

# Journal of the Canadian Historical Association Revue de la Société historique du Canada



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Volume 32, numéro 1, 2022

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1090742ar>  
DOI : <https://doi.org/10.7202/1090742ar>

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Éditeur(s)

The Canadian Historical Association / La Société historique du Canada

ISSN

0847-4478 (imprimé)  
1712-6274 (numérique)

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Citer cet article

Harker, S. (2022). “A Galaxy of Youth and Beauty”: Beauty Entertainment in Late Victorian Ontario. *Journal of the Canadian Historical Association / Revue de la Société historique du Canada*, 32(1), 39–66. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1090742ar>

Résumé de l'article

*Dans l'Ontario de la fin du XIXe siècle, les concours et les spectacles de beauté étaient des formes de divertissement influencées en partie par les tendances culturelles changeantes dans le domaine du divertissement et par les reportages de journaux de l'extérieur du Canada. Alors que les spectacles de beauté commercialisés avaient lieu dans des théâtres et remplissaient un espace croissant de divertissement de loisir, les concours de beauté étaient souvent organisés lors d'événements communautaires, comme les foires agricoles et les pique-niques d'associations. En tant que pratiques de présentation corporelle intrinsèquement sexualisées, ils fonctionnaient comme des sites de désirabilité publique acceptable. Les divertissements de beauté de la fin du XIXe siècle capitalisaient sur la visibilité accrue des femmes dans les espaces publics et sur l'intérêt populaire pour l'étalage public dans l'Ontario de la fin de l'époque victorienne, ce qui, tel que lu dans la presse ontarienne, se traduisait par une expression de modernité où la valeur culturelle des femmes était liée à leur apparence.*

# **“A Galaxy of Youth and Beauty”: Beauty Entertainment in Late Victorian Ontario**

**SYDNEY HARKER**

## *Abstract*

*In late nineteenth-century Ontario, beauty contests and shows were forms of entertainment influenced in part by shifting cultural trends in entertainment and newspaper reports from outside of Canada. While commercialized beauty shows took place in theatres and filled a growing space for leisure entertainment, beauty contests were often held at community events, such as agricultural fairs and association picnics. As practices of inherently sexualized bodily display, they functioned as sites of acceptable public desirability. Late nineteenth-century beauty entertainment capitalized on the heightened visibility of women in public spaces and popular interest in public display in late Victorian Ontario, which, as read through the Ontario press, resulted in an expression of modernity where women's cultural value was tied to their appearance.*

## *Résumé*

*Dans l'Ontario de la fin du XIXe siècle, les concours et les spectacles de beauté étaient des formes de divertissement influencées en partie par les tendances culturelles changeantes dans le domaine du divertissement et par les reportages de journaux de l'extérieur du Canada. Alors que les spectacles de beauté commercialisés avaient lieu dans des théâtres et remplissaient un espace croissant de divertissement de loisir, les concours de beauté étaient souvent organisés lors d'événements communautaires, comme les foires agricoles et les pique-niques d'associations. En tant que pratiques de présentation corporelle intrinsèquement sexualisées, ils fonctionnaient comme des sites de désirabilité publique acceptable. Les divertissements de beauté de la fin du XIXe siècle capitalisaient sur la visibilité accrue des femmes dans les espaces publics et sur l'intérêt populaire pour l'étalage public dans l'Ontario de la fin de l'époque victorienne, ce qui, tel que lu dans la presse ontarienne, se traduisait par une expression de modernité où la valeur culturelle des femmes était liée à leur apparence.*

The “best-looking” lady contest hosted at the 1891 Western Ontario Commercial Travellers’ Association picnic in the small town of Port Stanley, Ontario, was a popular event. According to the *London Advertiser*, three gentlemen were to select the “best looking lady on the

grounds.” The contest was tight. Late in the afternoon, the judges managed to narrow down the competition to three “fair ones.” After discussing the merits of the finalists, they chose 21-year-old Hattie Rapley of Strathroy, Ontario. “With such a galaxy of youth and beauty to choose from,” the paper stated, “the task called for the nicest discrimination.”<sup>1</sup>

Local Ontario newspapers reported regularly on such events in the late nineteenth century. As practices of inherently sexualized bodily display, local beauty contests and the more commercial “beauty shows” functioned as sites of acceptable public desirability where women’s appearances were surveyed and assessed. They were a kind of “beauty entertainment” — a term which encompasses late nineteenth-century beauty contests and shows that focused primarily on the display of women’s bodies, often involving aesthetic judgment, for entertainment purposes. Late nineteenth-century beauty entertainment capitalized on the heightened visibility of women in public spaces and popular interest in public display to assert the cultural value of women’s attractiveness through a heteronormative settler gaze, successfully negotiating the taboo against the public exhibition of women’s bodies that dominated Victorian social mores. The result was an expression of modernity where women’s cultural value was tied to their appearance. Of course, the perceived moral appropriateness of these events depended on their location, participants, and intent — their ability to maintain a sense of respectability.

Most Canadian studies of female beauty and beauty contests focus on the emergence of modern beauty pageants after World War I. Historians Jane Nicholas and Patrizia Gentile have addressed issues of modernity and colonial power in beauty pageants. Extending the seminal work of historian Lois Banner in *American Beauty*, both Nicholas and Gentile point to the 1920s as the period when modern iterations of beauty pageants first gained acceptance among the Canadian public. The success of pageants in the twentieth century related to the onset of modern consumer culture, changing cultural values around women’s roles and bodies, and conversations around citizenship and the nation.<sup>2</sup> Modern pageants differed in structure from the type of events commonly held in the late nineteenth century. Pageants were commercial entities that gained local and national appeal by the mid-twentieth century in large part due to the corporate infrastructure that provided funding and therefore credibility to the events.<sup>3</sup> By contrast, late nineteenth-century beauty entertainment was wide-

spread and encompassed largely informal enterprises. Nonetheless, the fixation with consuming and ranking women's beauty remained. Michelle J. Smith has pointed to the practices of beauty shows held at circuses in 1890s Paris that displayed various national types of beauty, some requiring a national dance, similar to the practices of modern beauty pageants.<sup>4</sup> Reports of these international beauty shows were printed in Ontario newspapers beginning in the 1880s, connecting the Ontario public to growing trends in beauty entertainment that subsequently reverberated throughout the province.<sup>5</sup>

The concept of beauty entertainment brings together beauty contests and shows. Though the terms were at times used interchangeably in late nineteenth-century Ontario newspapers, "beauty show" commonly referred to lucrative events influenced by vaudeville and dancing troupes that took place in urban spaces such as dime museums, exhibitions, and theatres.<sup>6</sup> As profitable events, they included an element of spectacle — including performances and costumes — that local beauty contests lacked. Shows were advertised by the press; the paying audience often played a role in the competition. Additionally, women received payment for their participation.

