

# QUEEN OF THE MAPLE LEAF

BEAUTY CONTESTS AND  
SETTLER FEMININITY

Patrizia Gentile



UBC Press · Vancouver · Toronto

## Sexuality Studies Series

This series focuses on original, provocative, scholarly research examining from a range of perspectives the complexity of human sexual practice, identity, community, and desire. Books in the series explore how sexuality interacts with other aspects of society, such as law, education, feminism, racial diversity, the family, policing, sport, government, religion, mass media, medicine, and employment. The series provides a broad public venue for nurturing debate, cultivating talent, and expanding knowledge of human sexual expression, past and present.

### Recent volumes in the series include:

- Reconsidering Radical Feminism: Affect and the Politics of Heterosexuality*,  
by Jessica Joy Cameron
- A Queer Love Story: The Letters of Jane Rule and Rick Bébout*, edited by  
Marilyn R. Schuster
- We Still Demand! Redefining Resistance in Sex and Gender Struggles*, edited  
by Patrizia Gentile, Gary Kinsman, and L. Pauline Rankin
- The Nature of Masculinity: Critical Theory, New Materialisms, and  
Technologies of Embodiment*, by Steve Garlick
- Making a Scene: Lesbians and Community across Canada, 1964–84*,  
by Liz Millward
- Disrupting Queer Inclusion: Canadian Homonationalisms and the Politics  
of Belonging*, edited by OmiSoore H. Dryden and Suzanne Lenon
- Fraught Intimacies: Non/Monogamy in the Public Sphere*,  
by Nathan Rambukkana
- Religion and Sexuality: Diversity and the Limits of Tolerance*, edited by  
Pamela Dickey Young, Heather Shipley, and Tracy J. Trothen
- The Man Who Invented Gender: Engaging the Ideas of John Money*,  
by Terry Goldie

For a complete list of the titles in the series, see the UBC Press website,  
[www.ubcpres.ca/sexuality-studies](http://www.ubcpres.ca/sexuality-studies).

# Contents

---

List of Illustrations / viii

Acknowledgments / ix

List of Abbreviations / xi

Introduction / 3

1 Beauty Queens and (White) Settler Nationalism / 21

2 Miss Canada and Gendering Whiteness / 52

3 Labour of Beauty / 88

4 Contesting Indigenous, Immigrant, and Black Bodies / 122

5 Miss Canada, Commercialization, and Settler Anxiety / 158

Conclusion / 193

Notes / 201

Bibliography / 246

Index / 267

# Introduction

---

Beauty pageants in North America flourished alongside the dime museums and freak shows of the 1870s. Like freak shows, beauty contests are institutions designed to entertain. They are spectacles where bodies are put on display: dangerous, extraordinary, fascinating bodies. Far from faddish, freak shows and beauty pageants endure, even if modified or seemingly anachronistic.<sup>1</sup> The reason for their longevity and popularity is their continued entrenchment of gender, class, and racial hierarchies – and in the case of beauty pageants, settler nation through bodies. Beauty pageants, like freak shows, are cultural institutions meant to anchor consistent images and ideals about beauty, bodies, and nation.

Most historians of the body concur that beauty itself is a complex phenomenon that is constantly contested, negotiated, and entangled with prescribed cultural practices.<sup>2</sup> A major theme of *Queen of the Maple Leaf* is how beauty contests<sup>3</sup> institutionalize and transform our private ritualized practices around beauty into public spectacles aimed at reinforcing white, middle-class, respectable femininity as a national discourse of white settler subjectivity. Beauty contests play a significant part in the making and sustaining of a modern version of *settler femininity* that codes white, heterosexual, female bodies as racially superior and exemplars of the healthy, prosperous, and strong settler nation. Settler femininity is a racialized and gendered signifier of the civilizing process not based solely on the dichotomy of the white, Victorian, respectable, chaste woman versus the “squaw,”

a derogatory and offensive term used to describe Indigenous women as promiscuous and sexually available (see [Chapter 4](#)). Although the term draws and feeds on this late-nineteenth-century dichotomy, it also adheres to a civilizing logic and is thus a tool directly linked to settler anxieties about the sexual and gendered character of colonial violence and nation building that characterized the twentieth century.

In her article “Taming Aboriginal Sexuality,” Jean Barman reminds us that the construction of the sexually promiscuous Indigenous woman was possible only against the foil of Victorian women’s chasteness in relation to the making of colonial masculinities.<sup>4</sup> Although they do not focus directly on settler femininity, scholars such as Barman, Sylvia Van Kirk, and Jennifer Henderson all offer a mapping of how settler femininity came to be a critical part of settler nation building.<sup>5</sup> One of the most important contributions to the scholarship on bodies, colonialism, and settler femininities is historians Katie Pickles and Myra Rutherdale’s edited volume *Contact Zones*,<sup>6</sup> which examines the body as a site of colonial encounter revealing the body’s centrality in settler world making and logics in Canada’s “colonial past.” In *Queen of the Maple Leaf*, I centre the bodies of beauty contestants and queens – white, immigrant, Black, or Indigenous – as a site of white settler logic and fantasy and suggest that these elements are in play in the historical past and present. In the 1920s, political and cultural regulatory practices that sustained Victorian codes of femininity and sexuality for settler and Indigenous women and for women of colour gradually began to be replaced by other social forces designed to transmit proper gender and sexual values. As a form of “banal nationalism,” which refers to social psychologist Michael Billig’s notion of how Western nations reproduce nationhood through continual and unconscious “flagging,” beauty pageants in the twentieth century became an unthreatening, even seductive, tool in the replacement of Victorian gender and sexual codes as a means to communicate settler femininity as a civilizing logic in the face of anxieties about gender and sexuality.<sup>7</sup> That these settler anxieties continue to manifest on women’s bodies is part of the long history linked to the racialization and feminizing of the nation discussed below.

