"Beautiful, though Deaf"
The Deaf American Beauty Pageant

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The rise and continued popularity of beauty contests in the Deaf world reflect the differing notions of cultural deafness and beauty, both within the Deaf world and in mainstream society.[1] These pageants have primarily emphasized the physicality of women, while often downplaying or denying their Deaf cultural identity. At the same time, Deaf male spectators herald cultural deafness at these competitions, and with their Deaf female peers they challenge the prevalent notion of "the perfect body" exhibited by mainstream beauty contests. Although certain aspects of displaying cultural Deafness in such pageants have changed since the Deaf President Now! Movement (DPN) and the greater politicization of the community in the 1990s, gendered Deafness has remained relatively static in significant ways.[2]

Several scholars have elegantly shown that the mainstream beauty pageants of the twentieth century responded to the rise of eugenics and social-scientific constructions of physical fitness and normalcy.[3] In one such provocative work, *The Black Stork*, historian Martin Pernick demonstrated that eugenics promised to make humanity not just strong and smart but beautiful as well. Being hereditarily fit included being visually attractive. Ugliness, according to these scientists, was a hereditary disease. Good grooming was commonly linked to good breeding.[4]

Articles in Deaf newspapers reflected a similar notion. A 1925 *Silent Worker* article noted, for example, that "good health is so radiant an attribute that mere 'irregular fatures'[sic] are almost, if not entirely, unnoticed

in their possessor. . . . is it not logical, therefore, that . . . the entire body can be developed to that physical perfection which is genuine beauty?"[5] A 1927 article in the same paper, entitled "Beauty Is Health Deep," claimed that "no one can be truly handsome unless she [sic] is truly healthy."[6] The article goes on to describe the discipline needed to maintain an appropriate regimen to show women's inner beauty by perfecting their outer beauty.

Deaf people have long accepted the hierarchy of "handicaps" expressed by early eugenicists and have rejected such negative classifications for only their own population. Deaf leaders and advocates consistently focused on their "normal" intelligence and ability to work—their "able-bodiness"—in public relations campaigns and in expressions to each other.[7] Yet mainstream society commonly perceived deaf people as similar to if not identical with "defectives" like feebleminded people, undercutting community members' citizenship status. As eugenic ideology intensified during the twentieth century, Deaf activists sought to preserve and protect their society by distancing themselves from other disabled people and emphasizing their commonality with mainstream, middle-class society.[8] Deaf beauty contests exemplify this strategy. Women's beauty, as projected by the Deaf media and pageants, enforced the notion of normalcy in two ways: the sense of commonality with (able-bodied) others, and the sense that beauty specifically suggests healthiness and vitality. The issues of "passing" (as able bodied), normalcy, and beauty strongly inform the popularity of Deaf beauty pageants.[9]

Deaf beauty pageants are ubiquitous. Since the 1920s, they have flourished at the local, state, and national level. Inspired in part by the early Miss America competitions, local, state, and national Deaf organizations began sponsoring Deaf beauty pageants in the 1920s.[10] Deaf newspapers, films, and eventually television programs frequently celebrated such victors, usually with greater frequency than other groups or types of women.

Commentary on Deaf beauty pageants in the Deaf and mainstream press reveals an intimate connection between women's beauty and oralism (as both a symbol and practice of "normalcy" in the period before DPN). Articles from the 1920s on deaf dancer Helen Heckman epitomize this. One entitled "Overcoming the Handicap of Deafness" asked readers whether they had ever witnessed a deaf girl play the piano compellingly or

sing and dance eloquently. Praising Heckman's ability to perform musical numbers—via instruments, her voice, and her body—the article alludes to the many obstacles overcome by the deaf prodigy: her "handicap of deafness," the loss of her mother at a young age, and her physical awkwardness. Repeatedly citing Heckman's ability to speak and dance as the means as well as the symbol of her success, the author instructs readers to learn from her example: "The results in this direction may be taken as a convincing demonstration not only of the value of the training of the body, but of the possibilities in the way of development of the mental faculties through the training of the body."[11] In other words, a beautiful, fit body reflects a beautiful, fit mind. The article originally ran in a mainstream publication (*Physical Culture Magazine*) and thus instructed presumably hearing women to take note from Heckman's experience, but its placement in the prominent Deaf magazine, the *Silent Worker*, takes on added meaning. Presenting Heckman as the model of a successful *deaf* woman specifically encouraged female deaf readers to emulate her physical beauty and poise as well as her efforts to speak vocally. The general absence of articles explicitly describing women who could not voice articulately or perform like Heckman (and hearing women) compounded the powerful message sent by the essay on the oral "overcomer": deaf female beauty required oralism. Other articles echoed this point.

