

Princesses or Monsters?: An Analysis of the Role of the Freak Show in *Toddlers & Tiaras*

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INTRODUCTION

Fake tans and the smell of hairspray fill the hotel rooms at a glitzy child beauty pageant. Mothers yell about being late while their children—the contestants—drink Red Bull and eat copious amounts of candy to help them stay awake during the grueling day. It all culminates in an hour-long television show called *Toddlers & Tiaras*. Aired first in January 2009, the show lasted for six seasons with a total of one hundred and seven episodes after it went off the air in October 2013 (Miet).

One of TLC's many reality shows, *Toddlers & Tiaras* follows three contestants as they prepare for and compete in a child beauty pageant. The pageant upon which each episode focuses and the contestants it follows change with each episode, but there are often contestants who have made several appearances on the show, notably Alana Thompson, who even inspired the TLC spin-off reality show *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo*.

In a typical episode of *Toddlers*, which had an average of 1.3 million viewers (Miet), half of the episode is spent depicting how each child gets ready for a beauty pageant. This includes interviews with both the child and parent(s) interspersed with footage of contestants practicing routines, getting costumes and dresses ready, getting their nails done, and some even applying spray tans. Most of these contestants are between the ages of two and nine. The other half of the episode focuses on the pageant itself: the arrival of the families, the preparation, the competition, and finally, the

Abstract

This essay explores a modern-day incarnation of the historical freak show: the child beauty pageant reality show *Toddlers & Tiaras*. The author draws connections between both freak shows and *Toddlers'* use of the concepts of normalcy, display, and consent, which ultimately reveals that shows such as these have a detrimental effect on how audiences view young girls, and the contestants themselves may feel negative about their self-worth and femininity after participating in pageants.

results. Contestants can win a multitude of awards; the top titles often come with cash or savings bonds as prizes, some up to \$10,000.

While seen as an entertaining show by many, notably its millions of viewers, *Toddlers & Tiaras* has also accumulated a host of critics, many of which note its strong resemblance to the freak show. The historical freak show became popular as the Victorian public was fascinated by those who did not fit into the social norms of the time. The so-called “normal folks” were able to compare themselves to the freaks and feel better about the fact that they were not as “abnormal” as those on display. Rosemarie Garland Thomson, a leading scholar in disability studies, writes, “The freak simultaneously testified to the physical and ideological normalcy of the spectator....This determining relation between observer and observed was mutually defining and yet unreciprocal, as it imposed on the freak the silence, anonymity, and passivity characteristic of objectification” while on display (62). While the young girls in *Toddlers* are also being put on display, they are being presented at the other end of the spectrum: the ideal. Three-year-olds wear copious amounts of makeup and fake teeth while eight-year-olds get spray tans and perform “sexy” dance routines in skimpy costumes—all to present themselves as perfect according to societal beauty standards.

While this aspect of *Toddlers* may seem to be the opposite of freak shows, Lennard Davis explains that, when someone is *so* ideal—or so far on the ideal side of the spectrum—it may actually serve to make them appear freakish to their more normal audiences (4). This aspect of *Toddlers & Tiaras* is part of its intense popularity—the audience cannot believe that young girls are able to emulate beauty ideals typically reserved for teenagers and young women.

The other popular criticism that the show receives is the argument that it unnecessarily sexualizes young girls. From the contestant wearing Julia Roberts’s prostitute costume from *Pretty Woman* to a three-year-old wearing Madonna’s iconic cone bra onstage, the show is no stranger to controversy (“The Five Biggest Controversies to Hit ‘Toddlers and Tiaras’”). In these types of pageants, young girls are expected to embody the same type of sexuality that society expects from twenty-year-olds, which can not only cause psychological damage in the self-esteem of contestants, but also detrimentally influence the way in which society perceives girls (Tamer).

