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Indian Beauty Pageants: Performing Indigeneity or Celebrating It?

Beauty pageants get a bad rap. Since their inception they have had a precarious and convoluted relationship with feminism. The majority of that relationship as of late has been one of criticism. Beauty pageants have been targeted for criticism and protest by feminists for years who claim they perpetuate the objectification and sexualization of women, present unrealistic models of femininity, and perpetuate a harmful image of white/middle-class beauty standards. But what about Native beauty pageants? Does this harmful culture cross-over into the indigenous model of beauty pageantry? Much like the conversation surrounding mainstream beauty pageants, the answer is much more complicated and nuanced than: “Beauty pageants are harmful to women”. In a lot of ways, they can be mechanisms for empowerment and an acknowledgement of female achievement, leadership, and talent. This is also true for Indigenous pageants. I argue that although it is not without it’s flaws, Indigenous pageants are an indigenous feminist act that should not be underestimated as a tool for resistance and cultural revitalization.

Mainstream white beauty pageants are critiqued by mainstream/white feminism, so it is only fair that we analyze Indigenous beauty pageants through an indigenous feminist lens. As a young girl going to powwow’s I had never once questioned the Powwow royalty contests or their place in powwow culture. I remember being infatuated with the idea of one day being powwow royalty, and day dreaming about being Queen of my tribe’s annual Restoration Celebration. As a young Klamath girl, powwow princesses and queens were the epitome of indigeneity. I wanted to wear the beaded crown and practice my traditions and be *that* indigenous. Now, upon closer inspection I’m not so sure I agree with Indian pageants all the time. However, as I mentioned before it is much more convoluted than I could even begin to understand as a child, and am still struggling to form an opinion on now.

**ISSUES**

It is important that we first address the history of these pageants. Like most things in Indian country, they have their roots in white supremacy and have been in some way infiltrated by settler-colonialism and molded by federal policies of assimilation. Many of the pageants were originally implemented and modeled directly after Whitestream beauty pageants that judged the women on their physical appearances rather than their cultural knowledge and commitment to their heritage. The Miss Indian America competition in Sheridan, Wyoming originally began in an effort to showcase the cities commitment to peaceful race relations. The competition was not implemented with the true intention to honor Indian women, but rather to absolve themselves from racism. Sheridan being a town that commonly boasted “NO INDIANS ALLOWED” signs in the windows of their businesses.[[1]](#footnote-1) Pageants in Alaska such as the Miss World Eskimo Indian Olympics competition had originally included swimsuit components even after the contestants expressed their discomfort with the swimsuit portion. Many of the pageants in no way honored the voices, histories, issues, or traditions of the people’s and women participating in them.[[2]](#footnote-2) They did not require the women to speak or be knowledgeable about their culture, nor did they respect their wishes to remain clothed. They were simply a Whitestream colonizing mechanism using the bodies of Indian women as objects for desire and silent performances of indigeneity.

The Image of the Indian Princess is one with a long and tiresome history. It is one that seldom is mentioned in Indian communities without being accompanied by a sarcastic tone or an eye-roll. It is well established that the Indian Princess image has been implemented and used as a colonizing device and move to innocence.[[3]](#footnote-3) Many argue that the image of the Indian princess is very literally being recreated through these pageants and performed for tourists and outsiders. There is a long history of calling Powwow and Indian Pageant contestants “Apple Indians”, which is meant to evoke the image of something that is red on the outside and white on the inside.[[4]](#footnote-4) Many people, especially those involved in red power and American Indian Movements viewed Indian pageants as a way to civilize Indian Women and to assimilate them into white mainstream ideas of femininity.[[5]](#footnote-5) This is hard to argue with considering the pageants are being taken up and practiced widely by communities, people, and nations that had never originally had princesses in the first place.[[6]](#footnote-6) The original implementations of these princesses and royalty pageants were quite obviously perpetuating the Pocahontas perplex, continuing to stereotype and attempt to civilize native women.

