

And the Winner Is...

Essay on Miss Canadiana by Michelle Jacques

“...I feel like she’s another person. She’s not cynical and jaded like I am.”

On July 1, 2002—Canada Day—Camille Turner crowned herself Miss Canadiana. As part of the fiction that she has created, there were other contestants, but they never posed any real threat. Turner *is* Miss Canadiana. She may have had to reach deep into her psyche to find that more optimistic, innocent part of herself, but with a tiara and floor length red gown, and over-the-top Canadian memorabilia to sustain her, she’s spent the past eight years making appearances at events across the country and around the world—sometimes invited, sometimes not—representing her country with the grace and goodwill befitting a real beauty queen.

“No matter how long I live in this country, I will never be thought of as Canadian.”

The idea for the performance came to Turner in a shopping mall in North Bay. Having stopped there for supplies for a camping trip in northern Ontario, she was surprised by the attention her presence elicited from the other shoppers. People were staring at her. She wasn’t dressed oddly; she wasn’t doing anything out of the ordinary. Canada defines itself as a multicultural Mecca, and yet, Turner who had come to Canada from Jamaica as a child, was being treated as though she didn’t belong; as though she was “some sort of alien”—which is how she describes how she was made to feel in this and other situations like it. Multiculturalism was adopted as official policy in Canada in 1971, and now has the highest per capita immigration rate in the world. Turner was feeling the failure of Canadian multiculturalism—more than seventy-five years after the Governor General of Canada, The Lord Tweedsmuir, said “the strongest nations are those that are made up of different racial elements.”

“If I walk down the street, it’s different than when she walks down the street.”

After her experience in the North Bay shopping mall, the idea for Miss Canadiana came to Turner in a flash. The beauty queen that first set out with a paper sash and dollar store tiara has now appeared at events and in exhibitions across the country, and around the world. Early iterations of Miss Canadiana saw her giving away Canadian flags and maple leaf cookies in public interventions on Parliament Hill in Ottawa, and as part of *Free Manifesta*, a project that artist Sal Randolph developed for *Manifesta 4* in Frankfurt, Germany, in 2002. Since then, she has been featured in exhibitions in venues in Mexico, throughout Canada, and most recently, at the Havana Biennial, Cuba, in a series of performances that cumulatively comprise Turner’s *Red, White and Beautiful Tour*. Miss Canadiana has also made appearances at many of the symposia, residencies, workshops, and panel discussions in which Turner is invited to participate—and these have taken place in locales as far reaching as: Broken Hill, Australia; Dakar, Senegal; Göttelborn, Germany; and, North Preston, Nova Scotia. She has become the consummate symbol of the country that would not let her in.

“Whenever I go places, people ask to take my photo. People have asked me for my autograph. It’s like being larger than life...identity is something you construct and you put on.”

Whether she is an official invitee or an unexpected guest, Miss Canadiana is greeted with a

certain awe and veneration. The admiration is well deserved, for she is as congenial and lovely as any beauty queen. Adorned from head to toe in patriotic red and white, distributing Canadian memorabilia, or presiding over a tea party, there is little in Turner's demeanor to suggest that she is not authentic. She graciously poses for photographs, embraces her fans, and answers their questions. She has amassed admirers around the world, who send their messages of support to Miss Canadiana's website. "I saw you on TV and wanted to say congratulations! You are a great representative of Canada and Canadians! You are so obviously proud of who you are, of being Canadian, and of winning the Miss Canadiana contest!" "Keep up the good job and do not get discouraged, I am so glad that you are Canadian." "You are a beautiful woman with lovely grace. You must be inspiring to so many people." "I just saw a... documentary called *Race Is a Four Letter Word*, in which you appeared. I want to thank you so much for your wonderful project, and for representing Canada with so much beauty, and intelligence, and sensitivity, and humour."

"I don't have to explain anything. People just see the symbols and automatically assume this is who you are."