In order to further explore the attitudes promoted by child beauty

pageants—specifically those featured on *Toddlers and Tiaras*—I will conduct a close analysis of two *Toddlers* episodes that epitomize the show’s similarities—as well as some differences—to the freak show and draw conclusions about how these attitudes affect the show’s audience and its contestants. I argue that the television show *Toddlers & Tiaras* functions similarly to the historical freak show, which influences the audience’s perception of normalcy, while affecting contestants’ self-image with regards to femininity and sexuality.

HISTORY OF THE BEAUTY PAGEANT

The modern beauty pageant was originally the brainchild of none other than P.T. Barnum, considered the father of the American freak show. Barnum’s inspiration came from the European medieval May Day celebrations, which often included competitions involving the selection of queens who represented the innocence of young girls. The first of Barnum’s pageants was held in England in 1881 and was well received in the United States (Friedman). The American version of May Day involved the selection of “women to serve as symbols of bounty and community ideals” (“People & Events: Origins of the Beauty Pageant”).

Beginning in the 1850s, Barnum held “national contests” where “dogs, chickens, flowers, and even children were displayed and judged for paying audiences” (“People & Events: Origins of the Beauty Pageant”). Baby parades and baby contests grew to be a popular form of entertainment with one parade in 1893 drawing 30,000 spectators. By the 1929 Coney Island Baby Parade, the number of spectators had grown to 500,000. However, because of the morals and values of the Victorian era, when Barnum announced a similar competition to find beautiful women, it was a huge flop—the respectable women of the time would not publicly display themselves (Friedman).

To combat this problem, Barnum pioneered a new system of competition: one of photogenic beauty. Women could send in pictures of themselves, which would be displayed in Barnum’s museum and voted on by museum-goers. For decades, this type of contest was widely used to boost morale: “Civic leaders...held newspaper contests to choose women that represented the spirit of their locales” (“People & Events: Origins of the Beauty Pageant”) to incentivize settlers and businesses to come to their cities

and towns.

As attitudes about female display changed over time, pageants became a more permissible form of entertainment. By the twentieth century, resorts held regular pageants as a type of amusement for the ever-expanding middle class. In “an effort to lure tourists to stay past Labor Day,” the first-ever Miss America pageant was held in Atlantic City in 1921 (“People & Events: Origins of the Beauty Pageant”).

Fast forward to the 1960s, and the modern child beauty pageant was in full swing. Known as “American-style beauty pageants,” the Little Miss America contest, which searched for “the most beautiful girls in the world!” (Miet) was a popular event for over a decade. From the sixties to the eighties, the child competitions focused on natural beauty, adding sub-competitions including categories titled “party wear, photogenic, and talent” (Miet). As competitiveness in child beauty pageants and the desire to outdo the other contestants grew, young girls were encouraged to wear caked-on makeup, fake eyelashes, expensive dresses, and hair extensions. When *Toddlers & Tiaras* debuted in 2008, this type of “glitz” pageant skyrocketed to an even higher popularity. In 2013, during the sixth season of *Toddlers*, the children’s pageant industry was valued at \$5 billion with more than five thousand pageants being held in the U.S. each year (Miet).

ANALYSIS

To further understand the connection between beauty pageants and the historical freak show, I analyzed two episodes of *Toddlers & Tiaras*. One episode called “Starz-N-Glitz: Stone Age” follows two-year-olds Charli and Maddisyn-Rae and three-year-old Savannah as they compete in Charlotte, North Carolina; the other episode on which I focus—“Universal Royalty: Grand Nationals”—showcases Lola, age three, and Hailey and Dianely, both age seven, at a national pageant in Austin, Texas. Through these analyses, I hope to illuminate the similarities, as well as some differences, regarding normalcy, display, and consent between freak shows and child “glitz” beauty pageants.

Normalcy

In his essay *Constructing Normalcy*, Lennard Davis writes that “we live in a world of norms” (3), and we are constantly comparing ourselves to

others in order to determine if we do indeed fit into the mold of what is considered “normal.” Davis argues that the idea of “the norm” first entered American consciousness in the mid-1800s, and thus accompanied the rise of the freak show, which helped the general public to define what was normal. In the 1830s, the concept of the “Average Man” motivated people to strive for normalcy (Fender and Muzaffar).

