Abstract

“Crowning Miss Sweden – Constructions of Gender, Race and Nation in Beauty Pageants”

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Gender and Power in the New Europe
5th European Feminist Research Conference
19-24 August 2003

The aim of the paper is to analyse how beauty pageants can be understood in relation to social constructions of gender, race and nation. Focus is primarily put on the beauty pageant Miss Sweden during the 1950s – the first ten years of its existence.

Banet Weiser (1999) argues that the beauty pageant Miss America is a complex cultural arrangement, e.g. it functions as an embodiment of national discourses. The competition constitutes a specific arena where, in Anderson’s (1991:1993) words, imagined communities are constructed. And it thus offers a place for people to gather around stories concerning what the nation is and who belongs to it. Moreover, beauty pageants are structured around sets of disciplinary body practices, through which gender identities are performed.

Since 1949 the beauty pageant Miss Sweden yearly crowns a woman who should act as a national representative and symbol of Sweden. We argue that this national beauty pageant may be traced back to a competition in search of the ‘Swedish race’ held in 1922. The aim was to select a man and a woman with physical appearances and pedigrees that could set the norm for a ‘pure and noble Swedish form’. The construction of this ‘form’ implied a white, blonde and blue-eyed appearance. This taken-for-granted whiteness is also found in the Miss Sweden pageant in the 1950s, and it has persisted throughout the 20th century.

The Miss Sweden looked for in the beginning of the 1950s was an athletic, natural and ‘nature loving’ girl – features constructed as typically Swedish at the time. But the construction of Miss Sweden was also performed through the bodily transformation of this athletic and natural girl into as a feminine, beautiful and glamorous ‘princess’ – thus constructing a concept of ‘the feminine’ closely linked to ideas of beauty and glamour.