

AMERICAN BEAUTY 907: WOMEN'S IMAGES, NATIONAL IDENTITY & THE STRUGGLE BETWEEN OPPRESSION AND SELF-DETERMINATION

AS IMPLEMENTED BY DR. KIMBERLY BROWN PELLUM

A woman is free if she lives by her own standards and creates her own destiny, if she prizes her individuality and puts no boundaries on her hopes for tomorrow.

-Mary McLeod Bethune,
Early 20th Century Educator and Political Strategist

COURSE DESCRIPTION:

Beauty, as a both gendered and racialized social construct, operates as a salient factor in the experiences of women in societal spheres including but not limited to American labor, politics and entertainment. Consequently, the “problem” of beauty is deeply embedded in the practice of inequality in such spheres. While, prevailing beauty standards are rooted in national identity and perpetuated by a pervasive media, divergent groups throughout history have challenged and renegotiated such idealism as a means to dismantle inequality and articulate and mandate their own definitions of freedom. This course examines pageantry as ritual and merges history and cultural studies to investigate 1) the construction and pursuit of Western beauty ideals and 2) forces of resistance.

As time progresses, the Twenty-First Century must resolve the conundrums American beauty, as an instrument of bias, presents. The intellectually strongest men must acknowledge their role and work alongside women to destroy image-based barriers and defy the status quo. Students in this course should see themselves as agents of resolution within their own circles and communities. The following questions serve as possible points of origin to help them establish their opinions on related issues and consider how they will communicate their positions in their own lives:

- In the Donald Trump Era of anti-immigration, will foreign women living within US borders feel more pressure to physically alter themselves? Consider the growing double-eyelid operation trend targeted toward Asians.

How will traditional Muslim women address their religious and gender identities tied to their hijabs?

- As transgender public figures such as Laverne Cox and Caitlyn Jenner gain notoriety, will notions of femininity change?
- Is there a need to revisit and expand feminist Naomi Wolfe's concern for elective surgeries with new consideration toward black-market buttocks enhancements that have led to death?
- Can or should stereotypes of ethnic women be undone as television shows showcasing poor behavior of such groups reach international audiences?
- How can institutions like the Smithsonian National Museum of American History, which prominently displays the dresses of First Ladies, yet marginally discusses their career work, be more responsible *and* appeal to the general public?
- How does sexy modeling on social media and pornography in the digital realm fit into conversations about technology, employment and empowerment versus objectification?
- Is it possible to reconfigure Google search results for the term "beauty" to be more inclusive?
- To what extent is the Black Lives Matter Movement and police aggression toward non-white bodies an issue of beauty?
- When a man, infamous for his recorded trivialization of physical vulgarity and lack of self-control around women ("grab 'em by the pussy," he said), ascends to the highest position in the world as President of the United States, where does that leave concepts of women's safety? How likely is a thoughtful reconsideration of rape culture and victim blaming?
- Furthermore, how will scholars make sense of the convoluted nature of President Donald Trump as a leader in the business of women's image-making as a one-time owner of the Miss Universe corporation (which he later sold to another male business tycoon, Ari Emanuel)?
- Will white, African American, Asian, Latino, Native and other women engage in collective beauty activism on the basis of gender unity? Can they find common ground, or will they cave to racial alliances?

Until firm and all-inclusive equality exists in the United States and all external worlds, the words of historian John Henrik Clarke offers an opportunity for internal work: "Your true liberation will come when you can look in the mirror and like what you see."

COURSE OBJECTIVES:

Ultimately, the course will consult the spheres of American labor, politics and entertainment in which women's images, and the manipulation and exploitation thereof, have obstructed them from securing full equality since the formation of the United States until now. Readings, analytical assignments, and experience-based projects will:

- Provide historical context essential to explicating how femininity and American identity became so intricately linked in the United States.
- Explain the politicization of beauty as a racialized concept.
- Investigate pageantry as a ritualistic cultural ceremony.
- Link beauty conceptualization to capitalism and oppression.
- Explore fashion as both subjugation and liberation.
- Probe current social media and reality programming trends.

