfulness; we work hard at issues of self-image in an effort to constitute ourselves as “significant” iconic workers” (Hearn, 2006: 622). As Hearn argues, individuals are encouraged to develop “tokenized personas” and essentially consider their bodies as products to be traded and sold: “individuals...self-commodify: to generate and brand their own personae and “get” fame, which can be exchanged for cash down the line. Participants on reality shows function as image - entrepreneurs, as they work to produce branded versions of themselves” (Hearn, 2006: 623). Individuals must be conscious of the image they create and be able to sell that image later on. These constructed personas can later be used to potentially gain access to the realm of celebrity: “reality television programs provide the mechanism whereby participants can effectively construct personae and put them to commercial use. Participants are laboring to create a product they know has market value—fame (Hearn, 2006: 623). Constructing a particular persona and branding yourself appears to be a necessary means for reality TV hopefuls to market themselves as viable options for reality shows.

Toddlers & Tiaras exemplifies the lengths that reality TV hopefuls will go to in order to get on television and attempt to achieve fame. The pageant parents manage their children’s images and attempt to make them more marketable in order to immerse them in the world of

celebrity. In each episode, each girl is intended to fill a specific role and embody a particular persona. On the *Toddlers & Tiaras* casting application, available on the TLC website, parents fill out a questionnaire which asks specific questions about both their own, and their child's, personality such as "Describe your personality at the pageant. Are you competitive?" and "Describe your pageant kid's personality on and off stage at the pageant." These questions present the opportunity for parents to construct a persona for their child and convey that persona to the casting department of the show. These constructed personas situate the child as a branded commodity. The questionnaire also illuminates the constructed nature of the program and how participants are "type-cast" to fill certain needs. The concept of the persona also demonstrates how the girls lose some of their agency and become "docile" in the celebrity machine. They are expected to act in the role that they are cast for and must conform to these standards or they will not be chosen for the program. In this way, surveillance and docility can be considered a necessary step towards celebrity.

Pageants and Celebrity

The second connection between *Toddlers & Tiaras* and celebrity culture is related to the show's centralization of the beauty pageant, which is a cultural site of dependence for notions of celebrity and recognition. Beauty pageants are inherently connected to notions of celebrity. According to Merriam-Webster dictionary, a pageant is defined as a "show," "exhibition," or "spectacle," all three of which connote ideals associated with celebrity. Putting on a show or an exhibition is essentially the main job description of a celebrity, to create a spectacle, primarily through TV mediation and related media saturation. Both the celebrity's professional career and their personal life are essentially a show that is exhibited for the public's viewing pleasure. Inherent in the word "show" is also the expectation of performance. Celebrities are perceived as

performing even when going about the routine tasks of everyday life. As Braudy explains, performance has become a central consideration in our everyday lives: “when daily life is perceived in great part as a constant performance before an audience of others, and the popular media are preoccupied with discussions of the proper and improper way to behave, individual self-consciousness about performance is unavoidable” (Braudy, 1986: 587). The other word from the definition of “pageant” is “spectacle”, which is also inherently linked to notions of celebrity. Some celebrities are spectacles in and of themselves while others create spectacles.

As argued above, the core of a pageant is based on performance. Beauty pageants are shows that perform and make claims to notions of ideal femininity. The pageant participants are the stars of the show. Like celebrities, pageant contestants are ‘exhibited’ and are spectacles for audience consumption. Beauty pageants also separate their contestants from the realm of the “ordinary” people in attendance in the audience by literally placing them on a stage. The “lucky” winners, or queens of the pageant, are further separated from the regular people of the audience and their fellow contestants when they are placed on a pedestal and crowned as queens in front of the “commoners” Even though older pageant contestants are most likely aware of the artificial nature of pageants, child participants may actually believe they are somehow elevated in status because of their win.