This notion is effectively demonstrated by the normalcy bell curve. This bell curve (Figure 1) is a symmetrical curve that peaks in the very middle of its variables. The ends of the bell curve represent a trait that occurs very rarely. In other words, when applied to humans, the majority of people fall in the middle—these are who society considers “normal” because they have flaws but are “normal enough” to be accepted, according to societal norms and expectations. On one end of the bell curve, there are the outliers who would be considered “freaks”—those who are considered so abnormal that there is no way they can fit in with those who fall near the middle of the bell curve. The other end of the bell curve encompasses people who are seen as “perfect” or nearly perfect. In other words, the “normal” people are expected to have some flaws, but, when someone looks or acts in a manner that is considered close to perfection—according to societal norms he or she shifts towards the “ideal” end of the bell curve, isolating him or herself from what is considered normal. Therefore, there are a large number of people who would be considered “normal” while only a small percentage of the population falls into the categories on either end of the bell curve—freakish or ideal.



Figure 1: Normalcy Bell Curve

Davis asserts that, eventually, just being “normal”—that is, falling in the middle of the bell curve—was not good enough for some; rather, they focused on inching further and further towards perfection, towards the “ideal.” This is the notion that is evident in *Toddlers & Tiaras*. Each episode depicts “glitz” beauty pageants, which means that contestants, no matter the age, often wear fake hair, lots of makeup, fake nails, and extremely expensive outfits and dresses, just so that they can be chosen as the most beautiful and most perfect girl onstage. This notion of what is considered perfection, of course, is largely connected with femininity. Because it is hyper-femininity that is valued in American society, these young girls attempt to follow that trend.

Both episodes of *Toddlers & Tiaras* that I examined showed the six contestants’ bedrooms, all of which were bright pink and showcased their crowns and sashes from past wins. This indicates to the girls that, not only is it “correct” to be extremely feminine, but also that pageants—and beauty ideals—are quite important. In fact, the most significant component of a pageant is the Beauty Competition. Both pageant directors described what this competition entailed: a beautiful face, overall great appearance, and a wonderful personality (“Starz-N-Glitz: Stone Age”).

Child beauty pageants are explicit in communicating to their competitors what the ideal notion of beauty is. All the girls in the episodes wear fake hair, lots of makeup, and get manicures or wear fake nails. The older contestants, Hailey and Dianley, both seven, had their eyebrows shaved and plucked, and Dianley’s mom spray tanned her daughter. While she is getting her eyebrows done, Hailey says, “If something hurts me, my mom always says, ‘Beauty is pain’ because if you want to be beautiful, it has to take pain” (“Universal Royalty: Grand Nationals”). Unfortunately, this is not a rarity. Many young girls who participate in these pageants believe that they must dramatically change their appearances in order to be perfect and thus win the competition.

What is important to note, however, is that *all* the contestants perform as essentially false versions of themselves. In attempting to reach the ideal of beauty, they believe that they must put on fake hair and nails and do their makeup. But because every contestant does this—that is, no competitor is able to win without spending hours getting ready—this also means that the standard of beauty those on *Toddlers* are attempting to reach is unattainable

without such props. Judges expect a certain “look” that they know is not natural or normal; the ideal of perfection for which the girls strive is an illusion.

Their outfits are also indicative of this quest for perfection. All the girls’ “beauty dresses” are short, frilly, and sparkly—traits most associated with feminine clothing choices. In “Starz-N-Glitz: Stone Age,” a facet of the competition includes “Stone Age Wear.” The judges are looking for “creative costumes, great hair and makeup, and cool routines,” explains pageant director Carla Smith. Two-year-old Charli dressed in a pink two-piece outfit as Pebbles from *The Flintstones*, and Savannah’s costume was that of Eve and was a two-piece made of leaves, while Maddisyn-Rae wore a two-piece dinosaur costume (“Starz-N-Glitz: Stone Age”). These “girly” outfits worn by contestants further speak to the norm of femininity that the girls are trying to portray—by showing off skin in small two-piece outfits, the girls are attempting to fit into the feminine role that society has assigned to them.

