SCHOOL GIRLS;
OR, THE AFRICAN MEAN GIRLS PLAY

By Jocelyn Bioh | Directed by Lili-Anne Brown
# School Girls; Or, The African Mean Girls Play
by JOCELYN BIOH
Directed by LILI-ANNE BROWN

## CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Page</th>
<th>Section</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Introduction to the <em>School Girls</em> Study Guide</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Top of Her Class</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Skin Deep: A Brief History of Race and the Beauty Pageant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Tales from a Not-So-Almost Pageant Queen</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>A Case for Pageants: Preparation, Practice, Poise, and Progression</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>Exploring the Ugly Side of Beauty Pageants</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>Facing Forward: A Brief History of Ghana</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17</td>
<td>Independence? Not So Fast: Defining Colonialism and Neo-Colonialism</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20</td>
<td>Overcoming Blackness: Colorism and Skin Bleaching in <em>School Girls</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>23</td>
<td>Dangerous Beauty: Sociology and Science</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>31</td>
<td>Mean Girls in Pop Culture: Psychology and Feminism</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>32</td>
<td>Bullying in the New Generation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>34</td>
<td>Back to School: Public Education in Ghana and Chicago</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>36</td>
<td>Connecting the Dots: Miss Universe, Trump, and Russian Interference</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>37</td>
<td>Resources Around Disordered Eating</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>39</td>
<td><em>School Girls</em> Guided Discussion Questions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>40</td>
<td>Theatre Etiquette</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Editors** Quenna L. Barrett, Liam Collier, Sam Mauceri

**Production Managers** Liam Collier, Sam Mauceri

**Designer** Liam Collier

**Contributing Writers** Neena Arndt, Quenna L. Barrett, Liam Collier, Thomas Connors, Mia Guevara Morgan, Anna Gelman, Sam Mauceri, Ja’Quia Parker, Willa Taylor, Abby Wesley

This study guide is published by Goodman Theatre’s Education and Engagement Department for participating schools and teachers in the School Matinee Series. The views reflected in this Study Guide are held by the authors of the articles, not Goodman Theatre.

For more information about Education and Engagement at the Goodman, [click here](#).
The first boy I ever had a huge crush on was Leon Jackson. He was tall for a seventh grader with a bright white smile that came as easily to him as breathing. He was an artist – he did beautiful figure drawings. He could draw anything and dreamed of studying at the Sorbonne.

He treated me as if I was a queen – he carried my books, walked me to and from school every day. He was always gracious and polite to my parents. My dad liked him because he could fix a carburetor. My mother liked him because he always offered to wash the dishes when he came for dinner.

One Saturday after Leon had gone home and my parents and I were having dinner, my grandmother said, “Chile, you can’t get serious about that boy. Think about your children.” Leon was very dark. I don’t think she saw the irony in this since my grandfather was darker than Leon. Maybe she wanted me to marry someone as light as she was to offset my skin tone… I know she believed that I was already at a disadvantage because my hair was nappy. She never believed I would be able to compete, and she was trying to give me every advantage. At least that is what I choose to believe.

When I got to high school, the only thing I wanted was to be popular.

I was not.

That does not mean I didn’t have friends, I did. I had good friends. Diane, Cloe, Charlie, Morris and his nine siblings who lived down the street, my cousins Donna and Retha Kay, and Junior. They were my posse and they were always there for me. But we were never a part of the popular crowd. We could never compete with them.

I wanted to be popular, and popular at James Madison High School in Dallas in the 1970s meant being a part of the Twins’ crew.

Jeanette and Paulette McGaughey were fraternal twins in my class. They were the “it” girls at Madison. They ran the social scene, dictated the fashions, ordained who was and was not worthy, and generally were “cooler” than anyone else. They were the teachers’ pets and they walked the hallways as if they owned the school. But ev-
everyone in their clique was light enough to pass…. And even though our grades were better, we were never chosen to be in the front of a photo, or on the stage for an assembly. We didn’t look the part.

In college, when pledge season came around, I naturally pledged Delta Sigma Theta sorority. I didn’t have a lot of choice as a double legacy: both my mother and her mother were Deltas. But I also didn’t have a lot of choice because the other Black sorority on campus – the Alpha Kappa Alphas – didn’t rush girls as dark as me. The rivalry – and boundaries were fierce and rigid between the AKA’s and the Deltas at University of Texas, even on a campus where only 500 students of the 40,000 were Black.

Colorism subtly influenced my options and limited my opportunities. Intersecting with the usual competition between women and girls, it took a long time for me to be able to accept myself, define myself, and see myself through my own lens and not as a mirrored refraction of others.

Women and girls compete, compare, undermine, and undercut one another. This “indirect aggression” includes behaviors such as criticizing a competitor’s appearance, like their body type and weight, spreading rumors about a person’s sexual behavior, and social exclusion. Evolutionary psychologists suggest this behavior is a way of protecting ourselves. If we diminish and dismiss other women, we raise our value for men. At least that is what we are socialized to believe. It has created a bullying culture that is hard to escape today, especially with the omnipresence of social media.

But what about our own worth? What do we lose when we cannot be ok with who we are and how we look? How do we learn to value our integrity and kindness instead of our color and our clothes?

Jocelyn Bioh’s brilliant School Girls; Or, The African Mean Girls Play is a sharply honed, hilarious dissection of how light-skinned and dark-skinned girls are pitted against each other, and how we are subconsciously raised to compete against each other as women.

Inspired by her mother’s experiences at a boarding school in Ghana, School Girls explores the serious issues of colorism, girlhood, competition, and beauty, issues that still impact girls’ and women’s self-image and their interactions with each other.

You will recognize the characters at the Aburi Girls Boarding School. They attend your schools; they are a part of your church congregation. You may recognize yourselves in the play, both in the adults and the girls. Hopefully, you will also recognize the injury and harm we can cause when we try to conform to who other people insist we be, and realize that it’s who you are, not what you look like or how you dress, that really matters.

“...it took a long time for me to be able to accept myself, define myself, and see myself through my own lens and not as a mirrored refraction of others.”
Top of Her Class

Lili-Anne Brown isn’t afraid of high school mean girls—or directing a big, boisterous play about them either.

by THOMAS CONNORS

Originally printed in Playbill and Onstage+

For most of us, success doesn’t come overnight, but it can appear that way to others when good things seem to happen all at once. Take Chicago’s Lili-Anne Brown. She has been performing and directing for years, making a name for herself locally, but these days, her career trajectory is taking off. On top of her laudable credits as Artistic Director of Bailiwick Chicago, she won Joseph Jefferson Awards for her 2019 staging of Caroline, or Change with Firebrand Theatre and Timeline Theatre Company and her 2018 staging of Buddy: The Buddy Holly Story at American Blues Theater. Just last year, she helmed two much-lauded productions: The Color Purple at Drury Lane Theatre and the world premiere of Ike Holter’s Lottery Day at Goodman Theatre. Now, she returns to the Goodman to direct the Chicago premiere of Jocelyn Bioh’s School Girls; Or, The African Mean Girls Play.

“I started my directing career in summer stock, so I work very fast, but stay loose and ready for Plan Z,” says Brown, offering a glimpse of her work ethic. “I came into my own in storefront theaters, so I have my eye on the budget, no matter where I am now. I abhor wasting resources.” As for engaging with performers, she notes that she spent 15 years as a professional actor, adding “I know what actors go through. So my prime directive is simply, ‘how I can help them get out of their own way?’ That’s all they really need me for.”

Brown started out in musical theater and comedy, genres she still holds dear. “I will find the absurdity in even the most serious piece,” she says. “I will bring out the music and rhythm and high theatricality in a straight play. If you want a hyper-real, grimy kitchen sink drama, I am probably not your girl. I would want that kitchen sink to run with blood or glitter.”

School Girls is set in a Ghanaian high school in the 1980s and revolves around that volatile mix of envy, ambition and admiration that rules the lives of young people, especially young women. Looking back at her own years at St. Ignatius College Prep, Brown says, “I may have had some inadvertent mean girl moments early on. I was bullied in elementary school and I was anxious to reinvent myself as cool in high school—but by senior year, I pulled a Jerry Maguire in my bougie social group over some mean girl stuff that was happening. It sucked. I lost my friend group that I’d been with all four years, and I didn’t get to do any of the fun graduation or prom stuff, all because I stood up for someone who was being slandered—who I think still ended up hanging out with these girls anyway. That’s high school!”

As her career continues to pick up speed, Brown exudes the enthusiasm of an artist for whom passion is everything and the future is rich with possibility. “At the end of the day, all this is in service to the why—why this story, why now, why this way?” she says. “I think any ‘you’re in the big leagues now’ nerves are gone. It feels like coming home to return to the Goodman.”