The desire for fame, notoriety and recognition are viewed through the spectacle of media concentration / magnification: all three of which are saturated with connotations of celebrity, plays an important role in prompting participants to engage in the beauty pageant process. Contestants enroll in pageants in hopes of winning and ultimately gaining recognition for their accomplishment. When pageants are broadcast on television, like many larger scale pageants, the connection to celebrity becomes even stronger. The participants are more likely to gain

substantial fame or notoriety for their participation in the pageant because of television's contribution to "spectacle." Beauty pageants also often make direct reference to "celebrity" in the titles of their competition. For example on *Toddlers & Tiaras* there have been episodes that follow three celebrity named pageants including the "Southern Celebrity Pageant", "Kentucky Southern Celebrity", and "Southern Celebrity Wonderland Pageant". There have also been competitions that references fame and stardom including the "Stars of Pennsylvania", "Texas Walk of Fame", and "West Virginia Walk of Fame Pageant". These titles help to naturalize the connection between beauty pageants and celebrity culture.

Pageants also provide sites for the creation of instant national celebrities. The winners of the larger scale pageants such as Miss USA, Miss America, Miss World and Miss Universe become national celebrities, at least during the year of their reign. Winners of national pageants are supposed to be representative of an ideal woman in that nation. As Banet-Weiser argues, "the Miss America Pageant produces images and narratives that articulate dominant expectations about who and what "American" women are (and should be)" (2004: 71). After the pageant, the winner spends a year promoting organizations associated with the pageant and performing charity work, all the while performing for the audience in her crown, sash and signature smile. In 2007, the experiences of the winners of the Miss Teen USA, Miss USA and Miss Universe pageants were documented on MTV's *Pageant Place*. The series followed the three women and their "peer advisor" (shamed former Miss USA winner Tara Conner) as they fulfilled their duties as pageant winners.

TLC, the channel on which *Toddlers & Tiaras* airs, is aware of this connection between celebrity and pageants and has a section on the show website devoted to naming celebrities who got their start in pageants. These famous individual's include Oprah Winfrey, Halle Berry,

Vanessa Williams, and Sharon Stone as examples of those who participated in beauty pageants before their careers took off. By including this list as part of the *Toddlers & Tiaras* website, TLC is providing evidence that pageants can indeed foster real stars. There appears to be an insinuation that the audience should pay attention to *Toddlers & Tiaras* because perhaps one of these young girls will eventually become a Hollywood star and this is where it all begins.

The Quest for Fame

The final and most prominent link between *Toddlers & Tiaras* and celebrity culture is evidenced in the show's depiction of the quest for fame. Explaining this search for fame, David Giles outlines several possible reasons for understanding the "individual desire to be famous". He examines psychological, biological and cultural reasons for wanting fame. In terms of *Toddlers & Tiaras*, there are a few theories that seem more relevant for understanding why parents are motivated to enroll their children in pageants. The first theory, generativity, describes the "urge to live on:" "At a reductionist level, generativity is little more than the urge to reproduce biologically, to live on through one's children" (Giles, 2006: 478). Parents may desire fame for their children because it allows their own identities to live on in a remaking of generativity: "fame is another way of preserving one's identity for future generations" (Giles, 2006: 478). Because the parents are not celebrities, they cannot reproduce celebrity. Therefore, they are seeking to leap frog their children over their own limitations into celebrity.

Another theory that helps to understand the thirst for fame on *Toddlers & Tiaras* relates to fame as a discourse of success. In such discourse, which is the dominant discourse, fame is viewed as the ultimate means of success. These discourses "may influence behavior... through the promotion of a value system constructed in numerous magazines and television features

whereby recognition, financial success and achievement are represented as the positive goals of the dominant culture” (Giles, 2006: 479). Since fame is considered to be an incredible achievement and is promoted as such in mainstream society, individuals are prompted to attempt to attain it through whatever means necessary.

The final theory is that fame is associated with “symbolic immortality” where, in contemporary culture, “technology development has given us an increasing number of ways that we can achieve immortality- words, pictures, records, video” (Giles, 2006: 482). Technologies, such as cameras, video recorders and television, have allowed participants in reality television to replicate and multiply themselves. This replication means that there are more opportunities for an individual to be seen and, according to Giles, this visibility fuels our desire to be famous (2006: 484).

