us to understand how the pageant can simultaneously identify and disidentify with nationalist ideologies of America?

Banet-Weiser's discussion of the talent show and question-and-answer session provides one way of rethinking the equation between Miss America and national narratives of whiteness. Far from being a rote dialogue between pageant organizers and contestants, the question-and-answer session is in fact critical to providing 'the architecture for the construction of the contemporary ideal female subject ... she is intelligent, goal-oriented, independent, feisty, and committed to individualism' (p. 88). Enunciated within a patriarchal (and paternal) liberal discourse of individual subjectivity, the contestant who participates in the question-and-answer session is both encouraged to speak, at the same time that her speech is regulated by what Banet-Weiser calls 'rehearsed spontaneity'. The pedagogical inculcation of contestants into dominant discourses of taste (and therefore class) illustrates the manner in which Miss America attempts to consolidate middle-class narratives of American selfhood. At the same time, the contestants' insistence on their capacity for *choice* in these two segments of the pageant implies that contestants actively negotiate their own desires and pleasures *vis-à-vis* the demands of pageant organizers, thus embodying contestatory notions of agency. In this reading of Miss America, the pageant does not hegemonically reproduce, or succeed in disciplining, representations of gender, race, and sexuality. Rather, the contestants re-inflect these narrative structures in order to realize new forms of embodied agency. As contestants actively re-make themselves and the meaning of the pageant, Miss America proves to be an ambivalent site on which the 'national dilemma' (p. 9) of American multiculturalism and femininity remains unresolved.

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Action chicks: new images of tough women in popular culture

Sherrie A. Inness (editor); Palgrave, London, 2004, ISBN: 1-4039-6396-7, £12.99 (Pbk)

Action Chicks is the latest in an impressive list of books in girls' studies edited by Sherrie A. Inness, Professor of English at Miami University, USA. It picks up on themes of some of her earlier works, especially *Tough Girls* (1999), by investigating the latest action heroines of (mainly US) popular culture. As with other Inness-edited texts, *Action Chicks* brings together a diverse group of contributors, mainly emerging academics, to provide fresh and engaging commentary on the meanings of women as action heroines in TV, film, comics and toys. The key concern of this

text is to consider how new images of toughness and action as portrayed through the contemporary female heroines of popular media engage with, advance or complicate feminist discourses of power, choice and strength, especially for young women.

In the Introduction, Inness suggests that it is time for feminist cultural studies to move on from the study of the usual suspects in this field, for example, the much-analysed Ellen Ripley of the *Alien* films and Sarah Connor of *Terminator 2*. To this end, the book is divided into two sections: section 1 examines the changing images of action heroines over the last decade, including Lara Croft, Buffy, Xena, Nikita, Pamela Anderson's *Barb Wire* film character and Sarah Pezzini of the TV show *Witchblade*, and section 2 looks at new and challenging notions of toughness through figures such as Chyna of the World Wrestling Federation, Carmela Soprano of the *Sopranos* TV series, and Aeryn Sun of the Sci Fi Channel TV show *Farscape*. The standout chapters are by Jeffrey A. Brown, who argues that new action chicks destabilize the dual gender system by embodying exaggerated masculine and feminine traits simultaneously; and Sara Crosby, who poses the question, why did the tough women of 2001 (Max of *Dark Angel*, Buffy and Xena) all commit suicide? She argues that the ideology of Republican individualism made action chicks possible, but that the feminist possibilities created in the process were shut down by recasting them as sacrificial heroines. A number of the other essays apply equally interesting frames to their material, for example, Charlene Tung considers the neocolonialist project at work in *La Femme Nikita*, and Sharon Ross explores the new style of hero-as-friend, arguing that toughness has been re-invented as 'something that can include caring for and about other tough women' (p. 236). Several essays also reflect on the metahuman as the new model of postgender action chick (e.g., David Greven, Renny Christopher, Claudia Herbst, and Sherrie A. Inness).

Action Chicks' engagement with very contemporary material is inevitably both a strength and a limitation. The pop culture heroines it investigates are necessarily transient, although their meanings and effects may not be. This is a balance taken seriously in the chapters, although some undertake a very close analysis of their particular pop culture text, and as a consequence may be primarily of interest to serious fans. And naturally the US focus may mean that the book is less relevant to scholars working in areas where the TV shows, toys and films of these action chicks are unknown or not so popular. An interesting issue but something more flagged than fully theorized in this volume is the meaning of the shift to girl heroines as opposed to the tough *women* of 1990s popular culture. For example, many contributors note that new images of toughness are emerging that differ significantly from the previous ones, and suggest that the meaning of the girliness intrinsic to these is something worth exploring further (and indeed done to very good effect by Hopkins (2002) in her book *Girl Heroes*).

The central question of *Action Chicks* is framed by Jeffrey A. Brown thus: 'when women are portrayed as tough ... are they being allowed access to a position of

empowerment, or are they merely being further fetishised as dangerous sex objects?' (p. 47). This is not a new question in feminist popular culture studies, but it receives some new treatments here, through the analytical work of emerging scholars and in relation to new images which may not fit into older frameworks of pop hero female role models. This is an engaging text highly relevant for scholars interested in the nexus between girls' studies and feminist cultural/media studies.

Anita Harris

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Women in contemporary Mexico

Victoria E. Rodriguez; University of Texas Press, Austin Texas, 2003, ISBN: 0-292-77125-8, £37.95 (Hbk), 0-292-77127-4, £12.50 (Pbk)

In recent years, the literature on women and politics in Latin America has burgeoned. This work, as one of the first book length studies of the roles played by women in Mexican politics, is a very useful addition to this growing field. It is the culmination of in-depth and sustained research that was undertaken from 1994 and involved interviewing and observing large numbers of Mexican women who were involved in both formal political activity and grassroots activism. Therefore, unusually for a study of this kind, it is in a good position to give us the perspectives of the women themselves. The author herself, originally from Mexico but now based in the United States, has studied Mexican politics for several decades and therefore is in an ideal position to write a book such as this.

The period that this book covers has been a time of great change for both the Mexican political system and for women in Mexican politics. The Mexican political system had been dominated by one party, the Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI), since the revolution that had enabled it to come to power early in the 20th century. During the 1990s, what was essentially a one-party state began a process of political liberalization, allowing other parties to achieve some power and influence. This political opening culminated in 2000 with the election of the right-winger Vicente Fox, the first president to come from another party for over 70 years. This transition to democracy and increased political pluralism was