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BEAUTY PRODUCTS: ON PAGEANT CULTURE AND THE FILIPINX FEMININE IDEAL

Journalist Gaby Wilson considers the relationship between beauty and power, pride and shame on the individual and national level.

by **GABY WILSON**

At around age seven, or maybe eight, I developed a habit of sitting too close to the TV. One of my parents would eventually notice and yell for me to "back up before it ruins your eyes," but for as long as I could, I would pull my tiny body, legs crossed and gaze locked, into the glow of the screen, enveloping myself in its spectacle. Holding my focus was usually one of three things—a cartoon, a basketball game or a beauty pageant—but sitting so close, the full picture was never the point. If I could, I would have stepped through that thick, convex glass and into the belly of its image; anything to inject myself into the world illuminated behind it.

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I come from a line of barrio fiesta queens: my mom (Miss New Year), my lola (Her Majesty Queen of Santa Teresa, Tubao), titas, ates, pinsans. The images of their rouged faces gliding across town stages, their younger selves piled with ruffles and sparkly baubles, are burned into my brain from brown-out afternoons spent hovered over family photo albums. I've never participated in any pageants, but I was raised with the understanding that they were appointment viewing. Perched just inches away from the TV, I would drink in every second of its theater. The roar of cheers in the arena, so constant they seemed fused with the air itself; each molecule of oxygen vibrating with their expectant applause. The hosts' pattering banter rising above the audience like a melody over a bass line. The cold open, performed as impromptu but stationed in a backstage corner pre-approved by the show's producers, filmed handheld to stoke intimacy and urgency, to be sure that you care.

In the 1990s, when my devotion was at its peak, these broadcasts usually started with hypnotic song-and-dance numbers. The contestants made their debuts to the stage, not so much as a parade of nobles vying for the same crown, but as a high-heeled, hair-sprayed drill team. Each soldier's rifle removed, hands left with nothing to do but perch akimbo under plastered Vaseline smiles unless otherwise choreographed. Then, after introductions, the field was divided and a hierarchy revealed as select women were ushered into an elite tier, a Top 15 or 20. It was at this exact moment when I would pledge my allegiance to whichever young woman was announced at the No. 8 spot. In an instant of spiritual alchemy, I would sync my fate to hers, willing No. 8 to ascend to the night's crowning title, vowing to share the burden of her disappointment if she didn't. The glitter and fantasy of a cartoon princess story charged with the nail-biting suspense of competitive sports. In pageants, as in sports, the battle lines of home geography typically shape loyalties, but my family moved constantly from one international military base to the next, complicating my process of claiming a hometown. I think the numerical choice was arbitrary at first, or maybe it had something to do with my age, but it quickly congealed into ritual. For all my pageant-watching years, I adhered strictly to this superstitious obsession with No. 8, minus one exception: the annual Miss Universe pageant. For that, my dedication was always firmly sworn to Miss Philippines.

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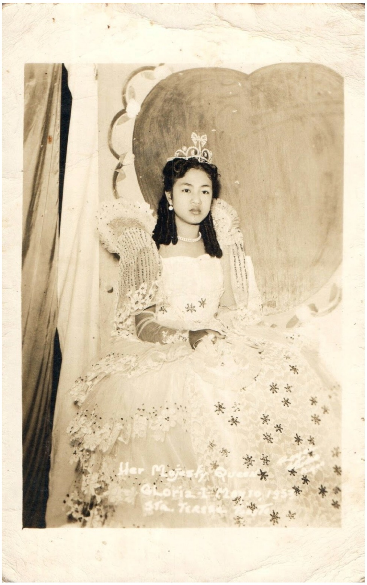


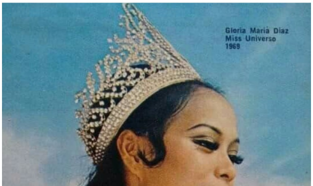
Image Courtesy of **GABY WILSON**

The first time a Filipina was crowned Miss Universe was July 19, 1969 at the Miami Beach Auditorium in Florida. Three days earlier at the Kennedy Space Center—also in Florida, but north a few hours by car—Neil Armstrong, Buzz Aldrin and Michael Collins initiated Apollo 11's historic spaceflight and were expected to reach the lunar surface the same weekend as the pageant.

"It certainly is exciting that on the eve of the first time that a man steps onto the moon, we're choosing the most beautiful girl on Earth," co-host June Lockhart said during the broadcast. "And unless they find someone very pretty up there, our winner tonight will indeed be the most beautiful girl in the universe."

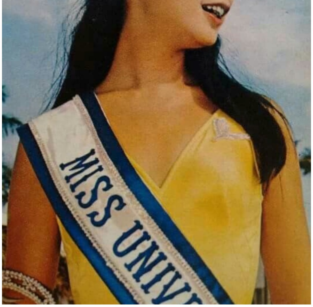
It was the first, and perhaps only, time the title seemed to truly carry the celestial weight of its name.