The success of these shows correlated with the popularity of theatre entertainment. By the 1890s, theatre flourished in Ontario despite a widespread economic depression. As J. M. S. Careless has argued, urban dwellers in Ontario's cities who sought organized entertainment in droves found relief in theatre performances.<sup>7</sup> In contrast, local beauty contests — or "best looking lady" competitions — were not held in theatres. They were held as supplemental entertainment at community gatherings, which carried less risk of the moral impropriety that often came with the display of women's bodies. Their level of respectability was due in part to where these events occurred. Agricultural fairs, picnics, and quasi-public civic improvement events did not hold the same moral and classist stigma that some theatres did. Whereas theatres were synonymous with drink, rowdiness, and overt sexuality, these community events were respectable affairs. For example, in 1900, a beauty contest took place in Hamilton at a real estate competition. For a chance at owning property in Union Park, the competition donated a single lot of land to "the best looking lady at the park" and the "prettiest baby," with the winners named in the *Hamilton Evening Times*.<sup>8</sup> Those attending were likely from the area and may have known the men organizing the contest. The young women who participated tended to differ in perceived respectability from

the working-class girls that featured in beauty shows. They attended events with family and friends and, in many instances, volunteered to participate or were included in the competition simply because they were in attendance. The names of local winners were often recorded in the paper. This was the case for a contest held at the 1893 Gala Day for the Formal Inauguration of the Electric Street Railway in London, Ontario. Out of 25 contestants, the *London Advertiser* published the names of the three ranked winners.<sup>9</sup> Prominent local men served as judges. Small businesses provided prizes for the winners, who also received a level of community recognition, more so if local papers published their name.

Though local beauty contests and commercial beauty shows differed in structure, treating them as unrelated entities in the late nineteenth century creates an artificial divide between entertainment based on commodifying women's bodies. There was certainly an appetite for beauty entertainment between 1880 and 1910, and a willingness among the public to accept diverse displays of the female body in both explicitly and implicitly sexualized ways.<sup>10</sup> The pervasiveness of these events in both rural communities and urban spaces demonstrates the ability for beauty entertainment to negotiate fraught ideas of moral appropriateness, undoubtedly a reflection of wider changes taking place in an increasingly modern Ontario. Industrialization and urbanization led to swelling cities, higher rates of literacy and circulation of newspapers, and an increasing number of young working women populating urban centres.<sup>11</sup> Somewhat ironically, the visibility of women in the streets, on stage, and in the labour force also influenced entertainment that reinforced the importance of the idealized feminine body to successful Victorian Ontario womanhood.

### Beauty Entertainment in the Press

Ontario newspaper reports suggest beauty entertainment was ubiquitous in the last decades of the nineteenth century. In this period, perceptions of women's roles and bodies were in flux; new notions of what being a woman meant were circulating with the emergence of the New Woman and the Gibson Girl, challenging Victorian views of modesty and women's place "in public." In the midst of discourse on changing ideas of womanhood, newspaper reports of beauty entertainment underscored the idea that women's appearances were under scrutiny. Historian Andy Croll has illustrated the importance

of the press in regulating behaviour in the late nineteenth century, arguing the local paper "had become an efficient means of extending the civilized gaze over the urban landscape."<sup>12</sup> Indeed, the press acted as a conduit of modernity, bringing Ontario readers into larger international discussions of beauty entertainment. Further, the press used women's beauty in conversations surrounding civic pride and national identity. Across various sections, newspapers included advertisements for travelling beauty shows, reports of international shows (framed as "contests"), and the names of local winners throughout the region. This familiarized the public with bodily display. Rewarding women who aligned with cultural perceptions of beauty signalled who deserved to be seen as desirable in these spaces.

While beauty entertainment privileged the gaze of male judges and audience members, it also informed those women present at the shows and, later, women reading the papers that they were being watched and judged based on their physical appearances. These acts of body surveillance were furthered by the press by reporting on beauty contests, naming contestant "winners," or noting the popularity of the events. Most reports that discussed the appearance of the participants were from international events, but were included as interest pieces. For example, the *Toronto Weekly Mail's* "Woman's Kingdom" section included a story on an 1883 St. Louis beauty contest where the winner was described as having "features of Grecian purity," such as rosy cheeks, dark lashes, pencilled eyebrows, pale gold hair, a white forehead, and slim waist.<sup>13</sup> This was not the case for local contest winners. Their names were instead recorded within an article about the larger community event, such as an account of an agricultural fair. Though the absence of any physical descriptions maintained a veil of respectability for the winners, it also disembodied them in the press, and hid any sense of specific characteristics that might have emerged.

The women who "won" beauty contests and shows in Ontario were neither fair queens nor beauty pageant winners. In late nineteenth-century United States, as Banner has argued, the selection of "queens" took place at festivals and tournaments, a separate and more respectable form of display than the beauty shows taking place in dime museums and midways.<sup>14</sup> Jodey Nurse has studied a 1911 "best looking girl" event that took place at the Cooksville Fair and has argued it "was not until the postwar period ... that beauty and Fair Queen contests proliferated."<sup>15</sup> This is true for fair queens, though notices of local beauty contests in Ontario demonstrate an unexpected

diversity in places where they occurred. Agricultural fairs and exhibitions proved popular locations, as Banner, Gentile, and Nicholas point to, but beauty entertainment in 1880–1910 Ontario also appeared at association picnics, galas, ice-rink openings, Labour Day celebrations, an Emancipation Day celebration, a real estate sale, and other community events.

Beauty contests and shows both engaged in the format of “structured seeing.” They reflect what feminist theorist Rosemarie Garland-Thomson has called a general culture of exhibition. Garland-Thomson details three essential elements to the “structured seeing” of exhibitions: the disembodied viewer, the embodied viewed, and the mediator.<sup>16</sup> Within that framing, the mediators served to choreograph the relationship between viewer and viewed. At informal local beauty contests, male judges — ranging from mayors, aldermen, and committee members for the event — acted as privileged gatekeepers over the celebration of the “beautiful” when they surveyed the crowds for whom they deemed the most beautiful girl present. Choosing particular women signalled to audiences, and particularly to young women, the cultural criteria of desirability in settler spaces. Similar to Gentile’s argument that the Miss Canada 1923 contestants were under the white settler male gaze,<sup>17</sup> local beauty contests elevated the opinions of white settler men and established their role as the ultimate surveyors of women’s beauty. They ensured audiences could identify beauty with particular women, including what those women represented in terms of ethnicity, class, age, shape, and health. As philosopher Elizabeth Grosz has argued, “bodies are always irreducibly sexually specific, necessarily interlocked with racial, cultural, and class particularities.”<sup>18</sup> Male judges reinforced what constituted “beauty” at the shows while viewers received the message.

Beauty entertainment also demonstrated to audiences that women’s appearances were under scrutiny and were being weighed against each other. Historian Keith Walden has noted that at Victorian Toronto’s exhibitions, fairgoers prepared themselves to “be the target of someone else’s gaze.” Projecting genteel respectability became the norm. Walden found “people, especially women, were reluctant to court public view deliberately, even at a remove.”<sup>19</sup> Concerning the 1884 Toronto Industrial Exhibition, he has discussed a failed attempt by the Ladies’ Department Committee to host a photographic beauty contest. Though it was anonymous and free to enter, no one did. The Toronto Industrial Exhibition attracted over 100,000 visitors, putting



it on a scale of public visibility that far surpassed that of local agricultural fairs or theatres. Such smaller sites were still public, but on a significantly reduced scale, impacting what was considered morally appropriate. Undoubtedly, the perceived respectability of certain places impacted women's willingness to participate in beauty entertainment.