Thomas Connors is a Chicago-based freelance writer and the Chicago Editor of Playbill.
Skin Deep: A Brief History of Race and the Beauty Pageant
By NEENA ARNDT
Originally printed in Playbill and Onstage+

In School Girls; Or, The African Mean Girls Play, the teenage characters pine to win the Miss Global Universe Pageant, 1986. In the midst of their youth and enthusiasm, these Ghanaian young women aren't yet aware that they are entering into a system rigged against them. The beauty pageant, as we know it, was born out of the idea that being beautiful required white skin.

The first Miss America contest—billed as a “bathing beauty” competition—was held on the beaches of Atlantic City in September 1921. Though 19th century festivals, including May Day and Mardi Gras celebrations, had often featured the crowning of a “queen,” the standalone beauty pageant emerged as American women gained more access to the public sphere, including the right to vote, and the Victorian constraints around decorum and sexuality began to relax (whether the pageant embraced that newfound independence or aimed to preserve Victorian ideals of femininity is up for debate). What is certain is that the pageant’s organizers aimed to celebrate and idealize only white women. All eight of the bathing beauties who graced the beach in 1921 were white; 16-year-old Margaret Gorman won the competition and was praised for her sweetness, short stature and flowing tresses. Two years later, in 1923, African-American women made their first appearance in the event—but not as competitors. Instead, they played “slaves” in a musical number. For nearly half a century, the pageant’s bylaws restricted participation to “members of the white race,” and until the 1940s entrants were required to catalogue their genealogy.

As the century progressed and beauty pageants gained popularity worldwide, women of color found success in pageants outside of America, though international pageants still favored women with light skin. It was not until after the Civil Rights Movement that a black woman competed in the Miss America Pageant, and not until 1983 that a black woman won. That woman, Vanessa Williams (who would eventually be stripped of her title after Penthouse published nude photos of her without her permission) later spoke of the many reactions to her victory. “There were a lot of people,” she noted in 2010, “that did not want me to be representative of the United States and Miss America.”

In 1989, six years after Williams’ win, black journalist Monte R. Young wrote in the Chicago Tribune about his complex interpretations of watching a mixed-race woman represent black Americans. “It had to do with her cat-green eyes, and the golden-brown shoulder-length hair flowing in waves over her light mocha skin,” he writes. “It had to do with the way she looked. With the white man’s stereotype of black beauty.” He goes on to note that when Williams nailed the talent portion of the competition, it was with her rendition of “Happy Days Are Here Again,” in which she “sounded more like Barbara Streisand than Aretha Franklin.” Even when a black woman won, Young implies, she did so because of her proximity to whiteness.

As for the current state of the crown, just last year, the four United States-based pageants (Miss America, Miss USA, Miss Teen USA and Miss Universe) were all won by black women for the first time ever. The current reigning Miss Universe, Zozibini Tunzi, is a black South African woman. In reflecting on her win, Tunzi said, “may every little girl who witnessed this moment forever believe in the power of her dreams and may they see their faces reflected in mine.”

The young characters in School Girls, coming of age in Ghana in the 1980s, long to grow into their own power and beauty. But what or who has the power to define beauty?

Neena Arndt is the Resident Dramaturg at Goodman Theatre.
I remember being a young girl and wanting to save the world. I mean, I’m a lot less young now and this is still my life mission, but I remember being an early-teen-something and saying word-for-word, “I want to bring about world peace and end world hunger.” And yes, even as an early-teen-something, I was aware that this could sound like a vapid, beauty contestant answer, but it was (and in some ways still is) my truth, and likely, I got it from watching Miss Something-or-Other Beauty Pageant.

When I was a sophomore or junior in high school, I almost got the chance to give that answer on stage in one of those pageants. I made it as a semi-finalist in the Miss Teen Illinois USA competition, which wasn’t as difficult as one might think. It was basically a matter of raising enough money to get to that point; at least, that’s how I remember it. I remember being ecstatic that I had made it to the actual competition, and that I thought it would provide a way for me to begin a career in modeling, something I’d always been interested in. A few years before participating in the pageant, I spent a week with Tyra Banks in a summer camp she hosted called TZone, which wasn’t at all about modeling but rather helping young women develop self-esteem. I’m pretty sure I and all the other girls there thought it was a secret modeling scouting mission for her, but truly it wasn’t. I bring up this story in relation to pageants because we actually spent a lot of time reflecting on our interests and passions, which is something I do think “beauty” competitions can help young participants to discover. Even though wanting to “save the world” is as broad a mission statement as can be, having identified that early helped me understand that I wanted to grow up and work in service of others. In the T-Zone camp, I was able to begin to articulate for myself and share with others...
my passion for the arts. Now, as an adult, I use theatre as a tool to work with people to make change on pressing social issues (so, I save the world through theater).

Modeling and beauty pageants can often get into the problems of what it means to rely on being validated by others’ often problematic standards, but I do think there’s a sliver of those industries that can support a person’s own securities when those environments are healthy and relationships within them are cultivated the right way. While School Girls beautifully illustrates some of the complications with pageant systems, I wanted to offer a slightly different perspective: that for many people who participate, it can offer meaningful and valuable experiences. I asked Ashley Cambers, an educational theatre classmate of mine who studied why women over the age of 30 competed in pageants, about her thoughts on some of the joys and pains of pageantry. This is what she had to say.

Quenna L. Barrett: When did you first compete in a pageant?

Ashley Cambers: I competed in my first pageant when I was 21 and a senior in college.

QLB: What made you interested in competing?

AC: I grew up watching pageants on TV and thought they looked like fun. I wanted to compete to see what pageants were really like.

QLB: What pageants have you been in?

AC: I’ve competed at Miss Michigan USA, Miss United States, Miss International, Ms. Captivating, and Ms. United States. Plus, I’ve competed in a few smaller pageants.

QLB: What were/are some of the aspects you enjoy about participating in pageants?

AC: I really enjoy getting to travel to new places as well as meeting women who share some of my interests. As I’ve gotten older, making friends and being more involved in my community have become two of the main reasons why I keep competing.

QLB: What were/are some aspects you dislike about participating in pageants?

AC: Pageants are expensive. Depending on the system, it’s not unheard of for a woman to spend $20,000+ for a pageant. I typically spend a few thousand.

I also wish that the main pageant systems were more accepting of different body types. For instance, I’m petite and often feel at a disadvantage when everyone else on stage towers over me because height equals stage presence to the judges.

(QLB: In your research, what did you find other women enjoyed and disliked about pageants?)

AC: Friendship was a reoccurring theme in my research as well as community service/making a difference, and personal growth.

Dislikes varied from none at all to a lack of diversity and unhelpful feedback.

QLB: Why do you think, generally, women compete in pageants?

AC: Women compete in their first pageant for many different reasons (curiosity, bucket list, scholarships/prize package, etc.), but I think friendship plays a major role in why women choose to continue to compete.

QLB: Is there anything else you’d like to share? Either from your own perspective and/or that emerged from your research?

AC: One of the things I enjoyed about doing my research was reconnecting with some of the women I’ve met through pageantry.
and learning more about them. Their willingness to participate in my project reinforced to me how supportive the pageant community is.

Fortunately, I don’t have any photos to document either my beauty pageant or Tyra camp experiences. They both occurred before the dawn of archiving every moment of life on social media, so they’re stuck somewhere in lifeless digital cameras I’m sure. My mom was never a great archivist either. All of the things I had been keeping since childhood, she let drown in a flooded basement. But that’s neither here nor there. What I will say about my mom is that during my pageant season she showed me how to apply makeup. Makeup for brown girls specifically, that didn’t make me look like a clown, and that was appropriately suited to my young face and features. To this day, I’ve never looked at any YouTube or other makeup tutorials, but I still follow those basic principles that she taught me when preparing for that pageant.

I remember feeling heartbroken when I didn’t win. I really thought I had a shot and was really devastated when I didn’t even place. Unlike the women Ashley spoke to, I don’t remember making many friends. I do remember having to do a group number choreographed to Britney Spears’ “Toxic”, and I bet we all commiserated over our hatred for it by the end. I’m sure I could have made friends, but I was still very shy then. And I don’t remember there being lots of other people who looked like me. Looking back at it I have to wonder how much that was part of the reason why I didn’t make it through...

I do remember feeling a sense of pride and accomplishment that I had made it as far as I had, and that my family and friends were excited for me to participate. While my network of support came in a different form than what Ashley described, I still had one, and that’s a valuable experience for a young person trying to pursue a dream or passion. I may not have gotten to share my vision for changing the world on the competition stage that day, but I was able to begin imagining and building it.
A Case for Pageants: Preparation, Practice, Poise, and Progression
by MIA GUEVARA MORGAN

Beauty pageants have been around since ancient Greece, where Aphrodite is considered to be the very first pageant winner because she bribed the judge, Paris. The rules and organization of pageants have changed a lot since then. One of the most popular beauty pageants we know today in the United States, Miss America, did not begin until the early 1920s. From bribing the judges to impressing the judges with your intellect and special talent, beauty pageants have come a long way. Beauty pageants used to only be about looks, but are now about finding the beauty within, according to 2014 Miss Maryland pageant contestant, Hailli Woo. Beauty pageants today are about benefiting young women, and helping them become more confident and comfortable in who they are and who they want to be.