> **"It certainly is exciting that on the eve of the first time that a man steps onto the moon, we're choosing the most beautiful girl on Earth. And unless they find someone very pretty up there, our winner tonight will indeed be the most beautiful girl in the universe." - June Lockhart**



Besides this proximity to historical significance, Miss Universe 1969, as an event, wasn't notably out of step with the conventions of televised pageantry. Bob Barker, in a double-breasted suit and bow tie, served as the evening's master of ceremonies, tugging at a long, wired microphone as he moved from one marked camera shot to the next. Soft, reimagined instrumentals of The Beatles' "Rubber Soul" provided the soundtrack as contestants from around the world took turns introducing themselves, each wearing some version of their national costume. There were swimsuits, interviews and evening gowns. Just as there had been for years before and would continue for years after.

At the end of the night, the Miss Universe crown was awarded to Gloria Diaz, an 18-year-old from Aringay, La Union. News of her coronation was radioed to the Apollo 11 crew in space. "She defeated 60 other girls for the global beauty title," the capsule communicator announced, describing her as having "black hair and eyes" and measuring "34-1/2, 23, 34-1/2" —the teenager's specific physicality broadcast like baseball card statistics over cosmic airwaves.



Gloria Maria Diaz, Miss Universe 1969. Image on Pinterest.

Diaz later told author Ana Maria Cumba that for the entire week preceding the pageant, the press never spoke to her. “They didn't even see me,” she said, “or perhaps they thought that I did not speak English.”

The beauty pageant’s place in American culture had reached an inflection point. The previous fall, hundreds of women from up and down the East Coast convened on the Atlantic City boardwalk for a protest action, just outside the annual Miss America pageant. Organized by the New York Radical Women, the group rallied around a list of complaints against the event — among them, the objectification of women inherent in its premise and the racism of its majority-white contestant pool.

They shouted and carried signs: “All women are beautiful. Women are people, not livestock.” At the center of the demonstration sat a vessel dubbed the "Freedom Trash Can," where participants were invited to throw out items they described as implements of women's oppression: bras, girdles, makeup and more. Most of the action remained outdoors, witnessed predominantly by those entering or exiting the pageant and the occasional boardwalk tourist, but minutes ahead of the final crowning, a few of the activists found a way into the venue. At the back of the auditorium, they unfurled a banner and shouted its message: “Women’s Liberation! “ While it was only faintly heard in the background of the televised broadcast, the protest put momentum behind the women’s liberation movement, propelling it toward national consciousness.

At the same time, the landscape of American pageants was widening. A national beauty contest for high school girls, Miss Teenage America, was created in 1961. Miss Black America emerged in August 1968, both as a radical celebration of Black women and as a protest against their absence from Miss America’s winners circle. In 1965, CBS finally split Miss USA and Miss Universe into separate broadcasts — they were previously airing jointly — and two years later, installed a then-up-and-coming Bob Barker as host.

Meanwhile in the Philippines, pageant culture — already expansive to the point of national pastime — was formalizing. Binibining Pilipinas, the pageant behemoth that selects Filipina representatives for the Big Four international beauty contests (Miss Universe, Miss International, Miss World and Miss Earth), was formed in 1964; the codification of at least a century of evolution. During the Philippines’ period of Spanish colonization, the Catholic church found that adapting an indigenous proclivity toward festive gatherings was an effective tool for educating and catechizing the public. It loaded up the calendar with holidays, festivals and processions, often with large, theatrical demonstrations. Some were region-specific, often devoted to a town’s patron saint, while others were intended for nationwide observation, like Flores de Mayo, a month-long festival dedicated concurrently to the Virgin Mary and Saint Helena, the mother of Roman Emperor Constantine the Great, who played a central role in transitioning Christianity from a persecuted minority to a globally dominant religion. The month ends with an event called Santacruzan, wherein towns and barangays across the archipelago assemble parades of reynas — neighborhood women chosen to represent biblical figures and theological virtues, dressed in elaborate regalia — and crown one as Reyna Elena.

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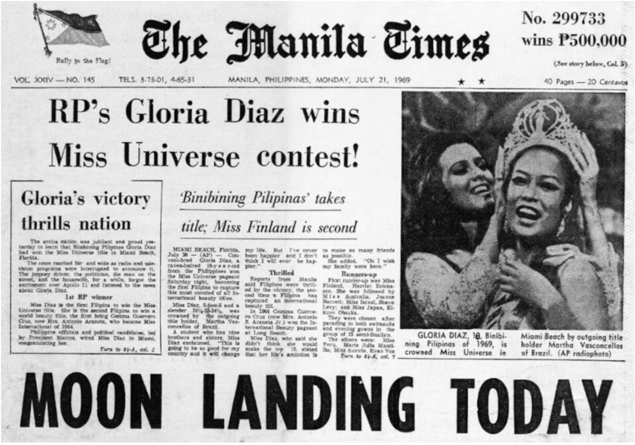
Shortly after the United States assumed colonial rule of the Philippines from Spain, the American government installed a festival of its own: the Manila Carnival, which culminated in the coronation of a Carnival Queen. The contest was primarily a fundraising initiative, established by former Secretary of Commerce Cameron Forbes. Votes were cast via purchased ballots and magazine coupons; the woman who garnered the most votes was crowned queen. In 1926, the Carnival Queen title was transitioned to its current name: Miss Philippines.