The breadth of beauty entertainment events demonstrates the number of places where displays of women's attractiveness was deemed acceptable and also demonstrated where women could expect overt public examination of their appearance. The range of events communicated to women the expectation of beauty as a crucial measure of womanhood, and judgment contributed to what became a more concrete sense of surveillance in the twentieth century. Nicholas has argued that the "notion of constant surveillance contested the boundaries between public and private displays," leading to women's performances of self-surveillance in public to become commonplace during the 1920s.<sup>20</sup>

For women in community spaces of leisure and celebration, particularly young women, beauty entertainment added to a sense of public scrutiny and alerted women that their physical appearances were being watched — knowingly or unknowingly — and judged. Indeed, not all women who won local contests entered them on purpose; while some women put their names forward, many included any woman who was present. This was true at some music hall events as well. As audience participation events, travelling shows sometimes included best-looking lady contests. Even as audience members, women could expect their appearances to be publicly judged. At one show in Watford, Ontario, in 1893, a man from the audience won a prize for the "laziest man in the audience," and a woman, named Mrs. Madgwick, won the "hair pin for the best looking lady."<sup>21</sup> This humorous practice brought a jovial tone to the events.

Winners, the embodied viewed, were nonetheless afforded a level of social capital beyond the prize they won. At the 1900 East Lambton Fall Show, a prize of one dollar was offered to the "best looking marriageable young lady on fair grounds."<sup>22</sup> The winner was later listed as Miss Carrie Elsom.<sup>23</sup> For women like Carrie Elsom, being singled out amongst their community as the best-looking woman of marriageable age gave them a level of societal value and heightened desirability among their peers.<sup>24</sup> Many local contests served the implied goal of promoting women of marriageable age by focusing on young women; some agricultural fairs highlighted both "marriageable young ladies"



and the “best looking widows” on fair grounds.<sup>25</sup> The precise age was less important than the marriageability of the contestants, and the prizes given were generally small tokens compared to the recognition of being chosen. What constituted youth differed depending on events. At the 1892 Harrow Fair held in Essex, the *Western Advertiser* reported that the fair directors would give out a prize to the best-looking young lady in the township.<sup>26</sup> The 1900 Lyndhurst Exhibition advertised that the best-looking lady between fifteen and thirty was eligible.<sup>27</sup> Prizes for the three winners included photographs and candies. Two years later, the same fair advertised the event for women under the age of twenty, the prize this time listed as one hundred pounds of flour.<sup>28</sup> Similarly, a 1902 manufacturing company picnic also gave this age requirement.<sup>29</sup> The repeated emphasis on youth and singleness not only insinuated that local contests were designed partly to illustrate marriage potential, but also the acceptance of bodily display when desirability was channelled through the accepted Victorian ideal of marriage.

### Respectability and Moral Suspicion

The local contests that took place, and the anonymous “beauties” that gathered in Ontario theatres, demonstrate the ability of beauty entertainment to adhere to standards of moral respectability that enabled them to exist in the first place. While some promoters advertised beauty shows as “polite entertainment” — a term used by advertisers to signal respectability, to establish they were appropriate for women and children — others catered to male audiences. The Hanlan’s Point beauty show did not expressly note their show was for men only. Instead, below the feature for the beauty show, the advertisement pointed to a dog and pony show for “the ladies and children,” the underlying assumption that the beauty show was not appropriate for respectable women and children.<sup>30</sup> As historian and playwright Brenda Foley has argued in her comparative study of beauty pageants and striptease in the United States, “elaborate rules (both established and unspoken) controlled female display even as they exploited the very notion of such surveillance.”<sup>31</sup>

Further, female display in entertainment was tied to value systems that deemed displays as either “clean” or “dirty.”<sup>32</sup> These distinctions were connected to where these events took place, who participated in them, and what audiences they attracted. Foley has

noted many performances risked the designation of being overtly sexual, while other instances were successful at promoting a "refined" notion of bodily display. Perhaps most successful at overcoming this divide was the introduction of a civic agenda in the twentieth century to beauty pageants and fair queens. As Foley has argued: "The civic female body onstage was more readily interpretable as a socially 'useful' body, therefore a virtuous one."<sup>33</sup> Instead, many of the late nineteenth-century beauty shows that took place in Ontario tried to adhere to understandings of respectability by marketing themselves as "polite" vaudeville, falling in line with middle-class sensibilities.<sup>34</sup> Historian Andrew Holman has noted that the divisions between the middle and upper class in Victorian Ontario were based upon occupational prestige, wealth, and idleness.<sup>35</sup> Moral values emerged as an important factor in middle-class identities, including notions of respectability, good manners, industry, and sobriety.<sup>36</sup> Historian Lynne Marks has argued that theatre in late nineteenth-century Ontario often attracted a mixed-class audience, popular with men and women from both the working and middle class. Melodramas and variety shows were well attended, despite repeated attacks against them by ministers of evangelical Protestant churches.<sup>37</sup> Performances that could therefore successfully market themselves as refined were subject to less moral scrutiny and enjoyed a wider audience.

Though community beauty contests escaped the level of moral suspicion aimed at beauty shows by moral reformers, they were not without opposition. An 1894 essay by editor Archibald McNee of the *Windsor Record* outlined what he saw as a rising concern. Reporting on a local church function, he wrote, "The pink tea, the necktie social and the common bun-feed gathering, with its vulgar accessories, are all questionable means for raising money and we can imagine the feelings of the unfortunate sexagenarian who pays five cents to participate in a voting contest for deciding the question of beauty or popularity between two young ladies."<sup>38</sup> Similarly, the editorial staff for the London Collegiate Institute's student periodical, *Chips*, provided commentary in 1890 on the nature of beauty entertainment. The editors wrote that they had intended to organize a beauty contest to find the "most beautiful young lady of the Institute" and print a photograph of her in the paper. If beauty contests were appearing in any number of places, why not a school magazine? However, they stated, "owing to a diversity of opinion in the staff as to whose young lady should occupy that honorable position, the scheme was abandoned as sterile, barren

and useless.”<sup>39</sup> The opinion of the students was clear: beauty contests were a fruitless exercise. Despite criticism and expressed concern over the nature of beauty contests, they continued to be a popular form of entertainment.<sup>40</sup>

As a means to communicate respectability, implied modesty was an important distinction between the nature of local beauty contests and theatrical beauty shows. It in part displays how judges and the women contestants navigated the differences in moral appropriateness. But it also demonstrates the reality of surveying women’s appearances. In many of the local contests, the women involved did not put their own names forward. Their presence was often enough for them to be included, likely mediating any sense of moral impropriety that could come from putting their names forward. If they were not intentionally courting the public gaze, women could not as easily be accused of immodest behaviour. This is evident in the reporting of a 1908 beauty contest in Lindsay, Ontario, hosted at an Old Boys of Victoria County gathering at the local agricultural park. While over 2,000 attendants came to watch a baseball game, the *Weekly Free Press* reported that “nothing created more excitement and amusement in the grandstand than the beauty contest.”<sup>41</sup> Five men served as judges, including Lindsay Mayor Jason Begg and the mayor of Toronto. As judges, they were expected to scour the grandstands and find the “prettiest young lady in Lindsay.” Spatially, this is an interesting use of surveillance. Instead of looking down from an audience onto a stage, the judges instead turned their attention back towards the women in the grandstands. It was after a “long inspection” that they chose 22-year-old Miss Stella Ellis. The paper reported that the crowd cheered on her as she “smiled modestly through it all.”<sup>42</sup>

A similar instance occurred during an agricultural show in 1903 rural New Liskeard (today Temiskaming Shores) when two members of Ontario’s provincial parliament held an impromptu beauty contest. The *Perth Courier* reported that the ladies attending the fair were unaware a competition for “the best looking young lady on the ground” was taking place until the judges presented the award to Cordelia Duncan, a teacher from Huron County. A photograph of Duncan in 1909 at the age of 28, six years after she won, shows her in a lace gown likely on her wedding day (see Figure 1). As for the contest, the paper reported that Duncan was “the most astonished person on the ground,” who “at first deeply resented the presumed liberty” until one of the judges “reconciled the young lady to the situation, after

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Figure 1. Photo of Mrs. J. L. Stewart (nee Cordelia Dunkin).