REQUIRED TEXTS:

There will be many published materials students will be responsible for studying. In addition to those shared via Blackboard throughout the semester, each student must acquire the following texts:

- Craig, Maxine Leeds. 2002. *Ain't I a Beauty Queen: Black Women, Beauty and the Politics of Race*.
- Cohen, Colleen Ballerino, Richard Wilk and Beverly Stoeltje. *Beauty Queens on the Global Stage: Gender, Contests, and Power*. New York: Routledge, 1996.
- Fanon, Frantz. 2008 (revised). *Black Skin, White Masks*.
- Ford, Tanisha C. 2015. *Liberated Threads: Black Women, Style, and the Global Politics of Soul*.
- Lim, Shirley Jennifer. *A Feeling of Belonging: Asian American Women's Public Culture, 1930-1960*. NYU Press, 2005.
- Roberts, Blain. 2014. *Pageants, Parlors, and Pretty Women: Race and Beauty in the Twentieth Century South*.
- Stoler, Ann. 2005. *Race and the Education of Desire: Foucault's History of Sexuality and the Colonial Order of Things*.
- Tu, Thuy Linh Nguyen. 2010. *The Beautiful Generation: Asian Americans and the Cultural Economy of Fashion*.
- Walker, Susannah. *Style and Status: Selling Beauty to African American Women 1920-1975*. Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2007.
- Weiser, Sarah. *The Most Beautiful Girl in the World: Beauty Pageants and National Identity*. London: University of California Press, 1999.
- White, Deborah Gray. *Ar'n't I A Woman? Female Slaves in the Plantation South*. W.W. Norton & Company, 1985.
- Wolf, Naomi. *The Beauty Myth: How Images of Beauty Are Used Against Women*. New York, New York: Vintage Publishing, 2002.

A SHORT TIMELINE CONCERNING AMERICAN BEAUTY:

- 1705 ...Virginia law mandates that all Black, mulatto, and Indian slaves are considered real property.
- 1915... Movie *Birth of A Nation* released
- 1930s ...Miss America orders Anglo ancestry as criterion for participation
- 1968 ...Miss Black America organization founded

- 1984 ...Vanessa Williams becomes first African American winner
- 2015 ...GLAMOUR Magazine names Caitlyn Jenner “Woman of the Year”
- 2016 ...Study shows Princess Kate Middleton as having “Most Desirable Nose”

COURSE CALENDAR:

Students will read and retain scholarly perspectives on various aspects of American beauty:

- WEEK 1: Gendering God across Cultures
- WEEK 2: Conceptualizing Beauty in Antiquity
- WEEK 3: Sexuality and Public Representation in Colonial America
- WEEK 4: Contesting Images: Enslaved African Women and European Mistresses
- WEEK 5: Analyzing Sojourner Truth’s *Aren’t I A Woman?*
- WEEK 6: Women in Film (*Birth of a Nation, King Kong & Gone With the Wind*)
- WEEK 7: The History of Miss America
- WEEK 8: Cross Your Legs at the Ankle: 20th Century Instructional Guides on Etiquette
- WEEK 9: Rosie the Riveter in World War II: Sexism & Patriotism
- WEEK 10: African American Glamour Girls & Black-Owned Media
- WEEK 11: Beauty Pre-Requisites in the Airline, Waitressing & Weather Industries
- WEEK 12: Pageants & Fashion in the Civil Rights & Black Power Movements
- WEEK 13: Playboy & The Culture Wars
- WEEK 14: Bleaching, Elective Surgeries & Dieting in Modern America
- WEEK 15: Race, Gender and American Politics: Mainstream Media’s Curation
- WEEK 15: Women in Hip Hop, Reality Television & Social Media