Rally to the Flag!

The Manila Times

No. 299733 wins ₱500,000

(See story below, Col. 5)

VOL. XXIV — NO. 145 TELS. 3-73-01, 4-65-31 MANILA, PHILIPPINES, MONDAY, JULY 21, 1969 ★ ★ 40 Pages — 20 Centavos

RP’s Gloria Diaz wins Miss Universe contest!

Gloria’s victory thrills nation

The entire nation was jubilant and proud yesterday to learn that Binibining Pilipinas Gloria Diaz had won the Miss Universe title in Miami Beach, Florida.

The news reached far and wide as radio and television programs were interrupted to announce it. The jeepney driver, the politician, the man on the street, and the housewife, for a while, forgot the excitement over Apollo 11 and listened to the news about Gloria Diaz.

1st RP winner

Miss Diaz is the first Filipina to win the Miss Universe title. She is the second Filipina to win a world beauty title, the first being Gemma Guerrero Cruz, now Mrs. Antonio Araneta, who became Miss International of 1964.

Philippine officials and political candidates, led by President Marcos, wired Miss Diaz in Miami, congratulating her.

Turn to 24-A, col. 1

‘Binibining Pilipinas’ takes title; Miss Finland is second

MIAMI BEACH, Florida, July 20 — (AP) — Convent-bred Gloria Diaz, a raven-haired 18-year-old from the Philippines won the Miss Universe pageant Saturday night, becoming the first Filipina to capture this most coveted of all international beauty titles.

Miss Diaz, 5-foot-5 and a slender 34½-23-34½, was crowned by the outgoing title holder, Martha Vasconcellos of Brazil.

A student who has nine brothers and sisters, Miss Diaz exclaimed, “This is going to be so good for my country and it will change my life. But I've never been happier and I don't think I will ever be happier.”

Thrilled

Reports from Manila said Filipinos were thrilled by the victory, the second time a Filipina has captured an international beauty tilt.

In 1964 Gemma Guerrero Cruz (now Mrs. Antonio S. Araneta Jr.) won the International Beauty pageant at Long Beach.

Miss Diaz, who said she didn't think she would make the top 15, stated that her life's ambition is to make as many friends as possible.

She added, “Oh I wish my family were here.”

Runners-up

First runner-up was Miss Finland, Harriet Ericksson. She was followed by Miss Australia, Joanne Barrett; Miss Israel, Shava Levy; and Miss Japan, Kikuyo Ohsuka.

They were chosen after parading in both swimsuits and evening gowns in the group of 15 semi-finalists.

The others were: Miss Peru, Maria Julia Mantilla; Miss Austria, Evan Von

Turn to 24-A, col. 7

GLORIA DIAZ, 18, Binibining Pilipinas of 1969, is crowned Miss Universe in Miami Beach by outgoing title holder Martha Vasconcellos of Brazil. (AP radiophoto)

MOON LANDING TODAY

Front Page of The Manila Times, July 21, 1969. Image Courtesy of The Kahimyang Project.

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I attended part of high school on an American military base in South Korea where the tradition of electing royal courts for dances wasn’t limited to upperclassmen. Along with the typical homecoming or prom king and queen, reserved for the senior class, there were princes and princesses, dukes and duchesses, lords and ladies. To my disbelief, I was elected Lady ahead of our winter dance my freshman year, a period of my life dominated by an enormous full-leg cast that I was prescribed to wear for six months after sustaining a remarkably stupid skateboarding injury. (Though, I think by the time of the dance, it had been downgraded to a half-leg walking cast.)

This was the same year I found myself at the center of my own makeover montage. Two older girls from the grade above mine invited me to hang out and spent the bulk of our time together showing me what mascara was and how to use it. Me, the Tai to their Cher and Dionne. They plucked my eyebrows; adjusted my clothes and hair; and said that we’d be meeting a group of people from school in the park later.

“Oh, and don’t wear your glasses.”

We stood around the playground equipment as dusk fell and smoked weed from an apple. I fielded compliments from our classmates and pretended that I could see.