Source: - "Photo of Mrs. J. L. Stewart (nee Cordelia Dunkin)," *The Almafilian*, vol. VI, no. 5 (Feb 1910): 79, courtesy of the Elgin County Archives, Alma College fonds, <https://heritagecollections.elgin.ca/en/permalink/archives113360>.

explanations; and the incident passed off, everybody seemingly well pleased."<sup>43</sup> In this instance, Duncan's reaction fit within the conventions of modesty, as she did not submit herself as a willing participant and appeared reluctant to accept the prize once she was made aware until convinced otherwise. Her reaction also demonstrated a level of discomfort with being surveyed without her knowledge. Like the rest of the women attending the fair that day, she was unaware her appearance was going to be judged, publicly acknowledged, and then later reprinted in the local paper. This event was interesting enough to also receive mention in a book written by a group of men from the Canadian Press Association (CPA) who travelled to the Temiskaming region in 1903. John R. Bone, the assistant secretary for the CPA, called it the most interesting event at the agricultural fair, and he evidently enjoyed the judging of women's appearances more than the root vegetable displays and sheep and swine contests.<sup>44</sup>

## Beauty Shows and Colonial Exhibitions

In beauty shows, the mediator — generally the show manager — hired the women who participated and decided what performances they gave on stage. At Hanlan's Point, a popular lakeside summer destination near Toronto, one 1910 attraction was a beauty show “composed of a number of show girls, who present a series of Mexican, Italian, Spanish, and other foreign dances.”<sup>45</sup> One advertisement noted the show consisted of 20 girls giving “exhibitions of European and Oriental dancing.”<sup>46</sup> Most beauty shows generally included some kind of performance, usually a dance. In *Sunbeams*, a weekly periodical published in Montreal, an 1890 report of Toronto claimed that “a beauty show never fails to draw a large crowd at the Theatre Royal. The ‘Night Owls,’ the company appearing there this week, certainly furnish such a show, and the consequence has been crowded houses at every performance.”<sup>47</sup> (See Figure 2) The Night Owls were an American travelling troupe that historian Frank Cullen has described as hovering between vaudeville and burlesque.<sup>48</sup> Beauty shows like those performed by the Night Owls combined the rising popularity of displaying women with theatre entertainment and their continual appearance in Ontario theatres and dime museums spoke to their success. For the women onstage, the dynamics of the performances functioned to convert otherwise private bodies into public — embodied — spectacles “whose cultural work [was] to constitute mutually the identities of viewer and viewed by enacting existing power relations.”<sup>49</sup> This is how the bodies of working-class women in search of pay were transformed into eroticized ideals on beauty show stages for audiences to gaze upon. On these stages, the judgment of women's bodies was expected and encouraged, allowing audiences to move beyond the realities of the women onstage and become active consumers and surveillants of beauty.

Emerging as popular beauty show locations, dime museums existed as sites of cheap entertainment for audiences and hosted a number of exhibits, including freak shows and “oddities” for guests to view. Garland-Thomson has suggested that these types of displays exploited embodied differences for commercial reasons, so the exhibits of beautiful women and “freaks” were posed as extraordinary figures against otherwise ordinary audience members. The process of decontextualizing the performers from their lived environments allowed audiences to view them not as regular people but instead as “a highly

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Figure 2. The Night Owls beauty show, created by Springer Litho. Co. in 1892. Source: “The Night Owls beauty show,” 1892, priJLC\_ENT\_000231, courtesy of the Jay T. Last Collection of Graphic Arts and Social History, The Huntington Library, San Marino, California, <https://hdl.huntington.org/digital/collection/p16003coll4/id/2389/>

embellished representation” of whatever identity they were meant to embody.<sup>50</sup>

Dime museums were uniquely North American venues that grew due to rural migration to cities. Their popularity reached a peak in the last two decades of the nineteenth century. Many dime museums tried to attract families to their shows, while others offered explicitly sexualized performances and were accused of being immoral and faced public criticism.<sup>51</sup> Their popularity was undeniable, however.

Gerald Lenton-Young has argued that in Ontario’s larger cities, dime museums “cracked the puritan bias that still affected most variety entertainment late in the century.”<sup>52</sup> Andrea Stulman Dennett has noted that popular dime museums in the United States wishing to retain a respectable reputation often downplayed the most sexualized aspects of female performances, though many museums took advantage of sexuality’s appeal and used the promise of “overtly suggested worldliness,” particularly through costumes that bared more skin, to draw crowds.<sup>53</sup>



As Smith has argued, beauty shows catered more towards amusement than serious competition, pointing to an 1889 Parisian beauty show held in a circus that displayed “different national types of female beauty.”<sup>54</sup> The women who entered the show, Smith has contended, were required to perform a national dance, some of which resulted in lifted petticoats that excited the crowd. According to Smith, “The element of sexual display and titillation for the audience was as crucial as the beauty of the participating women.”<sup>55</sup> These types of performances, and other reports of popular European beauty shows, particularly those taking place in Paris, New York, Vienna, and Brussels, made it into Ontario newspapers. For example, both the *Daily British Whig* and the *Toronto World* reported on a beauty show hosted at the 1889 Exposition Universelle in Paris, where, judged by spectators, “women representing the African, Asiatic, and Caucasian races” competed for a prize of \$6,000.<sup>56</sup>

Many beauty shows capitalized off the display of women’s appearances by highlighting women that were deemed “foreign” or “unnatural.”<sup>57</sup> A particularly popular show in Toronto was Al Reeves’s “Big Beauty Show,” which came regularly to the Gayety Theatre. Reeves’ show combined elements of vaudeville and burlesque, and one of the selling features of his show was the “curvy” chorus girls he hired.<sup>58</sup> During 1908, when a number of similar shows came to the Gayety, the theatre also hosted beauty shows those evenings.<sup>59</sup> Al Reeves’s show advertised curvy women, whereas other shows used the display of the *Other* as a draw. This was the case at an international beauty show, advertised as a contest, held at Moore’s Musee theatre in 1894. Located at 91–93 Yonge Street, the Musee was close to the popular commercial district at the intersection of Queen Street and Yonge. Although Moore’s Musee put on numerous shows and performances, the theatre appears to have maintained a reputation as a relatively respectable entertainment spot in the 1890s. It was listed in the 1894 *Toronto and Adjacent Summer Resorts*, an illustrated souvenir and guidebook, as a theatre that “presents attractions to novelty loving and easily amused sight-seekers and citizens.”<sup>60</sup> However, when it came under new management in 1896, the new owner published an article in the *Toronto World* ensuring the public “strenuous efforts will be made to get the dime museum idea out of the public mind and to put on first-class novelties and people that will tend to elevate instead of degrade.”<sup>61</sup>