Nowadays however, the pageants look much different from their original model. They no longer include swimsuit portions, that’s for certain. There isn’t enough basketball shorts and powwow t-shirts in the world to hold them now (Ayezzzzzz).[[7]](#footnote-7) Even as the pageants make more and more attempts to remain in practice and move away from their histories, the pageants still receive criticism. The pageants are scrutinized for being performances of indigeneity, rather than celebrations of it. Much like mainstream USA pageants, which push an ideal form of femininity and beauty onto women it is argued that pageants and royalty competitions in Indian country can force an idealized form of indigeneity onto women and communities.

The competitions require that women dress in traditional regalia. The judges favor those who have prettier regalia or who have regalia that was passed down from their mothers. This resonates with the judges as more traditional and shows them that the women are connected to their family, and supported by them.[[8]](#footnote-8) This is one of the subtle and superficial ways that judges can force ideals of indigineity onto the women. The pageants force contestants to alter their actions in order to appear more traditional. Many of the pageant women recall being made to do appearances where they were subjected to hurtful or ignorant questions from Non-Indians. Alaska Native women were asked if they lived in igloos and what they wear under their parkas and traditional dresses.[[9]](#footnote-9) Many of the women were chastised and forbidden from talking about politics or religion, and were required to always wear their traditional regalia. One winner of Miss Indian BYU remembers being criticized as “not Indian enough” for wearing a pants suit to visit young children at a public appearance.[[10]](#footnote-10) Do we harm women indigenous women by upholding and perpetuating Pan-Indian ideas of traditionalism? What do we accomplish when we make indigenous women compete against each other to work out who is the *most Indian* or *most authentic*? Comparing yourself to and competing against other women for recognition of your indigeneity can be an act of violence against yourself and others.

Of all the issues, my biggest personal hang-up with the pageants is that they require women to be single, not allowed to cohabitate with a partner, and many of the pageants (most notably Miss Indian World of Gathering of Nations)[[11]](#footnote-11) require women to be childless. This is not representative of the majority of Indian women, and completely at odds with the reality of so many women’s lives. It is restrictive in the sense that it does not truly represent native women, but rather, an ideal presentation of what a strong young indigenous woman looks and should behave like. Unfortunately, it recycles the logic that young mothers are not as valuable, are irresponsible, and not worthy of representing our people. It presents children as something to be ashamed of. Young pregnancy is frowned upon within settler societies, and by virtue of that many native communities are viewed as degenerative because they boast a high teenage pregnancy rate. When in reality a large percentage of our young women are care-givers of our next generations and that should be celebrated, not looked down upon. In indigenous feminism especially, there is this move towards the celebration of indigenous women as life givers and culture bearers. Does this not extend to 18-25 year olds who are competing to represent our communities? If these pageants are striving to distance themselves from their colonial origins, it is clear from a lot of the testimony and the nature of the requirements that they still have a lot of work to do.

**SOLUTIONS**

After discussing all of the cons it can be easy to jump to conclusions about these pageants and condemn them as restructured colonialism in regalia. However, it is *not* that simple. These pageants are also hailed as leadership development and cultural ambassador programs. Supporters of the pageants ardently believe that by participating in these pageants, the women are actively participating in a decolonizing process by putting forth and celebrating the visibility of indigenous beauty and cultural traditions. The pageants and contestants themselves are practicing the ethics of visibility, in a country where settler-colonialism has tried so hard to make them disappear.

Another aspect of the pageants that should be mentioned is that conventional beauty is no longer a factor in whether or not the women win. These pageants have the potential to reinvent beauty standards and shift the paradigm of whitewashing practices in mainstream beauty pageants, where pale skin and western features are all but required to win. Miss Indian World (MIW) often gains media attention for crowning curvy beauty queens, and the pageant is admired for its dedication to different body shapes. This is a welcome change from the tall and lithe Pocahontas stereotype people envision when they think of “Indian Princesses”. These pageants, although many reject the idea they are beauty pageants, are a celebration of non-conventional beauty, of ­*indigenous beauty.* Miss Indian World is not unique in this practice, as many of the Powwow royalty contests have been selecting winners who are “Indian and Round”[[12]](#footnote-12) for decades.

