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## Queens of Academe: Beauty Pageantry, Student Bodies, and College Life by Karen W. Tice

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**Tice, Karen W. *Queens of Academe: Beauty Pageantry, Student Bodies, and College Life*. New York : Oxford University Press, 2012. xi + 246 pages. Cloth, \$24.95.**

One would be hard-pressed to find a phenomenon that better exemplifies the effects of class, race, sex, gender, religion or ethnicity on campus life than a beauty pageant. A cursory analysis of the present volume from gender studies specialist Karen W. Tice quickly reveals that a large proportion of its content is drawn from experiences at historically black colleges and universities. This provides the all-important and often neglected dimension of cultural comparison to this work. The norms established by dominant social groups in any society are obscured until they are held up to comparison with subordinate groups.

Beauty has long been a path of upward mobility for women, so college beauty pageantry could be a manifestation of college women's consciousness of this path to higher social ground. Thus the standards of etiquette and fashion that have been prevalent in pageantry are derived directly from the middle classes' perceptions of the upper classes to which they aspire. Ironically, members of the upper class regard overt display of these social features as signs of striving and therefore *déclassé*. So, as the present volume points out, Harvard and Yale "do not feature pageants for women (but) hold all-male pageants..." that lampoon pageantry but outdraw audiences of all but the most ardent pageant-sponsoring campuses (p. 95).

As late as 1950, Miss America contestants had to certify that they were members of the white race. African-American, Native American, Latina, and Asian-American women were barred from beauty pageants, even those on college campuses. A rare glimpse into a more diverse future was offered by the University of Hawaii, where in 1938 the Miss Ka Palapala pageant began giving members of six ethnic groups the chance to participate in "a beautiful harmony...of the spectrum of the rainbow" (p. 33). The special case of African-Americans in American history is reflected in many of the traditions attached to beauty pageantry, not the least telling of which is the ideal of "the strong black woman." This "syndrome," Tice points out, makes the apparently laudatory claim of strength, but also serves to rationalize the great burdens, struggles, and suffering that black women are expected to bear.

Because of their historical role in affirming traditional gender norms, campus beauty pageants have become a platform for promoting post-modern gender constructions, which deconstruct naturalized gender identities. Recent history provides examples of openly gay and transgendered pageant contestants directly challenging the gender-as-nature paradigm. Tice describes how gay men have entered homecoming queen contests since the 1990s to challenge homophobia and advocate for equal rights and benefits for gay partners of benefited employees.

Beauty sells things, and that includes religion. In the early days of beauty pageantry, churches and religious figures condemned pageants as blasphemous spectacles, but by the 1920s most had reversed their positions and embraced beauty pageants as expositions of God's gift of beauty and grace to women and to the men whom they will wed. Even as social science records downward trends in church attendance, beauty pageant contestants are still very likely to give all glory and honor to the Lord. Tice makes a compelling observation about the convergence of religion and the value of self-making: "Although religion has always helped to shape socio-political ideologies and personal identities, new faith-based excursions into beautification, body fitness, and self-renewal are integral parts of contemporary neo-liberal rationalities" (177).

Tice has made a significant contribution to understanding several normative threads that when woven together constitute much of our unique American culture. The persistence of beauty pageantry on college campuses is illuminated in this book as a manifestation of changing

patterns in the global economy, as individual pathways shaped by neo-liberalism, and as competitive opportunities that have weathered waves of feminism. As so often happens when good social science is done on a seemingly narrow topic, the connectedness of human society is the real focus.

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