On *Toddlers & Tiaras*, young girls are paraded on stage in front of judges and the TV audience in their quest for fame. Although not every participant on the show is expecting to become an instant mega-star through *Toddlers & Tiaras*, they are aware that the show runs on national television and they will therefore receive at least some exposure. Comments from participant family members suggest many of them hope the show will provide a launching pad for a career in a celebrity industry like modeling or acting. When I use the word participant, I do not mean the children featured on the show since it is unlikely that the young girls featured believe that *Toddlers & Tiaras* and pageants in general will make them into a star, or that they even really care to become one since many of them are under the age of seven. Instead, participant refers to the parent guardians, not the children, as the ones who are depicted as the pursuers of celebrity status.

Many mothers on *Toddlers & Tiaras* articulate pageants as a means for future stardom. In season five, episode three, Alexis' mother states, "I'm hoping that pageants in general do lead her to acting and modeling." Similarly, eight year old Danielle's mother Teddy states in season one, episode five, "Her dream is to be famous. She wants to be famous and she is a beautiful child so if this in any way can help her achieve any kind of fame or anything in the future, than it's worth it. If I had millions of dollars, I'd spend whatever it took". Mackenzie's mother Juana echoes these same sentiments, "In 15 years, I think I would see Mackenzie somewhere just really, really famous. I really see her being a star one day". Participating in pageants, especially the televised pageant is viewed as a possible entry into the world of celebrity.

The attainment of celebrity on *Toddlers & Tiaras* is also posited as a competition between girls. Danielle illustrates this sense of competition when she gets upset at another girl who she perceives as "stealing her spotlight." By this, Danielle means that the camera has been taken off her for a moment to show another girl at the pageant. Danielle comments that she "hopes they cut that out" of the television program because she does not want another girl getting any of her air time. The opportunity for Danielle to "shine" on television and attract attention that may increase her celebrity causes her to become angry when she perceives another girl stealing some of her spotlight. There are no experiences of bonding or friendship depicted on the show even though many of these girls see each other at pageants repeatedly throughout the year. Conversely, there are actually fierce rivalries between four and five year olds (articulated through their parents) that receive a good percentage of screen time. For instance, Eden Wood and Taralynn Escheberger are described as "longtime rivals" during their episodes, even though they are only four years old. Kelly from season five, episode one has one year old twin girls Scarlett and Isabella who compete against each other at every pageant. Kelly acknowledges that,

“when the girls get older, if they choose to compete against each other, than they have to realize that there is going to be a winner, and there is going to be a loser and they are going to have to live with the outcome of that.” Even twin sisters are encouraged to compete as rivals so that one may shine.

Many famous individuals seem to begin their quest for fame at an early age. On *Toddlers and Tiaras*, the parents are depicted as the ones who desire fame and fulfill it with the help of their child, possibly because they have lost the ability to achieve it for themselves. Parents on the program are often portrayed as desperate attention seekers who, in their overzealous attempt to create a “star,” force their children into pageantry for their own vicarious pleasure. Although it is true that everyone believes that their own child is a star, the pageant parents can be seen to take their commitment to an extreme. Parents often provide discourse on the program about their children being “special”, which motivates them to sign their kids up because they think they are “special” and can potentially become famous. These “stars” are not born, they are actively created by parents and the media system. Because many parents on *Toddlers & Tiaras* believe that their child is destined for stardom, they actively attempt to make their child into a star by thrusting them into the limelight as soon as possible. This is especially apparent on *Toddlers & Tiaras* when they show mothers parading their infants on stage in pageant garb.

Eden Wood as Pageant Star

The most prominent example of the pursuit of stardom observed during my screening of *Toddlers & Tiaras* was during season three, episode five, “The Universal Royalty National Pageant”. This episode chronicles the journey of three pageant potentials, Janene, Eden, and Brooke. Although the episode follows the standard formula and profiles all three children, Eden

Wood is the standout. Eden is just four years old and already a “star” in the pageant world. The episode begins with Eden and her mother Mickie out at a restaurant where Mickie informs the camera, “My four year old daughter Eden is a star in the pageant world”. A group of individuals then approach the table and ask Eden for her autograph. The irony and absurdity of the situation is highlighted when Eden remarks, “I gotta remember how to spell my name”.

