

I Want to Be Miss America

JULIA ALVAREZ

In "I Want to Be Miss America," Julia Alvarez examines an American tradition from an outsider's point of view. After moving to the United States from the Dominican Republic at the age of ten, Alvarez and her sisters watched the Miss America pageant for clues about how to look more "American."

A prolific writer, Alvarez has published eighteen books, including *How the Garcia Girls Lost Their Accents* (1991), winner of the PEN/Oakland Award, and *In the Time of the Butterflies* (1994), a National Book Critics Circle Finalist. *In the Time of the Butterflies* was made into a 2001 feature film produced by and starring Salma Hayek, with Marc Anthony and Edward James Olmos. Alvarez's *Before We Were Free* (2002) won the 2004 Pura Belpré Medal for narrative from the American Library Association. Other recent works, *In the Name of Salomé* (2000), *A Cafecito Story* (2001), and *How Tía Lola Came to Stay* (2001), also won top book and media awards. She has recently published a novel, *Saving the World* (2006), and a nonfiction book, *Quinceañera: Coming of Age in the USA* (2007). Alvarez currently teaches creative writing at Middlebury College in Vermont. "I Want to Be Miss America" was first published in her collection of essays *Something to Declare* (1999).

THINKING AHEAD Within every culture, there are some firmly held beliefs about what constitutes "beauty." How are these ideals a reflection of the values of the culture? When have you questioned any of the beauty ideals in your own culture? What caused you to begin to question them?

As young teenagers in our new country, my three sisters and I searched for clues on how to look as if we belonged here. We collected magazines, studied our classmates and our new TV, which was where we discovered the Miss America contest.

Watching the pageant became an annual event in our family. Once a year, we all plopped down in our parents' bedroom, with Mami and Papi presiding from their bed. In our nightgowns, we watched the fifty young women who had the American look we longed for.

The beginning was always the best part—all fifty contestants came on for one and only one appearance. In alphabetical order, they stepped forward and enthusiastically introduced themselves by name and state. "Hi! I'm! Susie! Martin! Miss! Alaska!" Their voices rang with false cheer. You could hear, not far off, years of high-school cheerleading, pom-poms,

bleachers full of moon-eyed boys, and moms on phones, signing them up for all manner of lessons and making dentist appointments.

There they stood, fifty puzzle pieces forming the pretty face of America, 4
so we thought, though most of the color had been left out, except for one, or possibly two, light-skinned black girls. If there was a “Hispanic,” she usually looked all-American, and only the last name, López or Rodríguez, often mispronounced, showed a trace of a great-great-grandfather with a dark, curled mustache and a sombrero charging the Alamo.¹ During the initial roll-call, what most amazed us was that some contestants were ever picked in the first place. There were homely girls with cross-eyed smiles or chipmunk cheeks. My mother would inevitably shake her head and say, “The truth is, these Americans believe in democracy—even in looks.”

We were beginning to feel at home. Our acute homesickness had passed, 5
and now we were like people recovered from a shipwreck, looking around at our new country, glad to be here. “I want to be in America,” my mother hummed after we’d gone to see *West Side Story*,² and her four daughters chorused, “OK by me in America.” We bought a house in Queens, New York, in a neighborhood that was mostly German and Irish, where we were the only “Hispanics.” Actually, no one ever called us that. Our teachers and classmates at the local Catholic schools referred to us as “Porto Ricans” or “Spanish.” No one knew where the Dominican Republic was on the map. “South of Florida,” I explained, “in the same general vicinity as Bermuda and Jamaica.” I could just as well have said west of Puerto Rico or east of Cuba or right next to Haiti, but I wanted us to sound like a vacation spot, not a Third World country, a place they would look down on.

Although we wanted to look like we belonged here, the four sisters, our 6
looks didn’t seem to fit in. We complained about how short we were, about how our hair frizzed, how our figures didn’t curve like those of the bathing beauties we’d seen on TV.

“The grass always grows on the other side of the fence,” my mother 7
scolded. Her daughters looked fine just the way they were.

But how could we trust her opinion about what looked good when she 8
couldn’t even get the sayings of our new country right? No, we knew better. We would have to translate our looks into English, iron and tweeze them out, straighten them, mold them into Made-in-the-U.S.A. beauty.

So we painstakingly rolled our long, curly hair round and round, using 9
our heads as giant rollers, ironing it until we had long, shining shanks, like our classmates and the contestants, only darker. Our skin was diagnosed by beauty consultants in department stores as sallow; we definitely needed a strong foundation to tone down that olive. We wore tights even in the summer to hide the legs Mami would not let us shave. We begged

¹the Alamo: Former Franciscan mission in San Antonio, Texas, where Texans lost a heroic battle in the Texas war of independence against Mexico.

