

*Beauty Pageants*

FIGURING OUT MISS HIV

Poetic knowledge is born in the great silence of scientific knowledge.

AIMÉ CÉSAIRE

We want the creative faculty to imagine that which we know.

PERCY BYSSHE SHELLEY

THE QUESTION OF THE FIGURE

AS SHOWN IN THE INTRODUCTION, there is an overwhelming amount of published material in a staggering array of genres and venues with an equally overwhelming set of political allegiances on the HIV/AIDS crisis over the course of its now four-decade-long public history.<sup>1</sup> While the paleonymy of the term “figure” lurks, the focus of this book is elsewhere. I am interested in how the pandemic and those most affected by it have been imagined, and particularly how the pandemic has been imagined in terms of embodiment. Many have attempted to give the pandemic a human face, from the innocent child victims—Ryan White in the United States and Nkosi Johnson in South Africa—to the phobic spectacles of the dying and emaciated bodies of first the gay man and then the African AIDS patient, which have circulated widely in local, national, and international media.<sup>2</sup> The celebrity HIV-positive person offers another figuration of the problem of creating a face for the pandemic; Magic Johnson and Rock Hudson in very different ways are exemplary for the US and Fana Khaba (aka Khabzela) for South Africa.<sup>3</sup>

A welter of documentary and testimonial practices has tried to give the person living with AIDS a face and a voice. Stephanie Nolen’s *28*, twenty-eight short biographies of people living with AIDS (PWAs) in Africa, has the representational aspiration that each story will represent a million

stories: twenty-eight stories for the estimated 28 million people, mostly in sub-Saharan Africa, living with HIV in its year of publication, 2007.<sup>4</sup> These documentary attempts do powerful cultural work.

In this chapter, I am interested in another kind of figurational attempt—one that uses fantasy to supplement the testimonial realism of these more documentary projects—to bring those affected by the pandemic into representation. “Figure” is a tricky word, with a proliferation of cognate meanings from drawing to number to feminine embodiment inter alia. The figure under discussion in this chapter is “Miss HIV.” Miss HIV is a figure in that she is a complex representation that is required frequently to be both a representation and a representative. This figure, differentially embodied in the examples to follow, works as a *prosopopoeia* of sorts—a speaking in the guise of another. Thus, the person with HIV, or the imagining of HIV as a person, as a beauty queen or drag queen, is suggestive of new conditions of suffering, pedagogy, identificatory possibility, and historical agency in the multiply ironized and contested field of representations that constitute imaginative meanings of the pandemic in an era of globalization.

#### BEAUTY PAGEANTS ON THE GLOBAL STAGE

The figure of a Miss HIV relies on the imagined almost universal intelligibility of the beauty pageant in the mode of campy irony in my first case, the mode of sincerity in the second, and the form of a polemic in the third. In the popular parlance of the cyberworld, beauty pageants have “gone viral.”<sup>5</sup> The form and event of a beauty competition is useful for a diversity of political causes, norms of sociality, and economic possibilities. Recent decades have seen a proliferation of these competitions in many contexts, from US agricultural festivals to drag queen pageants in the Philippines alongside the longer-running national and international beauty pageants. The durable international popularity of the television show *RuPaul’s Drag Race* provides further evidence. A Miss Landmine competition was held in Angola in 2008, and a Miss Landmine competition was cancelled in Cambodia in July 2009.<sup>6</sup> The first-ever Miss Beautiful Morals pageant was held in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, in 2009.<sup>7</sup> Although the basic form of the competition is clearly transnational, and the nature of the beauty pageant as a spectacle of sorts usually means that its audience is always potentially expanding, the meanings of individual pageants are often singular and local.

Two pageants with global aspirations, the UK-based Miss World and the US-based Miss Universe, can accurately be understood as entrepreneurial opportunism in an era of neoliberalism. These two pageants are international—national contestants compete for each title—in their understanding of representation, though transnational in the ways they are organized and financed.<sup>8</sup> They also initially fit a model of globalization as cultural homogenization. But recent histories of the pageant form suggest a more complex relationship of local, national, and global public spheres. Miss HIV figures unevenly on this terrain.

Beauty pageants often expose the contradictions they wish to manage with explosive consequences. The Miss World pageant scheduled for Kaduna, Nigeria, in 2002 is exemplary. The pageant was moved to London after riots that resulted in two hundred fatalities. A Christian journalist, Isioma Daniel, in the Lagos daily *This Day*, had written that Muhammad would probably have chosen a wife from one of the contestants. This comment exacerbated regional, national, and international tensions over the imposition of the death penalty for adultery by a *shari'a* court on Amina Lawal in Katsina in 2002.<sup>9</sup> An international feminist call for a boycott resulted. Yet the local authority, in this case *shari'a*, represented yet another globalizing force, namely Islamism. The pageant revealed preexisting political tensions within Nigeria between the predominantly Muslim north and the predominantly Christian and oil-rich south. These tensions go back at least as far as the Nigerian civil war of 1967–70, and beyond that, to the contested inheritances of colonial rule.<sup>10</sup>

The significant work of beauty pageants—the staging of group representation in the flesh—is not only visible in pageants with obvious global reach. The idea of the beauty competition has a deep history. In the Hellenistic tradition—through which a very long and convoluted project, which could be called western civilization, imagines its origin—Paris's adjudication of the beauty of the goddesses Hera, Athena, and Aphrodite unleashes the Trojan War. (I mention this for those of you who might think beauty pageants are too lowbrow to warrant serious attention. No beauty competition, no *Iliad*, no *Odyssey*.) In the arguably less mythic time of the present, the typical title of the winners of such pageants is invariably Miss \_\_\_\_\_ (fill in the blank), revealing an interesting tension between the exalted idea of a queen and the democratic, egalitarian, almost dismissive title “Miss.” A queen is a powerfully illiberal figure of sovereignty suggesting an excess of agency and no shortfall of fabulosity, and consequently a fantasy figure of unbridled freedom.<sup>11</sup> The “Miss” reins her in.

