

Colonial Bodies at the Media Universal Stage: The Case of Puerto Rico's Participation in Miss Universe

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Abstract: Beauty pageants have occupied a prominent role in popular culture in Latin America and the Spanish Caribbean. In countries like Colombia, Mexico, and Venezuela, pageants have become not only an opportunity for social mobility but also a space in which the complex layers of identity, such as race, ethnicity, gender, and class, take center stage. In the case of Puerto Rico, a Commonwealth of the United States (U.S.) but also a bridge of the Americas, pageants have become a transnational display of cultural nationalism. With the highest number of international beauty queens per square mile, the island's national pageant circuit has historically showcased values of Puerto Rico's unique ethno-national identity. This article explores the figure of Miss Puerto Rico as a case study in how beauty queens, as a symbolic representation of an ethno-nation, have embodied the socio-political and cultural tensions that emerged from the complex colonial relation between Puerto Rico and the U.S. while presenting a unique case to understand nationalism in Latin American.

Key words:

beauty pageants, Miss Puerto Rico, embodiment, colonialism

1. Introduction

Beauty pageants have assumed a recognizable place in popular culture for almost a century. However, in Latin America and the Spanish Caribbean, pageants are a popular form of a mass-mediated event in which narratives about social mobility and social and racial hierarchies take center stage while national and cultural identities are articulated and communicated. The story of success of countries like Colombia, Mexico, and Venezuela in

pageants like Miss Universe, Miss World, and Miss International, have propelled these events to a prominent national level. With each triumph in international pageants, the space of pageant circuits turned into an obvious place for stamping the mark of the nation. But what happened when, among the parade of nations in Miss Universe, there was one country that was not formally a nation? What happened when a colonial body stepped onto the universal stage? This article explores the peculiar case of Puerto Rico's participation in Miss Universe and how the triumphs in this pageant reveal the paradoxical situation of the Puerto Rican brand given the political colonial situation of the island.

As a protectorate of the U.S. since 1898, Puerto Rico is a territory, not formally a nation-state but an ethno-nation. According to Frances Negrón-Muntaner (2004), as an ethno-nation, Puerto Ricans are “hailed and imagined themselves as ‘people,’ understood alternately as an ‘ethnicity’ (defined by a specific culture across national-state boundaries) and a ‘nationality’ (defined in relationship to a specific territory, with full or partial claims to independent sovereignty)” (p. 6). The question of whether Puerto Rico is a nation or not has been addressed by many scholars (Duany, 2002; Grosfoguel, 2003; Negrón-Muntaner, 2004). Duany (2002) crystallizes these debates when he makes the distinction that Puerto Ricans imagine themselves as part of a nation that responds to cultural nationalism rather than a political nationalism. He states that most Puerto Ricans insist “they are a distinct nation—as validated by their participation in such international displays of nationhood as Olympic sports and beauty pageants—but at the same time they want to retain their U.S. citizenship, thus pulling apart the coupling that the very term ‘nation-state’ implies” (p. 5). In fact, the island has been part of the parade of nations in Miss Universe since the creation of the pageant in 1952, coincidentally the same year that Puerto Rico became officially the Commonwealth of Puerto Rico.

Since the '50s, once a year, during the two-hour, prime-time television broadcast of the Miss Universe pageant, the Commonwealth of Puerto Rico symbolically turns into a nation-state, competing face-to-face with other countries, even with its political protectorate, the U.S. The “commonwealth” part is completely removed from their sash, and it only says “Puerto Rico,” making visible an ethnonational identity in which complex cultural narratives of race, nationalism, and imperialism take center stage. In this article, I intend to explore how Miss Puerto Rico, as a symbolic body offered for consumption, has

embodied the colonial tensions that exist on the island. By embodiment I refer to the idea that the figure of Miss Puerto Rico is a vessel of meaning and a social object that is actively experienced, produced, sustained, and transformed (Waskul & Vannini, 2006) in ways that become intelligible when positioned within a historical context.