Whether the 1894 beauty show the Musee hosted had been considered a degrading event or not, it had proved popular. Charging ten



cents per entry, the Musée's advertisement claimed to present over twenty girls of different nationalities, "The handsomest ladies that are to be found in Canada," while also representing every ward in the city of Toronto.<sup>62</sup> The decision of the most beautiful woman was up to the audience. A ticket earned audience members a vote for their choice of young woman and the winning contestant earned a watch and chain. Instead of having the women on stage, the Musée's lecture halls were set up like a parlour where audiences could visit the women and survey each woman carefully.<sup>63</sup> The show turned out to be immensely popular. The Musée hosted another show the week after with "an entirely new lot of ladies," the prize this time was a diamond ring. They also printed the results of the voting, announcing (unnamed) woman number 12 had won with over 2,000 votes.<sup>64</sup>

Unfortunately, the identities and even the appearances of the women who graced the Musée stage are unknown. What can be theorized is that these women were likely young, working-class, and fit within the late Victorian ideals of women's bodies.<sup>65</sup> In an advertisement for the second contest in the *Globe*, the ad noted that one of the contestants from Hamilton "represents a lady of fifty years ago, and has been engaged at great expense."<sup>66</sup> This demonstrates that the women involved were paid, and that the show involved costumes. Though the women's nationalities were not included, they were a commonly used marketing draw at the time. The promise of seeing bodies that differed from one's own was part of the spectacle that events such as this offered. Robert Allen has contended that unlike in plays, "when women appeared in spectacle pieces . . . their bodies, not someone else's words, bore the burden of signification."<sup>67</sup> The women on the Musée stage signified many things: beauty, desire, fantasy, and the audience's investment in their own entertainment based upon the commodification of the women onstage.

Larger beauty shows included even more elaborate staging and exhibition. As sites of colonial power, world's fairs became popular locations for hosting big beauty shows that employed the colonial gaze as a way to mitigate desire through strict ideas of racial separation. This took place in 1894 at Toronto's version of the 1893 Chicago World's Fair. One of the most popular exhibitions at Chicago World's Fair was the beauty show at the Midway Plaisance. The beauty show featured recreations of various villages and claimed to display women from places across the world. A. W. Stencell has written that such displays "provided white America with a grand opportunity for a subliminal

journey into the recesses of its own repressed desires and fantasies.”<sup>68</sup> Similarly, Walden has noted that this type of midway attraction reinforced messages of racial hierarchies, and were “a seductive place for both genders because everyone was encouraged to look at normally prohibited attractions.”<sup>69</sup>

Toronto’s Midway Plaisance was constructed at the newly opened Toronto Armouries by the Queen’s Own Rifles regiment, a volunteer reserve force founded in 1860. Officially opened in the spring of 1894 on University Avenue, the new armoury building was built as a centralized location for soldiers to train and gather. The size of the armoury made it ideal for hosting large events, and the Queen’s Own Rifles hosted the reconstructed Midway Plaisance as a fundraising event. By all accounts, Toronto’s version was a success.<sup>70</sup> The beauty show, hosted in the drill hall itself, included women representatives supposedly from Italy, Sweden, Dahomey, China, Russia, France, Ireland, Germany, and Algeria. There was also “a lecturer on hand to point out the beauties that the visitor might happen to overlook.”<sup>71</sup> Thousands of Ontario residents came to gawk at the representations of Dahomeyan, Irish, and Indigenous villages, Chinese and Turkish theatre, and the Moorish palace. Rosemarie Bank has argued that the Chicago World’s Fair Midway Plaisance was a site of expressed racism, and featured exhibits that “produced intensely racist, sexist, and ethnist effects.”<sup>72</sup> She characterized it as a “White City” dream scenario, “simulating for a mass audience its own sense of beauty, control, hierarchy, and self-secured success.” Toronto’s Midway Plaisance replicated these ideas by relying on what Homi Bhabha has referred to as a dependence on the “fixity” of stereotyped racial and sexual difference in colonial constructions of otherness.<sup>73</sup> In advertising Toronto’s upcoming Midway Plaisance, one journalist wrote that the “Congress of Beauties” represented almost every nation on earth. Although the language of the event indicated a coming together, it was in reality a demonstration of racist colonial fantasy. Notably, the advertisement highlighted the “fair-haired damsels” of Sweden and Norway, the “languorous beauty” of Andalusia, the “vivacious and winsome French coquette,” the “rosy-cheeked lass” from Scotland, and finally the “demure little maiden of the Dominion of Canada.”<sup>74</sup>

While the expectation for audiences might have been to see a number of beautiful and exoticized women, commentators pointed out a number of slippages in the performances. One review of the beauty show described the women as “young girls (?) somewhat mas-

culine," while audiences gazed at the "Moorish Princess" in wonder due to her astonishing weight.<sup>75</sup> Journalist Emily Cummings (Shortt), who wrote under the pseudonym Sama, reported in the *Globe*,

As I went into the beauty show, I was greeted by the Mexican beauty with a very broad smile, which I did not reciprocate, as I did not know him — her, I mean. Then the beauty said, in the plainest English, 'I don't believe you know me, Sama?' And, would you believe it, I suddenly realized that he — she, I mean — was a sprightly young cousin of mine, whose own mother would not have known him — her, I mean — in his — her — peasant's dress and long curls.<sup>76</sup>

Cummings's play on gender was possibly intended to poke fun at the beauty show and cast suspicion on the notion of these "beauties" on display, but it also displayed the work of bodily surveillance at these events. While the gender of the "Mexican beauty" is unknown in this likely fictional anecdote, female impersonators had been present at the Chicago World's Fair and cross-dressers were not an uncommon sight on American stages.<sup>77</sup> Clare Sears, in their study of cross-dressing in nineteenth-century San Francisco, has argued that gender transgressions were part of freak show exhibitions and dime museums where audiences partook in "pleasures of suspicion" and were encouraged by showmen to confront and unmask suspected gender "frauds."<sup>78</sup> Perhaps this was Cummings point after all: she had expected a beauty show, and instead was confronted with gender ambiguity. The appearance of masculine features turned the beauty show into a freak show. In her confrontation of the faux representation of the Other, she undermined the nature of the performance and revealed her careful surveillance of the beauty on display. Bank has described this as a way "performers complicate[d] unitary readings and performance resist[ed] binary interpretations."<sup>79</sup> Cummings's commentary shows a disconnect between the viewer and the viewed. Instead of admiring what was intended to be a display of beautiful foreign Otherness, Cummings addressed what she perceived as something else entirely.

