

OF BEASTS AND BEAUTY: GENDER, RACE, AND IDENTITY IN COLOMBIA BY MICHAEL EDWARD STANFIELD



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Review

"The book is successful as an overview of the nation's history, society, and the development of beauty pageants within its borders, and it provides a rich, well-written narrative that is enjoyable to read and full of interesting insights into Colombian culture....Summing Up: Recommended" (Choice magazine 2014-01-01)

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About the Author

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All societies around the world and through time value beauty highly. Tracing the evolutions of the Colombian standards of beauty since 1845, Michael Edward Stanfield explores their significance to and symbiotic relationship with violence and inequality in the country. Arguing that beauty holds not only social power but also economic and political power, he positions it as a pacific and inclusive influence in a country “ripped apart by violence, private armies, seizures of land, and abuse of governmental authority, one hoping that female beauty could save it from the ravages of the male beast.” One specific means of obscuring those harsh realities is the beauty pageant, of which Colombia has over 300 per year. Stanfield investigates the ways in which these pageants reveal the effects of European modernity and notions of ethnicity on Colombian women, and how beauty for Colombians has become an external representation of order and morality that can counter the pathological effects of violence, inequality, and exclusion in their country.

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Beauty as the Veneer of Society

By Jeremiah Norris

Prof. Stanfield takes readers through a literary odyssey in Colombia's socio-economic and political history, many elements of which I missed when living there for three years as a Peace Corps volunteer in the early 1960s. His time period goes back to 1825, when the country's total population was 1.3 million--35% of them Indian. Today, it is 47+ million, with less than 6% as Indian. The beasts of civil war and political violence went hand in hand when eight civil wars rocked the country between 1831-1902. Fourteen civil wars broke out over the same period. In the first half of the 20th Century, bipartisan governance dominated the political scene, quieting the beast. Ominously, this period ushered in the next era of Colombian history: La Violencia. The Liberal leader, Jorge Gaitan was assassinated in 1948, igniting the flash point of civil war with Conservatives. In the book "La Violencia en Colombia", sociologist Orlando Fals Borda wrote: "it was a lone act which stripped with a single bullet the thin veneer of civility from an entire society".

The mortality rate relative to a 14 million population base was greater than that experienced by the 145 million population in the U. S. during WW II.

It marked a time that became for survivors an enduring argument against remembrance. And yet ... there emerged the fig leaf of beauty amidst a roiled, genocidal national character, when highly competitive contests to crown national beauties blossomed in most every village and metropolitan area of Colombia. The murder of Gaitan led to a breakdown of elite politics. "Partisan civil war placed beauty and pageants center stage as the symbolic, nonpartisan, civic and peaceful ritual of positive Colombian national identity. Beauty and beast joined in a passionate tango, each partner with proscribed steps, neither able to part from the other for the rest of the 20th Century."

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