With that purpose in mind, I will pinpoint the figure of the beauty queen within moments of colonial tensions that took place on the island between 1970–2008. These moments revolve around debates of Puerto Rico’s political status and the emergence of anti-militaristic discourses (1970–1974 and 2001). These instances put into perspective the complexities of the U.S.-Puerto Rico relations and the political, social, and cultural consequences of these relations. My argument is that a victory of a Puerto Rican in a well-known international beauty pageant like Miss Universe means to a global community that Puerto Rico has symbolic currency and can circulate in world markets. However, that circulation will carry the colonial tensions related to the U.S.-Puerto Rican relations that emerged from events such as the political referenda to decide whether the island becomes a state or not to the emergence of an antimilitary sentiment as a result of a contentious U.S. military presence in Puerto Rico.

2. On How to Approach Pageants: When the So-Called Trivial Calls for Attention

One of the most intriguing parts of beauty pageants is that, as a global phenomenon, it draws not only national and international audiences but also considerable amounts of press coverage. In Puerto Rico, with a total of six Miss Universe winners and after hosting the international pageant on the island three times (1972, 2001, and 2002), to see the image of a beauty queen on the cover of the newspaper is not a strange event. In fact, both the Miss Universe and the Miss Puerto Rico pageants are the two TV shows with the highest ratings on the island (Santana, 2015). But regardless of the amount of interest and news information about pageants, the scholarly approaches to beauty pageants are limited.

According to Susan Dewey (2008), the scope of approaches to pageants is narrowed to critiques of popular culture (Banet-Weiser, 1999), the antifeminist nature of pageants, and the performance of gender (Ochoa, 2014). In the context of Latin America, Marcia Ochoa (2014) produced an ethnographic analysis on how femininities are produced,

performed, and consumed in the mass-media spectacles of beauty pageants, particularly regarding the Miss Venezuela participants. Rutter-Jensen (2005), author of the edited collection *Pasarela Paralela*, compiled a series of essays that focuses on the intersectionality of race, class, and gender in beauty pageants in Colombia. Extending the discussions about politics of representation of race and nationalism, Yeidy Rivero (2005) is the only scholar who has explored formally the Puerto Rican pageant arena. In her book *Tuning Out Blackness*, Rivero dedicates one chapter to discussing how the selection of a non-white Puerto Rican woman, Wilnelia Merced, as Miss World 1975 “reiterated the conflictive terrain of gendered blackness in the national imaginary (p. 105).

Out of the limited range of scholarship on pageants, I noticed that there was a sense that examining beauty contests was unworthy of serious and sustained intellectual scrutiny. Sarah Banet-Weiser (1999) explains that “the dearth of scholarship on beauty pageants... [comes as a result that] ...these events are often and easily dismissed as frivolous, meaningless, or carnivalesque ...too low to merit investigations or so obvious and opaque that vigorous investigation would be both, uninteresting and unnecessary” (p. 4). When treating beauty pageants as a trivial object of study, investigators “risk obscuring the operation of structures of power that are masked by the seemingly frivolous nature of events and images” (Cohen, Wilk, & Stoeltje, 1996, p. 7). With this article, I intend to add a voice to these discussions by incorporating new layers to the analysis of the complex circuit of beauty pageants in Latin America. By pageant circuit, I refer to the production and consumption of beauty pageants as communicative texts and the debates and discussions that emerge from within. In what follows, I will be presenting the landscape of the Puerto Rican pageant circuit and its insertion with an international arena with the successful participation in the Miss Universe pageant.

3. Sketching the Puerto Rican Pageant Circuit

Puerto Rico, an island of 100 by 35 miles, has more than 200 pageants registered with the Department of State. There is a pageant for almost every physical and cultural identity trait. For example, Miss Puerto Rico Petite is a competition designed for women who are less than 5’5” in height, while Miss Puerto Rico Teen is a competition for teenagers. Other competitions such as Miss Piel Canela and Miss Piel Morena have existed

since the early '70s and target “women of color” on the island. Puerto Rican males also have their space in pageantry with competitions such as Mister Puerto Rico International and Mister World Puerto Rico. However, the one that has acquired major exposition nationwide is Miss Puerto Rico, a more than 60-year-old competition dedicated to single woman between the ages of 18 and 27 that selects the island’s representative for the Miss Universe pageant.