### Ranking Canadian Women

Local beauty entertainment carried important ramifications for Ontario women given how it was used to categorize women's bodies into both racial and national types. Popular newspapers hosted

discussions about the beauty of Ontario and Canadian women, identifying Canadian women as more physically ideal than their English or American counterparts. This point was often demonstrated using the rhetoric of beauty contests and shows as sites where women's beauty could be observed and the beauty of Canadian women proven through competition. These discussions elevated the significance of women's appearances, turning a broad assessing gaze towards women's beauty and its role in developing civic and national pride. Anne McClintock has argued that as women were excluded from direct action as national citizens in the nineteenth century, they instead became "subsumed symbolically into the national body politic as its boundary and metaphoric limit."<sup>80</sup> In Canadian scholarship, Carmen Nielson has noted that images of women's bodies, and that of Miss Canada in particular, took on the "eroticised body of the nation." There, Miss Canada "acted as a substitute geo-body," one that played into viewers' anxieties, fears, and desires about their nation and its citizens.<sup>81</sup> This connection is perhaps not surprising given the growing Canada First movement that took shape in the 1870s in Ontario, indeed often being touted as an Ontario First movement above all.<sup>82</sup> The origins of this nation-building movement were rooted in unifying Canada under an Anglo-Saxon identity, one built upon notions of racial homogeneity and superiority.<sup>83</sup> This drive to capture a sense of a nationalistic spirit spilled over onto the bodies of select Canadian women. While discussions sometimes spoke of Canadian women more broadly, civic and local identities were also part of this rhetoric. When the category of Canadian women was brought up in major city newspapers, it referred to young, white settler Ontario women more often than not, revealing who was seen to embody the ideal. Such discussions were taking place when the political basis for citizenship and nationhood in Canada were uncertain, and as Barry Ferguson has contended, all Canadians had unclear international status, uncertain rights abroad, and a decidedly unstable identity.<sup>84</sup>

In Ontario newspapers, settler Ontario women in particular were heralded as the most beautiful. An 1897 article in the *Hamilton Times* denounced Yankee women for having "rather run to fat, their hard-working husbands taking great pains to give them plenty to eat and nothing to do."<sup>85</sup> Ontario women, on the other hand, were workers who could "hold their own in a beauty show." A year earlier, the *Globe* published an article about the beauty of girls in different localities, claiming it had been "mathematically demonstrated that out of

100 healthy Canadian girls, wherever born, ten are wildly beautiful, forty are exceedingly pretty and the other fifty are attractive."<sup>86</sup> Following this line of reasoning, the author stated that beautiful girls were attracted to cities — where they can get "as many good things in the world as possible" — which led to Toronto becoming a "colossal beauty show."<sup>87</sup> This type of rhetoric illustrates the assessing eye used in the press on women in public spaces and the modernizing appeal of the city.

While written in jest, the article highlights a connection between women's bodies and civic boosterism. This was also on display during an incident in 1903 when an Englishwoman published her unfavourable opinion about the appearance of Canadian women on her return to London. The author wrote that in Ottawa, Toronto, and Montreal, "The typical face is hard-featured and sallow, and frequently muddy complexioned," arguing that women in Toronto over the age of thirty dressed in a manner that only intensified their plainness.<sup>88</sup> The author concluded by noting no English girls had to worry if their lover were to visit Canada, as Canadian girls lacked charm. The pushback in Ontario newspapers was immediate. Both the *Globe* and *Hamilton Times* suggested Dr. J. Orr, the CNE association manager in 1903, should organize a beauty show at the next industrial fair "at which the pink and white of England would be pitted against the tan of the Canadian summer girl."<sup>89</sup> The *Globe* further called the incident an "attack on our girls" — an attack they believed could be righted by a beauty show. The *London Advertiser* also published a response, this time by a self-proclaimed "Canadian girl." The author accused English girls as having "very common features," and ruddy complexions, whereas Canadian girls had "the sweetest, mildest and most intelligent expression, with a comparatively clear complexion," as well as softer and prettier hair, and a better style of dress.<sup>90</sup> This implied that Canadian girls were superior in appearance and taste.

Appealing to the physicality of women and adopting the language of beauty entertainment, these authors sent a message about the value of physical beauty. Representations of women's appearances mattered, at least to some, and perceived slights against it had to be rectified. It mattered that Ontario women might be portrayed as having muddy complexions and hard features, supposedly the result of overheated rooms and the consumption of pastries and candy. The accusation of ugliness, to women in particular, held political and cultural meaning beyond the insult itself. Sara Rodrigues and Ela Przybyło

have argued that ugliness is not “solely the property of a body, space, or thing,” but “also a function leveraged to uphold notions of worth and entitlement.”<sup>91</sup> If Ontario women were perceived as plain and unattractive, it reflected on the nation as a whole. To suggest a beauty show was therefore an expression of the confidence that when the bodies of Canadian girls were judged beside English girls, Canadian girls (ergo, Canada itself) would prevail.

Other Ontario city newspapers used similar rhetoric about the beauty of women. A 1907 article written for the *St. Catharines Standard* and reprinted in the *Hamilton Times* noted that a girl from St. Catharines won a recent Chicago beauty competition. The article boasted a link between St. Catharines’ industrial nature, its climate, and its beautiful women, claiming the city had no equal in the province: “while it is recognized that St. Catharines girls can take beauty prizes wherever they may go this reflects credit upon Canada of which these less fortunate cities form a part.”<sup>92</sup> Weeks later, the *Toronto World* put out a large advertisement, asking, “Do you know a woman in Canada more beautiful than the winner of the Chicago Beauty Contest?”<sup>93</sup> The paper invited readers to turn their gaze towards beautiful women they knew and send in their photographs to the editors, claiming the “chivalry and gallantry of Canadian fathers, brothers and lovers is at stake. Let each man do his part in the search and the Toronto Sunday World is confident that Canada shall produce the International Queen of Beauty.”<sup>94</sup> The advertisement implied that since Canada was famed for its handsome women, there must be scores of “prettier women and girls in Toronto,” underscoring the point that cities, and Toronto itself, held greater urban possibilities for beauty. All photographs sent in were to be published in the Toronto *Sunday World* edition, noting the chosen “Queen of them all” would be entered into an international beauty contest to decide “who is the most beautiful woman on this continent.” The paper continually ran the ad over a series of months. It later published an anonymous letter from Ottawa in which the author included a photo of a proclaimed beautiful girl of Cobourg. He argued it was his duty to send it in, hoping “that there will be many others sent to you to show the nation south of us that Canada not only holds one beautiful woman but many.”<sup>95</sup>

The judgment of women’s physical appearances in leisure spaces and at celebration events held cultural weight, both at the local and national level. Commentators in the press were concerned with promoting the beauty of Canadian women and eager to weigh the bodies

of Canadian women against their American and British counterparts. The language of beauty entertainment was thus utilized to demonstrate both civic and national pride and prosperity.

## Conclusion

Local beauty contests and commercial beauty shows filled part of the growing demand for leisure entertainment in Ontario. They were also sites where audiences interacted with different understandings of physical beauty, and these discussions continued in the press. Beauty entertainment was the catalyst for modern twentieth-century beauty contests, operating as sites of acceptable public desirability. Certainly, the nature of these events changed after World War I. As visual culture expanded to include film and photography, contests centred more on public exposure and connections to a new sense of modern celebrity and femininity.<sup>96</sup> Even so, the influence of late Victorian beauty entertainment remained, and the exhibition of women’s bodies and the emphasis on physical appearance continued. Sentiments surrounding the celebration of “beautiful” women persisted in theatres, both in person and on screen, and in local communities. This persistent signalling of the importance of beautiful women was an expression of modernity that invited audiences and community members to survey women’s appearances and judge accordingly.