This chapter, however, will investigate three incarnations of a newish figuring of the beauty queen and her pageants, Miss HIV, in diverging national and international spaces, with different purposes, constituencies, and outcomes.

The first appearance of a Miss HIV that I have found is in Canadian filmmaker John Greyson's extraordinary 1993 AIDS musical, *Zero Patience*.<sup>12</sup> My second case study is an actual pageant called Miss HIV Stigma Free, first held in Botswana in 2003. The third incarnation under discussion will be the 2008 documentary film, somewhat disingenuously titled *Miss HIV*, in which the Botswana pageant serves as a foil for the promotion and/or resurrection of the Ugandan "Abstain, Be Faithful, Use a Condom" HIV prevention campaign of the 1990s, commonly known as ABC.<sup>13</sup> Flirting with what Lauren Berlant has called "the romance of the incommensurate," I will argue that the figure of a Miss HIV beauty or drag queen does very different kinds of representational work in these respective contexts, and suggest that the incarnations of this figure share an investment in making the pandemic intelligible for their imagined audiences in ways that engage and contest a range of epidemiological and policy arguments.<sup>14</sup> These versions of Miss HIV are irreducibly local and simultaneously important in the creation of expanded global awareness about the pandemic and in revealing the political and affective stakes in the task of representing HIV/AIDS.

#### ZERO PATIENCE: THE DEBUT OF MISS HIV

*Zero Patience* is a film containing a difficult-to-summarize narrative intertextuality and spectrum of historical reference.<sup>15</sup> It is first and foremost a full-frontal attack on popular media and scientific representations of the HIV/AIDS crisis in North America just prior to the widespread availability of antiretrovirals and more effective triple-combination drug therapies in the early 1990s, as well as a concerted effort to combat the stigmatizing and demonizing of the HIV-positive gay man, indicatively but not exclusively white.<sup>16</sup> Issues of race and multicultural national belonging appear in the struggles of the character, George (Richardo Keens Douglas), to reconcile his job, medical care, and activism, and any depiction of Sir Richard Francis Burton (called Dick in the film) inevitably invokes histories of race and empire. That said, the romance between Dick and Zero—the two white men at the core of the movie—affectively centers whiteness.

Miss HIV is a minor but key character, who appears toward the end of the film as the ghost of Gaetan Dugas (Zero) peers at his bloodstream through a microscope. In what is now the history of the history of the pandemic, Dugas appeared as the demonized hyper-sexual cause of the pandemic in the North Atlantic world in accounts inaugurated by journalist Randy Shilts's best-selling 1987 history of the AIDS pandemic, *And the Band Played On*.<sup>17</sup> Dugas was seen as patient zero in the North American pandemic. The title of Greyson's film *Zero Patience* reworks this putative prime cause into the urgency of activism. The film debunks this dominant historiography.<sup>18</sup> The film's choice to confront the moniker "Zero" by having all characters in the film refer to him as such heightens a sense of the dehumanization of Dugas in the accounts of Shilts et al.<sup>19</sup> As Zero, Dugas is literally the cipher upon which a range of toxic social attitudes have been projected.

In order to make sense of the triple functions of Miss HIV in this film as a mourning and memorializing storyteller, as an activist/pedagogue on emergent practices of safer sex as powerful HIV prevention strategy, and as the re/writer of the history of the pandemic, it is necessary to mention the web of associations around Miss HIV and the informing narrative context of her appearance.<sup>20</sup> The film begins with the subplot. A teacher, George, listens as one of his young students ponders *A Thousand and One Nights*, prefiguring the song "Scheherazade" that Michael Callen as Miss HIV will sing. Over the course of the film, we learn that George is slowly going blind from HIV-related cytomegalovirus (CMV), that he is a member of the local chapter of AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power (ACT UP), and that ACT UP is protesting the drug company that manufactures the only drug that might help him. From the realism of the subplot, we move to the fanciful main plot. Sir Richard Francis Burton (John Robinson), Victorian explorer, translator, and sexologist, is now 170 years old (due to an "unfortunate encounter" with the Fountain of Youth in 1892) and living in Toronto, Canada. The presence of Burton as a central character allows for a critique of the deep colonial history of the phobic connections between race and sex that continue to underwrite configurations of the pandemic. Burton, now the chief taxidermist at the Toronto Museum of Natural History, is working on an exhibition called the "Hall of Contagion," and decides to include Gaetan Dugas. Burton and Zero/Dugas embark on a torrid romance as the latter attempts to enlist Burton in the project of clearing his name and rewriting his place in the history of AIDS, under the guidance of Miss HIV.

In the scene where Miss HIV appears and gets to speak (and sing) for herself, she arrives floating in Dugas's bloodstream. Through a microscope, Dugas sees his bloodstream in the visual terrain of camp. The bloodstream appears as a degraded Esther Williams water-ballet, with a strong undercurrent of *The Fantastic Voyage*, the 1966 film about a shrunken submarine entering the bloodstream of a dying scientist to fight a blood clot; said clot was produced as part of an assassination attempt. That film won the Academy Award for special visual effects in 1966. These visual references take viewers into the genre of science fiction and into the epistemology of camp as a subcultural way of knowing and teaching, and, as the scene unfolds, as a powerful fantasy of healing and redemption.<sup>21</sup> Moreover, the scene is structured like a parody of a beauty pageant. The swimming pool scene of the action introduces the pathogen contestants in a bizarre version of the common (but not universal) swimsuit competition. Zero and then Burton conduct interviews with Untreated Tertiary Syphilis, CMV, and Miss HIV herself. That Miss HIV feebly beats up the other pathogens with her umbrella represents the campy fantasy of the competitiveness of beauty queens and the falsity of the niceness of their decorum.