Image Courtesy of **GABY WILSON**

To say I had no idea how to look the part for this dance would be a profound understatement. Another example: The first time I chose my own haircut was a disaster. To this day, I'm not sure whether I was hoping to emulate "The Rachel," Mary-Kate Olsen circa "Our Lips Are Sealed" or a chin-length style Britney Spears once wore in an ad for Polaroid cameras that I kept taped up in my locker. This is because, to my recollection, I did not bring a reference photo to the salon with me. The year was 2000, maybe 2001, and nearly every trendy hairstyle was "piecey" or "choppy" or "layered." Sometimes all three. They were the kind of cuts that come alive on a head of straight, light-colored (or heavily highlighted) hair with a liberal application of gel, but those were details I didn't realize at the time. As a child, I didn't think about my hair much. I liked accessories, matching headbands and elastic baubles to my outfits, but took very little care to maintain the neatly combed styles my mom sent me to school wearing. In our living room, a tidy half-up, half-down ponytail; in the yearbook, a look better described as "windswept."

I've had the same haircut for most of my life: waist-length with long layers, sometimes refined with thinning shears. The same color, too — dark brown, almost black — barring a brief flirtation with balayage in 2015. Its texture, as a stylist once described to me, is thick and coarse at the crown, but soft and fine along my hairline and the nape of my neck. It grows in tight waves that border on curls and have a tendency to frizz. I know this because after taking my first shower with my new "piecey" haircut, I looked into the mirror, horrified as my hair puffed up into an inverted triangle, a shape I'd never seen on Britney or Rachel or Mary-Kate. There's a chance it wasn't as bad as I remember, if only I'd known what to do with it. Mousse turned it dry and crunchy. Blow drying seemed to only make it bigger, fuzzier. With no YouTube to mine for solutions and my ego too bruised to admit to anyone that I'd botched this preliminary foray into independence, I slicked my hair into a scalp-tight bun where it stayed for years. I had given up hope I'd ever feel anything but contempt for my hair until my mom booked me a styling appointment before that winter dance my freshman year.

Staring back at me was a person I didn't recognize, a chimera of myself I had only seen inside my eyelids.

As I stared at my reflection, slumped in the salon's roomy swiveling chair, deeply unconvinced that the visit would be worth the expense, my mom discussed with a stylist. After some back-and-forth — what brought us in, what services were available — they settled on a deep side part — "to complement the dress's asymmetrical neckline" — and sleek, bone-straight hair because it would be most noticeably different without changing anything permanently. For hours, the stylist ran a flat iron through my hair, slowly, patiently. Taking one, one-inch section at a time into his hands, he'd spritz with heat protectant, place it between the wide titanium panels, then press, pulling firmly, delicately as he worked the iron down the section from scalp to end. Over and over and over again. It went on nearly until closing time. I watched the sun set behind the neighboring buildings outside the window.

After smoothing the final section, he sprayed the flyaways along my part and artfully trimmed my ends so the lines were sharp. I felt a pang of guilt putting my glasses back on to see his work, knowing they'd dent the sections around my temples. Staring back at me was a person I didn't recognize, a chimera of myself I had only seen inside my eyelids. My hair, now glinting under the vanity lights, gave me an air of sophistication, of polish. Turning my head from side to side, I watched the strands glide across my shoulders, swinging like beaded curtains around my face. In my hands, it felt like silk. At the dance, friends didn't recognize me either, acknowledging me only in the way you take stock of fellow shoppers in a grocery store, until a double-take— "wait, is that… oh my god!!!!"

I dreaded the comedown after washing it out.

Toward the end of the night, the court was announced, awarded crowns and sashes and directed to take group photos against the night's themed backdrop: a faux wrought-iron gate crawling with paper roses. "An Evening in the Park." The eight of us lined up as a chevron, elbows nesting. In the photo that was printed in the yearbook, my mouth is turned up in a sleepy, nonspecific grin, the evidence of my hands clutching my glasses just out of view. On some later visit to the Philippines, someone dug the pictures up again. My lola, beaming, said I looked like Miss Universe.

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Margarita Moran wins Miss Universe 1973. YouTube.

The second time a Filipina was crowned Miss Universe was July 21, 1973. For the final crowning moment, the Top 5 titles are typically announced in ascending order until, revealed by omission, the winner is the last woman left standing. *Fourth Runner-Up, Miss Israel. Third, Miss Spain. Second, Miss Norway*. The two women remaining—Amanda Jones, Miss USA, and Margarita Moran, Miss Philippines—clutched hands.

"Now, one of you will become Miss Universe of 1973, the other is the first Runner-Up."

Jones nudged Moran, whispering something to her. They both smiled nervously, expectantly.

At the time, the Philippines had been under martial law for almost a year, declared by Ferdinand Marcos while serving his second term as president. The decision marked the beginning of a 14-year period of authoritarian rule, Marcos' transition from president to dictator. By the 1960s, ravaged by the Second World War and increasingly conscious of its history of colonization, the Philippines had become home to an ulcerating nationalist movement. It urged for renewed focus on nativist traditions, for economic independence and a "Filipino First Policy," for a sovereign position on the world's stage. Marcos, then-Senate President, harnessed this sentiment, running a presidential campaign on populist rhetoric and a fabricated personal narrative as a decorated war hero. It catapulted him to the highest political office in the nation.