Some viewers are aware that Miss Canadiana is art. Others are not. If directly questioned about this, Turner will respond truthfully. She is often invited to speak to groups about her project, and in these contexts, she will engage in discussion about what she is trying to achieve by playing this role. But people don't tend to question the veracity of her crown; they don't generally ask whether Miss Canadiana is a real contest, so Turner remains in character. The crux of Turner's performance lies in the responses of her audience, which range from fascination with her fame and celebrity, to more pointed questions that make evident their wonder that Canada has a black beauty queen. Turner engages with all of these reactions, expanding the forum that she has created with Miss Canadiana. It is perhaps ironic that the place from which Turner examines Canada's failures to be multicultural and inclusive is one that, on the surface, seems to celebrate it. On one level, there is a certain amount of artifice involved in Turner's venture; on another, even in situations where the truth of the matter is revealed, it never comes off as duplicitous or ill-intentioned. With a great deal of wit and goodwill, Miss Canadiana provides a framework for a discussion and celebration of what Canada could and should be, if, as the Lord Tweedsmuir recommended so many years ago, its cultural groups were to "retain their individuality and each make its contribution to the national character."

"For me, I see the whole beauty queen icon as being kind of a blank slate that people project their desires on."

Interestingly, it is the "Canadiana" portion of Turner's performance that has drawn the most critical analysis. Perhaps it is because she is so believable as a beauty queen that the "Miss" is generally overlooked. Miss Canadiana uncovers our assumptions about what it means to be Canadian, and what it means to be beautiful. *Ain't I a Beauty Queen: Black Women, Beauty and the Politics of Race* is sociologist Maxine Leeds Craig's analysis of how personal appearance has been used by black women to negotiate the complexities of race, class, and politics in America. She traces the history of African-American beauty contests back to 1891 that consider all of their ambiguities such as the privileging of middle-class, light-skinned, black women, and the emphasis on race politics at the exclusion of gender and class politics. Craig points out the importance of these pageants in establishing positive representations of black women in a nation where most of the images of African-Americans were being propagated by

the racist South. While our post-colonial and post-feminist sensibilities tell us to eschew women judged against one another based primarily on their physical attributes regardless of colour, Craig argues that beauty contests were important weapons in the defense against predominating ideas and images of black inferiority. In September, 1968, while a group of women identifying themselves as members of the Women's Liberation protested the Miss America competition in front of the Atlantic City Convention Center, just a few blocks away, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) was mounting the first Miss Black America pageant in what it referred to as a "'positive protest' against the exclusion of black women from the Miss America title." While the NAACP typically fought racism by mounting legal challenges to the systems of racial segregation, they could not use this strategy in the case of the Miss America contest. African-American girls were allowed to compete—they just never won.

“[My] cultural identity has been defined through the guise of ‘multiculturalism,’ as a fetishized display of ‘diversity’ rather than an integral part of the fabric of Canadian culture.”

Turner enters this narrative from a Canadian point of view—one that intersects with this analysis of African-American beauty contests—but is set in a country where the intersection of beauty, race, and competition is made murky by a national narrative that, at least in theory, advocates diversity. The act of creating Miss Canadiana out of the feelings of alienation that were stirred by that experience in the North Bay shopping mall is akin to the African-American examples of using beauty culture to counter mainstream representations. Turner complicates her project by making it about beauty and nationhood: while the Miss Black America contest was censured because it privileged civil rights over women's rights, Turner's performance is a critique of both gender and race as they intersect with nationality. Canadian women have been competing in international competitions since 1947. The decisions about whom to send to international competitions were made first through various local competitions, then through various national events. Of these, the best known was the Miss Canada pageant, first begun as a scholarship competition in Hamilton, Ontario, in 1946, and later televised from 1963 through 1992. (Miss Canada did not go down at the hands of angry protesters—her demise was caused more passively—by economic difficulties and falling ratings.) This is not to suggest that beauty pageants do not continue to be a huge industry in Canada, where, since 2003, new or rejuvenated events such as Miss World Canada, Miss Universe Canada, and Miss Earth Canada have continued to appear. A quick survey of these recent winners would appear to support Canada's commitment to diversity—women of Middle Eastern, Asian, Eastern European, and mixed heritages have proudly borne the Canadian sash. But what do these beauty queens really say about Canadian attitudes? While the official pageant biographies of Lena Yangbing Ma and Mariana Valente, the currently reigning Miss World Canada and Miss Universe Canada, respectively, emphasize their ethnic backgrounds, the only “cultural” information given for Anglo-Canadian contestants are the names of the their hometowns. A woman of colour with a beauty queen title is a symbol of Canada's tolerance and inclusivity. Miss Canadiana has made it her mission to question why these ideals remain emblematic, rather than a fundamental aspect of the Canadian experience.

