

IMAGINING CARIBBEAN WOMANHOOD

RACE, NATION AND
BEAUTY COMPETITIONS, 1929-70



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✦ Rochelle Rowe ✦

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GENDER IN HISTORY

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The expansion of research into the history of women and gender since the 1970s has changed the face of history. Using the insights of feminist theory and of historians of women, gender historians have explored the configuration in the past of gender identities and relations between the sexes. They have also investigated the history of sexuality and family relations, and analysed ideas and ideals of masculinity and femininity. Yet gender history has not abandoned the original, inspirational project of women's history: to recover and reveal the lived experience of women in the past and the present.

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Imagining Caribbean womanhood

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List of abbreviations

BWIA	British West Indies Airways
CBU	Carnival Bands Union (Trinidad)
CDC	Carnival Development Committee (Trinidad, state-run)
CIC	Carnival Improvement Committee (Trinidad, private)
JFW	Jamaica Federation of Women
JLP	Jamaica Labour Party
JWTU	Jamaica Workers and Tradesmen Union
PNM	People's National Movement (Trinidad)
PNP	People's National Party (Jamaica)
SCC	Savannah Carnival Committee (Trinidad, private)
UNIA	United Negro Improvement Association

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Introduction – Caribbean beauty competitions in context

In 1949, the *Caribbean Post*, the brainchild of Jamaican feminist publisher Aimee Webster, announced the arrival of a new type of West Indian woman through its coverage of the pre-eminent beauty contest of British Honduras 'Queen of the Bay':

This year's 'Queen of the Bay' is the true type of evolving West Indian womanhood. Young, she is just eighteen, attractive with a tanned olive complexion, dark wavy hair, and bright black eyes; she has a flashing smile. And her queenly bearing is so characteristic of Maya Indian and African ancestry.¹

Webster's publication was proud to sponsor this new hybrid ideal of British West Indian femininity. A place was reserved for the 'Queen of the Bay' in the *Post's* own regional 'Miss British Caribbean' beauty competition. Webster used the competition to assert the modernity of the British Caribbean, and to support plans for self-government through the proposed federation of British Caribbean colonies. Alongside beauty competitions, the *Post* championed modern Caribbean femininity. In articles such as 'Daughters of the Caribbean', it increasingly portrayed light-skinned 'mixed-raced' or brown women of the middle-classes as cosmopolitan, well-travelled, 'adventuresome' and 'eclectic'.²

The *Post's* treatment of West Indian femininity reflected the growing significance of the beauty contest in the British Caribbean. The most prominent early beauty contest in the West Indies was the 'Miss Jamaica' contest, which began in 1929 and was sponsored by the national daily newspaper, the *Gleaner*. Though modelled in part on the new beauty competitions of North America – which aroused excitement and controversy in equal measure, for their parades of scantily clad women – 'Miss Jamaica' began modestly, as a debutante parade for white-creole women in ballgowns.³ However, at this moment of cultural revolution in the West Indies, beauty contests were not to remain as private parties, restricted only to white elites and the wealthier coloureds who skirted the margins of elite social life. Gradually, as beauty contests grew in popularity, especially after the Second World War, they became a space to contest the nation itself through competing representations of ideal Caribbean womanhood.

As the predominantly brown middle-classes became ever more confident in asserting their leadership and stewardship of the mass of African and Asian-descended labourers and peasants, so they fought to influence the icons of nationhood and citizenship. They began to challenge the supposed cultural supremacy of the British and through that, the racial system itself. Particularly fascinating and under-examined are the gendered and racialised aspects of this competition for culture, and the struggle to enact non-white subjectivities and carve them into the national image. This book provides a cultural history of Caribbean beauty competitions in the Anglophone Caribbean and in London, examining the significance of the performances on the beauty contest stage, to reveal that the work of the beauty competition was to help to bring subjectivity, the body and citizen into being as these countries emerged from colonialism.