²*West Side Story*: Broadway musical (1957) and film (1961) that featured clashes between rival gangs in a modern-day Romeo and Juliet story.

for permission, dreaming of the contestants' long, silky limbs. We were ten, fourteen, fifteen, and sixteen—merely children, Mami explained. We had long lives ahead of us in which to shave.

We defied her. Giggly and red-faced, we all pitched in to buy a big tube of Nair³ at the local drugstore. We acted as if we were purchasing contraceptives. That night we crowded into the bathroom, and I, the most courageous along these lines, offered one of my legs as a guinea pig. When it didn't become gangrenous or fall off as Mami had predicted, we creamed the other seven legs. We beamed at each other; we were one step closer to that runway, those flashing cameras, those oohs and ahhs from the audience.

Mami didn't even notice our Naired legs; she was too busy disapproving of the other changes. Our clothes, for one. "You're going to wear that in public!" She'd gawk, as if to say, What will the Americans think of us?

"This is what the Americans wear," we would argue back.

But the dresses we had picked out made us look cheap, she said, like bad, fast girls—gringas without vergüenza, without shame. She preferred her choices: fuchsia skirts with matching vests, flowered dresses with bows at the neck or gathers where you wanted to look slim, everything bright and busy, like something someone might wear in a foreign country.

Our father didn't really notice our new look at all but, if called upon to comment, would say absently that we looked beautiful. "Like Marilina Monroe." Still, during the pageant, he would offer insights into what he thought made a winner. "Personality, Mami," my father would say from his post at the head of the bed, "Personality is the key," though his favorite contestants, whom he always championed in the name of personality, tended to be the fuller girls with big breasts who gushed shamelessly at Bert Parks.⁴ "Ay, Papi," we would groan, rolling our eyes at each other. Sometimes, as the girl sashayed back down the aisle, Papi would break out in a little Dominican song that he sang whenever a girl had a lot of swing in her walk:

Yo no tumbo caña,
Que la tumba el viento,
Que la tumba Dora
Con su movimiento!

("I don't have to cut the cane,
The wind knocks it down,
The wind of Dora's movement
As she walks downtown.")

My father would stop on a New York City street when a young woman swung by and sing this song out loud to the great embarrassment of his

³Nair: A brand of hair-removal lotion.

⁴Bert Parks: Longtime host of the Miss America pageant.

daughters. We were sure that one day when we weren't around to make him look like the respectable father of four girls, he would be arrested.

My mother never seemed to have a favorite contestant. She was an ex-beauty herself, and no one seemed to measure up to her high standards. She liked the good girls who had common sense and talked about their education and about how they owed everything to their mothers. "Tell that to my daughters," my mother would address the screen, as if none of us were there to hear her. If we challenged her—how exactly did we not appreciate her?—she'd maintain a wounded silence for the rest of the evening. Until the very end of the show, that is, when all our disagreements were forgotten and we waited anxiously to see which of the two finalists holding hands on that near-empty stage would be the next reigning queen of beauty. How can they hold hands? I always wondered. Don't they secretly wish the other person would, well, die? 16

My sisters and I always had plenty of commentary on all the contestants. We were hardly strangers to this ritual of picking the beauty. In our own family, we had a running competition as to who was the prettiest of the four girls. We coveted one another's best feature: the oldest's dark, almond-shaped eyes, the youngest's great mane of hair, the third oldest's height and figure. I didn't have a preferred feature, but I was often voted the cutest, though my oldest sister liked to remind me that I had the kind of looks that wouldn't age well. Although she was only eleven months older than I was, she seemed years older, ages wiser. She bragged about the new kind of math she was learning in high school, called algebra, which she said I would never be able to figure out. I believed her. Dumb and ex-cute, that's what I would grow up to be. 17

As for the prettiest Miss America, we sisters kept our choices secret until the very end. The range was limited—pretty white women who all really wanted to be wives and mothers. But even the small and inane set of options these girls represented seemed boundless compared with what we were used to. We were being groomed to go from being dutiful daughters to being dutiful wives with hymens intact. No stops along the way that might endanger the latter; no careers, no colleges, no shared apartments with girlfriends, no boyfriends, no social lives. But the young women on-screen, who were being held up as models in this new country, were in college, or at least headed there. They wanted to do this, they were going to do that with their lives. Everything in our native culture had instructed us otherwise: girls were to have no aspirations beyond being good wives and mothers. 18