As the episode progresses, it becomes clear that Mickie has plans for Eden to transcend the pageant world and break into mainstream stardom. “She is so much more than just a pageant kid”, Mickie informs the audience, and explains that “since taking over the pageant world so to speak, she [Eden] was basically discovered.” Eden has been featured on *Good Morning America*, *The Talk*, *Nightline* and *The Insider*. Eden visits her manager Heather Ryan during the episode. She has a clothing line and an “Eden Wood” showgirl doll currently in the works which “is the brainchild” of Mickie and the manager. Eden excitedly states, “I’m gonna have my own Eden Wood doll, everyone is gonna want my doll”. Clearly, Mickie and Eden are counting on the exposure from *Toddlers & Tiaras* to help launch her career and sell her doll.

Money is no object for the Wood family when it comes to attaining celebrity. Ryan informs the audience, “Mickie doesn’t penny pinch on pageant stuff. She’s spent enough on wardrobe and pictures to pretty much feed every child in Botswana”. At this point, Mickie admits that she has spent about \$65,000 or \$70,000 on this pageant. In order to prepare for the pageant, Eden has a coach, a hairdresser and a makeup artist. Mickie states, “For us to get back on that winning track, I just went for the moon. I’ve always felt about my child that she is meant to have a bigger plan for her life than to stay in a small town. So my \$70,000 or \$80,000 is a drop in the bucket if all of this takes off and it’s all because of pageants”. Clearly then, all of the

investment in pageants is done in hopes of eventually transcending into even greater stardom. Pageant stardom is desired, even necessary, but it is not the end goal.

Surprisingly, Mickie is depicted as being very sweet and patient with Eden as opposed to other pageant mothers in this episode, like Janene's mom who is portrayed as cruel and snappish. Mickie employs hand puppets named Billy Bob and Bobby Sue to make Eden laugh and ensure that her pageant preparations are pleasant. Upon arriving at the pageant, it is obvious that Eden is well known within the circuit. When she arrives, the pageant director remarks that "Everybody loves Eden Wood. She is definitely America's favorite". This statement exemplifies Eden's star status in the pageant world. The other girls and their mothers in the episode even make reference to Eden as a "big name" attending their pageant to explain how high the caliber of the pageant is.

At the last pageant, Eden lost her title to another contestant, TaraLynn who is also competing in this episode. Eden and Mickie both are worried about the potential to lose to TaraLynn again, as this would be embarrassing considering the money and effort they have put into this pageant. A usually cool Mickie begins to lose her composure at the start of the pageant where she warns Eden, "you've got to get focused, okay? It's on you, the whole thing. All the work, all the money, it's all on you". This type of statement is commonplace on *Toddlers & Tiaras*. Parents warn their daughters that they must perform properly or they will be punished in the form of losing the pageant. There is also a greater threat here in Mickie's statement that Eden can lose it *all*, including her chance at stardom. Although Mickie mentions that there is money riding on Eden's win, it is unlikely that Eden losing a pageant would result in destitution for the family since they have invested about \$70,000 and the Grand Supreme title, the highest in the pageant, earns between \$500- \$700. Clearly, the real concern is the loss of the spotlight and the loss of pride if she loses to her rival TaraLynn.