In the other episode analyzed, there were additional talent and swimwear competitions. While Lola was fully covered for her talent routine, Dianely and Hailey both wore two-piece outfits for their performances. The swimsuit competition is perhaps most indicative of the pageant’s emphasis on perfection. Though the judges would never take off points for a younger contestant’s body type, the director of the pageant, Annetta Hill, explained that for contestants ages six and older, “we want them to be more elegant and classy [than the younger girls]” (“Universal Royalty: Grand Nationals”). Essentially, the six-year-olds are expected to have grace similar to the twenty-year-old women they are competing against.

One of the contestants, Dianely, has a unique problem when it comes to her body. At the beginning of the episode, Dianley explains that she loves to do gymnastics, but her mother, Fransoly, says, “Her muscles started developing too much and she didn’t look right in a beauty dress... so we’re taking a break from gymnastics, and her body is back to normal” (“Universal Royalty: Grand Nationals”). Fransoly’s use of the word “normal” while describing her no-longer-muscular child goes to show how pageants encourage a traditionally feminine look from all their competitors.

This analysis may seem quite disconnected from the historical freak show: these girls are striving for perfection at the opposite end of the spectrum. However, it is important to note that if a person becomes too

ideal, they can still appear freakish, especially to the so-called “normal” people who are passing judgement. Those who fall in the middle of the normalcy bell curve continue to judge the outliers, whether they fall on the “freak” or “perfect” ends of the curve. In this case, because such young girls are expected to wear revealing clothing while drastically changing their appearance, they appear to the audience of *Toddlers & Tiaras* as not “normal.” Joshua Gamson writes that many reality shows have this effect on audiences. These types of shows cause spectators to see the subjects of the shows on television as different from the average viewer. This causes the viewers to compare themselves to and simultaneously want to separate themselves from the television subjects.

These notions of comparison and separation are what make *Toddlers & Tiaras* quite similar to the freak show. In the case of *Toddlers*, however, the show communicates that young girls are expected to look and move like twenty-year-old women, which is what makes them freakish. While freak shows and *Toddlers* are found at opposite ends at the normalcy bell curve, the message received by the middle “normal” viewers is the same: “Thank goodness I am not like them!”

Display

It goes without saying that display is a large part of *Toddlers & Tiaras* and beauty pageants as a whole. In this case, not only are the contestants and parents on display for the reality show, but the girls are also being put on display to be evaluated by judges and other audience members who attend the pageants. This bears a striking resemblance to the freak show. Freaks were historically put on display solely to be examined and judged by members of the community. Further, many freaks exaggerated their physical differences or changed their appearances in order to make themselves stand out even more. For example, a group of indigenous Filipinos called the Igorots were brought to the United States for anthropological purposes. While originally put on display by the American government for educational reasons, the Igorots quickly became popular because they were touted as “dog eaters” and “‘true’ savagery, with all the trimmings” (Vaughan 226). The appearances and performances of the Igorots were altered by their handlers simply to get a crowd in the door rather than to educate spectators.

Child beauty pageants include immense changes in the children's appearances as well as a performative aspect: in the *Starz-N-Glitz: Stone Age* pageant, contestants performed dance routines while dressed in "Stone Age Wear," while at the *Universal Royalty* pageant, competitors performed talent and swimwear routines, both of which were highly performative. During all these routines, contestants are expected to smile; Hailey's family constantly yelled "Smile!" to her while she was onstage performing. While performing beauty routines, all contestants made gestures that would most likely be described as "cutesy," such as waving, blowing kisses, and batting their eyelashes. These gestures, as well as constant smiling, have become ways to perform stereotypically feminine behaviors for the judges and show off what they think the people judging them want to see.