Three years later, the November 1922 cover of the *Silent Worker* displayed a profile of Helen Heckman under the banner "Our Beautiful Deaf Women." Heckman had placed second in a mainstream national contest of beauty of face and figure. The extended article on Heckman not only celebrated her good looks but also highlighted her strict oral training and complete separation from Deaf people and Deaf culture. The newspaper again praised and embraced her "overcoming" story. Later, writing from Italian Switzerland in 1928, Heckman spoke directly to Deaf readers of the *Silent Worker*. Contrasting her deaf childhood with her oral adulthood, she said, "I think of myself at the age of twelve, a fat, lazy, ignorant girl, without speech or learning, using signs in lieu of words, deficient in the sense of balance, unable to eat without smacking or to exert myself at all without making unnatural sounds." With oral training she could "converse freely with hearing persons through the natural medium of speech; read the lips of others so easily that I do not sense

The Silent Worker
An Illustrated Monthly Magazine For, By and About the Deaf of the English-Reading World
Volume 35, No. 2 Trenton, N. J., November, 1922 25 Cents a Copy

OUR BEAUTIFUL DEAF WOMEN
Helen Heckman Awarded Second Place in a National Contest of Beauty of Face and Figure

HELEN HECKMAN, OF MUSKOGEE, OKLAHOMA
White Studio, N. Y.

the absence of hearing . . . [and] move about in the hearing world as a normal, happy being without the finger of pity being pointed toward me."[12]

Her point, like her speech, was clear. Success, normalcy, and beauty depended on oral ability. Although Heckman may have pitched her message to the broader Deaf community, it resonated mostly with women. Throughout the 1920s the *Silent Worker* (and its peers during and since) vilified deaf men who advocated oralism, limiting Heckman's example to female consumers. The paper, which was the premier Deaf newspaper of its time, consistently delineated success according to gender, and feminine deaf achievement was closely allied with oralism. Heckman, perhaps the most visible oral example of her time, appears to be the only deaf female to be honored twice on the front cover of the *Silent Worker*, the premier paper of its time.[13]

Other Deaf magazines echoed this message. For example, a 1935 *American Deaf Citizen* front page article celebrated Miss Deaf Chicago, Esther Dettinger. Repeatedly referred to as "the oralist," Dettinger walked away with the crown from the Kansas City pageant.[14] Four years later, two

The Silent Worker

An Illustrated Monthly Magazine For, By and About the Deaf of the English-Reading World

Volume 40. No. 7 Trenton, N. J., April, 1928 25 Cents a Copy

Deaf Persons *of* Note

Miss Helen Heckman, (from her latest photograph) of Muskogee, Okla., author of "My Life Transformed," recently published by the Macmillan Company, New York. Miss Heckman is also a graceful dancer. See article on pages 267, 268, 269, 270.

front covers of the popular *Digest of the Deaf* displayed oral beauties. The July 1939 issue claimed that Kansan Beulah Edith Harding enjoyed a "singing childhood" before becoming deaf at age ten and emphasized her speech skills. It later described her as "an excellent speaker and lip reader." A finalist for the Miss Chicago contest in the 1930s, Harding went on to professional modeling under the name Barbara Lee.[15] Marion Rene, the subject of the September 1939 issue, was a night club dancer. "Her success in spite of the critical criteria of the bright lights is yet another proof that deafness need be no bar to undoubted talent." The article continued: "Perhaps a story of her life will bring comfort and help to other young deaf people and make them feel that there indeed is a place for each of them in this hearing world."[16] This "blonde oralist" achieved success by appearing exceptional only in her beauty and dance skills, like Heckman. Subsequent media coverage of deaf winners of mainstream as well as Deaf

pageants—especially state and national ones—noted that the lovely ladies had "excellent" or "very good" oral skills.

Articles throughout most of the twentieth century continued to broadcast deaf beauties' ability to "pass" as hearing. In the 1950s Violet Hylton bested her coworkers at the Standard Garment Company beauty pageant, startling the judges when they learned she was deaf. The newspaper report specifically emphasized that the contestants were evaluated according to their poise, personality, and, "of course, how they would look in a bathing suit."[17] The "personality" component likely involved some spoken presentation that Hylton could satisfy with demure responses, whereas the poise and bathing suit competitions allowed Hylton to be seen exactly as the hearing women were seen—posing, sashaying, smiling, and nodding at the audience. In all of these ways, silence was seen as exemplary of femininity. A 1981 article on Miss Deaf America winner Mary Beth Barber noted: "A male patron at a theater once grabbed her and swooned over her sexy 'French' accent." It continued: "A date recently told her, 'Mary Beth, your ears may not work well, but they sure are pretty.'"[18] Barber, who had attended oral and mainstream schools, had overcome her shyness by joining the cheerleading squad and theater groups where she presumably voiced regularly (and successfully). Placed among a crowd of hearing ladies, Hylton, Barber, and others like them distinguished themselves not by their physical or cultural deafness but by their physical beauty. Even the attempt to pass seemed to be important. Although they failed to fully pass as hearing, the women still succeeded. Their attractiveness helped them "overcome" their stigmatized deafness in the eyes of hearing judges. In these cases and many others, authors reveled in the success of deaf women's actual or perceived victory over and among hearing women—in beauty pageants or in extracurricular activities. In the process, they—and presumably many readers—celebrated the approval bestowed on one of their own by the broader hearing world.