As Eden takes her turn on the catwalk, the pageant director uses the loudspeaker to inform the audience that “Eden’s ambition is to rule the world!” It is clear from this episode that it is Mickie’s ambition as well—to “rule the world” through the power of the spectacle offered by celebrity. After Eden performs, Mickie remarks, “In my entire life I think that was probably the most wonderful moment. Period.” Mickie appears extremely nervous before the winner of the pageant is announced as she paces back and forth. However, the pageant concludes with Eden winning the highest title, Grand Supreme. Eden and Mickie do not specify what they plan to do with the money, although many participants usually discuss how they are going to spend the earnings such as buying a puppy. Eden states, “Yes I was excited about the money, but the balloons, I was really excited about that”. This comment illustrates the absurdity of the entire situation. Mickie has invested close to \$80,000 so that Eden can be entertained by a bunch of balloons. Mickie however is ecstatic about the win and Eden regaining her title. It is clear that she believes this win represents another potential steppingstone to stardom. At the conclusion of the episode Mickie states, “Pageants have been good to us. Pageants have led to so many opportunities. We’re just a normal family that works hard so we can promote Eden. Anybody out there in TV land want to help support the Eden Wood doll, contact Mickie Wood.” In this statement, Mickie makes direct reference to pageants as stepping stones for other opportunities. Here, Mickie is asserting herself and her daughter as a new kind of celebrity, one who is “approachable” and depends on the help of the audience to make their dreams of stardom come true. The example of Eden and Mickie Wood demonstrates the strong ambitions towards fame displayed on *Toddlers & Tiaras*.

Reality television programs devoted to turning children into stars are not a novel concept. Previous child star reality shows like *Star Search*, which featured adult, teen and child

participants who competed in entertainment categories such as singing, dancing, and comedy in an effort to win a cash prize, seemed more innocuous than the child based reality shows of today. Unlike today's reality TV shows, *Star Search* (which aired from 1983 to 1995) did not focus on the contestant's backgrounds. They were really only mentioned in passing before the contestant's performance. Instead, the show was almost entirely focused on talent. As Washburne and Derno note in their analysis of *American Idol*, "What made this show so different from *Star Search*, for example, was its protracted, intimate, reality-TV focus on the subjectivities and biographies of its contestants, their private relationships, and the rigors they were put through during the elimination process" (2004: 214). *Star Search* placed the focus more on talent than personal histories. *Star Search* also seemed less harmful because it did not focus on children's bodies as a means of star creation as does *Toddlers & Tiaras* through the use of the beauty pageant format. Instead, *Star Search* focused on the children's performance ability and provided them with a viable launching pad for later success, by showcasing their talent instead of their bodies. This is evidenced by Christina Aguilera, Britney Spears, Justin Timberlake, Aaliyah, Tatyana Ali, Beyonce, Usher, Jessica Simpson and LeAnn Rimes who all appeared on *Star Search* as children and later enjoyed success in Hollywood.

Unlike *Star Search*, *Toddlers & Tiaras* focuses on the "backstage" identities of its contestants more than their actual stage performance. The contestant's personal relationships with their families and their rival contestants are used as central plot devices in the show and provide much of the entertainment. These "backstage" looks at how the children are groomed for celebrity rarely depict the experience in a positive light. The pursuit of fame appears calculated and almost cruel and can, at its very worst, even be dangerous (Giles, 2006: 484). Unlike older pageant contestants, children cannot choose for themselves if they want to participate or not.

These young girls become “docile bodies” in the quest for celebrity, as their parents force them to undergo invasive beauty rituals and hours of tedious practice in their pursuit of money and celebrity. “In some cases, parents resort to measures that are mentally punitive and physically cruel to get their kids to perform “properly”... parents often respond to such criticisms by claiming that their kids are doing exactly what they want to do and that they enjoy being in the pageants” (Giroux, 2000: 43).

Although many parents on *Toddlers & Tiaras* claim that their children are happy about participating in pageants, these claims are juxtaposed with images of crying children who are tired of practicing routines, applying makeup and sitting in the hairdresser chair. For example, on episode five of season three, Janene is upset and crying because she is tired at the pageant and does not want to get ready for the swimwear portion. Her mother Jeannie then proceeds to drag her out from under the bed by her arms. Juxtaposed with this image of Jeannie roughly ordering Janene to get ready is a confessional-type moment where the camera solos in on Jeannie as she remarks, “This is pretty much a mother daughter experience. We enjoy doing things together. We enjoy doing the makeup and the hair together”. According to any interpretation of mother-daughter relationships in civil society, this interaction would not qualify as a pleasant mother daughter moment, despite Jeannie’s efforts. There are other examples of situations on this program where the parents claim that the child loves to do pageants while the audience simultaneously views images of miserable, grumpy children.