But these routines do not always go smoothly. Though the contestants are young, they are expected to have practiced in order for their routines to go off without a hitch. If this does not happen, it can detrimentally affect the scores of the contestants. Maddisyn-Rae, for example, did not do her *Stone Age Wear* routine correctly, and her dad described it as "terrible" while her mom said it was "a definite fail in my book" ("*Starz-N-Glitz: Stone Age*"), showing the emphasis on performative display in beauty pageants.

Just like historical freak shows, the contestants want to present the best versions of themselves. For those working in the freak show, that meant they needed to be as "abnormal" as possible. For the girls on *Toddlers*, this means they must appear as "perfect" for the judges, who only see a narrow part of who these girls are. While performing the beauty routine, for example, the emcee describes appearance (Charli, for example, has "blonde hair and chocolate brown eyes" ("*Starz-N-Glitz: Stone Age*")), hobbies, and fun facts, such as favorite food. One thing I noticed in the description of Dianely is that she was described as enjoying "cheerleading and, of course, makeup and pageants" ("*Universal Royalty: Grand Nationals*"). Her love of gymnastics was not mentioned, even though, at the beginning of the episode, she expressed that she would love to be on the Olympic gymnastics team. Instead, her hobbies were written—most likely by her mother—to reflect interests that are desirable in the pageant world, most likely because they are associated with feminine traits.

Consent

Contestants on *Toddlers & Tiaras* cannot enter the competition by themselves—rather, they often have a strong driving force in the form of a parent (usually a mother) pushing them to enter in and win pageants. There is no doubt that the pageant world is quite intense, but it brings up a gray area about whether consent by competitors is required to participate in the competitions. Many contestants do not really get to have a say in whether or not they want to compete, and there are most likely some competitors who believe that they must compete in pageants, lest they let down their mothers.

This gray area of consent is also prevalent in freak shows. One of the most well-known human anomalies, for example, was Saartjie Baartman, who came from Africa and was exhibited in England for her “greatly enlarged rump” typical of San women from the area (Lindfors 208). Known as the Hottentot Venus, Baartman “testified in [*sic*] behalf of her managers, saying that she had freely consented to exhibit her person in England, was earning good money, and wanted the show to go on. There was some doubt that she fully understood the nature of the contract she had entered into” (Lindfors 210). Because Baartman was brought to England from Africa and did not speak English as her first language, many believe that she was manipulated and told that she was signing a contract with different terms than those that were actually included in the document.

These consent issues are evident in my analysis of *Toddlers*. Before competitor Charli was born, for example, her mother, Samantha, would enter their pet dog into dog beauty pageants. She says that “Charli was just next in line. She didn’t have a choice” (“Starz-N-Glitz: Stone Age”). Never during the episode, though, does she actually ask her daughter if she likes or wants to participate in pageants. Three-year-old Savannah is another story. She does not hold back when talking about her dislike of pageants, saying that she would much rather play hockey with her dad than spend a weekend competing. When her mom, Natasha, says, “I thought you wanted to go to the pageant,” Savannah replies, “No”; when the producer asks if she is excited to go to the pageant, Savannah shakes her head. When she is asked if she would rather go play hockey, Savannah nods. Though Savannah’s mother constantly says things like “[a]s long as she wants to do it, I’ll do whatever it takes,” or “[s]he loves being onstage!,” she does not actually listen

to her daughter, who does not want to be a pageant princess (“Starz-N-Glitz: Stone Age”).

Another issue that relates to consent is money. The pageant entry fees are not cheap, nor are the dresses, hair, and makeup. This means that the parents who pay for the competitions put immense pressure on their daughters to perform well, especially considering that there is usually money involved for the winners of the top prizes. Savannah’s mother even takes on extra jobs working as a clown in order to pay for pageants and constantly reminds her daughter of this fact, saying, “I didn’t dress up like a clown for a runner-up title” (“Starz-N-Glitz: Stone Age”). Dianely’s mom confesses, “I’m very competitive. If you’re in it, you have to do anything to win” (“Universal Royalty: Grand Nationals”). If anything, it seems as though the parents have more at stake than their children.