To those participating, pageants are considered a sport, says Rachel Gombosch, a Miss Ohio contestant. As much time, training, and money goes into preparing for a pageant as goes into preparing for a sports game. Like sports, pageants can bring about a sense of community, whether you are a contestant or an attendee. Pageant contestants are encouraged to make a change in their community and eventually go on to large-scale service work through participation in other pageants, writes former beauty pageant queen Alli Buettner. Beauty pageants bring together people from all over the town or state the pageant is held in. For larger scale pageants, people from around the country or even the world come together to support the contestants. Blogger Natalie Regoli writes that, like sporting events, pageants bring together people who share the same interests and connect people from different classes, communities, and cultures. Because of society’s interest in competition, pageants also call for the “game” to have a winner. As in sports, the winner is the contestant who plays the best; the contestant who has learned the strategy of beauty competitions comes out on top because they know what is expected from the pageant.
organization. Like sports, there are qualifications and rules that need to be followed before the contestant hits the big stage.

In order to qualify for large scale pageants like Miss America, one must compete in and win their local pageant, then win a state pageant. After this, they can enter to be a candidate. For Miss America specifically, a contestant must choose a platform and a talent, submit paperwork, and go through a private interview. Pageant contestants must complete these behind-the-scenes steps before audiences even see them on the stage. Those who are unfamiliar with the hard work that goes into preparing for a pageant tend to discredit pageantry.

Furthermore, there is a stigma attached to the purpose of beauty pageants and to the women who participate in them, but pageants are so much more than judging looks and talent. The “beauty” in beauty pageants is deeper than what is seen on the surface. Contributing writer for the Outlook, Kaitlyn McGuire, writes that pageants are about empowering women. Merriam-Webster defines “empower” as “to promote the self-actualization or influence of.” This definition accurately fits in the context of pageantry because young women learn through intense preparation that they can present themselves as poised and relatable. The judges of these beauty pageants do the “empowering” by validating one young women’s hard-work with a crown and title because she best represented the ideal, ordinary, well-rounded woman. Since there can only be one winner, the other contestants do not always leave the competition feeling as empowered as they did during the competition. Pageant coach Valerie Hayes lists a few tips on her website on what to do if you do not win a beauty pageant. Some of her tips include being a good sport, taking a break, and working on a new strategy for the next competition.

Beauty pageants provide young women and girls with a variety of opportunities such as supporting a cause they are passionate about, networking, and accessing scholarship or fundraising opportunities, explains Miss Ohio contestant Rachel Gombosch. One example of a pageant that creates opportunities is Miss Universe; Miss Universe helps candidates and titleholders pursue their goals by assisting them with the tools and resources needed for them to launch their careers. According to Jonathan P. Decker in the Christian Science Monitor, some titleholders say that adding “pageant winner” to their resume has helped them get noticed in the career they were pursuing: politics, entertainment, broadcast, etc.

Even though competing in pageants can be beneficial, societal bias can disadvantage some competitors. In her 2008 article, “Making the Perfect Queen”, Dr. Rebecca Chiyoko King-O’Riain explores how culture is produced through the globalization of beauty standards, specifically how Western beauty standards have led to bias in beauty competitions across the world. For example, judges tend to award women who are tall, slim, white, and “model-like”.

“Those who are unfamiliar with the hard work that goes into preparing for a pageant tend to discredit pageantry.”

---


Despite the negative connotations associated with beauty pageants, more recently the focus of pageants has been on the personal lives and accomplishments of the contestants. Recently pageants have even eliminated what used to be a popular segment of the competition: the swimsuit contest. Pageants are becoming more diverse with the participation of women of color. 2019 was the first time that women of color were titleholders for the top five major beauty pageants. Pageants are also becoming more inclusive of gender diversity; a recent article from the New York Times, states that pageants are now including transgender women participants. Pageants today strive to continue empowering a variety of participants in order for them to become well-rounded, well-spoken, and poised.

As mainstream pageants become more inclusive, more niche beauty competitions have formed. These specific pageants developed because the more well-known, larger scale pageants have historically been exclusive. For example, Miss Plus America was founded by Melissa Stamper in 2002 because she wanted a pageant that celebrates “full-figured women,” and Miss Petite Pageant was developed by two women in Houston in 1990 because they felt taller women in the Miss America Pageant had better chances at winning than shorter women. The National Deaf Pageant was conceived in the 1970s as a result of the lack of inclusivity in the more popular and widely publicized beauty pageants, like Miss America.4

Pageants are about empowering women and giving them the tools needed to help them succeed in their careers and in everyday life. Because of changes in society over time, pageants have worked on adapting with the times, and have made great progress to show that they are all-inclusive events. Pageantry is intense and glamorous, but only those that fit the bill with their preparation, practice, and motivation can be pageant queens. Beauty pageants are beginning to include a more diverse group of women in order to continue the promotion of uplifting and supporting women and their goals.

The history of beauty pageants is steeped in controversy, mainly surrounding the ideals that these competitions uphold. While specific competitions vary by region, the basic strategies and culture of pageantry remain the same, meaning that many of the problems that have existed since the beginning of pageants, such as sexism, ageism, racism, and links to eating disorders are still present in pageant culture today. The first modern American beauty pageant, which was staged by P. T. Barnum in 1854, was shut down due to public protest. In 2013, the French Senate voted to ban beauty pageants for children under 16. With conflict surrounding beauty pageants, pageant organizations must now decide if pageants are going to change with the times or stick with tradition.

Due to the competitive nature of pageants, the culture of beauty pageants is quite rigorous and oftentimes exclusive. An extensive amount of time, work, and money goes into competitions. Physical training, pageant coaching, and other private lessons are common. These and other costs associated with pageants such as entrance fees, wardrobe costs, professional headshots, hair and makeup services, and travel and hotel accommodations all limit who can participate in competitions.

Former Miss South Dakota USA 1997 and a three-time Miss Hawaiian Tropic Jamie Swenson estimates that some national contestants can spend up to $100,000 getting pageant ready. While participants can get sponsors to help offset costs, if the contestant does not consistently win, they can actually lose money by participating in pageants.

For many pageant contestants who dream of making it big, pageants become their life. Some of these issues have been addressed in the documentary, *Child Beauty Pageant: Stolen Childhoods - 12 Years Later*, the follow up to *Painted Babies*, which followed the life of two...
pageant contestants. This documentary discusses how parents or guardians involved with pageants will often use their children as a source of income and rely on them financially. Some parents even become addicted to winning and continue to have their children participate despite the child’s wishes. Some of these parents will go so far as to spend money on pageants that they do not have.

Despite ever-changing beauty standards, a contestant’s physical appearance remains a constant factor in who can win a pageant. Beauty competitions’ focus on conventional attractiveness has caused tension within recent years. Pageants have been linked to poor body image and other mental health concerns. For instance, the average Miss Universe pageant winner’s Body Mass Index (BMI) has decreased to fall within the underweight range, while the BMI of the average American woman has increased. The unrealistic beauty standards perpetuated through pageants can lead to some very dangerous outcomes. One 2003 study found that 26 percent of the beauty pageant contestants surveyed “had been told or perceived they had an eating disorder.” As eating disorders have the highest mortality rate of any mental illness, this statistic is alarming because it shows the damage competitions can have not only on contestants but the global narrative of beauty.

Some, like Alyssa Beaupre, argue that pageants provide participants with body confidence that they would not have otherwise. Pageants like Miss Universe insist that swimwear competitions are meant to display the pageant contestants’ “dedication to a healthy lifestyle.” However, pageant experts like sociologist Hilary Levey Friedman claim that these competitions reveal a darker side of pageantry that demonstrates the explosive nature of pageants, asking contestants “how far will they go to earn” the crown. Beauty pageants also often fall short in including people of diverse body types. Some competitions even have strict rules and regulations as to how tall you must be and the minimum and maximum size a contestant can be. This sends the message that you have to look a certain way to be viewed as beautiful.

“These rules and regulations raise the question of what the purpose of pageants is. Is it to find the woman who is an accurate depiction of the place she is representing, or is it to find an idealized version of a person who could be from there?”
inclusion have been present since the beginning of beauty competitions. Women entering the Miss America pageant for the first 50 years of its existence had to be “of the white race.” While this specific rule is no longer in place, these prejudices can still be seen in the world of pageants today.

Conventional beauty standards play a large role in the selection of beauty pageant winners. While these vary by culture, something that is not discussed openly is the prejudice against women of color. These values are held by select pageant judges and coaches who believe that lighter-skinned individuals are more likely to win beauty pageants because they consider lighter skin to be more conventionally attractive. This phenomenon is often referred to as colorism. One example of this can be seen in the controversy over the Miss India pageant in 2018. The semifinalists all had fair skin, which critics argued indicated that these pageants favor competitors with fair skin. This point is interesting considering that using tanning products to darken white skin tones is common practice within American beauty pageants.