Caribbean cultural and literary criticism hosts a discussion on the politics of beauty in the Caribbean, reflecting on the obsessive debates that thrive in today's press over who ought to represent the nation, but with little or no examination of the history of these somewhat tabooed, public debates. This rich discussion reveals that beauty contests in the Caribbean are, in the words of literary and cultural critic Carolyn Cooper, 'far more serious than mere entertainment'.⁴ Literary and cultural critic Belinda Edmondson, author of *Caribbean Middle-brow: Leisure, Culture and the Middle Class* has remarked on the lively 'regional obsession' over beauty contests in the Caribbean as a 'state-approved form of female spectacle . . . particularly useful in any discussion of the politics of femininity and public performance in the Caribbean'.⁵ Edmondson offers incisive analysis of the success of images of eroticised yet sanitised and approved light-skinned femininity in beauty competitions, and other public spectacles including dancehall and carnival, that reveal the ongoing stratification in the middle-class press between decorous brown middle-class and 'vulgar' black working-class femininity. Edmondson also remarks that since the late 1990s, the interplay between paradigms of brown and black femininity has begun to change due to the effects of globalisation; 'in the age of black supermodels and the ubiquitous Oprah Winfrey', black beauty queens, she explains (those who can demonstrate middle-class values), are no longer unseen and unheard of.⁶ Similarly Cooper, herself dedicated to reappraising the subaltern dancehall and black working-class culture in Jamaica as countercultural and defiant, dedicated a series of newspaper articles in the *Jamaican Observer* and *Gleaner* in the 1990s to critiquing the controversy surrounding the 'Miss Jamaica' competition and the ongoing marginalisation of

blackness in constructions of Jamaican society.⁷ More recently Cooper has also compared Jamaican beauty competitions with the rise since 2001 of professional modelling in Jamaica and argued that modelling makes more room for phenotypically African women, radically and sumptuously adorned, and in the process destabilises old beauty aesthetics valorised in the beauty competition.⁸

Most illustrative to date is the work of cultural critic Natasha Barnes, whose important essay 'Face of a Nation', originally published in 1994, was the first scholarly work to suggest that beauty competitions in the Caribbean had a history worth exploring, and shed light on the infamy of racialised politics surrounding the 'Miss Jamaica' pageant. Here I build upon Barnes's study, and the crucial commentary of Edmondson, Cooper and other cultural critics to elaborate a thorough historical discussion of the cultural history of beauty in the Caribbean as the process of decolonisation took hold.⁹

However, these works that have emerged from literary and cultural studies are written by scholars of literature and culture, and speak to other works of postcolonial literary criticism. Therefore whilst they provide essential observations, insights and a basis for new research into beauty, they lack detailed examination of the process of the development of racialised paradigms of beauty over time, and their political and cultural applications, in short their historical formation and contexts. The history and politics of constructions of racialised femininity and desirability in the Caribbean are not self-evident and need to be further explored and their origins accounted for.¹⁰ Clearly beauty contests are not only significant, but have a history steeped in power, marginalisation and contestation. For the first time this study contributes a book-length work to the discussion of the politics of beauty in the Caribbean, a detailed historical study that centres on the theme of beauty. It is based on thoroughgoing analysis of the origins and development of the beauty competition over time in the Anglophone Caribbean in this crucial period of the twentieth century.¹¹ It draws upon valuable archival sources of African Diaspora history spread between the UK, the Caribbean and New York, including newspapers, magazines, pamphlets, periodicals, and government records, as well literature and oral testimony gathered by the author. As a result of this wide research, it seeks to contribute to studies of beauty, gender, 'race' and postcolonialism.¹² In the process this book addresses a number of gaps in the existing literature on beauty in the Caribbean. It clarifies the mystery overhanging beauty competitions before the 1960s, the dawn of independence in the British Caribbean; it analyses the steady rise of competitions invested in brown femininity in

the postwar period; at the same time, it challenges the notion that black women had little or no role to play in the spectacle before the 1990s by bringing contrary evidence to the surface that demonstrates the ongoing construction of ideals of (dark-skinned) black femininity in the Caribbean. It aims to reveal that through the performance of cultured, modern femininity in the beauty competition that developed over time, brown and black women helped to enable creole-nationalist projects that sought to bring the subjectivities, embodiment and citizenship of people of colour into being. Although the construction of idealised femininity and not masculinity is under the lens in this book, it becomes clear that men had an investment in the beauty competition delivering these vital ends, and in many cases the organisation of the beauty competition was evidently 'too important' to be left to women.

This book is distinct in that it aims to highlight the significance of beauty to the wider social and political context of the transformation of the Caribbean within the twentieth century. By demonstrating that the performativity surrounding the beauty contest was used as a mode for realising racialised subjectivities, it aims to reveal that beauty was important for the possibility of nationhood and modernity amongst Caribbean people, both within the Caribbean and in the UK. As such, it is a work of feminist cultural history, adding to a growing, yet still tiny, body of critical feminist studies on beauty that look beyond the United States. This work in particular aims to help to fill the lacuna of such studies that specifically address the Caribbean and the black experience in Britain, in historical perspective.¹³