Miss HIV arrives as a grumpy but surprisingly benign blonde drag queen in tawdry wig and tiara, legs crossed, in black dress and hose, floating on what looks like an archery target, shot from above so that she glares up at the camera from underneath her umbrella. The dissident opinions of 1991 are then rehearsed by the other floating viruses. That Miss HIV as a drag queen is played by Michael Callen, a singer and important early North American AIDS activist, is significant here. Callen dies a mere three months after the film's release in 1993.<sup>22</sup> In 1992, at the Alternative AIDS conference in Amsterdam, Callen disputed the causal primacy of HIV: "The HIV paradigm has produced nothing of value for my life and I actually believe that treatments based on the arrogant belief that HIV has proven to be the sole and sufficient cause of AIDS has hastened the deaths of many of my friends."<sup>23</sup> But as Miss HIV in the film, he refuses to dance the co-factorial conga and, with the umbrella emblazoned with letters "HIV," pushes away the other pathogens wishing to claim credit.

Burton then asks Miss HIV about "the whole safer-sex business," in a parody of the beauty pageant's interview section. Miss HIV insists on the necessity of safe-sex practices and then debunks the notion that Dugas was "Patient Zero" and thus responsible for the spread of AIDS in North America: "For better or for worse, that famous flawed cluster soap opera you started back in 1982 convinced everyone that safe sex was crucial."



FIGURE 2. Michael Callen as Miss HIV. John Greyson, dir., *Zero Patience* (1993; Ontario, Canada: Wallace Studios, 1994), DVD. © Triptych Media

Miss HIV absolves Dugas of blame for the spread of HIV. After Zero/Dugas frets, “That story proves that I brought AIDS to North America,” Miss HIV reassures him, “That data merely documents that you slept with some men who slept with some men etc., etc., but it takes much longer than that, sometimes as long as twenty years, to manifest chronic symptoms.” She then tells Zero/Dugas that some of those men may have even infected him and then concludes, “Most importantly, why should it matter who was the first?”

Then as Burton and Dugas watch, Miss HIV breaks into song in a version of the beauty pageant’s talent competition:

Tell a story of a virus,  
Of greed, ambition, and fraud,  
A case of science gone bad.  
Tell a tale of friends we miss,  
A tale that’s cruel and sad.  
Weep for me, Scheherazade,  
Scheherazade.<sup>24</sup>

As the song crescendos, fluid spurts from the microscope into Zero’s eyes, making him suddenly visible to Burton’s ever-present camcorder, and he announces that he is alive and innocent.<sup>25</sup>

Why does it matter that the virus is figured as a speaking, lip-synching drag queen? Drag queens have been useful for thinking about gender for

a range of theorists, from Parker Tyler on Mae West, to the accusations of unavoidable misogyny by Sheila Jeffreys, to Judith Butler's careful celebration of drag's subversive possibilities.<sup>26</sup> Greyson's Miss HIV emblemizes similar contradictions. On the one hand, she offers the seductive promise of the virus finally speaking for itself. Her umbrella slap of the other viruses wanting to do the co-factorial conga dismisses many dissident claims. The film clearly wants viewers to identify with her didactic proclaiming of safe-sex messages. Her absolution of Dugas appears authoritative and is explicitly endorsed in his becoming alive and innocent (again?) for both Burton and Greyson's camera. The recognition of the pedagogical value and role of Michael Callen as Miss HIV feels particularly important, some thirty years after the first appearance of *Zero Patience*, as drag performers are under attack in many state legislatures in the United States. The attacks mostly take the familiar form of a moral panic about the corruption of children. The film subverts the previous form of this moral panic by showing gay George as a responsible teacher of young children.<sup>27</sup>

Whether the figure of the drag queen exposes gay male misogyny or subversive gender-fuck is immaterial here. What is undeniable is that the film uses gay subcultural figures and sites—the swimming pool of the bloodstream is a strong visual echo of the key hot tub bathhouse scenes earlier in the film—to reimagine the protagonists and audience for the story of HIV. In terms of ethical questions, the film imagines itself as speaking to and from HIV-positive people and potentially HIV-positive people and against the pseudoscience of Burton's Hall of Contagion exhibit. Miss HIV refuses the authority of the "scientific" experts, suggesting that idioms from other institutions—the drag show, the bathhouse—can be more effective in imagining and combating the pandemic. Representing the virus as a drag queen turns a pathogen into a teacher and a narrator in a loved and ironized sensory terrain of buttholes, bathhouses, drag shows, and musicals—objects, venues, and genres of a gay subculture under threat from the disease and from homophobic responses to it.<sup>28</sup> The closing of gay bathhouses as health hazards in many North American cities is the occasion for lively debate about the pleasures and dangers of gay male culture.

The Scheherazade reference explodes the film's contemporaneous frame. It provides a small meta-commentary on Sir Richard Francis Burton's role in the film. Burton is, after all, a famous Victorian translator of *A Thousand and One Nights* and the writer of a notorious appendix to his translation of the *Nights* entitled "The Sotadic Zone"—intended to explain the prevalence of

homoerotic elements in the tales, largely in terms of geography: “Within the Sotadic Zone, the Vice is popular and endemic, held at the worst to be a mere peccadillo, whilst the races to the North and South of the limits here defined practise it only sporadically amid the opprobrium of their fellows who, as a rule, are physically incapable of performing the operation and look upon it with the liveliest disgust.”<sup>29</sup>

The first English words spoken in the film, by a young boy in George’s classroom, are: “In *The Arabian Nights*, Scheherazade is sentenced to death.” The figure of Scheherazade is thus associated with George, the teacher of this classroom, who is going blind from CMV, and prior to the advent of antiretrovirals in the early 1990s, an HIV-positive diagnosis was frequently viewed as a death sentence of sorts. The structuring premise of the frame tale of *A Thousand and One Nights* provides a powerful metaphoric container for the film. King Shahryar kills a woman each night after having sex with her, until he is seduced and redeemed by Scheherazade’s storytelling. The film wishes to use the *Nights* to tell a different story about the relationship between sex and death than the one that has been told about “Patient Zero.” In doing so, the film inhabits and critiques the orientalism of its central protagonist, Richard Burton. The film further plays with the historical rumors of Burton’s sexuality. He and Zero become lovers.<sup>30</sup> Burton’s presence reminds us of the perverse origins of sexology as an emergent science in the late nineteenth century, that the line between science and sexual practice was once blurred, and that there may be interesting possibilities in blurring it once again in the context of the HIV/AIDS pandemic, as the emergence of safe-sex practices in the laboratory of the bathhouse indicates.