Centring embodied allegories to represent the nation, especially the modern, white, progressive nation, is featured in literary scholar Daniel Coleman’s work on nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century tropes of white civility in Canadian literature, which illustrates how claims of civility were part of a racial project that drew on a sense of Britishness.<sup>8</sup> In *White Civility*, Coleman shows how white settlers as the modern, progressive, and true inheritors of the Canadian nation are reified throughout key texts in Canadian literature from 1820

to 1950 to showcase and teach white superiority. All of Coleman's tropes – the Loyalist fratricide, the enterprising Scottish orphan, the muscular Christian, and the maturing colonial son – are male and thus centre the national allegory as masculine. Like Miss Canada, these tropes functioned in the same fashion as emblems of racial superiority and as conduits for quelling fears and anxiety about the continued presence of Indigenous and Black bodies.

Canadian beauty contests transmit this settler femininity over time and in a systemic and institutionalized way, thereby solidifying their value for white settler nationalism. Although the ideals of settler femininity underwent shifts throughout the decades from the 1920s to the late 1980s, these shifts cannot be measured neatly and in a linear fashion. Changes in social practices or political events such as the Second World War or the women's movement in the later part of the twentieth century obviously modified definitions and ideals, but the elimination and erasure of Indigenous and Black bodies continues to drive the vision of settler futurity, thus shaping femininity. In other words, tracing these shifts in a Eurocentric, linear, and progressive fashion to mark temporal change functions only to reinforce the settler logic that this book attempts to destabilize. This book traces how contested definitions of gender, race, modern consumer culture, community, citizenship, belonging, and nation were inscribed on the bodies of beauty queens through settler femininity over the twentieth century, but this tracing does not follow a linear narrative despite attempts to organize the chapters from the 1920s to the early 1990s. Beauty contests, in their multitude and variety, enable us to explore how the ideals and symbols of the white settler nation – in this case, Canada – were established within the framework of twentieth-century settler femininity and consumer culture. Canadian beauty contests took the rituals and spectacles of beauty and representations of the female body and created them as a "text" imbued with community values and white settler national identity. Although we can witness changes in this text over time, the choices about which bodies would be used to narrate this complex relationship between community values and white settler national identity were messy and do not fall neatly into a structured view of temporality often valued by historians.

There can be no doubt that beauty contests mattered in twentieth-century settler societies. Beauty pageants became ubiquitous because their structure and messages widely and effectively promoted the white settler values of competitiveness, individuality, respectability, and conformity as these social codes changed throughout the twentieth century. They strived not only to sell goods but also to spread ideals of community, racial homogeneity, moral character, and national symbols critical to upholding the myth of the modern white

settler society. Beauty contests are culturally significant and highly adaptable because in their effort to create a universal depiction of beauty by blurring and sometimes erasing race, class, and nonhegemonic sexualities, they actually render the idea of beauty problematic and exclusionary. Beauty pageants can amplify a settler future defined by scholars Eve Tuck and Rubén A. Gaztambide-Fernández as ensuring “the absorption of any and all critiques that pose a challenge to white supremacy, and the replacement of anyone who dares to speak against ongoing colonization.”<sup>9</sup> Beauty contests are one way that white settler societies can institutionalize this futurity, wrapped in entertainment and flash. By attempting to promote normative values designed to universalize white settler subjectivities, pageants create discourses about beauty and community that are unstable, tenuous, contested, and anxiety-ridden. Beauty pageants, therefore, give cultural historians a unique way to explain gender and bodies as signifiers of morality, sexuality, class, race, and womanhood within the context of consumer culture and the drive to commodify the body.

The beauty contestant’s body as text, as representative of or exemplifying femininity, race, community, or nation, was and continues to be an ambitious endeavour. Since a straight line connecting race or nation to the beauty contestant’s body is tenuous at best, this embodiment is in constant flux, easily manipulated, and always changing. Representations of whiteness and modernity in settler nations are contestable since they are signifiers of what historian Lorenzo Veracini labels the “imaginary spectacle” of settler fantasy, a foundational operating system of white settler societies.<sup>10</sup> By definition, the beauty contestant’s body as an example of settler femininity had to be malleable to fit this fantasy. The numerous examples of a range of beauty contests attempting to represent feminized and racialized symbols of the white settler nation are not considered to be static or ahistorical. The politics of beauty pageants demand a fluid relationship with ideals of femininity, race, consumerism, and nation in historical context. Who is included or excluded from these categories punctuates the politics of beauty pageants and defines which bodies are contested in white settler societies.

This book explains why beauty contests, as spectacles designed to embody ideals about nation and citizenship through the bodies of respectable, middle-class women, are critical to maintaining white settler nationalism. Beauty contests may seem like frivolous entertainment, and in many ways, they are. However, unlike other forms of spectacle and entertainment, the beauty contest persists because it is more than just another example of readily consumed popular culture. *Queen of the Maple Leaf* demonstrates that the longevity of beauty contests lies squarely in their capacity to act as

a tool for reasserting and re-entrenching, in seductive ways, the racial supremacy and heteropatriarchy at the heart of white settler societies.