These images of upset children and flustered parents need to be considered within a discourse of humiliation. *Toddlers & Tiaras*, like many other of today’s reality shows including *Wife Swap*, *American Idol*, *Trading Spouses*, and *Survivor* appear to use humiliation as a central component in the show. The use of humiliation in reality TV shows relates to Anna McCarthy’s

notion of the “neoliberal theater of suffering”. With this theater of suffering, McCarthy is referring to the way in which the “life histories of others [are put] on display for our horrified pleasure” (McCarthy,2007: 30). These histories are then critiqued and corrected by so-called “experts” including pageant and talent judges, life coaches, organizers and even nannies who insult the participants, often bringing them to tears or other such outbursts. Reality programs use techniques of “shame and scolding” to correct or change the participants’ behavior, usually in the context of self- improvement (McCarthy, 2007: 18). Audiences appear to enjoy watching these “train wreck” moments of the show because they are often dramatic and, can be perversely “entertaining,” according to McCarthy’s definition of the theater of suffering. However, the obvious humiliation that the participants suffer raises questions about why they willingly submit to such critique. The reality TV hopefuls of *Toddlers & Tiaras* appear to be willing to submit to humiliation in order to get a chance at stardom. As Mendible explains,

While contestants are often shown in an unfavorable light, the fact that millions are paying attention makes them important. Humiliation here occupies a second-order of meaning in which any televised activity—regardless of how embarrassing—is elevated in status. In this sense, "being" on TV creates an ontological condition always already validated; how can you feel "put down" if millions of people think you're worth watching? (2004: 336).

Therefore, humiliation may be viewed as a necessary step towards the attainment of fame and celebrity.

My analysis has explored how *Toddlers & Tiaras* acts as a celebrity machine. I have argued that the reality TV format, the connection to beauty pageants and the quest for fame all contribute to the clear link between celebrity culture and *Toddlers & Tiaras*. The allure of fame appears strong enough to convince individuals to exploit their children in their desire for celebrity. “There are a significant number of discourses of fame emerging whose theme is the damage that fame can do to an individual-disillusionment, loneliness, persecution by obsessive

fans and stalkers. Given these counter-discourses, why is fame still sought by so many? Perhaps the positive aspects of fame appeal to something that is more deep-rooted than the fanciful notion that we can emulate our heroes” (Giles, 2006:479). As Giles suggests, even though fame has acquired many negative associations, the pull of fame is still strong in US culture and individuals are willing to be surveilled, or have their children surveilled, in order to gain celebrity. *Toddlers & Tiaras* exemplifies how the strong pull of fame can influence adults to act against the best interest of children.

Chapter Four: Conclusion

Summary

I have employed a cultural studies perspective to understand how a cultural text such as *Toddlers & Tiaras* aids in the production and dissemination of ideologies about girlhood, beauty, and celebrity. I utilized a cultural studies approach because the discipline encourages a critical engagement with ordinary or everyday processes, interactions, and objects. This exploration of the ordinary is undertaken in an effort to understand how meaning is made. Cultural studies considers the exploration of television programs like *Toddlers & Tiaras* to be an important process that will lead to insight on culture.

Following from Giroux's theory of the beauty pageant as a place for the subordination of girls, I have argued that *Toddlers & Tiaras* represents a cultural product that encourages a disregard for girls through its promotion of hegemonic models of sexualized femininity and its emphasis on celebrity as girls' primary goal. My research was informed by literature on childhood innocence, feminist theory and beauty culture, beauty pageants and national identity, and reality television as a cultural medium. The literature on childhood innocence argues that child beauty pageants present a culturally sanctioned site for the exploitation of girls and provide children with limited access to power and agency. The feminist literature from Chapkis and Wolf critiques beauty culture as a site for the oppression of women and girls. Beauty culture encourages compliance with culturally accepted notions of beauty and ensures this compliance by shaming women and girls into believing that their natural body is not good enough. These beauty practices are used as a means for maintaining gender differences between men and women, and contribute to the construction of women and girls as "docile bodies" where they have limited power or agency. *Toddlers & Tiaras* normalizes these adult beauty practices for