Besides the exclusionary practices mentioned earlier, other factors that could disqualify a contestant from competing within major organizations such as Miss America or Miss Universe are marital status and a history of having an abortion. After Leona Gage won Miss USA in 1957 it came to light that she was currently married and had two children. She was stripped of her title. While the ban on divorcees and competitors who have had abortions was lifted in 1999, mothers are still not allowed to compete. These rules and regulations raise the question of what the purpose of pageants is. Is it to find the woman who is an accurate depiction of the place she is representing or is it to find an idealized version of a person who could be from there?

While the future of pageants is changing, diverse competitions are not yet the norm. Many improvements still need to be made to make these pageants more inclusive and reflective of modern society. While beauty competitions can empower women who participate, its exclusive culture denies most women that opportunity. As society continues to change, so will the narrative of pageants. Hopefully, for the better.
Beginning in the mid-eighteenth century, the Ashanti Empire unified much of the land that is known today as Ghana. By the early 1800s, under the leadership of Osei Tutu, the fourth ruler of the Ashanti Empire, they had conquered most neighboring city states in the region, formed a centralized government, drafted a formal constitution, and organized a standing military unrivaled in western Africa. Though the economy of the region had for years been centered around gold, the Ashanti Empire quickly became a major exporter of enslaved people. To satisfy America’s growing reliance on forced labor, the empire waged nearly constant wars with neighboring African states, like the Fante Confederacy, which were financially supported by the British Empire; these conflicts weakened the Ashanti, opening the way for the British to invade their territory in 1874 and establish a permanent colony known as the Gold Coast. By 1902, the Ashanti empire was defeated.

To manage their new colony, the British used a technique known as indirect rule. Instead of maintaining a large military force in the region, they delegated most administrative responsibilities to local rulers known as chiefs or nanas. In return for their compliance, the British rewarded these rulers with wealth and status. At the same time, they restructured Ghana’s economy to export cocoa, gold, and timber as cash crops, a move that threatened the region’s traditional food sources and hurt its potential for economic independence in the future.

Because the British maintained control through indirect rule, a political structure was already in place when, after World War I, calls began for a more representational government. Throughout the 1920s and 30s, the British appointed more and more Africans to positions of power. Following World War II, as calls for self-determination intensified, coupled with civil disobedience and widespread strikes, the
British ultimately decided maintaining a colony on the Gold Coast was more trouble than it was worth. In 1954, for the first time, the Empire allowed open elections in the region. In 1957, the newly elected assembly approved a measure that declared Ghana’s independence.

The first president of Ghana was Kwame Nkrumah, who had been an instrumental figure in the fight for independence, organizing non-violent protests, strikes, and non-cooperation with the British. Though initially popular, Nkrumah’s decision to raise taxes on cocoa farmers and borrow money from Western powers to fund the construction of the Akosambo Dam hurt his national appeal. To consolidate his power, in 1964, Nkrumah declared Ghana a one-party state to be governed by the socialist Convention People’s Party (CPP). Two years later he was removed from power by the military in the first of four coups that would define the next two decades of Ghana’s history.

In 1981, the fourth of these military uprisings brought Flight Lieutenant Jerry Rawlings into power. As president, Rawlings banned all political parties in Ghana, suspended the constitution, and executed senior officers in the military who he feared might orchestrate another coup. For the next ten years, the Provisional National Defence Council (PNDC), under the leadership of Rawlings, ruled over Ghana. Despite (or perhaps because of) his authoritarian approach, Rawlings managed to turn around Ghana’s stalling economy and remain popular throughout his time in office. In 1991, the PNDC set up a consultative assembly with the goal of reestablishing multi-party democracy in Ghana, and in 1992, Rawlings won Ghana’s first open elections since the 1970s. Rawlings went on to win reelection in 1996. In 2000, having reached the end of his constitutional term limit, he stepped down, allowing for a peaceful transition of power.

Since the end of Rawling’s second term, Ghana’s democracy has remained relatively stable. The same cannot be said of its economy. In 2007, the discovery of oil represented a new source of wealth for Ghana and set off a surge of foreign investment in the country, but the sudden drop in global oil prices in 2015 reversed this trend.

The faltering economy has prompted a new wave of migration out of Ghana, exacerbating an ongoing trend of educated Ghanaians leaving the country to find work abroad. In 2015, Ghanaians were the eleventh most common nationality among migrants arriving in Europe.

Two years ago, President Nana Akufo-Addo declared 2019 “The Year of Return” and invited members of the African diaspora to travel to Ghana to mark the 400th anniversary of the arrival of African slaves in America. Despite the country’s economic difficulties, over one million individuals participated, bringing new awareness to Ghana’s history and culture. As they look back, they will see the story of a nation that, in spite of all the forces set against it, has risen up time and time again with its eyes focused firmly on the future.
Independence? Not so fast.
Defining Colonialism and Neo-Colonialism
by LIAM COLLIER

In 1987, the year after the events of School Girls, Ghana celebrated thirty years of independence from British colonialism. But what is colonialism? And how does it affect those who live in formerly colonized countries?

Colonial America

Every year on July 4th, families across the United States celebrate Independence Day to officially mark the anniversary of this country’s independence from the British Empire. As you probably remember from history class, before declaring independence, the country we now call the United States was divided into thirteen separate colonies. This is why

From the perspective of the British Empire, the primary purpose of the colonies was to export resources that could enrich the Crown. This system, wherein a country rules over and exploits the resources of an outside group, especially when that group is a land’s indigenous people, is known as colonialism. Within this framework, Native Americans who lived on or adjacent to the land that Europeans claimed as their own were either seen as avenues to additional resources (if they served as guides or trading partners) or roadblocks that must be removed (if they resisted British rule in any way). Europeans living in the colonies expedited this process: pushing indigenous people off their land, forging alliances with friendly groups, and harvesting stolen territories in the name of the empire. However, as cogs in the colonial machine, settlers had no representation in British parliament and thus no say over what taxes were levied against them; this became a major point of contention in the years leading up to the American Revolution.

Colonialism Abroad

While the era of colonialism
may feel distant today, countries like Great Britain, France, and the United States were operating colonial regimes across the world well into the 1960s. In Africa, Latin America, and Asia, these powers systematically drained resources from native populations either by flooding their lands with foreign settlers (settler colonialism), driving indigenous people into forced servitude (exploitation colonialism), empowering one ethnic group over others in exchange for favorable treatment (surrogate colonialism), or, in Ghana’s case, combining all three approaches.

Throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth century, colonized nations across the world fought to win their independence. Like the American militias of 1776, some independence movements, including those in Haiti, Argentina, Chile, Algeria, Vietnam, and Kenya achieved these ends through revolutionary uprisings routed in military action. Other countries such as Ghana, India, Korea, and Czechoslovakia achieved independence through a combination of non-violent resistance and political action. By the second half of the twentieth century, traditional colonialism had been largely eradicated; however, the involvement of wealthy nations in the economic and political affairs of formerly-colonized countries was far from over.

Neo-Colonialism

In 1965, Kwame Nkrumah, the first Prime Minister and President of Ghana, coined the term neo-colonialism to describe the new relationship that was developing between formerly colonized states and wealthy foreign influencers. He defined neo-colonialism like this:

The essence of neo-colonialism is that the State which is subject to it is, in theory, independent and has all the outward trappings of international sovereignty. In reality its economic system and thus its political policy is directed from outside.

In other words, while foreign entities like the United States may no longer have direct control over formerly-colonized nations, they continue to exert economic pressure on these countries, which can have the same effect. Like colonialism, neo-colonialism takes many forms, including forced dependency, foreign loans, and cultural imperialism. All of these forms are playing out in Ghana today, and are present, just out of sight in School Girls.

In big and small ways, the characters in School Girls are influenced by money. We see this most directly when Eloise discusses the stakes underlying the Miss Universe pageant:

[Winning] means big, big, big money! For both myself, the winner AND a generous donation to the school - in this case, Aburi... I heard about girls testing pretty low in recent years, budget cuts, missionaries pulling their funding...?

Clearly Aburi’s financial downturn has a major impact on the actions of Eloise and Headmistress Francis. But why was Ghana’s economy in such dire straits to begin with? Part of the answer is neo-colonialism, specifically Ghana’s forced dependency and reliance on foreign loans.

According to Argentine economist Raúl Prebisch, dependency begins when wealthy nations extract raw materials from formerly-colonized countries. By turning these raw materials—in Ghana’s case cocoa, gold, and timber—into manufactured goods, wealthy nations increase their value. They then can sell these goods back to the periphery at a higher cost. Countries in the periphery ultimately lose money, which means they cannot invest in the infrastructure needed to create manufactured goods themselves. And so the cycle continues.