Multiple factors tied deaf femaleness to oralism and beauty, while anti-oralism partly defined male cultural deafness. For many—hearing and deaf—oralism had unique feminine qualities. For example, the quintessential oral educator throughout the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries was single, white, and female. The skills she taught fostered "polite"

behavior—speaking over gesturing. Discouraging facial expressions common in signed (visual) communication as "barbaric"—and thus inherently more "masculine"—oral female advocates focused on young girls more than boys, instilling lipreading and speech skills along with specific gendered behavioral lessons. Many parents and oral educators hoped that with speech training, deaf girls might attract hearing suitors; deaf boys, in contrast, were assumed incapable of landing a hearing girl and thus received more vocational training than speech training. As oralism expanded, female oral educators generally replaced deaf male teachers in the classroom. Emasculated by this cultural and employment threat, Deaf men—as "protectors of Deaf society and culture"—specifically fought oralism and oral educators.

Oralists and Deaf leaders fostered a specific form of deaf female femininity that encouraged deaf women to use oralism to pass as hearing in their search for beauty. For example, contributors to the *Volta Review*, the preeminent oral journal, explained to ladies how lipreading in front of mirrors helped cultivate beauty, including one article entitled "How to Be Beautiful, Though Deaf." The author goes on to call oralism a miraculous art for deaf ladies seeking femininity. Another article in the same issue continued, claiming that "Love May Be Blind, but Not Deaf."[19] Such prescriptive essays conflated love, sex, beauty, and marriage to describe successful deaf women. Especially pervasive was the suggestion that sexual appeal demanded greater "normality" for deaf women.[20] In other words, deaf women had to "pass" as hearing in order to be attractive. By the 1950s some vocational advocates advanced beauty arts, such as makeup classes and hair styling, for deaf women in particular because "it is logical to consider the proper use of cosmetics as the final oralist touch in the scientific care of the well body. The value of good appearance in the development of personality is frequently emphasized [and necessary]."[21]

Presenting deaf women as "normal" through their beauty and orality was in fact a conscious decision by some Deaf male leaders. Like many other minority groups in early twentieth-century America, Deaf elite men felt compelled to prove their value to society, and thereby earn a place of equality rather than to demand civil rights or government intervention on their behalf. In the case of Deaf beauty pageants, men emphasized deaf women's beauty and oral ability as a way of proving that they were "real"

men—to each other as well as to mainstream society. In essence, the men claimed that "our beautiful deaf women" were as good as hearing women, and therefore they themselves must be worthy men. In this example, deaf women were ornamental tools by which one group of men "spoke" to another. The desire to prove their worthiness and normalcy manifested in additional ways. This particular approach necessitated that the community minimize its difference with mainstream society. In Deaf media and public relations campaigns, Deaf organizations inflated qualities they shared with mainstream society: strong work ethic, patriotism, high moral values, and civic responsibility. In fact, many leaders went further, suggesting that Deaf people surpassed their hearing peers. This "hyper"-American image very specifically challenged the pervasive view of deaf citizens as disabled, different, or "Other."

Beauty pageants presented a public venue to assert deaf worthiness, deaf normalcy. Deaf contestants allowed themselves to be inspected, judged, and admired. This process assumed—implicitly and explicitly—that finalists and winners were the most worthy, the most "perfect" in their normalcy. The structure of these contests reveals both a close alignment with mainstream rituals and complex Deaf cultural expectations for women. Early contests, usually sponsored by local clubs, copied the patterns that prevailed in mainstream society, which highlighted a mixture of fashion modeling, walking, posing, and responding to questions. Various Deaf associations joined together to sponsor larger beauty contests by the 1930s, but a national program occurred roughly forty years later. Proposed by Douglas Burke in 1966, the Miss Deaf America pageant grew from the Cultural Program of the National Association of the Deaf (NAD). As one official website explains:

> There was one aspect of the arts that had yet to be explored—the world of drama. Dr. Burke visualized the need of a "way to recognize deaf actresses at an early age." . . . The main objective of the Miss Deaf America Talent Pageant was ". . . a new concept to help us elevate the image and self-concept of deaf ladies throughout the United States. This is not an ordinary contest. . . . beauty, poise, gracefulness are desirable qualities, but the biggest point is one's cultural talent performance."[22]

As with the Miss America Pageant, four categories of competition have dominated the national Deaf pageant since the 1970s: evening gown, swimsuit, talent, and congeniality (the question and answer—Q&A—interview). At most, two of the categories—talent and interview—encourage expression in ASL, and judges are expected to assess fashion taste in all four sections (as listed on their ballots). Moreover, the talent and congeniality performances occur in the final rounds, after all the contestants have "passed" under the audience gaze, representing themselves solely with their bodies (not using signed or spoken language). Thus, although many claim that such pageants offer deaf women a chance to express themselves, it is a highly physicalized version of expression, and the performative nature of the Q&A leaves a tightly scripted—and muted—personal voice.

The example of Ann Billington, winner of the first Miss Deaf America pageant in 1972, encompasses these complicated notions of "normalcy," beauty, and cultural deafness. Dressed in a trim white sailor suit, Billington signed while vocally singing a piece entitled "Hey, Look Me Over" during the talent competition. Raised orally, she only started to learn signs while attending Gallaudet College.[23] Articles on Billington consistently noted her understandable speech and her ability to read lips well. Many other contestants and subsequent winners had similar backgrounds and abilities and were proud to express them.

Billington's performance of exemplary deaf femininity continued during her reign as "an ambassador who conveys Deaf Awareness in beauty."[24] Mervin Garretson, president of the NAD in1978, asserted that Miss Deaf Americas as a group "face an awesome responsibility in projecting a positive and a genuine image of deaf persons, not only from the standpoint of entertainment, but also in information sharing and in engendering good will and acceptance of deaf people as they are."[25] One article specifically describing Billington proclaimed: "The Miss Deaf America winner is a talent queen! As such, she is a capable and beautiful performer. She can be helpful to your convention by performing a show whenever you need her talents, maybe at the ball or maybe during the banquet. She could sing a song at the banquet table, maybe 'The Star Spangled Banner' or 'America the Beautiful.' "[26]

Miss Deaf America, explicitly described by this ad, serves as an ambassador of beauty and vitality to mainstream society, but she also reflects cultural Deaf ideals. Billington is "talented and beautiful," challenging mainstream notions of disabled citizens (including deaf people) as dependent, incapable, and unappealing. Her possible performance of patriotic songs suggests commonality with mainstream society, of full and equal citizenship status, while also celebrating a deaf body and sign language. But gendered expectations also strongly informed her purpose at Deaf conventions. She was ornamental to the men and appealing to the eyes more than the mind (for she was not a main "speaker" at these venues). Additionally, she was a role model for young deaf women, who presumably saw her as successful—as what a deaf female should want to be. As Miss Deaf America, Billington and her successors held a special place in the community because they instilled pride and served as a symbol of unity, vitality, and happiness. Still, these queens, while visually testifying that deafness can be positive, rarely had the opportunity to "voice" their opinions on issues that complicated the community. The fact that the sponsoring organization—the NAD—did not allow female members to vote until 1964 or that it did not elect a female president until the 1980s serves to mirror this muted voice, to reflect on this muted place of female "deaf, though beautiful."

The requirements for contestants in the Miss Deaf America pageant (and Miss Gallaudet and many other state-level contests) reflect main-

stream pageant rules but also reveal physical and cultural Deaf components. For example, young ladies must be between eighteen and twenty-eight, never married (and may not marry during their reign if selected), without any children, free of any criminal record, and must be an American citizen.[27] In addition to having "talent, poise, charm, intelligence, beauty of face and body, social ability and maturity," a contestant must submit a certified audiogram and possess a hearing loss of 65 decibels or more (American Standards Association) or 75 decibels or more (International Organization for Standardization) in both ears. According to official documents, contestants are not required to possess American Sign Language (ASL) skills or other culturally "Deaf" attributes, such as attendance at a residential school, membership in Deaf clubs or churches, and

so forth. It is nevertheless culturally understood that sign language is the preferred mode of communication at these pageants.