female children through the process of the makeover and therefore contributes to the positioning of girls as “docile bodies” in the larger culture. The previous research on beauty pageants by Banet-Weiser and Watson and Martin revealed that beauty pageants reflect cultural ideology and correspond with trends in the culture. As such, *Toddlers & Tiaras*, as a program based on child beauty pageant, corresponds with trends in girl culture at large and reveals insights into cultural ideologies about the construction and positioning of female children. The program is useful for understanding how child beauty pageants articulate beliefs about girlhood identity. Finally, the review of the literature on reality TV revealed that reality programs should be considered more than trivial entertainment, as they influence cultural meaning and aid in the production and distribution of cultural ideology. *Toddlers & Tiaras*, as a reality program, functions to promote ideologies of post-feminism and neoliberalism that encourage a certain understanding and construction of girlhood.

Following from the theories in the literature, my analysis has explored *Toddlers & Tiaras* as a version of the reality television makeover that, through the discourse of post-feminism, promotes an unrealistic and hegemonic version of ideal femininity. The girls on *Toddlers & Tiaras* become “docile bodies” during the pageant makeover process, as they are provided with limited agency and power and must submit to the will of their parents and the pageant experts. Surveillance by the media and parents is used to create docility and encourage compliance with the makeover process. I also examined how the discourse of neoliberalism found within the makeover show encourages both surveillance of and labor on the body as a means to achieving desired feminine ideals. The girls on *Toddlers & Tiaras* are encouraged to become neoliberal citizens and “work” on their bodies in order to become better versions of their own selves, and therefore have a better chance of winning the pageant and being accepted as the most desirable.

My analysis of *Toddlers & Tiaras* and celebrity argued that reality television programs such as *Toddlers & Tiaras* encourages individuals, in this case girls and their parents, to construct commodified personas in order to have a better chance at stardom. These created personas contribute to the positioning of girls as “docile” because girls lose some of their agency as they must fill certain expected roles. I also argued that *Toddlers & Tiaras* depicts an intense desire for fame and celebrity, as demonstrated through parents’ attempts to propel their children towards stardom through the use of the televised beauty pageant. The surveillance of the disciplining of these docile child bodies by the media system leads to thinking that they are celebrities when they are not.

Limitations

Although my analysis provides insights on the complex world of televised beauty pageants, it is ultimately limited by my exploration of only one pageant reality program. However, the program stands as an emblem of the culture and still offers insight into the complex world of child pageantry. Other programs may have added additional insight or context on which to judge the cultural object as a whole. The study is also limited by my own choice to frame the analysis within the cultural spheres of makeover programming and celebrity, as there are a number of other directions that the research could go. Finally, my analysis is limited by my choice to exclude male pageant contestants from the analysis. Since there are only a few episode which feature male contestants, I made the decision to remove them from the analysis completely and focus on girls alone.

Future Research

As *Toddlers & Tiaras* is a controversial topic, future research could investigate the audience perception of the program. This could be undertaken through a focus group study with audience members or completed as a discourse analysis relying on commentary from television, blogs, news articles, message boards and social networking sites. This type of analysis could help to explore why the program is so controversial and the themes of the show to which audiences respond most passionately. Future research on *Toddlers & Tiaras* could also offer further exploration into how the show frames mothers, as they appear to be demonized as the perpetrators in their child's exploitation. I would also recommend later research to explore the representation of boys on the program, as there are a few episodes where young boys are seen competing alongside girls in the pageants. These episodes could provide interesting insight into how notions of attractiveness and "beauty" for boys are constructed in comparison to these same notions for girls. Finally, a future research project on televised child beauty pageants could compare the different child beauty pageant television programs, such as *Little Miss Perfect* and *King of the Crown*, to see if these programs promote the same discourses as *Toddlers & Tiaras*. This type of analysis could help to better understand the child beauty pageant as a televised event which creates meaning and contributes to larger ideologies about girls and beauty.