Beauty contest scholars have offered a variety of analyses to account for the origins, objectives, and impact of these events. Some of this scholarship focuses on local and small queen pageants, similar to queen pageants that aim to shore up community values and civic pride, such as Stephen Fielding's "The Changing Face of Little Italy: The Miss Colombo Pageant and the Making of Ethnicity in Trail, British Columbia, 1970–1977," Tarah Brookfield's "Modeling the UN's Mission in Semi-Formal Wear: Edmonton's Miss United Nations Pageants of the 1960s," Karen Tice's *Queens of Academe: Beauty Pageants and Campus Life*, and Blain Roberts's *Pageants, Parlors, and Pretty Women*. These beauty contest scholars highlight the history of the local pageant in question and offer an analysis of the motives behind its inception, which often include an eagerness to boost community values or to offer young women a means to better themselves. This scholarship shows how ubiquitous and useful the beauty contest model was for community boosterism or for selling products, turning a profit, or attracting people to an event, but it also highlights another important aspect of beauty contest culture: women's use of the beauty contest platform to create opportunity or social advancement. Tice and Roberts, for example, offer evidence of Black women's support of beauty contests as a resource to enhance racial pride or acquire social standing as respectable in the southern United States. The focus of this work positions beauty pageants as part of the politics of beauty, emphasizing that they can be deployed to wield social or economic clout for otherwise marginalized individuals.

On the whole, beauty contest scholarship considers beauty pageants to be vehicles through which ideas of nation and citizenship are gendered and racialized, such as the work of Sarah Banet-Weiser and Rebecca Chiyoko King-O'Riain. In *The Most Beautiful Girl in the World*, Banet-Weiser uses a cultural analysis of four controversial beauty queens throughout the Miss America Pageant's history to explore how beauty contests are about "gender and nation as racialized categories" and offers a thorough account of how the pageant's significant currency is linked to American values about femininity, race, and culture.<sup>11</sup> King-O'Riain's *Pure Beauty: Judging Race in Japanese American Beauty Pageants* deploys the theory and practice of "race work" to explain the complex gendered and racialized notions of ethnicity, nation, and citizenship at the core of the Nisei Week Queen Pageant in California from the mid-1930s to 1990s. In this book, King-O'Riain traces how beauty contests used the queen as a way to demonstrate loyalty to the United States by showcasing her body as an outstanding example of

“Americanness.” It was through this race work that a “white hegemonic gaze” was used to make the queen “American.”<sup>12</sup> Banet-Weiser and King-O’Riain critically engage with the interplay among beauty pageants, nation, race, gender, and citizenship but fall short in examining how white femininity, respectability, and settler nationalism – which lies at the core of this “Americanness” – become inscribed on women’s bodies to create the contested images that beauty contests propose. How did female bodies come to be understood as symbols of the settler nation in the United States and Canada? How has whiteness become understood as “beautiful,” normal, and desirable in the United States and Canada due to their histories of colonialism and the denigration and erasure of racialized bodies?

Scholarship on beauty contests is gaining in popularity because beauty pageants such as Miss Atom Bomb, Miss Tobacco, and Indian Princess make for fascinating historical studies about popular culture, politics, bodies, and spectacle.<sup>13</sup> An analysis that traces the cultural impact of beauty contests to their gendered and racialized representations of nation and citizenship *and* how these representations are rooted in racial and patriarchal settler hierarchies shows why beauty pageants continue to proliferate despite feminist critiques. The purpose of this book is to demonstrate that the common thread connecting local queen pageants (including “ethnic” beauty pageants) and national beauty contests that function as profit-making ventures is their compulsion to uphold white, respectable, middle-class femininity, or settler femininity, as the marker of the desirable body in settler societies. This book does not debate whether beauty contestants are dupes or victims of false consciousness or agents successfully manipulating the system to their advantage. My position is that women, whatever their racial, socio-economic, or ethnic identities, have engaged with beauty contests as participants, organizers, and spectators for a variety of complex reasons, but an in-depth study of those reasons is beyond the scope of this book. Instead, I am interested in understanding the contested values at the core of the Canadian nation in order to contest nation itself, metaphorically grafted onto the female body. This analysis necessitates a discussion of Canada’s settler colonialism and its politics of diversity through multicultural policies as anxiety-ridden attempts to manage race and nation.

Anti-violence scholar Andrea Smith demonstrates that because white supremacy and settler colonialism intersect, a theory of racialization or race formation that ignores the roots of settler colonialism continues to miss the mark.<sup>14</sup> For Smith, state formation in the United States is grounded in what she calls the “three pillars of white supremacy”: the logics of slavery, genocide,

and Orientalism as anchored by capitalism, colonialism, and war that maintain white settler societies.<sup>15</sup> Unlike colonialism, the project of settler colonialism is one of displacement – or elimination – and replacement through the logics of genocide, slavery, and Orientalism. Theorist and historian Patrick Wolfe uses the analogy of a double-sided coin to explain the displacement-replacement logic of settler colonialism: “The eliminatory project of replacing Native peoples on their land was one side of the coin of European property, the other being the enslavement of imported Africans and their descendants.”<sup>16</sup>

The logic of white supremacy is not part of the historical *past*; it is a logic that is perpetuated in the historical *present* through a multitude of narratives. These narratives are embedded in a range of political, economic, legal, and cultural institutions that manipulate race, bodies, and nation, such as residential schools, multicultural policies, and even “frivolous” beauty pageants. At the moment of her victory, the beauty queen – the “winner” – stands as the personification of the white settler nation and community. Her “victory” signals that she successfully belongs to a narrative of citizenship steeped in a specific gendered, racialized, and sexualized definition of nation. Although beauty contests such as Miss Grey Cup and Miss Carleton University may not have been explicitly about nation or citizenship, the celebration of white, middle-class, respectable, and “wholesome” femininity through these pageants signalled the de facto racialization of white female bodies as sites of privilege, supremacy, and power.