The parents of competitors act much like the freakshow handlers. They completely control their children’s routines and outfits and dictate that the girls should love pageants—recall that Dianely’s mother forced her to quit gymnastics because it was making her body type “not right” for a beauty dress. Further, each parent is heavily invested in the competitions—often more so than their daughters—just as freakshow handlers often paid large amounts of money to get the freaks and put them on display in the first place. In Baartman’s case, she was made to perform even when she was clearly sick. One observer noted, “She [Baartman] was extremely ill, and the man insisted on her dancing...the poor creature pointed to her throat and to her knees as if she felt pain in both, pleading with tears that he would not force her compliance” (qtd. in Lindfors 209). If she did not perform, the freakshow handler would lose money, which is why he would force performers to exhibit themselves, regardless of whether or not they wanted it. In their eyes, it was up to the human anomalies to make back the money the handlers had paid for them, or, in the case of *Toddlers*, to win.

One difference between freakshow handlers and the mothers on *Toddlers*, however, is the way that they fit into the freak show. Handlers presented themselves publicly as “normal” people, just like the spectators coming to see the show. On the other hand, the portrayal of the mothers and their relationships with their daughters on *Toddlers & Tiaras* indicates a demonization and, in a sense, freakification of the mothers as well. The stereotypical pageant mom spends large amounts of time and money to

drastically change her daughter's look and put her on stage to be judged nearly solely on appearance, and the moms are portrayed as egotistical and over-the-top. In fact, moms are often depicted in the show as a hindrance "to their daughters' chance of success" (Demanjee 467).

The biggest tie between these pageants and the freak show, however, is the issue of consent itself. Because parents have the option to make choices for their children, *Toddlers* often emphasizes a case like Savannah's, in which the child does not want to perform, but her mother forces her to. While some performers such as Baartman believed that they were freely consenting, many freaks in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries felt as though they had no other choice but to perform in the freak show. This was especially the case for performers who had physical disabilities. Brigham Fordham explains the traditional freakshow justification for display: "It is assumed that persons with exceptional bodies are destined for disgrace and unemployment due to their unusual physical characteristics. The freak show 'discovers' and saves these people by giving them what is assumed to be the only possible kind of productive employment and identity" (12). Especially in the Victorian era, there were fewer opportunities for those who were physically handicapped, and performing in a freak show seemed to be the only option, which is similar to the young girls on *Toddlers* who are trapped into participating in pageants because they do not think they have any other choice.

The fact that *Toddlers & Tiaras* is a reality show, though, adds another aspect to the consent issue in the form of exploitation. Christopher Cianci reports that children who star in reality shows often receive very little legal protection with regards to how much they can work and what they can be made to do. Not only does the *Toddlers* crew follow contestants around at the pageant, but they also come into the children's homes, spending a great deal of time interviewing the family. Because of the lack of laws in place protecting children on reality shows, the producers can effectively exploit the drama and tantrums of these children while not technically receiving their consent.

IMPLICATIONS

The real question to ask after analyzing *Toddlers and Tiaras* and comparing and contrasting the television program and the freak show is:

why does it all matter? Clearly, the reality show's ties to the historical freak show have many implications, the two most important of which are self-image and sexualization.

One could argue that *Toddlers & Tiaras* is the result of the world in which we live—that is, the result of a world that is not only grossly mediated, but also one in which media has a large impact on what society sees as acceptable. Jessica Bennett notes the impact that shows such as *Toddlers* can have on its predominantly female audience: “Reared on reality TV and celebrity makeovers, girls as young as Marleigh [age 2] are using beauty products earlier, spending more and still feeling worse about themselves.” She goes on to explain that today's culture has come to make “the girls of *Toddlers & Tiaras* look ordinary” (Bennett).