The role of sign language in pageants has specific historical gendered meaning. The most popular talent performances for contests, from the 1920s to the present day, are signed recitations of poems or signed-songs.[28] This kind of signing has been traditional for women in the broader cultural Deaf community, and it is one of the few areas where they received praise for their signing. Frequently at commencements and conventions, Deaf women have signed the national anthem or a piece of poetry. Seen as theatrical-dramatic performances as much as expressions of the splendor of sign language, these cultural expressions linked bodily beauty with artistic and linguistic merit. Deaf women were rarely called "master signers." That status was given only to men (and in some cases, hearing men). Even the NAD's film preservation series, which began in 1910 and included some twenty filmed presentations to capture "the butiful sign language," shows only one woman, Mary Erd. Her performance of Longfellow's "Death of Minnehaha" is one of stunning drama. Dressed in Indian garb and shot from a distance, her work stands in stark contrast to the closely shot, public speech/sermon style of virtually all the male masters' films. George Veditz, a main force behind these sign master films, derided Erd's performance, however, claiming she had not "the film face" and that hers was not "the sign language." Descriptions of women signing, even in the Deaf press, also connect the physical beauty of the woman to the elegance of her signs. No such commentary appears for men. Thus although women display their "talent" of signing, the lines between ASL skill, acting, and beauty are blurred together.

While deaf women's cultural status, when compared to their hearing peers, remains blurry and muted, cultural values regarding oralism and signs—as expressed in beauty pageants—have certainly clarified in the past twenty-five years. Civil rights activism and academic linguistic research that "proved" ASL was an authentic language—among other potent factors—have provided a more fertile environment for Deaf people to express and celebrate their cultural-linguistic identity. Emboldened by the DPN movement in 1988 and disability/Deaf civil rights activism since, Deaf judges (meaning both the officials and the general community) of pageants have expressed a more specific ideal of cultural Deaf

feminine beauty. An interview with the 1988 Miss Deaf America, Brandi Sculthorpe, for example, noted that the Illinois native's heroes included her mother and I. King Jordan, the Deaf president installed that year at Gallaudet as a consequence of the DPN protests. Several pictures in the article show Sculthorpe signing.[29] Coverage of the 1990 beauty queen, Nancylynn Ward, further demonstrates this enhanced Deaf cultural "read" of Miss Deaf Americas. Showered with photographs throughout, an article on Ward in *Deaf Life* magazine described the twenty-two-year-old auburn beauty's Deaf cultural credentials: she was prelingually deaf, attended a residential school for the deaf in Maryland (as well as other programs), and preferred ASL for communication. The pictures in the article especially mark her as culturally Deaf. Portraits throughout the essay show Ward signing words like "home," "meet," "fine," and "talk."[30] Distinguished from common modeling portraits, these "signing" shots include facial expressions, hand shapes, and hand positioning that resemble pictorial sign dictionary entries. In this way, the photos allowed Ward to "speak for herself" with signing readers, enhancing the common cultural-linguistic bond. Similar "signing" montages commonly appeared in Miss Deaf America interviews during and after the 1990s.[31]

Those who deviated from this model faced increasing challenges. For example, Alexandrea Hermann won the Miss Deaf California pageant in 1991, playing piano for the talent portion. After the pageant, however, members of the community roundly criticized her for "mainstream lifestyle"—reading lips and speaking, attending a hearing school, and socializing primarily with hearing people. Hermann was informed that she could not use her piano talent for the national competition.[32] She did not win the national title. In the following year, a *Deaf Life* poll asked readers whether they felt pageant contestants should be allowed to sing or play music as part of their talent routines. Although most (62 percent) answered yes, a strong minority (39 percent) disagreed.[33] One former judge in state deaf pageants suggested that contestants be aware that "some kind of fallout [might occur] if they decided to sign or play music." Another opponent of "hearing"-style performances answered with an emphatic "No!" The respondent continued: "Most Deaf audience do not benefit from it [sic]. . . . They will talk to each other until the next contestant comes on stage with respect and pride in her culture!"[34] This attitude

pervaded many state and national pageants. As a current description of the pageant notes, "This is not an ordinary contest . . . beauty, poise, gracefulness are desirable qualities, but the biggest point is one's cultural talent performance" and that "the women are judged across a broad spectrum of categories including . . . knowledge of deaf culture."[35]

Heather Whitestone, even before becoming Miss America and igniting a fury, experienced this firsthand. In 1992, she competed in the Miss Deaf Alabama competition, where she was trounced because of her choice to employ Signing Exact English and to voice (SimCom). Unable to fully understand the ASL of the interviewer (or the judges)—and their inability to understand her—ironically "handicapped" Whitestone, certainly posing a barrier to the prize. In addition, the usual camaraderie described by contestants about behind-the-scenes socializing was starkly missing for her at this contest. In fact, on an outing after the competition, Whitestone's peers glared at her and made disparaging remarks because she voiced her order to a waitress while the others used signs and writing.[36] As Whitestone wrote in her autobiography, "Just because I spoke, had a hearing family, danced ballet, and used signing exact English, they decided that I could not fit into the deaf culture, that I was not an 'ideal' deaf person."[37] Members of the Deaf world likely respond: "Exactly." As an "out" oral deaf person, Whitestone was "outted" by the women who claimed cultural Deafness as their common, beautiful, and beautifying bond.