In Canada, owners and organizers of beauty pageants past and present have lent credibility to their ventures by claiming to be searching for the “ideal Canadian girl.” This phrase is not accidental or simply a gimmicky way of attracting participants and curious onlookers. Finding the “ideal Canadian girl” reinstated whiteness and class hierarchies at the centre of the making of national subjectivities when questions of nationalism were at their most heated, whether in the early 1920s with the rise of the modern girl or during the protests by feminists in the late 1980s. But what happens to those bodies that are not easily included within the boundaries of settler femininity? *The Queen of the Maple Leaf* is also concerned with revealing how some contestants are deemed unacceptable symbolic representations of settler femininity. The seductive character of beauty contests, bolstered by the idea that they are “harmless” or even “good clean fun,” means that nonwhite women’s bodies, which are often excluded from national discourses about femininity, also participate in these competitions and sometimes win. These beauty queens are victorious because they perform a version of settler femininity successfully, or at least exceptionally in the case of Indigenous and Black beauty contestants, but several examples exist of how their

subsequent reigns have been fraught with problems and controversies. There are many instances of these “mistakes”: Bess Myerson, Miss America 1945, the first and only Jewish woman to win the title, which resulted in sponsors withdrawing support because of her “race”; Vanessa Williams, Miss America 1984, the first Black woman to win the title, who was dethroned due to a controversy regarding photos appearing in *Penthouse* magazine; Danielle House, Miss Universe Canada 1996, who was dethroned after assaulting another woman over a former boyfriend; kahntinetha Horn, winner of the Indian Princess title, who used it as a platform for Red Power and was stripped of her crown because of her political beliefs; Alicia Machado, Miss Universe 1996, who was told she was “too fat” by pageant owner Donald Trump; Jenna Talackova, a Miss Universe Canada 2012 finalist, who was eliminated from the competition because she was discovered to be a transwoman; and Nina Davuluri, Miss America 2013, the first Indian American to win the title, who endured a rash of racist tweets questioning her “Americanness.” When so-called controversial winners are chosen for national titles, the lines and boundaries of who belongs in the nation are made most visible.

Although this book focuses on queen pageants such as Miss Malta of Toronto (also Miss Malta) and Miss War Worker as well as on national beauty pageants in Canada, beauty pageants exist in relation to one another internationally, especially since many winners of national contests pursue global titles. But the relational character of beauty contests is also prevalent between local and community-based beauty contests and larger pageants such as Miss Canada or Miss Teenage Canada. The format of queen pageants is the same as or similar to the structure of national beauty pageants. Queen pageants are often used by the winners as stepping stones to provincial or national pageants. In this way, beauty pageants are part of a network whose tiers are not unlike the different levels of sports, such as Little League, Bantam, and so on. However, queen pageants are often organized as separate from national or provincial pageants – at times, deliberately so. In fact, some queen pageants, organized around a theme or a community event, are considered more relevant than national beauty pageants precisely because members of the audience and even the organizers themselves know the contestants intimately as daughters, nieces, or sisters. Queen pageants also differ in terms of the competitive component. Although no less demanding than provincial or national pageants, the “winner” often shares her victory so that no discernible winner is identifiable. However, the presence of judges does mean that someone has to win.

In *Queen of the Maple Leaf*, I argue that although queen pageants such as Miss War Worker, Miss Malta, and Miss Civil Service were local, the values

and codes they exemplified shed light on how certain messages about femininity, class, sexuality, and race shaped narratives of the white settler nation. This book, therefore, focuses on the part that they played as building blocks for the national pageants and on how they functioned to solidify networks for the making of white settler nationalism in the context of the beauty pageant industry. Performing settler femininity was still the overriding aim even though the pageant title was not expressly “national.” Although queen pageants are the poorer sisters of national beauty contests, they are still spectacles of racialization and gender. Whether the queen pageant in question is Miss Chinatown (a popular contest held in Vancouver in the late twentieth century) or Miss Restaurant, the goal of all beauty contests is to connect female bodies in some way to white, middle-class, respectable femininity and wholesomeness.

Beauty contests organized by unions were also very much involved in the entrenchment and reification of settler nationalism and white, middle-class, respectable femininity. It is no accident that immigrant women were not involved in the pageant of the International League of Ladies’ Garment Workers’ Union, called *La Reine des Midinettes/Queen of the Dressmakers*. This pageant was the enclave of francophone Quebecois women performing settler femininity. *Queen of the Dressmakers* was a way to uplift working-class francophone women as an example of acceptable bodies in the context of white settler society. However, viewing these queen pageants as less critical to our understanding of the connections between body, settler nationalism, and popular culture reifies a false dichotomy between the local and national. This book challenges this dichotomy, placing queen pageants on a continuum of beauty pageants and explicating their role in entrenching settler femininity. *Queen of the Maple Leaf* continues the dialogue between beauty pageant scholars and beauty pageants themselves and argues for the need to continue to understand beauty pageants in the context of settler nationalism and white supremacy.