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## Endnotes

- 1 “Enjoyment Ad Libitum: A Glorious Day Spent at Port Stanley,” *London Advertiser* (28 July 1891), 5.
- 2 Jane Nicholas, *The Modern Girl: Feminine Modernities, the Body, and Commodities in the 1920s* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2015), 123; Patrizia Gentile, *Queen of the Maple Leaf: Beauty Contests and Settler Femininity* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2020) 6–7, 53. In *America Beauty* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), 252–3, Lois Banner has traced the origins of modern beauty contests back to European folk events, including the selection of May Day queens. Banner argues that the symbolic roles women were given in festivals and tournaments as “queens,” including as fertility symbols as May Day queens, legitimized the selection and display of women in public. However, she notes that physical beauty was not the only factor in the selection of queens, as they were often chosen for their status within a community or connection to a man who was a local leader. On the cultural role May Day queens played, Gentile, *Queen of the Maple Leaf*, 6, has argued that queens became “sites upon which utopian views of community spirit, youth, beauty, and hope were sketched.”
- 3 Gentile, *Queen of the Maple Leaf*, 87.
- 4 Michelle J. Smith, “‘The Arts of Beauty’: Female Appearances in Nineteenth-Century British Library Newspapers,” *British Library Newspapers, Part V: 1746–1950* (Cengage Learning EMEA Ltd, 2016), 4.
- 5 Reports of international beauty shows in Ontario newspapers discussed shows in New York, St. Louis, Paris, Spa, Brussels, Vienna, Buffalo, and San Francisco.
- 6 *Girl Show: The Canvas World of Bump and Grind*, (Toronto: ECW Press, 1999), 5–7. A. W. Stencell has discussed the growing popularity of dances such as “hoochie-coochie” dances in the late 1890s as a result of similar performances shown at the 1893 World’s Columbian Exposition held in Chicago.
- 7 J. M. S. Careless, “The Cultural Setting: Ontario Society to 1914,” in *Early Stages: Theatre in Ontario 1800–1914*, ed. Ann Saddlemyer (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1990), 18–51.
- 8 “A Beauty Competition,” *Hamilton Evening Times* (20 August 1900), 8.

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- 9 “The Trolley’s Advent,” *London Advertiser* (26 October 1893), 1. One of the judges, W. L. Brown, was the school board secretary.
- 10 In discussing the Musée Theatre in 1890s Toronto, Keith Walden has argued that when audiences waned, the owners boosted sales by hosting burlesque shows. See Keith Walden, *Becoming Modern in Toronto: The Industrial Exhibition and the Shaping of a Late Victorian Culture* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1997), 253.
- 11 For a discussion of the presence of the “working girl” in Toronto and the problem she created for moral reformers, see Carolyn Strange, *Toronto’s Girl Problem: The Perils and Pleasures of the City, 1880–1930* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1995).
- 12 Andy Croll, “Street Disorder, Surveillance and Shame: Regulating Behaviour in the Public Spaces of the Late Victorian British Town,” *Social History* 24, no. 3 (1999): 260.
- 13 In 1883, “Woman’s Kingdom,” *Toronto Weekly Mail* (13 December 1883) 6, discussed the winner of a St. Louis beauty contests, Miss Flora Merrell. The description noted Miss Merrell had pure Grecian features, discussing her eyes, mouth, cheeks, teeth, hair, skin colour, and waist size.
- 14 Banner, *American Beauty*, 257–60. Banner has pointed to the 1893 depression and subsequent closing of agricultural fairs as the reason these events began to merge due to town chambers of commerce and businessmen recognizing the economic opportunity of incorporating more overt forms of women on display.
- 15 Jodey Nurse-Gupta, “Food, Flowers, and Fancywork: Fashioning, Negotiating, and Expanding the Roles of Women in Ontario Agricultural Societies and Fairs, 1846–1980,” (PhD dissertation, University of Guelph, 2016) 301.
- 16 Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, “The Beauty and the Freak,” *Disability, Art, and Culture (Part Two)* 37, issue 3 (1998): 459.
- 17 Gentile, *Queen of the Maple Leaf*, 56.
- 18 Elizabeth Grosz, *Volatile Bodies: Toward a Corporeal Feminism* (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1994), 19.
- 19 Walden, *Becoming Modern in Toronto*, 155.
- 20 Nicholas, *The Modern Girl*, 74.
- 21 “Russell’s Comedians,” *Guide Advocate* (6 October 1893) 1. Other instances of travelling shows including “best-looking lady” in the audience contests are the Shamrock Concert Co. held in Athens, Ontario. See “Local and General,” *Athens Reporter and County of Leeds Advertiser* (23 December 1908), 8.
- 22 “Special Prizes,” *Guide-Advocate* (7 September 1900), 5.
- 23 “The Prize List Specials,” *Guide-Advocate* (28 September 1900), 8.
- 24 Garland-Thomson has written: “The more attractive one’s self-presentation, the more competent and esteemed one is thought to be, which

- translates into economic and social advantage." See "The Beauty and the Freak," 37.
- 25 Best looking widow contests were held at the 1896 and 1897 Frankville Fall Fair in Leeds County. See *Athens Reporter and County of Leeds Advertiser* (22 July 1896), 3, and *Athens Reporter and County of Leeds Advertiser* (1 September 1897), 3.
  - 26 "Essex," *Western Advertiser* (23 September 1892), 2.
  - 27 "Lyndhurst Exhibition," *Athens Reporter and County of Leeds Advertiser* (8 August 1900), 4.
  - 28 "The Lyndhurst Exhibition," *Athens Reporter and County of Leeds Advertiser* (27 August 1902), 5.
  - 29 "Saturday Picnic at the Riverside Park," *London Advertiser* (1 September 1902), 8.
  - 30 "The Island Attractions," *Globe* (16 July 1910), 8.
  - 31 Brenda Foley, *Undressed for Success: Beauty Contestants and Exotic Dancers as Merchants of Morality* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 141.
  - 32 Foley, *Undressed for Success*, 5.
  - 33 Foley, *Undressed for Success*, 7.
  - 34 Polite vaudeville rose in popularity in the late 1880s as a way to market vaudeville performances to a broader audience. This included posing shows as suitable for families, which was "critical to set apart vaudeville from the coarse and common entertainments of the concert saloons, the dime museums and the circus." See Frank Cullen, with Florence Hackman and Donald McNeilly, *Vaudeville Old & New: An Encyclopedia of Variety Performers in America, Vol. 1* (New York: Routledge, 2006), xviii.
  - 35 Andrew Carl Holman, *A Sense of Their Duty: Middle-Class Formation in Victorian Ontario Towns* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2000), 16.
  - 36 Holman, *A Sense of Their Duty*, 159.
  - 37 Lynne Sorrel Marks, *Revivals and Roller Rinks: Religion, Leisure, and Identity in Late-Nineteenth-Century Small-Town Ontario* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1996), 130–1.
  - 38 Archibald McNee, "Editor's Easy Chair," *Windsor Evening Record* (1 September 1894), 4.
  - 39 A. J. Stringer, J. W. Plewes, and N. A. Tully, "Slivers," *Chips* (December 1890), 30.
  - 40 In 1893, the *Hamilton Evening Times* and the *Glencoe Transcript* printed an article by American journalist Kate Field where Field denounced beauty contests and shows. See "The Mysteries of Beauty," *Hamilton Evening Times* (19 May 1893), 7; and "The Mysteries of Beauty," *Glencoe Transcript* (1 June 1893), 2.
  - 41 "Big Time at Fair Grounds Monday Afternoon," *Weekly Free Press* (13 August 1908), 2.