Whitestone's victory at the 1994 Miss America pageant fueled a passionate dialogue within the Deaf community, as well as between Whitestone and Deaf culture activists. As an outspoken oralist advocate, Whitestone represented the exception rather than the norm of deafness. Her "anything is possible," motto—the overcomer image—resonated with mainstream society, making her one of the best-known Miss Americas. Whitestone's deaf "performance" exemplified her "can-do" platform. During the final round, the interview, Whitestone marked herself as deaf by wearing her hearing aids. In fact, her hairstyle—swept up—displayed them prominently. In this way, she specifically acknowledged her physical deafness while distancing herself from cultural Deafness. The latter she perceived as the true disability because it separates and distinguishes individuals from mainstream society. This interesting play among average, normal, and exceptional echoes traditional Deaf cultural strategies regard-

ing the concepts of disability and normalcy. But for many contemporary deaf people, Whitestone's "overcoming" strategy went too far. A *Deaf Life* magazine poll that year claimed that among its readers, 55 percent felt Whitestone did not represent deaf people.[38] In another article, a deaf social worker admitted that many of her peers initially celebrated Whitestone's win, remarking that "it's always a great joy to see a deaf person move on and be treated like the others."[39] The article goes on to claim that such successes are "encouraging: having a disability need not prevent you from being beautiful or glamorous or successful. You can have a disability and still reach the peak of 'perfection,' the 'ideal.'"[40] Belying the ambivalence within the Deaf world about disability, "passing," and oralism, the author asked: "What if the 'deaf heroine' is an oralist?"[41] Excessively virginal, sweet, sheltered, pretty, compliant, and hopeful, and with a disability to overcome that importantly did not hinder her perfection of superficial beauty, Whitestone was at once marked as disabled by her hearing aids and yet also invisibly disabled. By "overcoming" her deafness, too, she remained an ideal mainstream female beauty.

But she was not an ideal to the culturally Deaf world, and they rejected her attempts to "speak" for them. Whitestone lamented:

> I was beginning to think that my bright hopes of influencing the deaf community would vanish like morning mist. . . . I felt that some deaf people looked at me as a sort of freak. . . . I was willing to lend my voice to help them, but they didn't seem to care. No matter how hard I tried to talk about my platform . . . some deaf people always managed to bring up the controversy about speaking versus signing.[42]

Whitestone's similarity to Helen Heckman in the 1920s is striking. They both were dancers and oralists who used their bodies even more than voices—signed or vocal—in a wholesome yet alluring dramatic performance of hyperfemininity; they are the truly assimilated. Yet this so-called "assimilation" is achieved, ironically, by being "pedestaled."[43] Put on a pedestal, they remain, in a sense "outcast" (or rather "up-cast") in a paradoxical distant but "assimilated" position. Their disability—and from a cultural perspective, their deafness—is invisible except as an orna-

ment of their exceptionalness. They were, indeed, the mainstream ideal of a deaf woman.

As a literary and cultural mirror to Whitestone's image, the same 1994 issue of *Deaf Life* also provided an exclusive interview with Maureen Yates, who was crowned Miss Deaf America earlier that year. Yates, a lanky, blond, deaf daughter of deaf parents, embodied contemporary Deaf cultural ideals. She attended a Deaf school, had a masterful command of sign language, and participated in Deaf sporting events and clubs. Two months earlier, Yates had posed for the cover of the *New York Times Magazine,* signing the word FREEDOM for an article entitled "Defiantly Deaf."[44] Eminently comfortable among deaf people, Yates defined "inclusion"—a common term for mainstreaming deaf children into public schools—as "being Deaf in a school for the deaf" and "being Deaf in a Deaf environment."[45] Like Whitestone and all beauty queens, however, Yates accentuated the need for all deaf people to get along, promoting harmony and tolerance.

Deaf people's current outcry against the vision of deafness embodied by a Heckman or a Whitestone—compliant, oral, and assimilated—signifies an important evolution in projected notions of cultural Deafness. Although the community never fully submitted to the oppressive forces of mainstream society, its strategies and attitudes previously accommodated and incorporated significant common values. That is less true today as Deaf citizens publicly celebrate their separate social-linguistic identity and more forcefully reject acculturation.