### **Beauty, White Settler Femininity, and Canadian “Character”**

Before the first beauty contest appeared in Montreal in the early 1920s, iconic representations of the Canadian nation and character were already a common feature of the political and cultural landscape, as was certainly the case in literature, as documented by Daniel Coleman.<sup>17</sup> By the late nineteenth century, the Mountie’s red serge represented Canadian “honesty, justice and honour.”<sup>18</sup> Johnny or Jack Canuck, a cartoon character that first appeared in 1869 in the Montreal journal *Grinchuckle*, symbolized young Canadians, like

the country he represented.<sup>19</sup> The cartoon character sometimes morphed into a *habitant*, a farmer from seventeenth-century New France, who was a figure that romanticized and mythologized that chapter in Canadian settler history. Other historic symbols or icons of Canada included Niagara Falls, the beaver, the Canadian National Exhibition, Laura Secord, the Stanley Cup and hockey, and of course, the maple leaf.<sup>20</sup> To varying degrees, these geographic features, flora and fauna, sports, and people symbolized Canada's highlights, notably its natural attributes, its imagined colonial history, its international status in sports via hockey, its role in industrial progress, and its loyalty to the British Crown. Each one was framed, however, within a gender, race, and class discourse constructed for particular political, economic, and cultural uses. Veracini describes these settler society narratives as part of "a recurring narcissistic drive" based on the need to disavow the violence at the heart of all settler projects.<sup>21</sup> In settler societies, the fantasy of a peaceful nation reinforced through benign symbols and narratives of state formation functions to reconcile, even if tenuously, the violence of the settler colonial projects. The figure of a young, white female as a symbol of the nation is foundational to this settler fantasy.

Gender historian Carmen J. Nielson has revealed an important precursor to the twentieth-century beauty queen: a rendering of a young, white woman in "Indian" garb representing the image of British North America that appeared in popular nineteenth-century political magazines such as *Grip* and *Punch*. In this research, Nielson demonstrates the ways that the visual representation of this Miss Canada is rooted in the imperial gaze of the "indigenized, feminized body."<sup>22</sup> Political cartoonists used the image of Miss Canada when they wanted a symbol that conveyed "Canadian virtue."<sup>23</sup> According to journalist and author Ken Lefolii, Miss Canada arrived on the scene at the turn of the twentieth century because "some cartoonists found Johnny too crude a figure" and they needed another image to stand for "Canada's moral superiority in her quarrels with the U.S., the U.K., or the Métis of the Red River."<sup>24</sup> This rendering of Miss Canada is part of a long tradition in which nations have used the image of a young, white woman to represent them. Take, for example, the image of "Britannia" for England, "Marianne" for France, and "Lady Liberty" for the United States.<sup>25</sup> The problematic image of the female savage has also adorned maps, books, paintings, cigar boxes, and a multitude of products since the late eighteenth century to symbolize colonized lands. In the case of the pictorial representation of the early modern nation-state, the white, feminized (usually European) nation was sometimes in armour and wielding a sword and sometimes in a flowing tunic with at least one breast exposed. For Latin America or

Africa, the body of the Indigenous woman was almost always naked and sometimes hairy, emphasizing the primitiveness of the land and people.<sup>26</sup> Nielson also argues that the “repetitive deployment of feminised and eroticised images of the nation summoned particular gender, sexual and political identities into being and entangled viewers’ psychic investment in masculine, heterosexual and nationalist subjectivities,” as evidenced in editorial cartoons and political campaign posters published in English Canada between 1867 and 1914, a particularly critical period in nation building.<sup>27</sup> Settler nations such as Canada continue this legacy of the violent rendering of colonization, sexuality, and gender through the beauty pageant format in the historical present.

Like the beauty queen that would succeed her as the representative of Canadian womanhood, the Miss Canada figure used in political cartoons, on cigarette boxes, on magazine covers, and in propaganda posters during the Second World War represented the all-Canadian girl, and her looks and attire shifted accordingly.<sup>28</sup> The point was to create an image of Canada that would appeal to the middle-class settler gaze. In her work on cartoonist John Wilson Bengough, historian Christina Burr shows quite effectively how the image of Miss Canada used in political cartoons functioned to make Miss Canada “a symbolic [bearer] of the nation.”<sup>29</sup> Bengough capitalized on the shared view in nineteenth-century Canadian society that women were the guardians and protectors of the nation. Miss Canada as the wholesome fair maiden – Bengough’s favourite depiction – signified “faith, hope, charity, justice, prudence, temperance, and fortitude” and could thus convey powerful messages about nation to both Canadians and politicians.<sup>30</sup>

Miss Canada sometimes appeared in a *ceinture fléchée*, or sash, another appropriated fantasy of Canada’s settler historical narrative about whiteness, this time from the *coureurs du bois*, who were trappers in the fur trade. At other times, she was shown skating or as a sports girl, an image that would become synonymous with the Great White North, a label that was used to romanticize Canada both as a tourist ploy and as a reminder of its citizens’ fortitude.<sup>31</sup> The female bodies representing Canada were exclusively white, with no reference made to the increasingly complex ethnic and racial differences that accompanied the waves of immigrants entering the country in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Immigrant others complicate the racial and class hierarchies of white settler societies since their ability to legitimately belong to the white settler nation is called into question by the fact that their status as legitimate citizens is in a state of flux, even though they benefit from the dispossession of Indigenous people and the slave system. This liminal status is reinforced in the symbolic narrative: immigrant women’s bodies

are rarely featured as credible representations of Canada, and when they are used in this way, their selection is riddled with controversy.

The white settler gaze is crucial to understanding beauty contests. The act of consuming an image, symbol, or icon necessitates several “gazes” mediated by the categories of gender, race, ethnicity, sexuality, and class. After all, beauty contests are not about finding a “truth” about beauty; rather, they are unequivocally about performing settler femininity. Banet-Weiser suggests that what we experience additionally when we watch beauty pageants is a specific “gendered notion of citizenship” based on a “national field of shared symbols and practices.”<sup>32</sup> The white settler gaze, then, is informed by the messages that it receives, and it reinvents meanings based on a common set of cultural values and practices embedded in a white settler consciousness. *Queen of the Maple Leaf* surveys the multiple voices involved in organizing, protesting, sponsoring, and participating in beauty contests in order to illustrate the links between beauty, state formation, and the making of white settler subjectivities.