“I can put on different clothes and people relate to me in a completely different way.”

Turner came to Canada as a child. Born in Jamaica, her memory of that country's “Ten Types—One People” contest, introduced in 1955, inevitably informs her understanding of

beauty pageants. At the time of the competition's inception, Jamaica was on the verge of claiming independence from Britain; Jamaican nationalists created "Ten Types" as a step towards defining a modern understanding of the island. The "Ten Types" referred to skin tone—contestants were categorized according to the pigmentation of their skin, which was likened in colour to various types of trees and flowers, and competed under titles including "Miss Apple Blossom," "Miss Rosewood," "Miss Allspice," and "Miss Ebony." At the time, the "Ten Types" competition revolutionized how Jamaica viewed itself, transforming it from white and British, to brown (*do you mean 'black' here?*) and Jamaican. While Turner has noted that the dark-complexioned contestants in the Miss Ebony category rarely won, in a recent examination of the history of the event, historian Rochelle Rowe observes that it was Miss Ebony that garnered the most attention at the outset of the competition, for in the 1950s, she provided a beautiful allegory for the shift of black Jamaica into an urbane, modern citizenry. Again, the disparity between philosophies about race and beauty now, and as they existed in the mid-twentieth century becomes palpably evident. The shift in attitude about the modernization and middle-class aspirations of black individuals in Americas can be traced to the 1970s, when the notion of aspiring to mimic the attire and deportment of white people came under dispute. As Leeds Craig notes, in the 1960s, well appointed, middle-class, black women came to represent the dignity of the race. With the rise of the Black Power Movement "[a] new generation of black leaders used a gendered rhetoric of racial pride to excoriate 'bourgeois' black women for 'acting white.'" Miss Canadiana plays on this very issue, and Turner has noted that she is treated very differently when she is wearing her red gown and maple leaf paraphernalia. One would think that today that we have moved beyond a time when a black woman is supposed to dress or act in a particular way, but Turner has been admonished by a male, Latino artist in South America for "pretending to be a white girl," and a told by a white, French audience member at her conference presentation in Dakar that "When you are Miss Canadiana, I forget that you are black." The significance of Turner's project—of Miss Canadiana—is situated in these and other strong responses, which remind us that race, beauty, and nationality—like a red gown or tiara—are things that we wear.

Doug Saunders, "Canada's mistaken identity," *The Globe and Mail*, June 26, 2009, retrieved August 22, 2009. New York-based artist Sal Randolph purchased a spot in the 2002 *Manifesta European Biennial of Contemporary Art* for \$15,099 in an eBay auction, and invited any artist who wished to participate to exhibit their work as part of *Free Manifesta*. More than 225 artists and groups, including Turner, contributed free public art projects throughout Frankfurt, as well as through broadcast, telephone, mail, and the internet. Saunders.

Maxine Leeds Craig, *Ain't I a Beauty Queen: Black Women, Beauty and the Politics of Race*, (Oxford, UK, New York: Oxford University Press, 2002) 3.

Rochelle Rowe, "Glorifying the Jamaican Girl: The 'Ten Types - One People' Beauty Contest, Racialized Femininities, and Jamaican Nationalism" in *Radical History Review*, volume 2009, number 103 (winter 2009): 36-58.

Leeds Craig, p.4.