With the hopes of becoming more financially independent, in the 1960s, President Nkrumah and other leaders around Africa and Latin America attempted to invest in major infrastructure projects by borrowing.
money from multinational organizations like the International Monetary Fund (IMF). These foreign loans came with strings attached, requiring countries to shrink the size of their government, which hurt those relying on government aid, or privatize key industries, which placed more power in the hands of foreign actors. Perhaps more significantly, loans with high interest rates left formerly-colonized countries in debt to multinational organizations, which are often controlled by the very powers they theoretically won independence from. As of 2016, Ghana was losing thirty percent of government revenue to external debt payments each year. These conditions left Ghana unable to invest in institutions like Aburi Girls Boarding School, or in families like Paulina’s, who might have benefited from government programs aimed at reducing poverty.

At the same time, cultural imperialism, a key facet of neo-imperialist regimes, hurts individuals’ ability to invest in themselves. Consider this quote from Paulina:

Lucky? Are you serious? Lucky where?! That my mother has eight children, most of us with different fathers? Lucky that we are the poorest people in our village? Lucky to be the darkest one in my family? That even with our little bit of money, my mother gave me bleaching cream instead of food - cause that would “serve me better in life!” ....

Cultural imperialism is the dominance of one country’s customs, traditions, symbols, and values over another’s. By associating American culture with prosperity and progress, this form of neo-colonialism can make subservience to Western powers feel inevitable. This can look like McDonald’s or Disney infiltrating markets across the world; or, in the case of School Girls, a historically European bias towards lighter skin infiltrating African culture. In School Girls we also see cultural imperialism manifest in characters’ obsession with American brands. While seemingly harmless, lack of access to American products clearly limits who is able to succeed in the play, both socially and professionally.

Like colonialism before it, neo-colonialism is a complex and pervasive system. It can also feel far away or invisible to those of us who live in wealthier countries like the United States. But for millions of people across the world, including some of the characters you’ll see on stage this spring, the effects of this system are abundantly clear.

For more information about colorism and skin-bleaching, check out the study guide article “Overcoming Blackness: Colorism and Skin Bleaching in School Girls” by Quenna L. Barrett.
Overcoming Blackness: Colorism and Skin Bleaching in *School Girls*
by QUENNA L. BARRETT

“If you’re black, stay back; if you’re brown, stick around; if you’re yellow, you’re mellow; if you’re white, you’re all right.” - 20th Century Nursery Rhyme

A large issue the characters in *School Girls; Or, The African Mean Girls Play* navigate is that of colorism. If you’re an African-American or Latinx young person, you’ve likely encountered this notion on some level in discussions with friends or family. For those unfamiliar, colorism is defined as the privilege and bias given to lighter skin complexions over darker ones. Colorism is an effect of white supremacy, colonialism, and anti-blackness, and is directly inherited from the Atlantic slave trade.

Black Americans have long held the narrative of lighter-skinned slaves being afforded the “luxury” of working in the master’s house, while darker slaves had to toil out in the sun. Being fairer-skinned gave those slaves some level of privilege over others. Ultimately, many of those people gained freedom first as they were often the offspring of white slave owners, and could pass for

---

1 Harper, Kathryn and Choma, Beck L. “Internalised White Ideal, Skin Tone Surveillance, and Hair Surveillance Predict Skin and Hair Dissatisfaction and Skin Bleaching among African American and Indian Women.” *Sex Roles*, 2019.

---
white, thus giving them more access to resources. After slavery, lighter-skinned Blacks had access to education, better jobs, and more positive social outcomes. Slave owners and white colonists ingrained white supremacist ideals - beliefs that white people are the superior race - into slaves and people of color nearly anywhere they settled, particularly on the continent of Africa. This gave birth to the premise that the closer one was to whiteness, the better, the prettier, the more powerful they were or would become. The characters in School Girls have internalized these beliefs too.

When the new school girl Ericka arrives, who is lighter-skinned and has naturally longer hair, the other girls ask about what beauty products and routines she uses to get such good hair and even, light skin. Mercy exclaims, “Even the Caro-Light they have in The States must be top shelf. You don’t even have any blemishes!” We see the former pageant queen and current competition scout Eloise being immediately drawn to Ericka: “Now she’s a girl who can actually stand a chance against the likes of beauty queens from Spain, Brazil, France or Columbia”. Eloise comments that Ericka has a “more universal and commercial look” and that she’s looking for “girls that fall on the other end of the African spectrum”. Later she laments, “So if I have to push every darkie out of the way so be it! I want a damn promotion!” For Eloise, winning the contest affects her own status. It means a promotion, more money for her and some for the school, it means the opportunity of someday owning the pageant itself. It represents the opportunity for herself to be seen. Eloise, like many of the characters in the play, believes that proximity to whiteness is proximity to power.

The girls’ behaviors and dialogue demonstrate that they have internalized white beauty standards, and this shows up in their use and discussion of skin whitening creams, like the Caro-Light cream that Mercy mentions. Skin bleaching is the act of intentionally brightening one’s skin using lightening agents, with store-bought or homemade products containing certain chemicals. Skin bleaching, also referred to as skin lightening, skin brightening, skin toning, and skin whitening, began in Ghana after World War Two but has been practiced all over the world, and its earliest uses date back to the Greeks and Romans. Queen Cleopatra of Egypt is said to have used mercury to brighten her face. From the 8th-12th centuries in Japan, high ranking people of all genders wore white makeup.
comprised of rice powder, lead, and starch. In Europe and Asia in the 16th-18th centuries, white skin was a sign of social importance. Across the globe, formulas for skin-lightening began to be developed in the mid-16th century for use by upper-class citizens, and ultimately this would turn into our modern beauty industry.

Though the practice of whitening skin occurred on most continents, studies show that the impact has been the most detrimental to African women since colonialism. By the 1950s, skin bleaching was a well-known and often-used practice across Africa. African women and other women of color, were marketed to believe that lighter skin would give them fewer skin imperfections, and access to higher status and better professional opportunities. They believed lighter skin was prettier, and that with it, they could attract better husbands. African women associated black or darker skin with “poverty and backwardness,” and skin-bleaching offered an alternative.

Paulina, the most likely choice for pageant candidate before the lighter-skinned Ericka comes to town, is seen using the cream and hiding it. Later we see the negative effects that that has on her skin. She is the ultimate mean girl, picking on the others for eating too much or not having the coolest clothes, but she is unhappy in her own literal skin. She, like many Black and brown girls throughout history, has been taught that her skin in its natural state is unworthy of winning beauty contests, that she has to look like the European girls. Paulina, even though she exists in this play in the 1980s, still represents some contemporary school girls. A 2011 report showed that 77% of Nigerian women bleached their skin with regularity. A 2010 study showed correlations between economic advantages and skin color, with more income inequalities in people and families of darker skin.

The legacy of anti-blackness globally meant that Blacks with fairer skin were often able to have better opportunities educationally, professionally, and socially than their darker counterparts. Many really fair-skinned Blacks were able to pass as white to obtain such opportunities. But this passing or being offered access because of having lighter skin can be seen not only as a way to move up the social ladder, but also as an act of safety. In a world that tells you your dark skin has no value, the physically damaging act of lightening one’s skin becomes a mechanism of survival in a colored world.

In 2014, Ghanaian actress Ama K. Abebrese launched “I Love My Natural Skintone” to address issues of colorism. Image courtesy of @ilovemynaturalskintone.
Dangerous Beauty: Sociology and Science
by SAM MAUCERI

In *School Girls*, the characters go to great lengths to be “beautiful”. The young women in the play wear their most ostentatious dresses to compete, aspire to own expensive fashion brands, and alter their bodies in dangerous ways, like skin bleaching and restrictive dieting. These great lengths may feel familiar to many of us who have used beauty products with painful or damaging results. I’ve certainly endured blisters from too-small shoes, or applied skincare products with dubious ingredient lists.

So why do we do it? What cultural and sociological principles influence people, and particularly young women, to alter their bodies, and what effects do those choices have on one’s health? Here are a few modern day beauty trends aimed primarily at women, and their resulting health implications.

**Makeup Containing Toxic Chemicals**

Makeup is a nearly ubiquitous accessory and ritual among women; the global cosmetics industry is projected to reach a value of $863 billion by 2024. But do you know what chemicals and harmful ingredients might be in the products you put on your face every day?

According to the US Food and Drug Administration (FDA), “The law does not require cosmetic products and ingredients, other than color additives, to have FDA approval before they go on the market.” Toxic ingredients appear frequently in moisturizers, shampoos, eyeshadows, and more. Watch this video from USA Today to learn more:

Parabens and phthalates may get the majority of media attention, for a more extensive list of dangerous ingredients that pop up in cosmetics, click here.

**So why do it?**
People have applied makeup for adornment or to highlight certain facial features since ancient
times, and many of these substances were toxic as well; Ancient Egyptians of all genders achieved their iconic black eyeliner look by using kohl, which contained lead, and Ancient Greeks applied lead to their faces to gain a white and “clear” complexion.