Historian Véronique Nahoum-Grappe suggests that the erotic gaze allows for the consumption of femininity, ethnicity, and nation on a vast scale. This gaze uses female beauty “tactically, to persuade, as if it were a kind of rhetoric,” with the result that the “effect of beauty is to divert attention from one object to another,” making it socially efficient.<sup>33</sup> This conceptualization goes beyond Banet-Weiser’s claim that “beauty contests produce the female body as a site of pleasure.”<sup>34</sup> Indeed, the idea here is not just that “sex sells” but also that beauty and women’s bodies were accepted as important tools in reifying abstract ideals like femininity, nation, community, or “whiteness,” which, I argue, then became part of collective settler consciousness. Beauty is not definable because it is rhetorical. Instead, the beauty queen’s body was exploited as an object of desire in contexts where white settler anxieties about categories of class, gender, race, ethnicity, and nationalism were debated and resolved.

*Queen of the Maple Leaf* does not offer an exhaustive history of beauty contests or beauty contestants in Canada. As a cultural history of beauty contests, it describes the history, structure, and format of several beauty contests to help situate the main narrative: beauty pageants are cultural institutions used to reinforce and entrench, however ambiguously, versions of settler femininity as an exemplar of the desirable body, past and future, in settler nationalism. This narrative does not discount the fact that Indigenous and Black beauty queens destabilized this settler futurity. As incongruent and always outside of settler normativity, these bodies are a reminder of colonial racial hierarchies that are at once forgotten and remobilized when needed. I focus on what was *said* about beauty contests and beauty queens in order to offer a better understanding of how the multiple ideals

of settler femininity embedded in beauty contests became entangled with ideals of race, community, consumerism, and nation. I argue four main points throughout this study. First, beauty pageants are embedded in the beauty industrial complex, which includes representations of the white settler nation. We “consume” the beauty contestant’s body as both a “product” and an embodiment of the values entrenched in nation, which gives us the notion of the consuming nation.

I employ the term “beauty industrial complex” to describe the dependency between business interests, the national or local imagination, and beauty contests, which is central to understanding how pageants were imbued with the gendered discourse of consumer culture. My use of this term refers to the connection between beauty contests, the media, and the corporate sector, namely the “beauty industry,” which encompasses cosmetics, fashion, modelling, and advertising. The term adapts historian Kathy Peiss’s “beauty industry” and scholar Varda Burstyn’s development of the notion of a “sport-media complex.”<sup>35</sup> In her book on beauty culture, Peiss describes the modern beauty industry as “large-scale production, national distribution, and advertising” accompanied by a “mass market of beauty consumers.”<sup>36</sup> It was this beauty industry and its ability to make cosmetics “affordable and indispensable” and then to establish a dependency between fashion and cosmetics, or the “face as a style,” that entrenched the buying and selling of cosmetics as an integral part of consumer culture.<sup>37</sup> The term “sport-media complex” refers to the forging of “deep links” between sport and commercial media in the twentieth century.<sup>38</sup> For Burstyn and her project on masculinity, sport spectacle, and business, the root of the sport-media complex is what she dubs the “sport nexus,” or the existence of a “highly lucrative, multibranch transnational economy of enormous scope and influence.”<sup>39</sup> It is this nexus that has established sport and its pervasive culture as “a spectacle of elite/professional performance.”<sup>40</sup>

The idea of the beauty industrial complex helps to underscore the intersections among the corporate sector, the media, and beauty pageants. From the outset, beauty pageants played a pivotal role in the beauty industrial complex because they were easily manipulated to serve corporate interests attached to the fashion, cosmetics, modelling, entertainment, and advertising industries. Whether the contest was local or national, the integration of beauty pageants into corporate interests made sponsoring pageants an obvious business endeavour. It is no coincidence, for instance, that beauty pageants historically were organized by Chambers of Commerce and funded by businessmen. For corporations, beauty pageants were ideal venues through which to promote products because they appealed to the masses as vehicles of popular and consumer culture.

Second, I argue that beauty pageants are a product of the modern need to make oneself “special,” which had arisen by the turn of the twentieth century as an embodied reinvention that dovetailed with the settler fantasy of racial and class hegemony.<sup>41</sup> I use Warren Susman’s culture of personality because it allows me to link the concept of the erotic gaze with the beauty industrial complex; however, he did not question the racial character embedded in this modern subjectivity.<sup>42</sup> Susman identifies the culture of personality as an outcome of the emerging consumer culture of the early twentieth century, which focused on a person’s ability to construct a pleasing and attractive shell. In other words, being liked and selling one’s *self* became more important than what one thought or felt. By the turn of the twentieth century, North American society increasingly defined itself through the purchasing of goods, or consumerism, whereby individuals were valued for what they had, not for who they were.<sup>43</sup> As Susman explains, the culture of personality signalled the breakdown of the culture of character and the rise of anonymity in urban society.<sup>44</sup>

Within this emerging culture of abundance and anonymity, the culture of personality thrived as the emphasis shifted to projecting a personality based on charm, attractiveness, and distinctiveness but always within a white, middle-class respectability. This process allowed for a sense of “liberty and democracy” to flourish separate from the structures of class and race hierarchies.<sup>45</sup> Beauty contests in the context of twentieth-century consumer culture reinforced defining one’s self in terms of external signifiers by providing fertile ground for the labour of “making yourself,” a fundamental tenet of the culture of personality and the construction of the public self in the twentieth century. Coupled with this process, advances in technology and mass communication, such as radio and television, ensured that the normative discourses of femininity and whiteness were widely disseminated, thus rooting self-worth in external beauty defined by the hegemonic ideals of whiteness, class, and citizenship.