The final injunction of Miss HIV’s song is “Weep for me, Scheherazade,” and the long operatic repetition of the name of the famous narrator of *A Thousand and One Nights* not only positions both Zero and Burton as Scheherazade, but also, and more importantly, us, the viewers. Miss HIV tells us to tell two kinds of tales—“Tell a story of a virus / Of greed, ambition, and fraud / A case of science gone bad,” and “Tell a tale of friends we miss / A tale that’s cruel and sad.”

The first story is one of political and sociological critique; that is, the ongoing story of blunders, callousness, and failures of the attempts both to address and ignore the AIDS crisis. The second is the tale of friends we miss and points to the mourning and memorializing work that Miss HIV believes is necessary. We are not too far from the psychoanalytically inflected arguments in art critic Douglas Crimp’s roughly contemporaneous essay

“Mourning and Militancy.”<sup>31</sup> And Miss HIV is exhorting viewers to be at least like Scheherazade, spinner of a thousand tales, who puts her own life at risk in order to save others like her and to teach the agent of death—in her case, her lover and king—that sex and death need not be inevitably connected, that the genres and tonalities of sex, sexuality, and gender need not be tragic.

Michael Callen and Richard Berkowitz’s “How to Have Sex in an Epidemic” is widely credited as the inaugural text of safe-sex practices.<sup>32</sup> *Zero Patience* works to turn Zero from villain to a key figure in the invention of safe-sex practices, from scapegoat to person. The agent of this transformation is a singing drag queen in Zero’s own blood. Miss HIV is figured as the voice of historical correction, redemption, and pedagogy, but she does not weep for herself. Instead, the work of mourning and memorialization is handed over to the legendary Scheherazade and to the viewers. The anthropomorphizing of the virus makes an ethical claim around the unruliness of the body. The scene makes it clear that Zero has no control over the pathogens in his bloodstream. They literally have lives of their own. Miss HIV is tragically not amenable to Zero’s will.

Telling another story about Zero, a new one, cannot really make him alive again, but it can allow him to speak for long enough to clear his name and reevaluate his place in the imagined histories of the pandemic. It is not insignificant that Michael Callen’s Miss HIV is the agent of this transformation. In the slightly macabre and campy parody of a beauty pageant in Zero’s bloodstream, Miss HIV literally beats out the other contenders—untreated tertiary-stage syphilis, CMV (cytomegalovirus), among others—for the dubious implied title of Miss Immune System Wrecker. In being played by Michael Callen, Miss HIV simultaneously emerges as an activist and the agent of the redemption of the memory of Zero, if not Zero himself. She both lays the dead to rest, and, through her strong advocacy of safe-sex practices, she can prevent future deaths. With the ache of hindsight, viewers now can also mourn Michael Callen and his generation of AIDS activists.

Imaginative meaning is not made only in the imaginations of producers and consumers but in the equally complicated realms of institutions and economies. In terms of the funding of its production, *Zero Patience* marks a moment in the North Atlantic AIDS crisis when public funding became available for cultural productions. The film script was initially developed through a grant from the Canadian Film Centre, and the production was funded by a consortium of parastatal organizations—the Canada Council,

Telefilm Canada, and the Ontario Film Development Corporation in Canada—and Channel 4, a commercially self-funded but publicly owned broadcasting channel in the United Kingdom.<sup>33</sup> This Miss HIV is enabled by institutions that recognize both aesthetic innovation and HIV prevention to be public goods, marking a moment in the palimpsestic history of the modern welfare state that can be usefully contrasted to subsequent state, international, and NGO attempts to tackle the pandemic.

*Zero Patience's* Miss HIV is thus a figure who instructs in a contemporary gay vernacular of those the film imagines as most affected by the pandemic, while being played by an HIV-positive activist. She works as a safe-sex advocate and activist as well as a historian rewriting dominant and phobic accounts of the ostensible origin of the pandemic in North America and exhorts Zero/Dugas and Burton and the viewers to tell other kinds of stories about the pandemic.

#### “STIGMA FREE”: MISS HIV AS THE GIRL NEXT DOOR

At first blush, it would appear that Botswana's Miss HIV Stigma Free has very little in common with Greyson and Callen's figure of a Miss HIV.<sup>34</sup> Despite the elements of a competition between Miss HIV and the female figures representing syphilis, CMV, and others, Greyson's *Zero Patience* only parodies a beauty pageant, and the femininity performed by Michael Callen as Miss HIV is hyperbolic rather than quotidian, as one expects from most drag queens. The Miss HIV Stigma Free pageant, first held in Botswana in 2003, has not much in common with a pageant like the Miss World beyond adherence to the basic generic form of a pageant itself, yet it is very much not a parody. Contestants in Miss HIV Stigma Free, like contestants in Miss World, appear in evening wear and are interviewed by judges. They also appear in traditional Tswana feminine attire. In 2005, an audience of five hundred people watched the pageant live. The rules for contestants' eligibility are not that they represent a country or region—like in the big national or international pageants—nor a disease in Zero's campily rendered bloodstream, but rather that they are either HIV-positive themselves or that they have a close relative who is. Katherine Curtiss notes: “To change Botswana's regional misconceptions about HIV, Kesego Basha-Mupeli founded the Miss HIV Stigma Free pageant. A pageant designed for women who are currently receiving health and wellness counseling and HIV antiretroviral treatment

to come out to their friends and family as being HIV-positive.”<sup>35</sup> Given the very high prevalence rates in Botswana in the first decade of the twenty-first century, there would be no shortage of eligible contestants.