While in power, Ferdinand Marcos and his wife, First Lady Imelda Marcos, set to work erecting large foreign-backed infrastructure projects. One of these was the Cultural Center of the Philippines Complex, which became the site of the 1974 Miss Universe pageant following Margarita Moran's win. Installed with multiple theaters, galleries, a museum and a library on premises, the hope was to create a cultural hub in Manila — à la New York City's Lincoln Center — that would solidify Marcos' "True Filipino Ideology," while also drawing a certain kind of regional and global tourism, and there was no better marketing opportunity than the internationally televised Miss Universe pageant with Miss Philippines playing the homecoming queen. The 1974 show was broadcast from the Cultural Center's Folk Arts Theater — built in 77 days, specially for the pageant — at 10 a.m. Sunday so the program could air live on Saturday evening in North and South America. The contestants performed their opening number just after breakfast, flanked by stone-faced rows of the Philippine Military Academy's honor guard, while Bob Barker, clad in a crisp, butterfly collar barong, explained to the audience at home that the setting for this year's event was the Philippines — "where Asia wears a smile."

The First Lady, a former beauty queen herself, was particularly invested in the pageant's success as a kind of commercial for Philippine tourism. Scandalized by the thought of visiting dignitaries bearing witness to Manila's poor, she ordered the construction of whitewashed walls along the route to the pageant to hide the city's slums. Anticipating that Typhoon Iliang would make landfall the same weekend as the event, she asked her husband to deploy the country's Air Force to seed the clouds and halt the storm. Iliang came anyway, battering Central Luzon, leaving in its wake $2 million in damages, 20 people dead and at least 80 missing. At the end of the pageant, by way of Secretary of Tourism Jose Aspiras, she gifted Miss Universe 1974 with a statue of María Clara made of 3,700 Philippine shells.

"It is a symbol, not only of Filipina womanhood, but the Philippines, the Pearl of the Orient Seas," Aspiras said.

According to an event pamphlet, Marcos planned to gift the winner an island, too.

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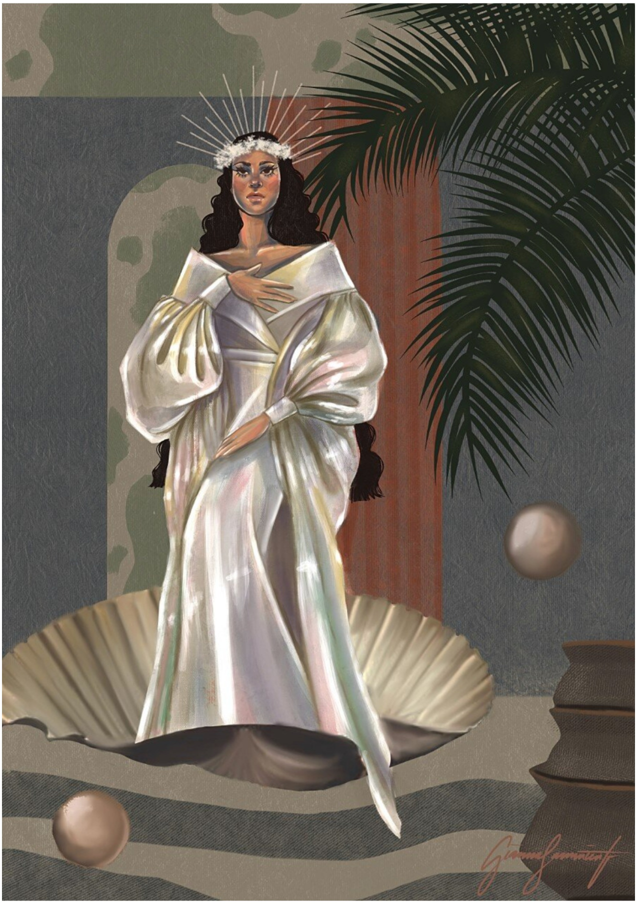

Illustration by **GIANNA SARMIENTO.** Exclusively for MERCADO VICENTE.

At my mom's elementary school, students read "Noli Me Tángere" in the fifth grade and its sequel, "El Filibusterismo," the following year, in sixth. They're fiction but were taught as part of her social studies curriculum because of their historical significance, written by Filipino national hero José Rizal. They're the reason Rizal is a hero at all. During the period of Spanish rule, these works helped to catalyze the Philippine Revolution for independence, their stories alluding to corruption and abuse perpetrated by the colonial government and the Catholic Church.