Third, I illustrate how beauty pageants are competitive enterprises entrenched in the idea that beauty practices, literally, are part of women’s work. In other words, daily beauty rituals within a beauty culture are labour practices and an integral part of the beauty industrial complex. Looking beautiful is central to the daily ritual that women must undergo in order to engage *successfully* in society. Engaging in beauty practices – applying cosmetics, exercising, counting calories, removing unwanted hair, and keeping up with the latest trends in fashion – is unpaid work but labour-intensive nevertheless. These beauty regimens and cultural practices take time and sustained commitment. In the world of beauty contests, the beauty

contestant, especially the winner, is held up as the exemplar of a woman who has done the job well and therefore succeeded in this work. The process of crowning this woman epitomizes the value accrued to these beauty practices, while reinforcing the competitive nature of beauty culture in white settler society. Performing settler femininity is hard work; sustaining it requires a certain level of engagement in the fantasy narratives of white settler society and in the politics of race and beauty on a daily basis. This beauty labour is different for women of colour since performing femininity, settler or not, is not just about ensuring legibility; rather, it is often seen as a duty to uphold racial pride in the face of a society that denies your existence. The format of the beauty pageant mimics the politics of competition at the core of ritualizing beauty practices and the winner-take-all character of settler projects, even when the terrain is anything but equal: just like on stage, women compete with each other on the streets, in office buildings, and in their homes.

The ideology of beauty is central to beauty contests and their competitive organization. The association of beauty and youth with goodness and truth often frames the use of beauty queens as props to promote and advertise an event or product. I use the term “ideology of beauty” to refer to the meanings that emerge when we think about the value placed on the concept of beauty. The ideology of beauty refers to the evolution of thought associated with the shifting definitions of beauty. The terms “beauty culture” and “cult of beauty” are employed in the book to describe the practices that men and women engage in so as to beautify themselves.<sup>46</sup> Beauty culture generally encompasses these elaborate rituals as well as our use of fashion magazines, commercials, newspapers, celebrities, and even the oral tradition of passing beauty secrets from mother to daughter as coaching material. The ideology of beauty and beauty culture are related in that the former informs the social value of beauty, whereas the latter organizes the cultural importance and prominence of beauty in the lives of men and women.

As this book documents, beauty contests transmit cultural messages because they belong to the cult of beauty, coded white, middle-class, and wholesome, past and present. Without the context of rules and rituals defined by beauty culture, beauty contests could not convey such powerful images, and beauty contestants would not be marked as the “success stories” of ritualized beauty practices. As an integral component of the beauty industrial complex, beauty pageants have always been seen as important purveyors of those very beauty practices. For example, beauty contests mirrored the cosmetic and clothing fashions that were in vogue at particular

historical moments and, in turn, were used to introduce the latest fashions.<sup>47</sup> The ritualization of beauty practices in this way can be traced to practices institutionalized in beauty pageants as early as the nineteenth century.

Finally, this book critically examines how beauty pageants function as a seductive tool to reinforce gender, race, and class anxieties in white settler societies such as Canada. The bodies of beauty contestants and beauty queens have become a modern representation of legitimate white, respectable, middle-class femininity central to the fantasy of racial and social supremacy needed to support the narratives of settler societies. The winners of Miss Canada or Miss War Worker or Miss Malta appealed to the white settler gaze because they were all performing a version of settler femininity that was considered appealing. That beauty contests are annual events helps to sustain repeatedly the legitimacy of the white, middle-class body as the embodiment of the nation. The women who won beauty contest titles represented the national body – the desirable and desired body of settler nationalism. In the performativity of settler femininity, beauty queens and contestants reinforced and maintained gender, class, hetero-patriarchal, and racial codes. The beauty contest format and structure, with its gendered division of labour – chaperones and coaches were female, whereas judges were male – its focus both on displaying bodies and on competitiveness and individuality, and its anxieties about legitimacy contributed to the predominance of white contestants, as revealed by the pictures in this book.

Settler femininity as a practice and ideal required a steady diet of advice. Advice about how to be beautiful, charming, and respectable was forthcoming from every corner. Beauty contests, manuals, modelling agencies, and finishing schools were institutionalized versions of what women and girls would have heard from earlier generations about how to stay youthful, beautiful, and pure. However, modernity and consumer culture changed how these messages were constructed and received, making beauty pageants all the more powerful. Attempting to avoid a trap that would label beauty pageants as exploitative and greedy, pageant organizers often claimed that their competition “was not a beauty contest!”<sup>48</sup> Chapter 1 explores this conundrum and what I call the *pageant paradox*, the delicate balance between selling desirable bodies and maintaining the illusion of Victorian white femininity and moral standards. The pageant paradox has a long history in the European context dating back to the sixteenth century with the arrival of the May Day queen, and it continues to make its mark in the contemporary period. Understanding this contextualization is critical to understanding how beauty pageants – local, national, and thematic – were not harmless “shows” but intricately tied to white settler nationalism.