Like other so-called powerhouses in pageants in Latin America, such as Colombia, Mexico, and Venezuela and others around the world like India, the Philippines, and the U.S., to become Miss Puerto Rico involves being part of a mediatized ritual of representation founded on a capitalist ideology and a principle of competition. The principle of competition is a mechanism for creating distinctions between winners and losers, elites and commoners. In a very common schema, the women appear on a stage to be visible to an audience but most importantly to a select panel of judges. This group of so-called experts will scrutinize the contestants’ physical appearances and evaluate their answers to the final questions for those who are finalists. The winner will not only be awarded with hundreds of thousands of dollars in prizes, but also by public recognition and the opportunity to step onto a global stage as the representative of their country at a major beauty pageant.

This rewarding process exemplifies the paradox of pageantry described by Cohen, Wilk, & Stoeltje (1996) when she states that these types of competitions “identify both, the fundamental principles by which modern society sustains a system in which women are subordinated, and points towards the channels of power potentially available to women for the transformation” (p. 28). However, this relation of power collapses in the training and redesign of the beauty queen, who involves both the organizers/trainers of the queen and the will of the beauty queen itself.

Throughout the years, pageant franchise holders like the Miss Venezuela and Miss Puerto Rico organizations have created a robust regime of training for their winners. A few days after the selection of the winner, an entourage of professionals in beauty, fitness, fashion, and public speaking will evaluate the winner to initiate the transformation. The first thing to decide is whether she needs plastic surgery or not. This is crucial because after these procedures the queen will need at least three months for recovery. Among the most

common surgeries are breast augmentations, lipo-sculptures, and nose jobs. Other less invasive procedures in the gums and teeth will guarantee a balance between a harmonious face and perfect smile. After the surgeries are completed, the goal will be to attain or maintain the ideal 34-24-34 body figure. The latter will be achieved thanks to an extreme diet that consists mostly of lean protein combined with good carbs in order to promote muscle tone. All of these are incorporated with a routine of intense cardio training, weight lifting, yoga, and dancing lessons.

During the physical transformation, the beauty queen will be trained in other areas such as dancing, catwalk, and participating in weekly intensive coaching for skills in interviewing, public speaking, and learning about current events and general culture. More importantly, the winner will take classes to improve her English. Even though Puerto Rico is a commonwealth and English is also an official language, just like in most of Latin American, Puerto Ricans do not speak English fluently; therefore, reinforcing this area is imperative for the success in the pageant. After all, this is what will guarantee the queen the ability to communicate effectively in a competition like Miss Universe—an international pageant owned and produced by an American organization (WME|IMG) and broadcasted in English by an American TV network (FOX).

The Miss Universe contest was founded in 1952 by the California clothing company Pacific Mills. Since then, it has been gathering contestants from an average of 80 countries around the world every year. It was created the same year the island became the Commonwealth of Puerto Rico during the government of Luis Muñoz Marín. Those were the postwar years during which the island became a showcase of democracy and capitalism in the Caribbean (Avilés-Santiago, 2015). However, it was not until the summer of 1970, almost two decades after the pageant was created, that a green-eyed brunette from Puerto Nuevo, Marisol Malaret-Contreras, won the first Miss Universe crown for Puerto Rico. After her win, the island has won at least once every decade: Deborah Carthy Deu in 1985, Dayanara Torres in 1993, Denise Quiñones in 2001, and Zuleyka Rivera in 2006.

Several other representatives have also stepped onto the international stage and have occupied a spot among the semifinalists and finalists. Others have obtained special awards like Miss Photogenic, which is selected by the audience through popular vote. Because of the successful record in Miss Universe, the yearly celebration of the pageant generates a lot

of excitement among Puerto Ricans. The night of pageant, the imagined community formed by both the island and the mainland gathers at homes and even at town squares for public screenings in hopes for another triumph. Puerto Rico, a 100 by 35-mile island in the Spanish Caribbean, is considered a powerhouse in beauty pageants.

4. **Beauty Pageants and the Colonial Gaze**

Puerto Rico is not alone in the high ranks of international beauty pageants. Global Beauties, an online magazine that specializes in beauty pageants, annually publishes the global rankings based on countries' successes in pageants such as Miss Universe, Miss World, and Miss International. Based on their success in these pageants, the ranking is (1) Venezuela, (2) India, (3) the United States, (4) Puerto Rico, (5) China, (6) the Philippines, (7) Spain, (8) Canada, (9) Colombia, and (10) South Africa. At first glance, two observations stood out; first, Puerto Rico's former and current colonizing countries, U.S. and Spain, occupy a spot among the top 10. Secondly, seven out of the ten countries in the top ranks shared a history of colonialism with U.S., Spain, or Great Britain. Colombia, Venezuela, the Philippines, and Puerto Rico were former colonies of Spain, while India, South Africa, and Canada were colonized by the British Empire.

