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Beauty Pageants, FIU, and "Worlds Ahead": An Open Letter to FIU President Mark Rosenberg

Abstract

In response to FIU's decision to rent space to Donald Trump's Miss Universe Beauty pageant, it is argued that FIU has a responsibility toward its female and male students to work for a less sexist world. As the leadership of the university does not seem to be aware of the dangers of exaggerated beauty standards and female objectification, the letter draws on feminist insights to add non-sexist substance to FIU's vision of being "worlds ahead".

Keywords

Beauty Pageants, Women's and Gender Studies, Feminism, Gender Equality

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Dear President Rosenberg,

When this letter appears in FIU's online journal *Class, Race, and Corporate Power*, the November elections will be over. Thus, the eminently important question of whether FIU gets access to the adjacent fairground to enable the university's territorial expansion will have been answered by the local electorate. This means that FIU leadership can hopefully relax from its campaign trail mode, in which it had to present itself as a strong, radiant, positive institution seeking community approval in any way possible. I hope we can now talk more freely about a controversial issue that came up during campaign-time: The announcement that the finale of Donald Trump's Miss Universe beauty pageant would take place at FIU's arena in January 2015.

Judging the public statements of FIU leadership in regard to the pageant *before* faculty and student protest formed, the event was framed as a source of pride and an occasion for students to learn. In the student newspaper *The Beacon*, you were quoted saying: "Our students will gain valuable insights from this opportunity to intern with and learn from this world-class event" and "I am delighted that having the pageant on campus will also make it possible for our first generation students to receive scholarships and young people all over the world to be exposed to FIU." Only after voices of criticism became louder did you turn to your internal constituency with a different message, roughly along these lines: A public institution cannot reject a request for renting space from any legal organization (a statement that seems to imply that you would have done just that, had there been the opportunity); FIU is only *renting* the space, it does not *co-host* the event and its logo will not appear in association with the pageant (of course logo representation or in this case, the absence of it, is important these days, but how clear a line does it draw?); FIU will use television time during the event to present itself as the forward-looking institution it is, in particular in terms of its strong support of women in academia (again, the question of separation between the institution and the event arises when FIU actually uses the event for self-promotion). You also announced in a town hall meeting that for the future there will be a certain procedure in place for renting out space that ensures the mission of the University is carefully considered in the process – this sounded as if the procedure currently in place was faulty, and that something needed to be fixed. Thus, the internal message was one of discomfort; there was not much attempt, as far as I could tell, to sell to faculty and students the unique international character of this world class event; but this is the message sent toward the general (voting) public.

I get the difficulty. I respect it. I sincerely hope that FIU will have the opportunity to expand – after all, we are growing in student and faculty bodies, so we could use this space extremely well.

However, now that the election is over, let's talk a bit more seriously about this episode. Here is where the problem lies: Renting this space and embracing the event as a learning opportunity for students shows a level of ignorance that should be understood as a liability for the University. FIU aims to be future-oriented – "worlds ahead". It sure has a lot to offer, and one thing I am

most proud of is its mission to have a direct impact on the South Floridian community, which is, to a large degree, a disadvantaged community. However, I cannot stop but ask myself what you, as FIU's President, think students will learn from a Beauty pageant? Is it possible that FIU's leadership does not understand the harms of commercialized sexism? As I see it, FIU had a chance to send a different message, determined in its opposition to female objectification, for the sake of our students' futures, both female and male. Instead, FIU has taken the path of least resistance and in doing so, partakes in the perpetuation of problematic stereotypes.

If you are wondering at this point what exactly the problem is then please talk (and more importantly, listen) to your Women's and Gender Studies faculty, to your feminist students, as individuals and as organized groups. They have studied these things, and they understand what it means to put knowledge into transformative practice. They will, by the way, protest against the pageant. These feminist voices will tell you that beauty has been among the first issues that the second wave women's movement in this country has organized around – a particularly iconic moment was the 1968 protest against the Miss America pageant in Atlantic City¹. For society as a whole, it was hard to see at the time how female beauty – arguably the most important capital women had, the one asset they were endowed with on a higher level than men – could be a bad thing; and do not all women *want* to look pretty? The women who organized the protest in Atlantic City, however, saw a connection between the dictate of beauty standards that were not achievable for 99% of all women, the undervaluation of everything women do, and widespread violence against women. They rebelled against these structures of sexism. At the time, this was “a daring act of defiance against everything that women were supposed to be”² – unfortunately, it seems we haven't moved that much since then. What stuck in the general psyche from the 1968 protest is that bras were burned (which they weren't – but even the possibility of dangling breasts apparently deeply disturbed fundamental American values). What also began here is a deep-seated rejection of everything feminist as abhorrent and “man-hating” – something so crazy that it should really not exist. This rejection of radical thinking, interestingly, goes hand in hand with a national self-construction of believing in the rights of women and gender equality, a stance that is often framed as superior to that of “other” cultures; but the social movements and activists that drive these emancipatory ideas are nevertheless sidelined and ridiculed. The goal is silencing. This mechanism is routinely applied to radical segments of transformative movements – feminists, socialists, and radical parts of the civil rights movement, to name just a few.