In America today, makeup is predominantly marketed to women, who are frequently expected or pressured to wear it in order to appear more “professional”. In fact, this issue came to a head in 2006, when waitress Darlene Jespersen refused to wear makeup as required by a new policy at her employer Harrah’s Casino in Reno, a protocol which was not required of her fellow male employees. In the resulting case, Jespersen v. Harrah's Operating Co., the Ninth Circuit Court decided that American women could legally be fired by their employer for refusing to wear makeup. As anyone who uses it knows, makeup can be expensive. Not only are many working women shouldered with the financial burden of purchasing makeup, they are also required to spend copious amounts of time applying and removing makeup. This is valuable time and money spent that is not similarly expected of their male co-workers. For many women, makeup isn’t just a fun way to express oneself; it’s a requirement to keep their job.

Waist Training

Popularized by the Kardashians, Jessica Alba, and other celebrities and Instagram influencers, waist trainers are a type of tight corset-like shapewear. They have been touted as a way to create an hourglass body shape by strengthening abdominal muscles if worn while exercising. However, while temporary slimming of the waist does occur while wearing the waist trainer, medical professionals say the long term health effects are much more dangerous.

If worn for an extensive amount of time, waist trainers can actually weaken core muscles that have come to rely on the support of the waist trainer. If a waist trainer is too tight, the compression could also contribute to heartburn, interfere with breathing, and even dangerously change the position of one’s organs over time.

Some doctors also suggest that waist trainers can have negative effects on mental health and body image. “When you wear this uncomfortable contraption all day, it is a constant reminder that there’s something wrong with your body—that your body is not good enough as it current-
Ideals of body shape also vary widely across culture and nationality, and can have different impacts on different communities. In NPR’s podcast Code Switch, which focuses on race and identity in culture, the hosts explored the current American beauty ideal for women to be “slim thick” and how it impacts young Latinas in particular. One interviewee spoke to that pressure, “I feel like there’s also this, like, standard to be, like, thin. But then, […] we also have to have curves.” Another interviewee responded, “I see it online. It’s a phrase I see often. […] everybody wants to see a girl that’s slim-thick. Everybody wants to aspire to be that.”

The cultural value placed on some body types over others can have a massive effect on people’s body image and mental health. According to the National Eating Disorders Association (NEDA), “Weight stigma poses a significant threat to psychological and physical health. It has been documented as a significant risk factor for depression, low self-esteem, and body dissatisfaction.”

For resources related to body image, disordered eating, and mental health, see the study guide article “Resources Around Disordered Eating” compiled by Anna Gelman.
Hair Straightening Formulas

Tools and products used to straighten hair are widely used at home and in salons, but the products used to achieve these looks range from safe to potentially harmful.

The Brazilian Blowout, a hair treatment applied by a stylist to straighten very curly hair, contains the carcinogen formaldehyde, sometimes when products are falsely advertised as “formaldehyde-free”. Take a look at this video from ABC News for more info:

Meanwhile, chemical hair relaxing formulas have commonly been used by many Black women for a wide variety of personal and cultural reasons. Tippi Shorter, the global artistic director of Aveda, says, “Someone who’s getting a relaxer can expect a total change in their hair structure — which can be either good or bad depending on what you want. It takes your curly strands and permanently straightens them.” There are several different types of hair relaxers that function in different ways, which intentionally break or weaken the disulfide bonds in hair to permanently alter the curl pattern. No-lye relaxers, most commonly comprised of guanidine hydroxide or calcium hydroxide, which both permanently change the structure of the hair, are more sensitive on the scalp than lye relaxers, but can be drying or damaging to the hair itself.

Lye relaxers, whose main active ingredient is sodium hydroxide, can be extremely irritating and damaging to the scalp. According to the GHS, sodium hydroxide is classified as a corrosive substance, which can cause severe skin burns and eye damage. In a video from his documentary Good Hair, comedian Chris Rock conducts an experiment in which three soda cans are each left in a container of sodium hydroxide for different lengths of time, illustrating how the chemical erodes the can in just a few hours. Nevertheless, because lye relaxers are so effective at straightening hair quickly, they are the type of relaxer most widely used by stylists.

If relaxers are overused or used incorrectly, they can lead to chemical burns or hair loss. Saffiyah Edley reflects on her firsthand experience with chemical relaxers, “Back in the day when I was young, African American girls and women were putting relaxer on our edges every two weeks [...] I’m sure you’ve seen African American women with their edges missing. And we suffer from chemical burns, all of that.”
What overlooked consequence do both Brazilian Blowouts and chemical relaxers have in common? They often put the stylists who apply these products and those who work in manufacturing these products at risk, as they inhale the fumes all day. Stylists in the ABC News video noted that they often have difficulty breathing while doing their job, and in Good Hair plant workers who package hair relaxers inform Chris Rock that lye can cause blindness.

So why do it?

As journalists Charisse Jones and Nicquel Terry Ellis report in USA Today, “Many black women say they’ve felt pressured for decades to use excessive heat, chemical relaxers and weaves to conform to European standards of straight hair.” Alternatively, many trailblazing Black women, like civil rights activists Angela Davis, Kathleen Neal Cleaver and Blaxploitation action film star Pam Grier, challenged these Eurocentric standards by wearing their natural hair in an era when it was considered less socially acceptable to do so. Check out the video below from Allure to learn more about the history of Black hairstyles over the last century:

To learn more about the chemistry of hair relaxers, click the image above. Courtesy of Chemistry Blog.

Jones and Ellis go on to explain that much of this immense pressure on Black women to
straighten their hair comes into play in the workplace, schools, and other institutions where white beauty standards are enforced or rewarded. Take Sara, an entrepreneur interviewed by Essence in 2018: “When I was working in financial services, I remember feeling like it was only work-appropriate to wear my naturally curly hair pulled back in a bun. It wasn’t something that was expressly stated, but there weren’t any other people in power positions that looked like me and wore their hair out, curly, kinky and free.” Law Professor Joan Williams, the founding director of the Center for WorkLife Law, remarks on the inequity: “It’s taken time for white people to recognize that African Americans have to self-edit in a way that is, in addition to and on top of, the ways that all of us have to self-edit to keep our jobs.”

In 2020, the tides are beginning to change. In February, Maryland lawmakers heard testimony on a bill to ban racial discrimination based on hair. This followed in the footsteps of several states that have passed or introduced legislation to ban race-based hair discrimination, including California’s Create a Respectful and Open World for Natural Hair (CROWN) Act. The short film Hair Love, which focused on these discrimination cases, won the Academy Award for Best Animated Short Film at this year's Oscars. While a 2015 NBC News article asked the question “If Big, Natural Hair is In, Why Don’t We See it On Television?”, Refinery29 highlighted a few emerging portrayals of natural hair on TV, and a Mashable article provided a more robust roundup. In 2019, Journalist Chante Griffin illustrated how Insecure and black-ish in particular have provided meaningful and revelatory portrayals of natural hair. As natural hair has become more popular and visible in the mainstream, hair relaxer sales have plummeted 38% between 2012 and 2017. However, even with these progressive strides, the pressure to conform to white beauty standards is still prevalent. As NBC News Correspondent Simone Boyce wrote in 2019: “Embracing my natural hair on-air wasn’t easy — but I’m not alone.”

Very High Heels

Heels are standard for many women, from formal events to everyday wear. However the height of the heel and the length of time they are worn can cause numerous health problems. In this video from the Today Show, Dr. Natalie Azar explains how high heels can be detrimental to foot, back, and knee health.

For more info on anti-blackness and white supremacy in beauty products, check out the study guide article “Overcoming Blackness: Colorism and Skin Bleaching in School Girls” by Quenna L. Barrett.
So why do it?

High heels have been an iconic piece of fashion for centuries, although they were originally worn solely by men. The first high heels were invented in Persia, some historians citing the 15th century and others as early as the 10th century, to help soldiers ride on horseback more easily by allowing them to hook the heels of their shoes into their stirrups. For more info on the history of high heels transitioning from menswear to womenswear, check out the video below:

Although significantly fewer American women are wearing high heels every day than in previous decades, they still remain a mainstay. In an excerpt from her book *High Heel*, investigative journalist Summer Brennan claims that “the high heel is now womankind’s most public footwear. It is a shoe for events, display, performance, authority and urbanity. In some settings and on some occasions, usually the most formal, it is even required.”

As Dr. Azar mentions in the video above, high heels can create the visual effect of longer legs, which is considered a desirable silhouette in Western culture. In a business editorial in the Huffington Post, journalist Emily Peck describes how “heels are the ultimate feminine accessory”, and points out that many women feel tall and strong when they wear them. In the article, a group of lawyers claim that they “just look better in heels,” which Peck attributes to the ways in which high heels alter the shape of women’s bodies to meet our cultural expectations of how women’s bodies should look: curvy and feminine. Peck goes on to illustrate how women in careers like law and finance are typically expected to wear heels in order to appear more “professional”. Does that expectation sound similar to other beauty trends on this list?
If beauty is pain, why do we do it?