In the case of Puerto Rico, as stated earlier, their participation in Miss Universe started in 1952, the same year the Commonwealth was formally established by the U.S. Before that, PR competed on a few occasions during the early years of the Miss America pageant, the country's oldest beauty contest that started in 1920 as an Atlantic City seaside tradition. In 1948, Irma Nydia Vazquez became the first Puerto Rican, and Latin American, to compete in Miss America. It is significant that in the same year an Asian-American woman represented Hawaii. Shirley Jennifer Lim (2007) argues, "Their participation can be interpreted as the United States gaining Cold War legitimacy for colonial possessions in Hawaii and Puerto Rico" (p. 126). Within the idea of turning PR into "a symbolic showcase of the U.S. capitalist model of development for the Third World" (Grosfuguel & Georas, 2001, p. 106), it made sense that these women represented territorial possessions.

Including a Puerto Rican in a pageant like Miss America or Miss Universe "reminded women that the modern scene was competitive and that their inclusion depended upon one's ability to measure up" (Tice, 2006 p. 153). Therefore, the visual comparison

and the sense of competition that a beauty pageant provides, produced within the confines of restrictive and exclusionary models of racially coded feminine ideals, created markers by which modern women, including the beauty queen, were defined. Within this framework, Miss Puerto Rico and Miss Hawaii appeared as exotic and primitive spectacles to be displayed but not to be rewarded. Karen Tice (2007) adds that:

...pageants have been stretched to fit a wide array of historical and cultural contexts and agendas, reinforcing hegemonic social relations; constructing notions of modernity, civilization, and development; domesticating race and class divisions; but also articulating divergent (and sometimes counter-hegemonic) identity projects. (p. 187)

These were the years of the Operation Bootstrap, the industrialization program that started in 1947 and ended in 1970. This initiative marked the beginning of a new stage of industrial planning based on external capital and tax exemptions for the island. These were also the years that that Puerto Ricans did not place among the finalists either in Miss America (during the '20s) or in Miss Universe (from 1952 to 1969).¹ Banet-Weiser (1999) would argue that “international beauty pageants can be seen as colonizing arenas, and success in such arenas means accepting the colonizer’s values” (p. 188). In the case of Puerto Rico, on one hand we can argue that the acceptance of the colonizer’s values happened right after Operation Bootstrap when in 1970 Marisol Malaret, a green-eyed brunette who was fluent in English, won the first Puerto Rican crown at Miss Universe. At the same time, her triumph marked the beginning of a series of debates concerning Puerto Rico’s right to compete in Miss Universe vis-à-vis its relationship with the U.S.

5. Going to Miss Universe or Becoming the 51st State? The National Franchise Dilemmas

During Miss Universe 2014, celebrated in Doral, Florida, the delegate from Puerto Rico, Gabriela Berrios, was asked during the preliminary interview what her opinion was

¹ . During the early years of the pageant, under the directorship of Lenora Slaughter, the contest became segregated via rule number seven that stated: “Contestants must be of good health and of the white race.” Rule number seven was abolished in 1950. In addition, although there were Native American, Latina, and Asian-American contestants, there were no African-American contestants for 50 years. (African-Americans appeared in musical numbers as far back as 1923; however, they were cast as slaves).

on Puerto Rico becoming a state or not and what the future of the island's participation would be in Miss Universe if they became a state. She answered, "I consider myself very nationalistic. I feel very Puerto Rican, and I love the Enchanted Island. For me, Puerto Rico should always have a representative in Miss Universe" (my translation).² Her vague answer never alluded to the complexity of the prompt question, yet she approached the query with the idea of cultural nationalism as cultural distinctiveness. According to Arlene Davila (1997), the cultural nationalism in Puerto Rico is "a direct result of the limits imposed by colonialism on the development of a politically defined nation-state, which led to the emphasis on culture as Puerto Rico's domain of sovereignty" (p. 11). For Berrios, as long as the Puerto Rican culture prevails, there is no political reason that could challenge the possibility for the island to be present in Miss Universe. However, people on social media questioned why the issue of the U.S.-Puerto Rican relationship mattered in the context of a beauty pageant when taking into account they are often referred to as trivial and frivolous competitions. However, in Puerto Rico, beauty pageants and politics are not disconnected at all.