The plot of *Noli Me Tángere* centers Crisóstomo Ibarra, a mestizo student — not unlike Rizal himself — who returns home to establish a school after the death of his father but runs into a series of social obstacles. María Clara is Ibarra's mestiza childhood sweetheart, characterized as beautiful, demure and tragic. Paragraphs are devoted to her physical description: large eyes, long lashes, fair skin, straight nose. Her primary actions are blushing, fainting, crying and growing bored — until the epilogue, where it's implied that she's the victim of routine sexual assault. In the sequel, she dies.

"The greatest misfortune that has befallen Filipino women in the last one hundred years is María Clara," lamented writer Carmen Guerrero-Nakpil in a 1956 essay on the character. "In trying to live up to the pattern set by Rizal's beautiful heroine, millions of Filipinas became something other than their real selves."

As a result of the novel's publishing and Spain's subsequent overthrow, Rizal became a national hero, and María Clara, a national feminine ideal. The venerated male: a living man whose creative labor is celebrated for propelling an historic uprising; his female counterpart: his work of fiction, an idealized figment of patriarchal imagination, a martyr.

"The greatest misfortune that has befallen Filipino women in the last one hundred years is María Clara," lamented writer Carmen Guerrero-Nakpil in a 1956 essay on the character. "In trying to live up to the pattern set by Rizal's beautiful heroine, millions of Filipinas became something other than their real selves."

In a generous reading of the text, perhaps Rizal meant María Clara to be a kind of warning, a cautionary tale against quiet self-sacrifice, an example of the far reaches of colonial rule, all the way into the body.

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For some deranged reason, it's at the age when children's bodies begin to transmogrify into adult ones — stretching and swelling and surging with hormones — that schools direct them to change clothes in a room together. I don't remember learning much in gym class — maybe how to shoot a lay-up, certainly that I hate running — but I did gain a catalog of insecurities I had never considered before.

Once, as I was doubled over mid-stretch, I became conscious of my own legs. I noticed that where mine were covered with faint, black hairs, other girls' were not. As our teacher counted down the seconds left before we would switch to the next pose, my mind drifted. I recalled a series of images, snippets of commercials I had previously written off as intended for someone older. Slender, moisturized legs moving and lounging in tandem on white sand beaches. Extreme close-ups of manicured hands caressing knees and shins. Animated demonstrations of "how our patented, triple-blade design works." I wondered whether anyone else had noticed. And for how long.

That night, I snuck into my parents' bathroom, locked the door and scanned for a razor. My dad's — a monstrous, bulky thing with chrome accents — was readily available on the counter right next to the toothbrushes, but I was intimidated. It was too conspicuous, or I was too unpracticed; I worried I'd make some grave mistake that would show up on his face when he shaved the next morning.

I rooted around in the cabinets under the sink, strategically extracting their contents so I could reassemble them just as I'd found them. Sponges and cleaning agents. Unopened lotions from holiday gift sets. Musty old perfumes saved, I imagined, for sentimental value. A few crumbling, magenta boxes of something called "whitening soap." I had never heard of it before and lingered on them, confused because the magazines I read were full of ads for self-tanners. "No fake orange color. No zebra-like streaks."

I remember asking my mom about the soaps days later and that she was dismissive, explaining that they were for lightening spots of hyperpigmentation on her knees but that she hadn't touched them in years.

Eventually, I found an opened bag of single-blade Bic disposables and considered, for a moment, how bizarre I thought it was that they used the same packaging for razors and lighters and the mechanical pencils I used for school. Almost instinctively, I shook the canister of my dad's shaving cream, lathered, then carefully dragged the blade and its plastic case across my shins and calves, over and over until all that was left was smooth. I looked at my thighs and immediately regretted not checking whether the other girls at school had hair there, too. Probably not.

I kept lathering and shaving. I noticed dark hairs on my arms. To match, I told myself.

I remember asking my mom about the soaps days later and that she was dismissive, explaining that they were for lightening spots of hyperpigmentation on her knees but that she hadn't touched them in years. I couldn't get the packaging out of my head. The cartoon women on its label applying it to their faces like Neutrogena cleanser.

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The Miss Universe pageant was originally founded as a promotional vehicle for swimsuits. Before 1952, Catalina, a U.S.-based swimwear manufacturer, was the primary sponsor of the Miss America pageant, which gave them national exposure as the official uniform of the swimsuit competition, and a new, culturally relevant spokesmodel every year: the reigning Miss America. That is, until Yolande Betbeze, the winner of the 1951 Miss America pageant, declined to appear in Catalina ads after her coronation.

"I'm an opera singer, not a pinup!" Betbeze declared.

Her refusal led Catalina to pull their sponsorship and start their own rival pageant, creating both Miss USA and Miss Universe; USA as a direct Miss America competitor, and Universe as an additional title — accessible only through Miss USA — to further incentivize participation in their lineage of contests.

