

Michael Edward Stanfield

Of Beasts and Beauty: Gender, Race, and Identity in Colombia

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In *Of Beasts and Beauty*, Michael Edward Stanfield examines why Colombians have been and remain obsessed with women's beauty. In a study spanning more than a century, Stanfield describes Colombian society's collective beliefs about women's physical appearances and spiritual virtues. He places ideas concerning feminine beauty against a historical backdrop of widespread violence, political instability, socially exclusionary practices, and a frail, corrupt state, arguing that it represents an alternative to horror and injustice. Consequently, women's beauty has been the symbol of peace, civility, and hope, particularly during the notable periods of unrest after the mid-twentieth century. Stanfield insists that feminine beauty has long been the sedative for Colombia's torturous history and geographies of disparity that reflect gendered, racialized, and geopolitical hierarchies. These hierarchies express notions of beauty. In this fashion, Stanfield contends that feminine beauty both influences and is influenced by the currents of history. Here he demonstrates that this beauty constitutes a robust vehicle for understanding Colombian national identity, that identity's evolution over time, and its relationship with people's lives.

Stanfield's key contribution is that he frames issues of women's beauty within Colombian political, social, and economic national processes and the broader Latin American context. Here he engages with the Colombian scholar Zandra Pedraza's work on corporality, body disciplines, femininity, and power structures. He also engages with Joanne Hershfield, who has added to the nascent Anglophone literature on modern women's representation by examining Mexican visual culture. Ultimately, Stanfield addressed long standing questions in women's history such as those examined in Kathy Piess and Margaret Lowe's works on beauty industry and body regimes in the United States.

Stanfield begins by considering a period of fervent political activity in the mid-nineteenth century when, in less than a decade, the Conservative and Liberal parties that would dominate politics took form, and as economic reforms opened Colombia to international trade. Through an examination of travel books and personal journals, Stanfield explains how fashion shaped concepts of beauty in a period when Colombians relied on regional traditions as much as

international ideals to delineate national identity. In tandem with women's spiritual attributes, women's fashion revealed patterns of progress and civilization Colombians yearned for and tried to assiduously implement in their country. By the 1880s these concepts of beauty had been altered somewhat as women's health and fitness were now included. What did not change throughout the century was that whiteness was viewed as an intrinsic element of feminine beauty and the pinnacle of a racialized vertical order whereby white women were considered the most beautiful. With this assertion, Stanfield adds beauty as a factor in what he calls Colombia's "pigmentocracy," explaining how race and beauty remained intertwined. In this analysis, what is not considered is the role non-white actors played in the construction of this pigmentocracy, or how representations of non-white women, and their presumed lack of beauty, was understood by contemporary writers, though such a discussion would likely reinforce these arguments.

Moving to the twentieth century and interrogating some of the mainstream press of the 1920s, 1930s, and 1940s, Stanfield tracks changing ideas of beauty, especially the emergence of what he terms, "commercial beauty." These decades saw a blending of newly introduced ideas from the U.S. culture industry, European fashion paradigms, and Colombia's own durable regional identities that created a notion of feminine beauty rooted in consumption. Stanfield explains that while most Colombians championed this "commercial beauty," some argued that women's health and dynamism were the source of their beauty.

The indiscriminate and pervasive sectarian violence of the second-half of the twentieth century frames the rest of Stanfield's history, from *La Violencia* beginning in 1948, to the proliferation of guerrillas during the era of the National Front in the 1960s and early 1970s, to the drug economy of the following decades. According to Stanfield, over the course of these years Colombians established new means of assessing beauty and its value, developing a fixation on pageants and public performances of feminine beauty as a counterpoint to what he terms "the beasts." Beauty offered a means of cohesion for a country in danger of begin torn apart by the beasts of violence in the 1940s and 1950s. As the beast of elitism and its concomitant popular insurgency

grew during the subsequent years of the National Front, beauty symbolized social and political inclusion and participation. When the beast turned into the dangers of drug cartels that governed the politics and economy of Colombia in the 1980s and 1990s, beauty became the locus of both opulence and entertainment for the masses who conceived women's beauty as effective palliative for the beasts. Stanfield argues, provocatively, that this historical trajectory of beauty reinforces gender categories that Colombians hardly can or want to escape from. While the argument that feminine beauty was a "sedative for the violence" comes from Stanfield's sources, there is no similar basis for the use of masculine beastliness as synonym of violence and decadency. A gender analysis based on such a dichotomy leaves questions unanswered. Who exactly crafted the parallel between beauty and women's worth? Was it just the elite or the media? What were the motives? To what extent was beauty a product of "the beasts" and thus constructed both by women and men? What did women gain and what did they lose from all this? Further research is needed to understand women's and men's roles in the historical process Stanfield narrates in *Of Beasts and Beauty*.