Throughout history, the island has celebrated four status referenda to determine the political relationship of Puerto Rico with the U.S. Since the establishment of the current Commonwealth status in 1952, further attempts to decide the island's political status were held in the years 1967, 1993, and 1998. For most of the cases, three options have always been available for the Puerto Ricans during those elections: joining the nation as the 51st state (Statehood), to maintain the colonial relation with the U.S. (Commonwealth), or to become an independent country (Independence). To politicize the situation on the island even more, each of the three major political parties has represented these options. The New Progressive Party (PNP) favored statehood, the Popular Democratic Party (PPD in Spanish) has been pro-commonwealth, and the Independent Party (PIP in Spanish) has favored the independence cause. However, history has revealed that for Puerto Rico to become a state, language and cultural identity issues would have to be addressed in a way that makes Puerto Ricans comfortable about joining the union.

². Original text: "Soy bien patriota, me siento bien puertorriqueña y amo la Isla del Encanto. Para mí, Puerto Rico debe tener una representante de nuestro país en Miss Universo."

For example, when debates about Puerto Rico's status surface for public scrutiny, there are four elements that stand out as potentially inconsistent with statehood: (a) the familiar "nationhood" concept, (b) the Spanish language, (c) the participation in the Summer Olympics as an autonomous national team and, (d) the participation as a nation and not a commonwealth in international beauty pageants such as Miss Universe. According to Christina Duffy Burnett (2001), keeping the right to participate in major beauty pageants plays a "prominent role in a debate that is ultimately about the basic democratic rights of people" (p. 16). But to understand the way pageantry is inscribed in national politics is imperative to historicize the intersection of beauty pageants and status referenda in Puerto Rico.

The first plebiscite ever made to decide the political status of the island took place in 1968. That was the paradigm-shifting year in which international events such as the civil right movements, international student strikes, and the Vietnam War were also manifested in Puerto Rico in diverse ways. For example, an anti-militaristic sentiment was spreading on the island as a result of the Vietnam War and the draft of thousands of Puerto Rican soldiers. Simultaneously, after more than two decades in power the PPD lost the general elections to the PNP, a pro-statehood party led by Luis A. Ferré. Yet the commonwealth option, represented by the PPD, won the plebiscite with an overwhelming majority of 60.4% of the votes.³

Two years after the 1968 referendum, Marisol Malaret won the first crown of Miss Universe for Puerto Rico in the city of Miami Beach, Florida. At the time, the island had not had a single semifinalist in the 18 years of existence of Miss Universe. The biggest irony of her triumph relies on the fact that the pageant ended up with Miss Puerto Rico and Miss USA holding hands as the top two finalists. At the end, the Commonwealth won over its own protectorate. The crowning of Marisol Malaret represents the beginning of a history of success in the pageant.

Puerto Ricans learned about Malaret's triumph through the radio waves; however, the images of her crowning started circulating in the press and became a media sensation during the days following her triumph. Her welcoming parade was like no other event that

³ . The Statehood Republican Party and the Puerto Rican Independence Party boycotted the plebiscite.

has taken place on the island. Thousands of Puerto Ricans jammed into the Isla Verde International Airport while many others gathered along the Ponce de Leon Avenue to receive the new elected Miss Universe. Upon her arrival, government officials, like Governor Luis A. Ferré (Pro-statehood) and heads of the Senate and the House, greeted her. The enthusiasm was such that the governor declared Malaret's welcoming day a holiday for the island's government workers. However, her triumph was not exempt of political polemic. An article published in *The Morning Record* (1970) stated:

Marisol has even become the focus of a political controversy. Senate President Rafael Hernández Colón, an adherent of the present Commonwealth status, told a rally of followers [...] that Marisol would never have won the Miss Universe title for her island if Puerto Rico were a state. Our island would lose its unique personality.” (p. 3)

In that regard, the connection between the political status of the island and the Miss Universe pageant was put into perspective for the first time in the history of Puerto Rico's participation in an international beauty pageant.