Conditions for entry thus starkly differ between an insurgent pageant like Miss HIV Stigma Free and an international spectacle like Miss World or Miss Universe. That said, like in Miss World, a contestants’ interview makes up 50 percent of her final score, though the interview questions gauge the contestants’ knowledge about HIV—its transmission, symptoms, prevention, and treatment. Most of the contestants are already HIV/AIDS counselors. The contestants of Miss HIV Stigma Free in 2005 were trained in contestant deportment by the 2004 Miss Botswana, Jubu Peacock, who expressed the hope that the country would soon see an openly HIV-positive Miss Botswana. In terms of personnel, there is some overlap within the pageant world. Miss HIV Stigma Free is thus understood as a “real” beauty queen, or adjacent to one, rather than as a parody, because to do her restorative pedagogical work she must invoke forms of embodiment and cultural vernaculars that speak to the experiences of Botswana in 2003, by appearing as “normal” as possible.<sup>36</sup>

The material context of HIV prevention and treatment options in Botswana in that moment are central to the kind of interventions Miss HIV Stigma Free can imagine making. In his *Three Letter Plague* (2008), published in the US as *Sizwe’s Test*, South African writer Jonny Steinberg begins with the problem of why, despite then having the only free antiretroviral rollout program on the continent, the HIV-positive population of Botswana had been reluctant to take advantage of life-saving medicines.

Knowing that up to a third of its population had HIV or AIDS, and that about one hundred thousand people were in urgent need of drugs, the government of Botswana announced in 2001 that it would offer free antiretroviral treatment to every citizen with AIDS. It was a dramatic declaration of intent, unprecedented in sub-Saharan Africa. By the time the drugs had hit the shelves and health personnel were ready to administer treatment, just about every soul in Botswana knew of it.

And yet, on the last day of 2003, more than two years after the launch of the program, only about fifteen thousand people had come forward for treatment. The rest—over eighty-five thousand people—had stayed at home. The majority would now be dead.

Why did they not go to get the drugs?

When people die en masse within walking distance of treatment, my inclination is to believe that there must be a mistake somewhere, a miscalibration between institutions and people.<sup>37</sup>

One could argue that this is the national terrain in which the Miss HIV Stigma Free pageant makes sense: How to help people access the life-saving treatment they need, and to overcome the forces of shame and stigma that are understood as the most significant impediments to accessing treatment.<sup>38</sup> One can read the pageant as an attempt to address this “miscalibration between institutions and people.”

Whereas Miss HIV in *Zero Patience* attempts to give a human face to the virus itself, Miss HIV Stigma Free works to humanize and normalize the person living with HIV. I would argue that one of the most powerful aspirations of insurgent or (arguably) subaltern beauty pageants is their attempt to capture normative gender power for stigmatized and marginalized groups, who have been expelled from it. Although beauty pageants, with their investment in competition and potential commodification of bodies, can from some perspectives look like allegories of capitalism, patriarchy, and western cultural imperialism, the event of the pageant has proved seductive to resource-poor communities. To hold a beauty pageant, all you need is a space, contestants, judges, a theme, and community buy-in, but Miss HIV Stigma Free, in terms of its organization and funding, does not quite or only come from below.

The Miss HIV Stigma Free pageant, at the level of organization and funding, emerges through the glass darkly of corporate benevolence. We have a partnership between a local nongovernmental organization (Centre for Youth and Hope), Merck (the multinational pharmaceutical), the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, and De Beers (the South African diamond monopoly). At the level of the economic, even if only in the simplest “follow the money” way, Miss HIV Stigma Free is clearly a globalized cultural event and was inaugurated in the same year as PEPFAR (discussed in the introduction to this book). PEPFAR produced a massively influential and contested shift in the funding and programming of HIV-related health initiatives, with significant global reach. This pageant represents a neoliberal—at the level of funding and organization—“best practice” to supplement a massive postcolonial state public health initiative. There was not initial state funding for the pageant itself.

At the level of consumption, its primary sites are national and local. The winner of the pageant is charged with touring Botswana, promoting HIV testing, and advocating for antiretroviral treatment. In an interview, Miss HIV Stigma Free 2005, Cynthia Leshomo, admits to feeling and looking a little tired because “I have just come from a launch of a nutritional supplement at Game City and after this will be heading to the National Stadium to register for a

Christian Crusade that is coming to town.”<sup>39</sup> These are the local and national sites of circulation of a Miss HIV Stigma Free. Simultaneously, the pageant increasingly has an international audience, being the subject of a play produced in Warsaw, Poland, in 2005, and the ruse for a 2008 film that lops the “Stigma Free” off her title, as well as graduate student studies in Vienna, and cameo appearances in national and international HIV magazines.<sup>40</sup>

Nevertheless, it is tempting to read this pageant as the local hijacking of a form from below, to take the popularity of beauty pageants and make the form do other cultural work than the prompting of commodified normative gender fantasy: that is, to make that prompting restorative.<sup>41</sup> It appears that what personally consoles and is seen as having transforming political power is precisely a reentry into the possibilities of the normative. Cynthia Leshomo, the winner in 2005, told reporters, “I want them to see that even if you are HIV-positive, you can look sharp. You can look beautiful.” Anna Ratotsisi, one of the contestants, asked the crowd, “Look at me. I’m attractive. I’m HIV-positive. What’s the big deal?”<sup>42</sup> We are in the imagined healing power of normative sexual allure as an encouragement to getting tested and treated. Ratotsisi asserts that being HIV-positive and knowing and proclaiming that status does not make one ugly or remove you from the powers and pleasures of being sexually desirable, fit, and potentially reproductive.<sup>43</sup> The film discussed in the next section will turn this claim into an accusation of “sexualizing the disease,” and thus furthering the spread of the pandemic.