Future research should also be completed on child beauty in general to enhance knowledge of these cultural sites, as they are a billion dollar industry that is largely unregulated. Even though interest in adult beauty pageants has waned, child beauty pageants are becoming more popular. There are hundreds of child beauty pageants that take place all over the country, and internationally, throughout the course of each year that promote the same ideologies found

within *Toddlers & Tiaras*. These pageants are popular for some reason, and research into them could help provide insight into why such events are viewed as desirable in the culture.

Finally, future research can be undertaken to investigate children on reality programming in general. As reality television becomes more popular, children are seen more on these programs. Although there are more instances of kids depicted in reality programs, there is little research that exists on how children are represented and how childhood is constructed. The portrayal of children on various reality programs needs to be explored in order to understand how these depictions influence ideological conceptions of and narratives about children.

The Bigger Picture

As part of a larger cultural studies project, this thesis hopes to encourage thinking about the construction and positioning of girls in American society. My arguments, and those of cultural critics cited, seek to demonstrate that girls are being encouraged to not only accept, but embrace narrow versions of femininity that are based on false notions of power. This construction of girls establishes a limited notion of girlhood, where girls are encouraged to engage in bodily display, where physical transformations are hailed as a means to a “better you”, where sexualized images of girls are viewed as acceptable, and where celebrity status is situated as the ultimate attainment.

It is easy to place blame on parents for promoting these limiting views of girl subjectivity as they are the ones who interact with their children on an everyday basis. However, we instead need to question a culture that encourages these representations. *Toddlers & Tiaras* raises questions about the morality of reality programming that focuses on children and their bodies. After all, who benefits the most from these representations? Perhaps it is telling that the most

famous child beauty queen is JonBenet Ramsey who was murdered in her home: “The death of the young beauty raises serious questions about those forces at work in the cultural practices and institutions that organize children’s lives, often in ways that undermine the possibility for children to enter adulthood free of violence, intimidation and abuse along the way” (Giroux, 2000: 36). Although cultural practices like the beauty pageant are promoted as wholesome entertainment, they contribute to ideologies that have a real impact on the lived experiences of girls. “The Jonbenet Ramsey case revealed not only how regressive notions of femininity and beauty are redeployed in this conservative era to fashion fragile identities of young girls, but also how easily adults will project their own fantasies onto children, even if it means selling them on the beauty block” (Giroux, 2000: 37). As Giroux argues, JonBenet’s death illuminates that not all of the cultural practices that we consider to be acceptable are necessarily beneficial for children.

In order to combat these regressive images and discourses of femininity, we as academics and researchers should reach out to the community and engage in dialogue that encourages more inclusive definitions of female subjectivity and the rejection of these limited notions of girlhood. Too often there is a disconnect between cultural studies research and theory and actual action. As Durham argues, “We’ve got to wake up. To imagine that childhood is a pure and innocent state, closed off from the rest of the world, is to live in a fantasy world of denial” (Durham, 2008: 45). Engaging children in discussion about gender, sexuality, or celebrity and treating them as if they are critical and discerning agents, can empower them to make educated choices for themselves and help to restore a sense of power and agency. Girls should be targeted for this type of engagement, as they are ultimately the ones who will or will not embody these subjectivities. Boys too should be included in these discussions so that they can support and encourage girls to occupy varied subject positions. Parents should be included as well, as they can help to

encourage their children to think critically and base their self-esteem on more than just appearances. Durham admits, “when...advocacy projects point to the risks inherent in the explicit sexual representations available to children, they are dismissed as killjoys, eggheads, or closet conservatives intent on censorship and moral policing” (2008: 51). Regardless of the possibility of dismissal, we must persist in our efforts to encourage more encompassing notions of girlhood identity and teach children how to combat the hegemonic images they see in the media. Engaged conversations would provide a good starting point for getting involved.

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