Deaf society's projected notion of gendered deafness has changed little. Although critical assessments of beauty pageants proliferate in mainstream society and burgeon among many ethnic minorities in America, virtually none appear in the Deaf cultural world. Even as the Deaf community celebrates its gains in mainstream society, it still "reflects the most traditional and conservative attitudes our society holds about women, attitudes that are perpetuated by the communication barrier created by deafness."[46] These barriers undermine Deaf women's status on multiple levels. Deaf and hearing women rarely interact, in large part because of language differences and the related, pervasive misperceptions hearing people have about deafness. Discouraged by inaccessibility, Deaf women frequently do not join mainstream associations, thus limiting the exchange of ideas,

experiences, and perspectives on gender and women's issues in general. Moreover, language barriers affect literacy and education, as several other essays in this collection attest. Often limited by lower reading skills, Deaf women may have greater difficulty accessing the dense feminist critiques that proliferate in academic and activist circles. Likewise, historic inaccessibility to popular media such as radio, television, and film have resulted in Deaf women's comparatively limited exposure to diverse expressions of gender, power, and identity. Other factors likely undermine internal reassessments of women's place in the Deaf world. For example, criticism from "outside" the Deaf world is often taken as criticism of the community rather than of a specific issue within the group. This is common for many minority groups, but it may be heightened in this case because of the continued experiences of oppression and discrimination by hearing people. Moreover, those very hearing people have only recently expressed direct recognition and active support for Deaf people's culture and abilities, first and most visibly in the Deaf President Now! Protest in 1988. Perhaps feminist and similar critiques—originating from the "outside"—still appear too radical, threatening a community that still battles broad discrimination based on their auditory condition.

Deaf men and women historically have rejected perceptions of deaf bodies as defective or dependent, yet Deaf beauty pageants still have yet to incorporate more complex expressions of female cultural Deafness. Immensely popular, folksy, and kitschy, Deaf beauty pageants exemplify the subversive conservatism of this minority culture and the ambiguous and ambivalent place of Deaf women within it.

Notes

1. In this work I focus primarily on larger competitions and the National Association of the Deaf's Miss Deaf America Pageant, initiated in 1972 in Miami Beach, Florida. To my knowledge, there have been no historical studies of Deaf beauty pageants and very few on Deaf women in general. Much of my work thus owes a debt to scholars in general women's and gender history. A number of academics have produced excellent works on America's beauty pageants, and I acknowledge two in particular: I draw heavily from Maxine Leeds Craig's work, *Ain't I a Beauty Queen?* (Oxford: Oxford Univer-

sity Press, 2002), which cogently describes the politics and cultural meaning of African American beauty pageants; I also borrow from the model of interpretation provided by Sarah Banet-Weiser's *The Most Beautiful Girl in the World* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), which reveals the intersection of beauty, citizenship, and national identity.

2. Deaf President Now! (DPN) symbolizes the 1988 protest at Gallaudet University, then the world's only liberal arts institution primarily serving deaf and hard of hearing students. DPN activists demanded that the university dismiss its recently elected hearing president and install its first Deaf president. The campaign resulted in the election of I. King Jordan, a Deaf administrator, and symbolically remains the most prominent example of recent Deaf civil rights success.

3. See, for example, Craig, "*Ain't I a Beauty Queen?*", and Wendy Kline, *Building a Better Race* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001).

4. Martin Pernick, *The Black Stork* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 60–61.

5. Helena Lorenz Williams, "Health, the Course to Beauty," *Silent Worker* 38, no. 3 (1925): 136–37

6. Elizabeth Cole, "Beauty Is Health Deep," *Silent Worker* 39, no. 9 (1927): 340.

7. For more on this, see Susan Burch, *Signs of Resistance: American Deaf Cultural History, 1900 to World War II* (New York: New York University Press, 2002).

8. For more on the Deaf community and eugenics, see Burch, *Signs of Resistance*.

9. "Passing" in this sense refers to the ability to be viewed as hearing or otherwise normal.

10. There is anecdotal evidence that national Deaf beauty competitions existed as early as the 1930s, but the official "Miss Deaf America pageant" sponsored by the NAD did not occur until the 1970s. See "Miss Deaf Philadelphia," *Pennsylvania Society News* 11, no. 9 (1936): 10, and "Miss America of Deaf 1955 Selected for First Time Here," July 4, 1955, Washington, D.C., Gallaudet University Archives, Subject file: Beauty Contests.

11. Lloyd Swift Thomas, "Overcoming the Handicap of Deafness," *Silent Worker* 32, no. 3 (1919): 59.

12. Helen Heckman, "Dreams that Come True," *Silent Worker* 40, no. 7 (1928): 267–68.

13. Oralist superintendent of the New Jersey school, Alvin Pope, ultimately shut down this paper, run by George Porter, in 1929 because it chal-

lenged the oralist policies of the school too vehemently. This Little Paper Family (LPF) publication was not generally on the fence about oralism or Deaf values.