The pageant, however, can also be read as a marker of a significant national resistance to the encroachment of globalization in terms of the universalizing neoliberal economic orthodoxies espoused by the international monetary institutions, the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund, even as its own funding depends on such networks, policies, and ideologies. We are, after all, at the height of the era of structural adjustment, with its attempted privatization of public goods and services as the pageant takes the stage. Economist Ingeborg Klepper and marketing professor Marylouise Caldwell identify the pageant’s participation in the transnational development discourses of “embodied health movement activism” and “Positive Living”—“best practices” often at odds with local lifeworlds—but I argue the pageant is not entirely assimilable to the forces of globalization.<sup>44</sup>

In contrast to these wider global economic and ideological drivers, Botswana was able to use its diamond wealth in concert with its relatively small population to offer the first state-funded antiretroviral rollout to its citizens on the continent. This rollout is remarkable in that global moment

when many states in sub-Saharan Africa saw debt service as the leading priority on national budgets alongside the opening up of national markets in the name of structural adjustment, as well as the aforementioned privatization and/or NGOization of healthcare.<sup>45</sup> Miss HIV Stigma Free, while not an employee of the Botswana government, can advocate for antiretroviral treatment because she lives in a country where such treatment is both available and free, even if her stipend, free beauty treatments, and her very title come from the neoliberal collaborations that produce the pageant as an event.

What literally enables Miss HIV Stigma Free as a national public event is an enormously complicated set of transnational exchanges, precisely connected at the level of the economic to the global histories and their libidinal economies that have allowed the entrenchment of the pandemic in the first place: De Beers and Merck—the former, part of the prime corporate agent of the mineral revolution that drove the incorporation of Southern African societies into the world capitalist system, and the latter, one of the diversified pharmaceutical conglomerates that have the saving medicines to sell. (The character of George’s ambivalence about protesting the drug company that produces the drug that may save his eyesight in *Zero Patience* registers a similar historical irony.) The spectacle of Miss HIV Stigma Free, a title that itself confronts a history of commodified gender normativity, performs important pedagogical work in a national public sphere, but she can never quite reveal the conditions of her possibility.

Miss HIV Stigma Free imagines herself as a role model despite, and not because of, her HIV-positive status. The 2003 Miss HIV Stigma Free, Kgalalelo Ntsepe, cowrote a pamphlet with Glynis Clacherty called *I’m Positive: Botswana’s Beauty Queen*.<sup>46</sup> Published by Heinemann as part of its Junior African Writers Series (JAWS) HIV/AIDS series, the pamphlet articulates its aim “to install the knowledge, skills, attitudes and values that will enable our children to confront the pandemic that is sweeping through our world.” Rhetoric scholar Daniel C. Brower argues that “in the narrative of Kgalalelo Ntsepe, one can discern the operation of material politics at global and national levels in a specific body dramatized in the format of a glamorous cultural production.” Those large-scale material politics are undoubtedly at play, but “glamorous cultural production” seems more means than end to Ntsepe.<sup>47</sup> The pamphlet concludes:

I now live my life to work to stop stigma against people with HIV. I am planning to go all over Africa telling people my story and teaching them about



FIGURE 3. Kgalalelo Ntsepe, the first Miss HIV Stigma Free (2003). William Rankin, Sean Brennan, Ellen Schell, Jones Laviwa, and Sally Rankin, “The Stigma of Being HIV-Positive in Africa,” *PLoS Medicine* 2, no. 8 (2005): e247, 10.1371/journal.pmed.0020247. © Sönke C. Weiss

HIV. Then I am going to buy goats and some cows. I have some goats and three cows already. They are at home. I am planning to go back home and be a farmer later. I have a future! I have a future even with HIV.<sup>48</sup>

The final image of the pamphlet is one of Miss HIV Stigma Free in a T-shirt and baseball cap talking to four young children. This pamphlet tells us clearly what a Miss HIV Stigma Free thinks of herself. For Ntsepe, winning the title looks most like a psychologically restorative event. Unlike the exceptionality conferred on the winners of many beauty pageants, winning Miss HIV Stigma Free offers her the opportunity simply to be normal again—to go back home. This Miss HIV wishes to reenter the genre of living that could be called the “peasant pastoral”—the world of social reproduction inhabited by children, goats, and cows, to not be eternally marked by her encounters with the traumas of colonial and postcolonial modernity. This restorative fantasy is in many ways a feature of insurgent or even subaltern beauty pageants.

Thinking about this pageant in terms of the socially transformative work it hopes to accomplish, and how it imagines this work and the historical ironies of its funding and organization, I find myself struggling to imagine the kinds of knowledges that would need to be yoked together to write a

political economy of sentimentality. The aching pathos of this restorative ethos infused in a pageant like Miss HIV Stigma Free is rendered appallingly clear in the Miss Landmine pageants referenced at the opening of this chapter. The winner of a Miss Landmine pageant wins not only a title, a sash, and a tiara, but also the prosthetic limb that will substitute for the one she lost. This literalization of restoration exposes the limitations, perhaps deliberately, of the beauty pageant's imagining of restoration or redress: All contestants need prostheses, but only the winner wins one! We are in the shaming strategy of human rights discourse here.<sup>49</sup> A single person's return to normative personhood stands in as a goad for a victimized group, whether HIV-positive people or landmine victims. Where Miss HIV Stigma Free differs from a Miss Landmine is that Botswana is a country that offers free antiretroviral treatment to all its citizens who need it, and, more problematically, want it. In Miss Landmine, only the winner wins the prosthesis; Miss HIV Stigma Free works to encourage everyone to be tested and for all HIV-positive people to get and take their antiretrovirals.

#### MISS HIV: MISS HIV AS FEMME FATALE

EthnoGraphic Media's 2008 documentary, *Miss HIV*, makes the figure of Miss HIV a partisan combatant in an ideological war around global HIV/AIDS policy, particularly as it pertains to sub-Saharan Africa, which itself is part of the export of western-based ongoing culture wars fought on the terrain of gender and sexuality, now of long duration. The sites and issues of these skirmishes are continually shifting. Homosexuality is a decadent western import. No, homophobia is the decadent western import. Binary gender was the colonial imposition. No, now it is gender diversity that is neocolonial.<sup>50</sup> I will argue that *Miss HIV*'s representation of the Miss HIV Stigma Free pageant suggests that the pageant represents western imperialism, performs a dangerous sexualization of the pandemic, and is a site where the interests of HIV-negative people stand in sharp distinction to the interests of HIV-positive people.