Moreover, the success and local importance of these pageants is not limited to the U.S. They are practiced throughout South America, Canada, and even the Pacific. One pageant in Tonga encourages transgender contestants to enter, which shows the potential for queer empowerment and locality in indigenous beauty pageants.[[13]](#footnote-13) Pageants have the potential to seriously challenge and alter our views of conventional beauty. Many people argue it is a reinvention of colonial and patriarchal practices, but it can also be seen as active resistance to colonial and patriarchal ideas of the Indian princess trope, and conventional beauty standards.

Additionally, the pageants have altered drastically in terms of the featured segments. Rather than having swimsuit portions they now boast culturally specific talents and informational portions. For example, the Miss Navajo Nation competition now has yarn spinning and sheep butchering portions, rather than talent and swimsuit.[[14]](#footnote-14) Likewise, the Miss World Eskimo Indian competition in Alaska made the very intentional switch to a cultural ambassador competition many years ago and now has talent portions that include: fish cutting demonstrations, creation story reenactments, subsistence lifestyle presentations, and traditional dances.[[15]](#footnote-15) The competitions often require women to know their language. Many women speak it for a large portion of the event and even tell jokes in it.[[16]](#footnote-16) In this way, the pageants are a site for language revitalization.

Most importantly, perhaps, the pageants no longer ban their contestants from discussing politics or religion. In fact, it is almost impossible to win a pageant these days without having some form of knowledge about the issues in your community and without having a platform to address them. In this way, the pageants make a concerted effort to bring attention to the voices of young women. Alaska Native Women often take up issues such as alcoholism or suicide, and make visits to troubled youth centers during their competitions.[[17]](#footnote-17) Ashley Callingbull (Enoch Cree), the 2015 Mrs. Universe winner was applauded for her political agenda, and used her title to bring awareness to MMIW, first nations poverty, and was openly critical of the Harper government in Canada.[[18]](#footnote-18) Maya beauty pageant contestants who participated during the Guatemalan civil war used the pageant as a platform for explicit messages on the situations of Mayan people. One person recalls this moment, “[it was] astounding what many of the girls had then had then to say with the president (of Guatemala) and other political dignitaries present. They had never flinched from speaking ‘truths’.”[[19]](#footnote-19) Even in times of deadly civil war these pageants showcase veracity, courage, and the commitment these women have to their people.

The pageants are an example of the ways that decolonizing a practice can be successful and practical. We often think that we need to do away with things entirely in order to decolonize, but this is a good example of how we can decolonize something by altering it and making it indigenous. Indigenizing something and decolonizing something go hand in hand and often look like the exact same thing. We can take things that have an assimilationist history, and use them as a testament to the refusal and strength of Indian nations. This is an example of nations and communities who have overcome that origin to make it something indigenized, something that fights back against hetero-patriarchy and colonialism. Why is MMIW an act of indigenous feminism but MIW isn’t? We love to band together and fight against Heteropatriarchy and the horror of settler colonialism when our women are nowhere to be found yet when they are present and visible we scrutinize them. There is no reason why we should be scrutinizing women when they’re alive, but honoring and missing them when they are gone. Yes, we should always be critical of the ways that settler-colonialism can reinvent itself in our communities. But with so much happening to our women all the time, I think we should uphold anything that lifts them higher and recognizes their accomplishments and talents, even if in subtle ways it resembles a very misogynistic whitestream practice. We must remain cognizant of the history of these pageants, and continue to make intentional changes to them. There is always room for improvement, you can never have too much decolonization! ☺

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6. R., Green, loc. cit. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. C., Wright, Original quote, *real life indigenous humor* [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. J., Clough, op. cit., p. 34 [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. C., Williams, op. cit., p. 28 [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
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