Miss America itself originated as part of a 1920s sweepstakes to help sell newspapers. After a regional circulation meeting, nine newspapers from major cities along the East Coast decided to coordinate a photograph-based popularity contest to bolster readership. The winners, who became known as the Inter-City Beauties, would each win an all-expenses paid trip to Atlantic City to attend a festival called the Fall Frolic. Building off the success of the newspaper contests, the Fall Frolic organizers, themselves aiming to extend Atlantic City's tourism calendar past peak summer months, decided to develop a competition of their own, automatically enrolling the Inter-City Beauties to face-off against one another during their visit.

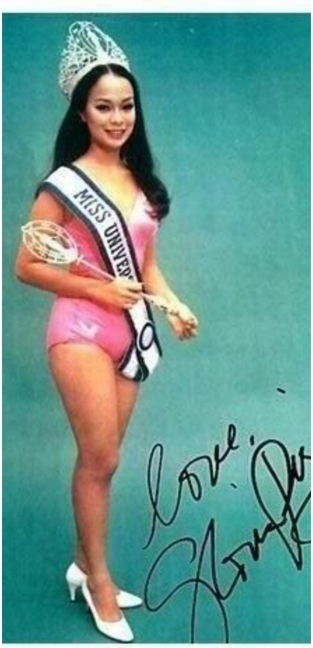
"In assigning value to women in a vertical hierarchy according to a culturally imposed physical standard," Wolf wrote, "it is an expression of power relations in which women must unnaturally compete for resources that men have appropriated for themselves."

Pageants and their participants, like other spectacles of similar scale, function as living billboards for their roster of sponsors. There are, of course, benefits of participation that pageant devotees typically espouse — networking opportunities, communication skills, community service and scholarship programs, which are a significant part of the winners' packages but rarely cover the average cost of even one semester's tuition at a four-year college — but they were also created to sell things.

While exceptions exist, pageants primarily present opportunities for social or economic mobility for young women who already have access to generational wealth, able to afford the litany of expenses associated with participation. In this way, they reinforce conventional beauty as a commodity (as in, the women who possess the most "beauty" — via biology, aesthetic labor or purchasing power — have the means to achieve beyond their circumstances) and a complete currency system, as author Naomi Wolf described in "The Beauty Myth."

"In assigning value to women in a vertical hierarchy according to a culturally imposed physical standard," Wolf wrote, "it is an expression of power relations in which women must unnaturally compete for resources that men have appropriated for themselves."

By creating Miss Universe, Catalina swimsuits formalized an international tier to this hierarchy and installed the American gaze at the helm of a globalized beauty economy.



ABS-CBN: GLORIA DIAZ FOR CATALINA SWIMWEAR

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It started with a flat iron. I begged my mom to buy one for me after that winter dance; the high of feeling beautiful was too intoxicating to let slip away. One weekend, my mom took me to the Base Exchange, where I picked out a Conair model with wide metal panels. When we got home, I spent the rest of the day practicing how to use it, training my hands to press and pull to get the best results. The muscles in my shoulders burned from holding my arms up. If it took hours in the salon, it took even longer in my bedroom and never looked quite the same.

I wondered if my technique was wrong. Waiting in checkout lines, I hunted through the pages of magazines, searching for tips. “Hold the hair taut. Make sure it’s completely dry. Use a heat protectant.” None of it seemed to work the way I wanted. I wondered if I had picked an inferior model. Was I really going to ask my mom to buy another one? I decided to try harder, go even slower, press more tightly, set the temperature higher. It was better, but I couldn’t shake the feeling that a different brand, a different plate material would make it perfect.

I kept this up for a year, maybe more, until my mom got me a curling iron. Excited to add a new tool to my repertoire, I followed the same pattern: spend a weekend with it, note the issues, scan magazines, repeat. The curling iron required more dexterity, more coordination. The index and middle fingers press the lever to open the clamp, while the rest of the hand holds the base. The left hand holds the hair taut, away from the neck, while the right hand places the iron close to the scalp but not close enough to burn. Both hands work together to spin the tool, while the thumb releases the clamp, bit by bit, through each rotation. The wrist alternates rotation directions with each section to avoid big, clumped together, sausage curls. It took all day to master, but once I did, it became my new routine.

Before carrying on with the rest of my morning ritual, I lay on my bed, waiting for my vision to return, hoping the pause would help even out my body’s circulation, knowing things would only get worse if I didn’t change something — a lot of things.

For the rest of high school, I woke up every day at 5 a.m., took a shower, blow dried my hair, straightened it completely, then curled it — straightening first because I preferred how it looked. It took two and a half hours, beginning to end, but the sense of control it gave me was unparalleled. Soon, I discovered that I could apply this practice to other aspects of my appearance to similar effect. I learned how to use an eyelash curler, how to do a smokey eye, how to apply liner to my water line.

And then, I hit the accelerator: I got braces. I switched to contacts. I practiced a smile in the mirror that would narrow my nose. I ran six miles a day. I only ate dinner. It warped into a compulsion.