Whether it’s a bold makeup look, a graphic T-Shirt, or a brand of sneaker, the choices we make about our appearance often send a message about who we are, what we like, or how we feel. Self expression through beauty and fashion are a normal and accepted part of mainstream American culture. However, when our beauty trends and standards demand conformity based on predetermined identity factors like race, ethnicity, size, gender, sexual orientation, etc., the universal beauty standards we ascribe deserve a more critical eye.

As we use clothes and cosmetics to express our individuality, we can also strive to make choices that are healthiest for us as individuals. For four years, I bleached my hair every few months in order to dye my hair blue, knowing full well that bleach poses a health risk. Would I do it again, knowing what I know? Maybe! Blue hair helped me to express important parts of my identity as an artist and a queer person. But if I choose to use bleach again, it may benefit me to weigh the decision against the potential negative health effects.

What risky beauty products or practices have you used? What reasons do you have for using or not using a product that poses a health risk?

When people are pressured to utilize dangerous beauty tools and products, how does that limit their choices and opportunities? How do societal powers that demand conformity in exchange for success limit their choices? Is it ever possible to use a beauty product purely based on one’s own enjoyment? Who gets to decide what’s beautiful, anyway?

The character type of “the mean girl” is an incredibly common trope (a common or overused theme in a story) in American pop culture, from Regina George to Cheryl Blossom. This video from the Take explores the commonalities between some of the most well-known mean girls in pop culture, and what these characters tell us about power, social dynamics, and the expectations put upon teenage girls. Click the image above to watch the video!

In rehearsal, the cast of School Girls; Or The African Mean Girls Play shared their own thoughts on what a mean girl is. Click the image above to watch the video!
Bullying in the New Generation
by JA’QUIA PARKER

This year, Goodman Theatre’s Education department has the privilege of hosting a high school intern through Urban Alliance. Ja’Quia Parker, a senior at Catalyst Maria High School, will be with us through summer 2020 and will contribute to our study guides this season, sharing a younger perspective and approach to the content. The following article is her second piece with us and explores some of her views on bullying in contemporary school culture, as we see it exhibited in School Girls; Or, The African Mean Girls Play. We’re honored to support Ja’Quia’s work and growth and to share that journey with you this season.

Bullying isn’t anything new under the sun. It has been around way before this generation was even thought of. The only thing that is different about bullying is the platform it has gained over the years. From commercials to billboards to even some of our favorite shows. It has been presented in plays like School Girls; Or, The African Mean Girls Play. Bullying has been a definite problem that can divide us as people in this world and it needs to be solved. I believe it is up to us as the new generation to solve it.

Bullying, like a black plague of our generation, can take on multiple forms and can be exerted on anyone. Its most common amongst the younger generation, and it shows in a study that 20% of people ages 12-18 have experienced bullying. It can lead to suicide, which is the second leading cause of death among young people ages 10-24. Many people can testify that they have experienced some bullying. Although multiple websites attempt to help solve bullying, it still exists. Every seven minutes, someone is being bullied. How is it that we have so many people wanting to stop the issue, but nothing is being done? I believe one answer to the question is that because the people that want to stop bullying aren’t where it occurs. Most of the bullying doesn’t happen on the playground or out in the open, but it happens where certain people are allowed. It occurs where people send their children and expect them to get a good education. It happens inside our schools.

Schools can be like homes...
for bullying. **282,000** students are physically attacked at school each month. In certain schools, bullying is as common as using a calculator. In a study conducted, **70.4% of staff in school** have witnessed bullying, and **70.6% of students** have witnessed bullying. People are bullied because of multiple things. In this day and age, the most common thing someone is bullied for is their sexuality. Research shows that **74.1% of LGBTQ students** are bullied. It seems like we are going backward. We are supposed to be the generation of acceptance, and people are being bullied in school because of their identity.

In this era of identity judgement, every aspect of one’s character is examined to the bone. One thing that most people worry about now is their looks. You have to look a certain way to be accepted. Throughout the play *School Girls*, people are judged and picked on based off of how they look. One of the main problems presented in the play is colorism, which send the message: the lighter you are, the more attractive you look. In the play, Ericka was chosen over all of the other girls to represent Ghana in the Miss Universe pageant because her skin was lighter than the other girls’ skin. A report shows that in 2017, the global skin-lightening industry was worth **$4.8B**. That means that many people are investing in products that help lighten their skin. Our generation needs to be the generation that ends colorism because if we don’t then who will? People must learn to accept the differences of others. We must use the platforms we have to encourage acceptance. Instead, the platforms we have are used as ways to uphold the traditional standards.

Our generation is invested in social media. Our world revolves around it. Social media is where people flaunt their identities and show off who they are and what they do. It is also the home of cyberbullying. Percentages of individuals who have experienced cyberbullying at some point in their lifetimes have nearly doubled (18% to 34%) from 2007-2016. This generation uses the platform for so many things, and one of the main things is to tear people down. We may not think much of it at first because we believe it’s funny, but this generation needs to know that what we post can affect people more than we intended it too.

Bullying has been a significant problem in this world. We must help put an end to bullying once and for all. If we don’t, then the next generation will grow up and believe that it is fine to bully someone when, in reality, it’s not. There is no reason why anybody should be bullied. In the end, this generation needs to stop the old habits of the past generation and learn that just because you’re different doesn’t mean you can pick on someone. The color of someone’s skin, the way someone’s body is shaped, the way someone identifies does not justify why they should be bullied. We all have our differences, and they should be celebrated instead of being cast aside and dismissed.

Stats on bullying in the United States. Courtesy of the BULLY Project.
In some ways, the setting of Jocelyn Bioh’s *School Girls; Or, The African Mean Girls Play* may feel familiar. Aburi Girls Boarding School, where the play takes place, is a public high school in Ghana; an institution that, like your school, exists primarily to educate young people as they prepare for college or begin their careers as independent adults. Moreover, in 1986, the year that the events of *School Girls* unfold, the Ghanaian education system was in the midst of an ongoing financial crisis not unlike the budgetary dilemma that Chicago’s public school system is currently navigating in 2020.

Due in large part to the lingering effects of British colonialism, Ghana’s economy in the 1980s was in steep decline. In 1986, nearly thirty years after gaining independence, Ghana continued to rely on the same major exports that the British had structured their colonial regime around: gold, cocoa, and oil. As global prices for these resources fell, the Ghanaian government lost a huge portion of the tax revenue they relied upon to run public programs like education. Moreover, the shrinking economy forced Ghana’s government to accept foreign loans, which were offered on the condition that Ghana shrink the size of its government and privatize major industries.

To make up for lost funding from the state, Ghana’s public schools required families to pay fees for textbooks, uniforms, and other educational materials. Fees were especially high at public boarding schools where students were also expected to pay for lodging and meals. These fees effectively shut poor Ghanaians out of the education system. As you may already know, this problem is not unique to Ghana.

The state of Illinois has been in financial debt since at least the 1980s; however, until the 2010s, state politicians did little to address this growing dilemma. When the issue came to a head following the 2008 financial crisis, the problem had grown exponentially and Illinois’ avenues for new funding were limited. From 2011 to 2017, former Chicago Mayor Rahm Emmanuel tried...
to address the growing deficit by implementing major funding cuts to CPS. At the same time he closed fifty neighborhood schools and restructured school funding to be allocated based on student enrollment rather than school need. As charter school networks expanded in Chicago, dwindling enrollment left many neighborhood schools severely underfunded despite “equality grants” meant to level the playing field. As a result, some public schools, especially on the Northwest side, have implemented annual enrollment fees as high as $400, a move that directly contradicts the U.S. Department of Education’s stated mission to provide “educational excellence and [ensure] equal access.”

In Chicago and Ghana, these official fees are only part of the problem. The explosion of standardized testing in the United States over the last two decades has limited who has access to what quality of education. In 2001, No Child Left Behind, a federal law passed by the Bush administration, tripled the number of federally mandated tests American students are required to take. As the number of tests increased, so did the stakes behind these assessments. Today, between kindergarten and twelfth grade, the average student in an American city will take one hundred twenty-two standardized tests, which often determine what classes, schools, and careers they have access to.

The same was true in Ghana in 1986. While the Ghanaian government provided ten years of elementary school free of charge, enrollment in Ghanaian high schools was predicated on test results. Students who did not score high enough were immediately enrolled in “continuation classes”, which trained them in vocational skills in order to prepare them to join the workforce. In order to avoid this fate, wealthier Ghanaians would enroll their children in private primary schools that specifically focused on training students for standardized tests. As a result, social mobility—the ability to work one’s way into the middle or upper middle class—in Ghana remained difficult throughout the early 1980s; wealthy students received a high school education, while poorer Ghanaians were trained for manual labor. Although the education system in the United States is arguably less regimented, a family’s ability to pay for tutoring or other forms of specialized education undoubtedly impacts their children’s access to higher education as well.