Sometimes there would even be a contestant headed for law school or medical school. "I wouldn't mind having an office visit with her," my father would say, smirking. The women who caught my attention were the prodigies who bounded onstage and danced to tapes of themselves playing original compositions on the piano, always dressed in costumes they had sewn, with a backdrop of easels holding paintings they'd painted. "Overkill," my older sister insisted. But if one good thing came out of our watching this yearly parade of American beauties, it was that subtle permission we all felt as a family: a girl could excel outside the home and still be a winner. 19

60 Define "American"

Every year, the queen came down the runway in her long gown with a sash like an old-world general's belt of ammunition. Down the walkway she paraded, smiling and waving while Bert sang his sappy song that made our eyes fill with tears. When she stopped at the very end of the stage and the camera zoomed in on her misty-eyed beauty and the credits began to appear on the screen, I always felt let down. I knew I would never be one of those girls, ever. It wasn't just the blond, blue-eyed looks or the beautiful, leggy figure. It was who she was—an American—and we were not. We were foreigners, dark-haired and dark-eyed with olive skin that could never, no matter the sun blocks or foundation makeup, be made into peaches and cream.⁵

Had we been able to see into the future, beyond our noses, which we thought weren't the right shape; beyond our curly hair, which we wanted to be straight; and beyond the screen, which inspired us with a limited vision of what was considered beautiful in America, we would have been able to see the late sixties coming. Soon, ethnic looks would be in. Even Barbie, that quintessential white girl, would suddenly be available in different shades of skin color with bright, colorful outfits that looked like the ones Mami had picked out for us. Our classmates in college wore long braids like Native Americans and embroidered shawls and peasant blouses from South America, and long, diaphanous skirts and dangly earrings from India. They wanted to look exotic—they wanted to look like us.

We felt then a gratifying sense of inclusion, but it had unfortunately come too late. We had already acquired the habit of doubting ourselves as well as the place we came from. To this day, after three decades of living in America, I feel like a stranger in what I now consider my own country. I am still that young teenager sitting in front of the black-and-white TV in my parents' bedroom, knowing in my bones I will never be the beauty queen. There she is, Miss America, but even in my up-to-date, enlightened dreams, she never wears my face.

EXERCISING VOCABULARY

1. Record your own definition for each word below in your notebook.

acute (adj.) (5)
sallow (adj.) (9)
gawk (v.) (11)
sashayed (v.) (14)
inane (adj.) (18)

aspirations (n.) (18)
prodigies (n.) (19)
sappy (adj.) (20)
diaphanous (adj.) (21)
gratifying (adj.) (22)

2. Define the word *quintessential* and then explain why Alvarez calls Barbie "that quintessential white girl" (para. 21).

⁵peaches and cream: A complimentary description of Caucasian skin.

3. In her final sentence, why does Alvarez refer to her adult dreams as "enlightened"? How have her dreams changed since her childhood? How truly enlightened are her dreams?

PROBING CONTENT

1. When Alvarez explains where her family came from, what geographic reference points does she use to help friends locate the Dominican Republic? Why does she choose these landmarks instead of others?
2. Why don't the Alvarez girls trust the opinion of their mother about what looks good? Why is their father's opinion also suspect?
3. What hopes for the future were Alvarez and her sisters expected to have? How were these expectations at odds with the plans of some of the Miss America contestants? How did this difference make the girls feel?
4. How did a change in the appearance of Barbie dolls mirror what Alvarez saw at college? How does Alvarez feel about this development?

CONSIDERING CRAFT

1. Why does Alvarez put an exclamation point after every word of the contestant's introduction in paragraph 3? What does this unusual punctuation achieve?
2. In paragraph 4, Alvarez writes, "There they stood, fifty puzzle pieces forming the pretty face of America . . . though most of the color had been left out." How does this figurative language reinforce the main idea of her essay?
3. Reread paragraph 13. Explain the irony in the last sentence. Why does Alvarez use irony here?
4. How does Alvarez's concluding paragraph differ in tone from the first paragraph of her essay? What message does this difference in tone convey to the reader?

WRITING PROMPTS

Responding to the Topic Do you identify with the strong need of Alvarez and her sisters "to look as if we belonged" (para. 1)? Why are some people so motivated not to express and celebrate their differences but to simply "fit in"?

Responding to the Writer Write an essay in which you explore numerous expressions of American culture to prove or disprove Mami's assertion that "Americans believe in democracy—even in looks" (para. 4).