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- 42 “Victoria County Old Boys Held Big Celebration — Interesting Events at Park,” *Watchman-Warder* (13 August 1908), 10.
- 43 “New Liskeard Fall Fair a Success — Prettiest Girl on the Ground,” *Perth Courier* (13 Nov 1903), 7. The judges were listed as Dan McGillicuddy and Milton Carr, MPP.
- 44 Canadian Press Association, *New Ontario: The Canadian Press Association’s Excursion to Temiskaming* (Welland, ON: Sears and Sawle, 1903), 10.
- 45 “Over at Hanlan’s Point,” *Globe* (14 July 1910), 5. In the American context, historian Hilary Levey Friedman has noted that postbellum beach resorts were ideal hosts for beauty contests, as they were sites of leisure and generally locations where bodily display was more lenient. See Hilary Levey Friedman, *Here She Is: The Complicated Reign of the Beauty Pageant in America* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 2020), 19.
- 46 “The Island Attractions,” *Globe* (16 July 1910), 8.
- 47 “Toronto’s Growth Explained,” *Sunbeams* (10 May 1890), 9.
- 48 Cullen, Hackman and McNeilly, *Vaudeville Old & New*, 101. The popularity of burlesque shows can in part be traced back to travelling troupes that incorporated women and dancing in the 1860s. In *The Unembarrassed Muse: The Popular Arts in America* (New York: Dial Press, 1970), Russel Blaine Nye has pointed to two types of burlesque theatre. The first drew from the European tradition of low comedy, and the kind that arose in 1860s America after the 1866 appearance of *The Black Crook* at Niblo’s Gardens in New York. Nye argues this performance “introduced the popular theater for the first time to the display of the female figure for its own sake.” See *The Unembarrassed Muse*, 173.
- 49 Garland-Thomson, “The Beauty and the Freak,” 459.
- 50 Garland-Thomson, “The Beauty and the Freak,” 459.
- 51 Lenton-Young, “Variety Theatre,” 195.
- 52 Lenton-Young, “Variety Theatre,” 190.
- 53 Andrea Stulman Dennett, *Weird and Wonderful: The Dime Museum in America* (New York: New York University Press, 1997), 83.
- 54 Smith, “The Arts of Beauty,” 4.
- 55 Smith, “The Arts of Beauty.”
- 56 “A Beauty Show in Paris,” *Daily British Whig* (19 February 1889), 1; *Toronto World* (20 February 1889), 3.
- 57 Foley, *Undressed for Success*, 22.
- 58 Irving Zeidman, *The American Burlesque Show* (New York: Hawthorn Books, 1967), 49.
- 59 “Gayety Theatre,” *Toronto Saturday Night* (14 March 1908), 14; “Music and the Drama,” *Globe* (20 April 1908), 10; “Gayety Tonight: Beauty Competition,” *Globe* (20 May 1908), 2; “Gayety Tonight: Beauty Competition,” *Globe* (27 May 1908), 2.

- 60 Ezra Herbert Adams, *Toronto and Adjacent Summer Resorts: Illustrated Souvenir and Guide Book with Maps and Tables of Railway and Steamboat Fares, Hotel Rates, Meteorological Data, Etc.* (Toronto: Murray Printing Company, 1894), 57.
- 61 In 1896, Marion S. Robinson, a previous owner, bought the Musee. It appears Robinson wanted to distance the theatre from its reputation as a dime museum and wanted to make sure that there would no longer be performances that could be “considered offensive to any lady or gentleman,” *Toronto World* (29 August 1896), 8.
- 62 “Music and the Drama,” *Globe* (26 October 1894), 8; “Notes on Tonight’s Amusements,” *Globe* (29 October 1894), 8.
- 63 “Handsome Ladies,” *Toronto Mail* (26 October 1894), 6).
- 64 “Music and the Drama: Forecasts or the Shows to be Presented Tonight, Results of the Musee Beauty Contest,” *Globe* (5 November 1894), 8. The article printed the number of votes for each woman who participated, with some receiving votes in the hundreds, and others more than 2,000.
- 65 The late Victorian ideal of physical beauty generally fit into the category of the “natural woman,” according to Banner, *American Beauty*. While the voluptuous woman remained popular on stage, Banner contends that the rising importance of physical fitness in the 1890s led to the increasing popularity of thinner bodies. The Gibson Girl standard appeared thin with hourglass proportions, generally tall and dark-haired (128). Regardless of waist and hip size, these representations of female physical beauty catered towards white middle- and upper-class women. Banner argues that by 1900, the voluptuous woman popularised in the 1870s had all but disappeared, as it was associated with the lower-class subculture of theatre and performance (153).
- 66 “At The Musee,” *Globe* (6 November 1894), 1.
- 67 Robert C. Allen, *Horrible Prettiness: Burlesque and American Culture* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1991), 81.
- 68 Stencell, *Girl Show*, 4.
- 69 Walden, *Becoming Modern*, 158.
- 70 The *Globe* reported the Midway in Toronto had been “a most striking success throughout, and reflects the greatest credit on the committees of the Queen’s Own Rifles and on Mr. H. J. Hill.” See “General City News,” *Globe* (13 June 1894), 8.
- 71 “On the Midway: Opening of the Unique Show by the Queen’s Own—The Plaisance in the New Drill Hall,” *Globe* (5 June 1894), 8. In terms of where the representatives came from, one paper mentioned that they came from the Chicago World’s Fair, but this is unknown.
- 72 Rosemarie K. Bank, “Representing History: Performing the Columbian Exposition,” *Theatre Journal* 54 (2002): 597, 591.

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- 73 Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Power* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 96.
- 74 “The Midway Plaisance of the Chicago World’s Fair: It’s Reproduction in Toronto Next Week,” *Globe* (2 June 1894), 3.
- 75 “On the Midway: Scenes Last Night Among the Palaces and Foreign Exhibitions at the Drill Shed—A Street Parade Today,” *Globe* (9 June 1894), 6.
- 76 “Sama’s Gossip: In the Midway,” *Globe* (9 June 1894), 6.
- 77 Jim Elledge has pointed to the belly dancer called “Fatima” at the 1893 Chicago World’s Fair and rumours that Fatima was actually a male, such accusations leading to Fatima’s temporary detention by the Chicago police for “erotic imagery.” Elledge also has noted that a Chinese female impersonator performed at the fair. See Jim Elledge, *The Boys of Fairy Town: Sodomites, Female Impersonators, Third-sexers, Pansies, Queers, and Sex Morons in Chicago’s First Century* (Chicago: Chicago Review Press, 2018), 89–90. Gillian Rodger also has offered a comprehensive overview of the history of drag performers in nineteenth-century American theatre in “Queering Middle Class Gender in Nineteenth-Century US Theater,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Music and Queerness*, ed. Fred Everett Maus and Sheila Whiteley (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018).
- 78 Clare Sears, *Arresting Dress: Cross-Dressing, Law, and Fascination in Nineteenth-Century San Francisco* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2015), 110.
- 79 Bank, “Representing History,” 598.
- 80 Anne McClintock, *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender, and Sexuality in the Colonial Contest* (London: Routledge, 1995), 354.
- 81 Carmen Nielson, “Erotic Attachment, Identity Formation and the Body Politic: The Woman-as-nation in Canadian Graphic Satire, 1867–1914,” *Gender & History* 28 (2016): 123.
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