One morning, I nearly passed out in the shower. My hearing started to buzz out, and my vision closed in on itself until I couldn’t see. I stumbled through finding my towel and relocating to my room. Before carrying on with the rest of my morning ritual, I lay on my bed, waiting for my vision to return, hoping the pause would help even out my body’s circulation, knowing things would only get worse if I didn’t change something — a lot of things. I ran less. I stopped contorting my nose in pictures. After the fainting spells grew more frequent, more perilous, and in locations far less private than my bathroom, I started eating regular meals again.

Everything else is still a work in progress.

TOWN PLA
SAN FERNANDO
MISS SAN FERNANDO
HER MAJESTY QUEEN
TOGETHER

Image courtesy of **GABY WILSON**

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If you collected the portraits of every Miss Universe winner since its inception nearly 70 years ago, the archetype would be difficult to deny. Most of the pageant’s winners have been light-skinned, dark-haired with slender bodies and large winsome smiles — the lowest common denominator tastes of the show’s judges, producers and sponsors throughout its history. The candidates, dispatched from all corners of the world, are resultant of similar processes in their home countries, which creates its own median effect around the figment of an ideal, but because Miss Universe is a U.S.-based organization, it centers the world’s gaze around American — rather, certain Americans’ — standards.

From 2002 to 2015, reality TV personality Donald Trump owned the Miss USA and Miss Universe pageants. During his ownership, his personal preferences and prejudices loomed large over the Miss Universe Organization, including and especially regarding decisions about which women would advance as finalists, according to his staff.

“If there were too many women of color, he would make changes,” a former employee told authors Michael Isikoff and David Corn for “Russian Roulette,” their joint book. “He often thought a woman was too ethnic or too dark-skinned. He had a particular type of woman he thought was a winner.”

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Trump helmed the franchises for 13 years, but admittedly, Miss Universe has looked a certain way since 1952; it seems naïve to assume his methods were anomalous. In 2018, the Miss America pageant eliminated its swimsuit competition, largely as reputational rehabilitation after years of emails between several of the organization’s high-ranking male executives revealed a long exchange of disparaging messages about past Miss Americas, notably referring to one former winner as a “blimp” and others as “cunts.”

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Miss SAN FERNANDO '81
JENNIFER G. RULLODA
AURA AMY BARTOLOME
CAROLINE DOLORES MIRO
ELIZABETH GALVEZ
TO PEACE

Image courtesy of **GABY WILSON**

I found a video on YouTube recently, where young women in Manila, mostly students, were asked about their beauty ideals. They name their idols — Nadine Lustre, Julia Barretto, Sofia Andres, Anne Curtis — and wish aloud to be taller or for lighter skin and noses with higher bridges. The comments are full of notes about how much they’re all smiling. Smiling as they share the things they don’t like about themselves, the things they’d change, the things they think lower their value.

There's an element of personal benefit to being perceived as beautiful that's illustrated succinctly by the pageant format. If we can just situate ourselves in a position of advantage — get the right dress, hit the right measurements, look the right way, say the right thing — we benefit from the exercise, launching ourselves to the top of the proverbial food chain. It's the pedestal that elevates something from sculpture to statue, that enforces and reinforces hierarchy. In that way, an idol and an ideal are not far off, but ideal, in the sense of beauty, is a moving target that has as much to do with power as it does aesthetic, a goal post pulled further and further back the closer you get to it, often by design. This is the root of so many organizing principles of the fashion and beauty industries. Develop trends, educate on their merits, work to saturate the market, then pivot. Once you've mastered contouring, it's time to learn about highlighter. Then, the ground shifts; suddenly, you're expected to moonlight as an amateur dermatologist, stocking your medicine cabinet with serums for perfect skin. The modern beauty standard demands the illusion of effortlessness, and perpetuation of the ideal has gone underground, its mechanisms covert. It's 12-step skincare routines, but also plastic surgery, collagen injections, waist trainers, retouching apps, cult exercise.

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Beauty can be both an innate quality and the result of a skill, requiring not only mastery of the relationship between implements and medium, but imagination for what could be. And yet, the evaluation process of pageantry portrays beauty solely as a raw material for extraction rather than the product of some kind of labor; as a commodity with no thought, reference or interest in the artistry wielded to achieve it. To dare reveal the effort put toward beauty putrefies it into vanity.

Nothing makes clearer that beauty is work than the moments we feel beautiful — to ourselves, to other people. There are elements of validation there, of confirmation of personal value, of realized potential, but mostly, it's exhale — "finally, I can relax for a moment."

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Sometimes, in very brief breaks between programming, the screen would go dark. Maybe the commercial timing didn't quite match or the live production had narrowly missed its cue. In those fleeting moments, perched inches away from the TV screen, I could peer deep into the nothing staring back at me and find my own reflection.

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