The beauty contest emerged in tandem with the cultural revolution, forced by labour unrest in the 1930s. It is, therefore, a primary site to examine racialised femininity under construction and reconstruction, in connection with the growth of interlinked public discourses on identity, national identity and decolonisation. By engaging the Caribbean middle brow culture, to use Edmondson's phrase, this book aims to build upon Caribbean cultural criticism on the rise of the Caribbean nation. However, this cultural history of Caribbean beauty competitions may also supplement political histories, which as literary critic Veronica Gregg has observed, have produced a 'nationalist creation story', focused in particular on the political life of a 'handful of remarkable men', and which has unsurprisingly, 'created many absences'.¹⁴ Furthermore, as historian Howard Johnson has pointed out, Caribbean scholarship of the past has at times tended to focus upon the black 'sufferer' in isolation from the rest of the society.¹⁵ In contrast, of particular interest to this study are the middle-class and the aspiring middle-class, as they were drawn into

the saga of the beauty competition, either as nationalist activists subtly critiquing or openly protesting the idealised parade, or as self-conscious audiences examining themselves and the candidates in a circuitous flow of surveillance, or as consumers enticed by the alluring and glamorous spectacle of the beauty competition, its display of luxurious lifestyle and thrilling prizes.

Performativity and the beauty contest

As sociologist Shirley Tate has shown, 'feminist ideas on beauty are "raced", classed and the site of othering others'.¹⁶ Therefore, this book emerges out of the need for more feminist historiography that engages race, beauty and politics, in the vein of Maxine Craig's landmark study of African American beauty competitions. I take up Tate's elucidation of race performativity to examine the work of the Caribbean beauty competition and the significance of brown and black women's involvement therein. Tate has theorised black beauty as performative, that is, 'designed activity', and:

[A]n ongoing negotiation of aesthetics, stylization and politics produced through the mobility and mobilization of beauty knowledge, stylization technologies, feminist and anti-racist/Black Nationalist ideology in the Black Atlantic diaspora.¹⁷

Taking up a Butlerian grounding in performativity Tate argues that 'racialized subjects bring into being what they name, within the reiterative power of discourse on "race"'.¹⁸ By extension the participants in Caribbean beauty competitions, be they audience members, organisers, judges or contestants, continue to shape and identify race as they participate in creating and affecting the performance of cultured, modern femininity in and around the beauty competition. This book will explore how the competition itself becomes a mode of articulating particular performances to deliver certain ends. The performance of cultured modern beauty, the idealised femininity of women of colour in the beauty contest, became the mode for projecting the wholeness and citizenship of Caribbean subjects.

However, in the process contradictions and occlusions occurred that reveal the limitations of the beauty competitions for this mode. Crucially Cooper's work on dancehall has addressed the 'pejoration of vulgar', which marks binaries of high and low culture in Jamaica, and has become 'encoded in the Jamaican body politic'.¹⁹ Racialised notions of vulgarity are embedded in discussion of the performance of idealised femininity

and are teased out here through the journey of the beauty contest from elite leisure to national product. And yet, the history of Caribbean beauty also bears the influence of counter-cultural anti-racist discourses, focused on locating blackness in so-called 'natural' stylisation processes and politics. This cultural history of Caribbean beauty competitions provides some much-needed examination of the surprising and little-known interventions of radical anti-racist voices into the beauty contest fray and considers the impact they had on the development of competitions in the Caribbean.

Hybridity and creolisation

As Edmondson writes, concepts of hybridity and creolisation have been used to theorise 'the development of a society that is the blend of ethnicities and influences'.²⁰ However, these concepts continue to be the subject of great debate among Caribbean and postcolonial scholars and still need to be further unpacked and their multiple historical and current usages examined. Here I take up Edmondson's observation that hybridity has somehow been posed as democracy-at-work and mysteriously become a romantic paradigm of Caribbeanness in popular culture.²¹ Similar work has been done by anthropologist Donna Goldstein, who suggests that scholars wishing to understand the survival of discourses of racial democracy in Brazil ought to examine the much neglected question of the role of gender in the construction of a national mythology.²² Here, I engage hybridity, as Edmondson suggests, not merely as a theoretical postcolonial trope, but for the way it was imagined on the beauty contest stage, specifically the use of the beauty contest to make literal representations of harmonious racial and cultural blending in the Caribbean through performances of cultured, modern beauty, created by contest organisers, beauty candidates and observers.²³ Through the examination of the beauty contest this book explores the serviceability of the concept of hybridity within the different nationalist projects of the mid-twentieth century in Jamaica, Trinidad and Barbados, and how these projects were challenged, in the Caribbean and in London. Beauty competitions provided the opportunity to orchestrate a national romance underpinned by idealised hybrid feminine beauty, a pageant of national self-realisation that attempted to harmonise racial, social and ideological conflicts and set forth a model for nationhood, according to the vision of its middle-class authors. However, as I have argued elsewhere, Caribbean gender constructions have, since the colonial encounter itself, used female bodies as the markers of racial difference and Euro-American