Although class and power are key themes in School Girls, the characters spend little time discussing these ideas, focusing instead on the high stakes drama of high school life. This is probably for the best! Dense discussions about policy and economics rarely make for good theatre. That said, the specificity of the setting that playwright Jocelyn Bioh has chosen for this story raises a few important questions: How do the shortcomings of Ghana’s education system affect the characters we see on stage? And, perhaps more importantly, how has the nature of your own education impacted your life?
Connecting the Dots: Miss Universe, Trump, and Russian Interference
by SAM MAUCERI

What political implications can a global beauty pageant possibly have? The election of U.S. President Donald Trump, for one. From 1996 to 2015, Trump owned the Miss Universe pageant. In 2013, he held the competition in Moscow, Russia and used this international competition to try to seal major real estate deals there, gain the favor of Russian President Vladimir Putin, and set the stage for his 2016 presidential election. Check out these three articles (one written pre-election, and two written post-election) to connect the unlikely dots of Trump’s unlikely Russian exploits.

In this 2019 Salon article, journalist Lucian K. Truscott IV draws connections between the 2013 pageant and Trump’s 2016 election. In a more editorial style, he explores the implications of Trump’s public praise of Russia’s invasion of Ukraine and seizure of Crimea, as well as the formation of Russia’s Internet Research Agency, whose employees were indicted in 2018 for attempting to interfere in the 2016 US election.

In this article from May 2016, Michael Crowley, the White House and national security editor for Politico, reflects on Trump’s attempt to use the 2013 Miss Universe pageant to establish a warmer relationship with Putin and with Russian billionaire Aras Agalarov and his pop-star son, Emin. The article also highlights the political backdrop of the pageant, notably Putin’s discriminatory laws criminalizing public displays of gay pride or “gay propaganda”.

In this 2018 New Yorker piece by journalist Jeffrey Toobin takes a deeper retrospective look at the intertwined history of the 2013 pageant and Trump’s subsequent presidential campaign. Toobin illustrates Trump’s failed attempts to establish himself permanently in Russia by constructing a new Trump Tower in Moscow, which was never built. The article also highlights Trump’s harassment and sexist behavior towards the women competing in his pageant, and how the racist remarks he made during his presidential campaign ultimately cost him his ownership of the Miss Universe pageant.
When describing the characters in *School Girls*, Jocelyn Bioh writes that Nana is someone who “struggles with her love of food and snacks,” something that Paulina can be extremely cruel to her about. In studying a play about both pageants and peers enforcing beauty standards, it’s necessary to discuss disordered eating, and the way it can affect many young people’s lives.

**What is disordered eating?**

Disordered eating refers to a wide range of irregular relationships with food, nutrition, or dieting. This can include behavior that is normally associated with eating disorders (such as restricting or binging), as well as issues with body image, exercise, diet culture, or nutrition. A person experiencing disordered eating does not necessarily have an eating disorder. Still, any issues around eating should be taken seriously.

**What is the difference between disordered eating and an eating disorder?**

The biggest difference between disordered eating and an eating disorder is a diagnosis of an existing condition, or whether the symptoms of a person experiencing disordered eating align with the criteria for eating disorders as defined by the American Psychiatric Association. This can mean that the symptoms for disordered eating can be the same as an eating disorder with less severity or frequency, or it can mean that symptoms do not align with an established diagnosis.

**Resources in Chicagoland**

The Awakening Center

Providing a holistic approach to issues around eating as well as other mental health support, the Awakening Center is “a private practice composed of counselors and nutritionists who have come together because of a shared treatment approach and philosophy.” Through the Awakening Center, clients can be connected with a private counselor or support group, as well as drop in therapy, workshops, and yoga-informed therapy.
The Renfrew Center
A national organization of in-patient residential care for disordered eating, the Renfrew Center was founded in 1985 and “integrates an emphasis on the healing potential of empathic relational connection with evidence-based, emotion-focused treatment interventions.” In addition to treatment, the Renfrew Center also offers Action & Resource Guides, as well as a wide range of educational tools for individuals and schools. One of their 19 locations is in Northbrook, Illinois.

The Eating Recovery Center
The Eating Recovery Center provides in-patient residential, partial hospitalization and outpatient care for patients experiencing disordered eating, as well as clinical training for counselors and psychologists looking to specialize. The Eating Recovery Center is affiliated with Insight Behavioral Health Centers, which specializes in other mental health support.

National/Online Resources
National Eating Disorders
This online resource provides support and treatment options “for yourself or a loved one” via their helpline (800 931-2237) or through online chat. On their website, you can also find educational information about disordered eating, how to seek treatment and what to expect, as well as cost options. They also host online support groups and forums to foster community and connection.

Eating Disorder Hope
Eating Disorder Hope provides information about disordered eating and symptoms, as well as a detailed search to connect people to local resources and support groups. Their website also includes a detailed resource list for specific eating disorders as well as specific identities of treatment-seekers.

Multi-Service Eating Disorders Association
Like the websites above, MEDA can connect people seeking treatment with providers and options for support. They also specialize in education and awareness programs, including work in body image and confidence, as well as resources for schools, teachers and parents. MEDA also hosts a professional member network of clinicians who specialize in disordered eating to further networking and professional development. This includes training for two graduate clinical interns each year, forwarding skills in both medical and psychological treatment.

Because disordered eating intersects with many aspects of health (including mental/emotional health, developmental/social health, genetic health and biological/physiological health), additional and tailored resources can be found with a trusted mental health or primary care provider.
Guiding Questions For *School Girls*
by GOODMAN EDUCATION

1. Before reading or seeing *School Girls*, what was your perception of pageants, the people who compete in pageants, or the reasons someone would choose to compete in a pageant? Did the play shift, change, or challenge those perceptions? If it did, how? If not, why not?

2. The characters in *School Girls* have specific perceptions about the United States and American culture. As a young person in the United States, what perceptions felt accurate or inaccurate to you? What does this tell you about the experiences of the characters? Before seeing the play, what perceptions did you have of Ghana, the setting of *School Girls*? Were they accurate, inaccurate, or did you have any perceptions of Ghana at all? What does this tell you about how people perceive cultures they don’t have direct contact with?

3. This year, for the first time in history, the pageants Miss USA, Miss Teen USA, Miss America, Miss Universe, and Miss World all crowned Black women as their winners. Do you think these victories signify a change in the way pageants deal with racism and racist beauty ideals? Do they signify a larger societal shift? Why or why not?

4. Though much of the conflict in *School Girls* centers around a group of young women, there is also significant conflict between the two adults in the play, Headmistress Francis and Eloise Amponsah. What are the similarities and differences you see between the conflicts between young people and the conflicts between adults in the play? How do you think these conflicts are related?

5. *School Girls* takes place in a boarding school, but many of the expectations placed on the main characters throughout the play aren’t academic, but are rather about their beauty, decorum, and appearance. How do you think this affects the way the main characters see themselves? How does it affect their goals, plans, and who they want to become?
THEATRE ETIQUETTE

Eating, drinking, and smoking are not allowed while inside the theatre.

Be respectful to the artists onstage and to your fellow audience members. Wait until intermission and after the performance to talk, and remain in your seat during the performance. Be mindful of others seated next to and in front of you. Wait until after the show to use phones or electronic devices. The glow from the screen is distracting to your fellow audience members AND the actors, who can see your phone from onstage!

What should I wear? Dress according to your school’s dress code. The Goodman is air conditioned, so bring a sweater or extra layer in case you get cold in the theatre.

How should I respond to what’s going on on the stage? Honestly and appropriately. Attending a theatre performance is different from watching a movie at home; in a theatre, you are in a room full of people who can hear your responses just as you can hear theirs. Most importantly, the actors can hear and see you. They will appreciate any appropriate feedback to what is happening onstage (laughter at jokes, gasps at surprising moments) but might be distracted if it is inappropriate (laughter at the wrong time, talking when it is not warranted). Whether we enjoy the play or not, we owe respect to the actors.

What if I need to leave the theatre during the show? You should only leave the theatre if it is an emergency. Make sure to use restrooms before the show, or wait until intermission.
What to do before the show:
When you arrive at the Goodman at 10:30am, you will wait to enter the theatre with your group. Once your group is called, a staff member will lead you to your seats. Please promptly sit where you have been assigned. Remember that the show needs to begin on time and everyone needs to be seated.

What to do during intermission:
Most plays have a 15 minute intermission. This gives you time to stretch your legs, use the restroom (located on both floors), get some water, and discuss the play with your friends. When intermission is over, the lights in the lobby will flash several times. That is your cue to get back to your seat, because the performance is about to begin!

What to do after the show:
There will be a post-show discussion immediately following the performance. Members of the cast will come out on stage and answer your questions. Feel free to ask any respectful questions you might have about the play, the job of the artists, or behind-the-scenes secrets.