From your faculty and students, you will hear that there is a long tradition of analyzing the social relevance of beauty: It has a relevance in objectifying women and reducing them to their appearance. In our commodified consumer culture, this dictate is now also imposed on men, but the message sent to each gender is different (in short – passivity and lack of subject status for women, dominance for men³; variations exist, but they do not distort the general picture – they only make it easier to digest as there seem to be “options”). There are constant attempts to discover inner beauty, and the diversity of understandings of what beauty is; there are many moves to deconstruct rigid beauty standards, both because they should not be relevant (vis-à-vis

intelligence, passion, goal-orientation - you name it) and because they are dangerous and cause mental and physical diseases. Beauty is also an important part of a thriving economy – the attention we pay to it, the money and time we invest in it creates jobs, often female jobs, and growth.

What does a university have to do with female beauty in general and with a beauty pageant specifically? I think it should enable students to understand the societal functions of these phenomena.

Do beauty pageants empower women? This is a message often sent from the women participating in it – doors are opened for them to do good, to be heard, to raise money for worthy causes; and presumably, their beauty (if combined with intelligence) also gives them access to scholarships (I admit I am less impressed with this option since watching [John Oliver's analysis](#) of the dispersion of such scholarship monies that is more virtual than real). If there is empowerment, it is individual. It has no positive collective effect on women. What will be empowered, however, is the beauty industry – the less-than-beautiful 99% can be more easily persuaded to increase their consumption of beauty products the more they are confronted with their comparative beauty disadvantage (= watching a pageant).

Could beauty per se be empowering? Self-esteem can clearly emanate from the body. As a person who grew up in a culture where bodily self-esteem was not particularly rewarded, I always felt deficient in cultures where women and men carry their bodies with pride, dance sensually and expose rather than hide their bodies. However, one should pay attention to the degree to which such self-esteem is contributing to self-realization or whether it is imposed and defined by the gaze and assessment of others. If we assume, for example, that a body-positive culture is prevalent in countries like Venezuela or Brazil, countries that are said to be extremely enthusiastic about beauty pageants, how do we explain the increasing obsession with plastic surgery in these countries, starting at a disturbingly young age, encouraged and rewarded by parents, friends and broader society? Would this be a simple surgical enhancement of female physical self-esteem, or rather the outright denial that a woman's physical beauty can ever be good enough?

Finally, I think a university should look at the context in which we see beauty. In this, it has a threefold responsibility: First, the university should make young women realize that their individual expression of beauty is less their individual decision than they think, but is framed within a broader socioeconomic structure that marginalizes all forms of beauty that cannot be commercialized. In this light, it is clearly entirely counterproductive to connect scholarships for female students to beauty (pageants) – connect them instead to any form of structural disadvantage that affects our students, both male and female. Secondly, a university has a responsibility toward young men as well. It should help them unlearn the messages sent about women by society as a whole – that they are to be judged by their looks and that it is fine to treat them as objects for men's fantasies. This responsibility taken seriously would mean a lot of

things, and one among them is a comprehensive university-wide policy to confront sexual assault and harassment on campus. FIU, regrettably, does not have anything of that kind. Finally, universities should be spaces where stereotypical beauty is critically investigated - in its consequences for women, men, and even more fundamentally, for all who do not fit neatly into a bipolar male-female gender order.

Mr. President, female objectification is a dangerous part of American mainstream society. A university with FIU's ambition to shape the country's future has to stand up against it. Academic culture is about reflection, critical thinking, expression, good arguments, reasoning. This gives us valuable tools to swim against an anti-emancipatory mainstream. However, academic culture is also deeply misogynist. It is a space where women have long been excluded, first as bodies, then as insufficient minds and inappropriate voices. A recent lecture of British Classicist Mary Beard titled [The Public Voice of Women](#) chronicles how throughout ancient history, men have silenced women, or in Beard's words, told them to "shut up". Beard connects her findings to her own experiences as an outspoken public intellectual. She is, coincidentally, not interested in her physical appearance, and she often receives extremely hostile reactions to her numerous public statements such as tweets that compare her "genitalia to a variety of unpleasantly rotting vegetables"⁴. The pattern she finds is that men cannot accept women's contributions to public affairs as legitimate and appropriate. In history and today, the ability of public speech is a male marker.

I offer this last thought as a juxtaposition – society and academia is comfortable with smiling, silent, beautiful women, but not with those who resist a judging gaze and act assuming they have something relevant to say. If we don't ALL work to change such biases, they are here to stay. The "worlds ahead" that FIU envisions must not be sexist business as usual.

Sincerely,

Susanne Zwingel

¹ Hanisch, Carol 1998: Two letters from the Women's Liberation Movement, in *The Feminist Memoir Project: Voices from Women's Liberation*, ed. Rachel DuPlessis and Ann Snitow, Crown, 197-207.

² Ibid., p. 197.

³ See, for example, Jean Kilbourne's famous "Killing Us Softly: Advertising's Image of Women" series, <http://www.jeankilbourne.com/videos/>

⁴ Beard, Mary 2014: The Public voice of Women, London Review of Books LRB Winter Lectures, <http://www.lrb.co.uk/v36/n06/mary-beard/the-public-voice-of-women>