14. "Chicago's Queen Challenges K.C.," *American Deaf Citizen*, June 21, 1935, 1

15. *Digest of the Deaf*, July 1939, cover, 10.

16. "Marion Rene: Night Club Dancer," *Digest of the Deaf*, September 1939, 5.

17. Obie A. Nunn, "Virginia Girl Is Beauty Queen," *Silent Worker* 6, no. 3 (1953): 8.

18. "Mary Beth Barber," *Deaf American* 38, no. 8 (1981): 7–8.

19. See B. S__ky, "Matrimony from an Unmarried Girl's Point of View," *Volta Review* 26, no. 4 (1924): 205, and John A. Ferrall, "How to Be Beautiful, Though Deaf," *Volta Review* 26, no. 5 (1924): 258.

20. *Volta Review* (June 1924): 9. Although similar in mindset to hearing contestants, deaf beauties appreciated the contests for added reasons. Because many girls had vocational training in the art of beauty—cosmetology, hairdressing, and dressmaking—the competitions allowed them to demonstrate their own handiwork as well as their figures.

21. Lillian Dorethelia Jenkins, "A Survey of Vocational Training in Cosmetology for Deaf Girls in the United States" (MS thesis, University of Tennessee, 1954).

22. "Miss Deaf America Pageant History," http://www.uad.org/mdup/mdap_history.htm (accessed January 25, 2005). In 1976, the NAD dropped the term "talent" from the title, making it resemble the Miss America contest more.

23. Billington sang vocally and with signs. "Hey, Look Me Over," *Gallaudet News* February 8, 1972, 2. See also Gallaudet University Archives, Biographical file: Ann Billington.

24. Ruthie Sandefur, director, "Welcome to a Starry Night," Gallaudet University Archives, Subject file: Beauty Pageants.

25. July 2, 1978, letter to Miss Deaf America contestants, Brochure, Gallaudet University Archives, Subject file: Beauty Pageants.

26. *Deaf American*, April 1972, 12.

27. Between 1972 and 1984, two of the eight winners gave up their role because of marriage. However, some more local competitions did allow married women to compete.

28. Susan Daviduff, Miss Deaf America, 1976–78, "Sing a Sign," Brochure, Gallaudet University Archives, Subject file: Beauty Pageants.

29. "Exclusive Interview," *Deaf Life*, October 1988, 21–23. Sculthorpe graces the cover of this issue as well, but she is not signing in the picture.

30. "Miss Deaf America: Nancylynn Ward," *Deaf Life*, October 1990, 19–29.

31. See, for example, "Coming through with Flying Colors," *Deaf Life*, October 1992, 24–28.

32. Jane Slama, "Miss Deaf Captures Title, Controversy," *Santa Maria Times*, September 17, 1991, front page, Gallaudet University Archives, Subject file: Beauty Pageants.

33. "Readers' Responses," *Deaf Life*, December 1992, 34.

34. "Readers' Responses," *Deaf Life*, December 1992, 34.

35. "Miss Deaf America Pageant History," http://www.uad.org/mdup/mdap_history.htm (accessed January 10, 2005).

36. Heather Whitestone, with Angela Elwell Hunt, *Listening with My Heart* (New York: Doubleday, 1997), 42.

37. Whitestone with Hunt, *Listening with My Heart*, 42.

38. "Readers' Responses," *Deaf Life*, December 1994, 28.

39. "Mixed Blessings?" *Deaf Life*, October 1994, Plus 2.

40. "Mixed Blessings?" *Deaf Life*, October 1994, Plus 2.

41. "Mixed Blessings?" *Deaf Life*, October 1994, Plus 2.

42. Whitestone with Hunt, *Listening with My Hear*t, 94.

43. Many history works examine this symbol. See, for example, Caroll Smith Rosenberg, *Disorderly Conduct* (New York: A.A. Knopf, 1985); Anne Firor Scott, *The Southern Lady: From Pedestal to Politics, 1830–1930* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1995); and Maxine Harris, *Down from the Pedestal: Moving beyond Idealized Images of Womanhood* (New York: Doubleday, 1994).

44. Andrew Solomon, "Defiantly Deaf," http://www.ling.upenn.edu/courses/Fall_2000/ling001/nytimes_deaf.htm; "An Exclusive Interview," *Deaf Life*, October 1994, 20.

45. "An Exclusive interview," *Deaf Life*, October 1994, 26.

46. Martha Sheridan, "Deaf Women: A Review of the Literature," (Dayton, Ohio: Wright State University, 1995), citing G. Becker and J. Jauregui, "The Invisible Isolation of Deaf Women: Its Effect on Social Awareness," *Journal of Sociology and Social Welfare* 8, no. 2 (1981): 250.