Not only are girls trained to focus on their appearance because of these shows, but they are also expected to do so at an increasingly younger age. Instead of taking the time to do what was formerly considered a “normal” activity for a pre-teen—such as playing soccer or going to the mall—the new “normal” is spending countless hours scrutinizing the way they look and the ways that they can change it, including changing hair style and color, getting nails done, and, for some, even surgery. Because girls as young as those depicted on *Toddlers & Tiaras* are making these major appearance changes, older girls who may watch the show feel as though they must also adhere to that standard of beauty.

This effect on the self-worth of young girls is not limited just to the audience of pageants but is often even more manifested in the contestants themselves. Because pageants are so involved and contestants often compete for many years, the ideals of beauty can become skewed, starting when pageant princesses are young girls. The so-called “rituals” of female beauty that contestants must undergo “speak to an ideal, heteronormative and consumption-based femininity” (Demanjee 465). In other words, the perception of beauty that is held by contestants on *Toddlers* is most likely an idea of femininity that is unattainable. Yet, because of the time spent performing in pageants and attempting to attain this ideal beauty, competitors feel as though there is something wrong when they are not able to do so, which harms their self-esteem.

The second major implication that stems from the popularity of a show like *Toddlers & Tiaras* relates to how society at large perceives

young girls. In my analysis of the show, girls were judged heavily on their appearances, and, in competitions other than Beauty, they often wore two-piece outfits, and their hair and makeup matched that of a twenty-year-old woman much more than an eight-year-old girl. Further, in their quest for beauty, the girls had their eyebrows shaved and were spray tanned to compete with young adults.

In fact, in both episodes I have analyzed, the title of Ultimate Grand Supreme—the top title that a contestant can win and one that any age can receive—went to girls who were eighteen- and twenty-years-old. This, of course, is not surprising, as the women who won undoubtedly had more experience than the toddlers they were competing against. What is surprising, however, is the fact that the young contestants featured on *Toddlers* would be expected to compete with contestants who were ten years older.

This points to the unnecessary sexualization of the girls on the show and in pageants. A major reason that contestants put on the hair and heavy makeup is not only to attempt to attain an ideal of beauty but to attain a beauty that is expected of young women, not young girls. Additionally, as Demajnee points out, sexuality has become “strategic for contestants, who quickly learn that they are judged positively on their ability to mimic the sexualised [*sic*], girlish poses in their routines, such as wiggling their hips, flicking up their legs as they strut off stage, blowing kisses and pouting” (465). Because of the young age of the girls on the show, this “sexy” behavior coupled with revealing outfits create an unfamiliar dichotomy between childish innocence and intense sexuality. However, as Demanjee goes on to explain, “Performances [are] dismissed as harmless, fun, part of the normalised [*sic*] play and mimicry of children, as opposed to alternative readings such as the exploitation and sexualisation [*sic*] of children” (465).

CONCLUSION

Through my analysis, it is clear that *Toddlers & Tiaras* bears a strange and troubling resemblance to the historical freak show. It is evident that the program shares similarities to the historical freak show in terms of normalcy, display, and consent. Though the girls displayed on *Toddlers* are seen as freakish because of their quest to become the “ideal woman,” the fact that society ogles, ostracizes, and sexualizes them still presents troubling

implications.

Many would like to think that our society has progressed past the historical freak shows, and the reasons that they existed in the first place. The sad reality, however, is that the freak show has merely been reconfigured to take the form of reality shows such as *Toddlers & Tiaras*. While society will always look for a group outside the norm—be they on the grotesque or ideal end of the spectrum—the effects of reality shows are often harmful and long-lasting, whether for the subject of the show or the audience and larger society who pass judgement. Reality shows are not going away anytime soon, but it is important to remember that the programs only portray a small sliver of the real lives of contestants. They, too, just want to be accepted.

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