Arguably, the most important beauty contest to illustrate the interplay between settler femininity, pageants as cultural institutions, and white settler nationalism is the Miss Canada Pageant. Not surprisingly, the Miss Canada Pageant enjoyed attention from the business community and government officials. The first national Miss Canada contest was organized as part of the Montreal Winter Sports Carnival in 1923. It was officially trademarked in 1946. Throughout its history, the pageant underwent major shifts based on economic and political changes and was always influenced by the context in which it thrived and failed. [Chapters 2](#) and [5](#) examine the history of this specific pageant and its central role in shaping and entrenching ideals of settler femininity and nationalism through white bodies. [Chapter 2](#) focuses on the pageant's history from 1923 to 1961, when it changed hands, passing from beauty salon owners in Hamilton, Ontario, to a public relations firm. The growing pains experienced through the first half of the pageant's history reveal the deliberate and methodical development of settler femininity as an exemplar of the only legitimate desirable body in the settler society.

The workplace was another arena where beauty pageants flourished. Grooming working-class women to emulate and perform settler femininity became a popular pastime. Employers and union officials alike used the beauty pageant format to boost morale while promoting their companies, products, and union principles. [Chapter 3](#) highlights four examples of workplace pageants: Miss War Worker, Miss Civil Service, Miss Secretary of Canada, and Queen of the Dressmakers. I chose these beauty pageants to highlight both their intermittent existence on the public stage from the 1940s to the 1970s and how they largely used working women's bodies in similar ways despite being organized by different interests: the private sector in the case of Miss War Worker and Miss Secretary of Canada, the public sector in the case of Miss Civil Service, and a union in the case of Queen of the Dressmakers. These pageants drew large crowds from the workplace and the community because they functioned as queen pageants in what would be considered the most unlikely places: a munitions plant, a government office, and a union hall. But these pageants played a critical role in reinforcing and entrenching settler nationalism since they helped to sustain gender, class, and racial hierarchies in the guise of harmless fun. In fact, it was the very banality of the beauty contest format that made them so influential.

Although I organize [Chapters 3](#) and [4](#) thematically, they continue the discussion about the use of the queen pageant format to celebrate community through the performance of settler femininity. The main difference,

however, is that [Chapter 4](#) focuses on ethnic and racialized communities. Pageant organizers for these competitions fashioned the beauty contest format as a venue through which to educate Canadians about their respective cultures as part of the centennial celebrations in the 1960s. I use Miss Malta of Toronto as an example of an ethnic/immigrant community's beauty contest and Miss Black Ontario, Miss Caribana, and Indian Princess as racialized community pageants to analyze the way that these competitions were used not only to educate white settlers about these communities through emulation but also to destabilize settler futurity. The complexities, negotiations, and challenges of performing settler femininity for the Miss Malta of Toronto contest, which exemplify the politics of diversity framed by settler discourses of multiculturalism launched in the early 1970s, differed in comparison to those evoked by the performances of the alterior bodies of Black and Indigenous contestants. Settler logic allows Black and Indigenous bodies to "improve" by performing the tolerated other, but the politics of beauty allow these bodies to use the settler logic of improvement to create opportunities otherwise inaccessible. Although this is a complicated relationship, it does present a way to destabilize settler femininity.

[Chapter 5](#) returns to the Miss Canada Pageant but begins with the history of how television changed the way that settler femininity was literally broadcast to Canadians through this competition. By the late 1960s and throughout the 1970s and 1980s, the Miss Canada Pageant tried to negotiate critical national debates about identity, multiculturalism, bilingualism, and feminism while maintaining its hold as a credible expression of white settler nationalism. From the 1920s to late 1980s, settler femininity underwent several changes, but its function as a performance of white civility and respectability was still in play throughout the roughly seventy-year span that *Queen of the Maple Leaf* covers. The main reason for this continuity is that these versions of femininity responded to the changing nature of settler anxieties throughout this period and corresponded to the futurity imagined by settlers who foresaw a Canada free of bodies that refused to disappear. From the mid-1960s, a moment when Canadians were in the throes of debating the parameters of the settler nation beginning with the centennial celebrations, the pageants discussed in [Chapters 4](#) and [5](#) played a part in anchoring a version of settler normativity that matched those internal debates about multiculturalism, language, regional differences, dispossession, feminism, and what it meant to be Canadian.

© UBC Press 2020

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, without prior written permission of the publisher.

### **Library and Archives Canada Cataloguing in Publication**

Title: Queen of the maple leaf : beauty contests and settler femininity / Patrizia Gentile.

Names: Gentile, Patrizia, author.

Series: Sexuality studies series.

Description: Series statement: Sexuality studies | Includes bibliographical references and index.

Identifiers: Canadiana (print) 20200287818 | Canadiana (ebook) 20200287869 |

ISBN 9780774864121 (hardcover) | ISBN 9780774864145 (PDF) |

ISBN 9780774864152 (EPUB) | ISBN 9780774864169 (Kindle)

Subjects: LCSH: Beauty contests – Social aspects – Canada. | LCSH: Feminine beauty

(Aesthetics) – Social aspects – Canada. | LCSH: Beauty contests – Canada – History.

Classification: LCC HQ1220.C2 G46 2020 | DDC 791.6/60971—dc23

### **Canada**

UBC Press gratefully acknowledges the financial support for our publishing program of the Government of Canada (through the Canada Book Fund), the Canada Council for the Arts, and the British Columbia Arts Council.

This book has been published with the help of a grant from the Canadian Federation for the Humanities and Social Sciences, through the Awards to Scholarly Publications Program, using funds provided by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada.

Set in Segoe and Warnock by Apex CoVantage, LLC

Copy editor: Robert Lewis

Proofreader: Helen Godolphin

Indexer: Christine Jacobs

Cover designer: Martyn Schmoll

UBC Press

The University of British Columbia

2029 West Mall

Vancouver, BC V6T 1Z2

[www.ubcpres.ca](http://www.ubcpres.ca)