

***Drag Queens and Beauty Queens: Contesting Femininity in the World's Playground*****Laurie A. Greene****New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2021****248 pages****ISBN: 9781978813861****DOI: <https://doi.org/10.14713/njs.v8i1.277>**

In *Drag Queens and Beauty Queens*, Laurie A. Greene finds queer history in the shadows of one of the great edifices of normative heterofemininity, the Miss America pageant. Less heralded, but no less fascinating, is the Miss'd America pageant, the gleefully camp drag inversion of the more famous event, running, not quite continuously, since 1993 in Atlantic City. In so doing, Greene adds a rich layer to the history of gender and sexuality in New Jersey.

New Jersey's LGBTQ history has been underserved by scholars, perhaps a function of the gravitational force New York City and Philadelphia exert on the opposite ends of the state, pulling both sexual outlaws and scholarly eyes in their respective directions. But from the pioneering Rutgers Homophile League of the late 1960s (only the second such college organization in the country), to the vibrant Black queer worldmaking of Newark in the 1970s and beyond, and through gay suburbanization in Collingswood and Maplewood, nearly every region of the Garden State holds rich queer stories that merit more attention. Bryant Simon's 2002 *Journal of Urban History* article about gay life on Atlantic City's New York Avenue still stands as a high point in this small field, and Greene picks up precisely where he left off, showing how community and resistance persist even as the institutions that sustain them evaporate.

In the case of Miss'd America, the destruction of local gay culture in the 1980s set the conditions for the pageant's emergence. Queer Atlantic City can be traced back to the 1890s, when journalists noted men with "brightly colored silk garters with their black bathing suits" around the beach (85). In the 1960s, local bar Val's was party to the landmark 1967 state supreme court case *One Eleven Wines & Liquors, Inc. v. Div. of Alcoholic Beverage Control*, which curtailed the

powers of the oppressively antigay liquor board to close gay bars. And by the 1970s, New York Avenue hosted a thriving community. But the concurrent forces of casino-driven redevelopment and the AIDS epidemic took devastating tolls on the gay scene. By the time of Greene's ethnographic fieldwork in the 2010s, one longtime drag performer wistfully showed her the "vacant lots and run-down buildings" that once bustled with queer energy (78).

Miss'd America emerged as a response to this decline, boisterously reasserting the bonds of community despite the collapsing structures around it. It also, perhaps more obviously, played on Miss America, whose own exaggerated over-performance of femininity, Greene suggests, already contained within it the seeds of queer critique. Miss America is far better documented than Miss'd America, but Greene supplies a useful comparative overview, tracking it back to P. T. Barnum's pioneering pageantry of the 1850s and its formal commencement in 1920 as the Fall Frolic, designed by city boosters to keep tourists in Atlantic City beyond Labor Day. White supremacy was always inherent to Miss America, spelled out formally in the infamous Rule 7 of the 1930s, which limited contestants to white women, and extended informally long beyond the rule's revocation in 1940. Feminist critique of the pageant erupted most vividly in the 1968 women's liberation protests that became iconic, but continued through the sexual harassment charges and elimination of the swimsuit contest during the Trump era.

Riffing on Miss America, Miss'd America gave voice to a catty camp parody that might not exactly constitute *critique* (the love of pageantry has always been sincere and deeply felt) but certainly offered a more diverse and inclusive version. In contrast to Miss America's racist history (which included stripping the title from its first Black winner, Vanessa Williams, for violating its moralistic, patriarchal rules by having posed for nude photographs before winning), Miss'd America's first winner, in 1993, was Black performer Alexia Love. The event struggled with its

own obstacles, particularly transgender inclusion, since drag queens overwhelmingly identify as cisgender gay men, though as performer Cleo Phatra helpfully explains, “Drag elevates itself beyond the specific gender binary and it allows itself to become a starting point for discussing gender” (70). In some ways, a more pressing challenge has been the impact of *RuPaul’s Drag Race* bringing drag to mass culture and indirectly infusing the pageant with newly professionalized standards that wrenched Miss’d America from its raunchy, raucous grassroots local origins into a national clearinghouse of sorts, moving from modest gay bars to large casinos and event centers. Tickets grew more expensive, and corporate censorship pressured performers to depoliticize their routines, especially during the divisive Trump years. As one exasperated performer notes, this goes against drag culture’s style since before the 1969 Stonewall rebellion: “Drag is everything political” (99).

All of this is told by Greene through attentive ethnographic fieldwork, with transcript excerpts often conveying not just the words but the animated community conversations from which she draws. She makes productive use of sources like Facebook pages dedicated to Atlantic City memories, which can sometimes offer richer LGBTQ archives than more recognized repositories. Ultimately, *Drag Queens and Beauty Queens* is not as expansively or densely theorized as, say, Marlon Bailey’s landmark ethnography of the Detroit ballroom scene, *Butch Queens Up in Pumps*, but its trade-off is greater accessibility. This would make a productive text in undergraduate courses, where the Miss/Miss’d America comparative analysis would surely spark discussion. Greene’s ethical commitment to producing a readable text for the drag community itself is also to be commended. With this book, Laurie Greene has expanded the canon of New Jersey LGBTQ history and offered a valuable model of community-based scholarship.

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