In the film *Miss HIV*, the Miss HIV Stigma Free pageant is made to represent Botswana as one inter/national model—massive treatment rollout, a focus on safer sex rather than monogamy or abstinence campaigns—for combating the spread of HIV. The contestants in the pageant are primarily represented in the film as outspoken femmes fatales who use their sexual allure to

confound the men attracted to them. Sex with an HIV-positive woman is seen as the powerful and risky route to normalizing HIV-positive people and the most effective way of countering the stigma of HIV. This argument is made explicitly through interviews with a contestant in the pageant.

When viewers first meet Gaelebale Thabang, she tells the story of the death of her sister and how this death occurred in a climate of stigma, silence, shame, and denial. The next time she appears in the film, she is staged as a pained but incorrigible flirt, focused primarily on men's responses to her beauty: "How can a beautiful lady like you be HIV-positive?" . . . [M]en, they say no, we want to love you—we love you. We want you to be—one say, my girlfriend—one say, to be my wife. They don't know what I am going to say. I'll dance. I'll do everything to attract them. Every day when I go to the kitchen for breakfast, lunch, or supper, about six men . . . say 'Baby, come here, can you give me your number please?'"<sup>51</sup>

This representation of a Miss HIV Stigma Free contestant is nothing like the representations found in *I'm Positive: Botswana's Beauty Queen*. Kgalalelo Ntsepe describes her winning of the title: "When I came onto the stage everyone was shouting for me. They know I am a big joker and that I speak about things so they wanted to hear me. I was nervous but I knew my dress was beautiful. And I spoke about how we need to accept people with HIV. . . . I thought I would not win because I was not beautiful, but I think the judges were looking for the beauty of courage and openness . . . Winning has given me the courage to do this work."<sup>52</sup>

We are in the language of sentimental interiority here—the beauty of courage and openness rather than the beauty of sexual allure. The film *Miss HIV* cannot portray this way that a Miss HIV might feel about herself. In *Far and Beyond*, a young adult novel by Unity Dow published in 2001, a mere two years before the first Miss HIV Stigma Free pageant, a High Court justice in Botswana risks reproducing the tradition/modernity dyad as the crucible of African gendered subjectivity, but also movingly works against the idea of modernity as sexualization and chastity as tradition and imagines African women beyond these strictures.<sup>53</sup>

The polemic of the documentary *Miss HIV* goes beyond merely sustaining accusations that the pageant sexualizes the disease; the film intercuts a scene of the contestants in the pageant dancing with shots of open graves. And the ebullient and charismatic Ugandan pastor, Dr. Martin Ssempe, makes the accusation that the pageant is sexualizing the disease loudly

and clearly. Ssempe achieved a degree of notoriety for burning condoms at Makerere University in Kampala in 2004, but the film makes no mention of this, nor of the fact that Ssempe has been a major supporter of the death penalty for homosexuality in Uganda.<sup>54</sup>

Not surprisingly, given the film's commitment to ventriloquizing African voices, the most damning attack on this version of Miss HIV Stigma Free, the ideological pole that the film requires the figure of a Miss HIV to embody, comes from a contestant's brother. When the young man is interviewed in the film, he is first heard making the claim that HIV-positive people are as deserving of sexual attention as HIV-negative people, and that they should not be discriminated against sexually but that condoms should be used. Later in the film he recants, saying, "Ah I have never had sex. Okay, I have been having so many girlfriends, but I have never had sex with them. Some even pressurize me to have sex with them, but I feel I am not ready. I don't want to be HIV-positive—at all. That's the best reason I don't want to have sex, I don't want to get HIV."

Late in the film, this young man from Botswana is shown to have worked out by himself what the ABC campaign in Uganda knew all along, and the film, which mostly gives equal airtime to the ideological positions it constructs as deadly adversaries, definitively reveals its preference for the putative success of Uganda against Botswana. The Ugandan success story is a reassuring one, but not only have its statistical successes come under increased critical scrutiny, the film's claims that it is an indigenous African solution is also highly dubious. A focus on abstinence and fidelity has been a feature of many Christian responses to HIV/AIDS policy in other spaces and times than Uganda in the 1990s.

*Miss HIV* makes the argument that stigma, fear, and fear of stigma can be powerful allies in prevention campaigns, and Uganda is presented as exemplary. Former Harvard professor Edward C. Green, ignoring the key fact that ARVs were neither available nor free in the Uganda of the ABC campaign years, pronounces in the film: "People have to be made afraid of getting the disease. We can't make it seem like . . . as long as you use our antiretroviral drugs, you can lead a happy life, a normal life. The strategy of Uganda was to make people afraid of AIDS, to cut through the denial, to believe that AIDS was really a killer disease, and it was really in Uganda and people were getting it." In short, making people very afraid as the prevention strategy par excellence. How does that help the third of the Botswana population living with

HIV? The Botswana case makes it clear that stigma, fear, and fear of stigma are equally powerful deterrents when it comes to testing and treatment.

But the film wishes to construct an ideological opposition between Uganda and Botswana, claiming that Uganda institutes an arguably successful, authentically African set of policies for addressing HIV/AIDS and that Botswana reveals an allegiance to a sex-positive western set of policies that were overdetermined by the first “gay” wave of the pandemic, the people living with HIV in Botswana too terrified to get tested or treatment, the quotidian aspirations of Miss HIV Stigma Free be damned.

Who/what is EthnoGraphic Media, and how did this documentary on Miss HIV Stigma Free come to be made?<sup>55</sup> EthnoGraphic Media (EGM) is an educational nonprofit 501(c)3 community of artists and filmmakers that appears to no longer be in business, though the director of *Miss HIV*, Jim Hanon, continues to make films. EGM’s web presence is shadowy at best. Its Facebook page has not been updated since 2014. Its website now offers real estate tips.<sup>56</sup> Its LinkedIn page describes it as follows: “EGM IS EthnoGraphic Media, a revolutionary film and new media group exploring the critical issues of our time. We are writers, artists and filmmakers backed by a worldwide community believing in local solutions to global problems. We believe the actions encouraged by scripture are inherently relevant to every life and every culture. Our films blend the insight of documentary story telling with animation, design and styling similar to graphic novels. We strive to be catalysts—entry points to social change—through film and grassroot programs.”<sup>57</sup> I have been unable to ascertain how the film was funded, but its ideological commitments are of a piece with the huge investments of US-based evangelicals in shoring up so-called traditional values in Uganda.<sup>58</sup>

Its religious leanings frankly disclosed on that page are nowhere declared in the actual film, so it may be fair to conclude that what is presented as policy is more like theology, and the specificities of Botswana in the early 2000s must be rendered identical to those of Uganda in the early 1990s. The phrase “every life, every culture” effectively flattens out any notion of African specificity— affective, historical, cultural, epidemiological—that the film pretends to defend. More importantly, the ensemble of strategies to eliminate the stigma against people, and particularly women living with HIV, in which Miss HIV Stigma Free was a key player, is working. In 2022 Botswana, mother to child transmission is close to being eliminated and the prevalence rate has more than halved.<sup>59</sup>

## CONCLUSION

To frame the central problems with Hanon's film in terms of the figure of Miss HIV, his version of Miss HIV Stigma Free must silence the powerfully quotidian voice of the first Miss HIV Stigma Free, Kgalalelo Ntsepe, paradoxically in the name of African authenticity. Instead, the figure of Miss HIV must appear as a glamorous and lethal ghoul, using her beauty to spread infection. To construct this ideological opposition, the film needs to forget an intra-African set of historical concerns. Miss HIV Stigma Free is responding to the needs of a country that had a purported prevalence rate of 32 percent in 2001 and a democratic government that was willing and able to provide an antiretroviral rollout.<sup>60</sup> Uganda in 1991 had a purported prevalence rate of 16 percent, antiretroviral treatment was in its infancy, with no viable treatment options. Under the dictatorship of Yoweri Museveni, Uganda was divided by a protracted and ugly civil war. An ABC campaign made sense then and there. It would not necessarily make the same kind of sense or have similar outcomes in Botswana in 2003. In imagining ABC as a one-size-fits-all success story, the film ironically accomplishes what it accuses Miss HIV Stigma Free of doing: imposing its ideological baggage with no concern for African specificities.

Although the Miss HIV Stigma Free pageant may be a neoliberal performance at the level of production, it proleptically critiques EthnoGraphic Media's *Miss HIV* by insisting on forms of African feminine agency outside the networks of the film's representation of her. EthnoGraphic Media's visual remonstrations invoke a colonial anthropology dressed in an anticolonial guise. EthnoGraphic Media's presentation of Miss HIV Stigma Free pageant argues that African agency is being eroded by western cultural productions and ideologies about sex, gender, and AIDS, without any acknowledgment that it is itself precisely such a cultural production. The film unwittingly shows how projects that portend to be anticolonial foment and consolidate coloniality. Miss HIV in the film is presented as a hypersexualized westernized vamp, almost a deracinated figure though still risking a colonial hypersexualizing of Blackness. Miss HIV Stigma Free in the long-running pageant wishes to be a regular African woman. She is robbed of the Stigma Free part of her title and thus her pedagogical agency and place in an African national community. *Zero Patience* avoids the blackening of the subject of HIV by having the primary figure of Miss HIV embodied by a white male—Michael Callen, but that may make more sense for that film's imagined audience and

sites of intervention. George, the racialized subject of HIV in *Zero Patience*, appears as more like Miss HIV Stigma Free than EthnoGraphic Media's *Miss HIV*, and while the film guards against the universalizing whiteness of queerness, in its figuration of a Miss HIV, that risk appears.

Moreover, the Miss HIV Stigma Free pageant imagines itself as both a treatment and prevention campaign. The figure of Miss HIV Stigma Free must work on both fronts simultaneously. By restoring quotidian dignity to the HIV-positive person, she fights the stigma of getting tested and treated. By telling her story and teaching about the transmission and prevention of HIV, she hopes to embody the pedagogical work of prevention. For the film *Miss HIV*, prevention must always trump treatment, and we are left in the ethically untenable position of the interests of HIV-positive people and HIV-negative people appearing as a zero-sum game.

*Zero Patience's* Miss HIV, Botswana's Miss HIV Stigma Free, and the eponymous Miss HIV of EthnoGraphic Media's *Miss HIV* stand in complicated geographic, historical, political, and ethical relation to each other, as they work the figure of the beauty queen as drag activist/teacher, ordinary woman, and lethal warning. Michael Callen as Miss HIV has historically circumscribed options: preaching safe-sex and exhorting viewers to both contest the hegemonic stories circulating about AIDS and to remember the friends "we miss." This incarnation of a Miss HIV is enabled by a transnational collaboration between developed nation-states with public investments in both healthcare and broadcasting. Miss HIV Stigma Free wishes to balance treatment and prevention as a neoliberal (produced by NGO and corporate responsibility collaboration) attempt to supplement a huge state public health initiative, and to restore agency and dignity to HIV-positive African women. The figure of Miss HIV in *Miss HIV* embodies an ideological position in the global fight against the pandemic as the dangerous enemy in the imagining of authentic African agency, and as the unwitting agent of western, liberal cultural imperialism. Here she is a femme fatale deadly to innocent menfolk blinded by her sexual allure. She appears to be enabled by the export of US-based culture wars. All three figures stand and fall in the uneven global imaginary of the beauty pageant as a site of pedagogy, restoration, and betrayal.