In spite of the fact that the political status of the island was widely discussed and debated in the public sphere, during the '80s, Puerto Rico did not celebrate a status referendum. However, general elections took place on November 1984. In that election, the New Progressive Party, led by Governor Carlos Romero Barceló, lost to the Popular Democratic Party, whose leader was Rafael Hernández Colón, which favored the commonwealth. It was Hernandez Colón who, as Senate President, had argued that Marisol Malaret's triumph would have not been possible if Puerto Rico were a state. Seven months after the 1984 elections, another Puerto Rican green-eyed brunette won the second Miss Universe crown for the island—19-year-old Deborah Carthy-Deu from San Juan. Carthy-Deu had won over the favored Miss Spain, which meant that both of the island's Miss Universe winners had triumphed over their former and current empires (Spain and the U.S.), whose contestants had ended up as first runners-up.

In between Deborah Carthy-Deu's triumph in 1985 and the next Miss Universe from Puerto Rico in 1993, the island experienced several cultural and socio-political events that put the idea of cultural nationalism into center stage. In 1988, Puerto Rico's Olympic Committee took the very first step in its effort to bring the 2004 Summer Olympic Games to the island. Yet again, the bid brought into a contentious discussion the political status of

Puerto Rico. What happened was that, as a territory of the U.S., the island had the right to compete as a nation and bid for the Summer Olympic Games. But in the event of a referendum to determine Puerto Rico's status in the future, the result would have serious implications for the local Olympic committee. If the result was statehood, the preferred solution by the administration of then President George H. Bush⁴ was that the local Olympic committee could find itself folded into the United States Olympic Committee. Considering this scenario, the president of Puerto Rico's Olympic Committee, German Rieckehoff, stated that "if we don't have a national Olympic committee under statehood, we'll never have the opportunity we now have, to compete as our own people." (Janofsky, 1989).

In 1991, the Legislature of Puerto Rico overwhelmingly approved a bill that made Spanish the official language of the island. The bill revoked the Official Languages Act of 1902, which designated both English and Spanish as the languages of the commonwealth government's business. The *New York Times* reported:

Some members of Congress have voiced concern about the possibility of a mainly Spanish-speaking state, and former Gov. Carlos Romero Barceló, a statehood proponent, said the Spanish-only bill was an attempt to portray Puerto Rico as "a different nation" with a separate culture that could not be easily assimilated. (Associated Press, para 5, 1991).

Later that year, Governor Hernández Colón (pro-commonwealth) received the Principe de Asturias de las Letras award that was granted to Puerto Rico by Felipe de Borbón in recognition of the defense of Spanish as the official language of Puerto Rico. One year after the island received the Principe de Asturias, Hernández Colón lost the 1992 general elections against the pro-statehood party under the leadership of Pedro Rosselló. A year later, the island had its third Miss Universe in 1993 in the figure of Dayanara Torres, an 18-year-old who won the title in Mexico City. Just like her predecessors in 1970 and 1985, Torres was welcomed back with a massive parade and celebrated with a gala organized by the recently installed Governor Pedro Rosselló and his wife, Irma Margarita Nevárez.

⁴ . A full transcript of the State of the Union is available at: <http://www.usa-presidents.info/union/bush-1.html>.

Six months after Torres' triumph, Rosselló organized the 1993 referenda. After very contentious debates in which the possibility/impossibility of participation in the Olympics and Miss Universe occupied a prominent role, the Commonwealth obtained its second win with 48.6% of the vote versus 46.3% to Statehood and 4.4% to Independence. The triumph of the status quo took place against a discourse of "Estadidad Jíbara" (Hillbilly Statehood) that emerged within the pro-statehood party. Estadidad Jíbara refers to:

the kind of statehood where Puerto Ricans will not sacrifice their cultural identity in exchange for political annexation. Under such statehood, Puerto Ricans will be allowed to continue using Spanish, celebrating Puerto Ricans traditions and holidays and identifying themselves with their culture" (Santana, 2000, p. 26).

However, participating in Miss Universe was not a guaranteed item among the Estadidad Jíbara proposal. An article published in the *LA Times* discussed the impossibility of Puerto Rico not competing in Miss Universe if becoming state. "Commonwealth supporters also emphasized that becoming a state would probably mean Puerto Rico would lose its right to an Olympic team and its entry in the Miss Universe pageant won this year by Puerto Rican Dayanara Torres" (Clary, para 3, 1993). Another article from *The Victoria Advocate* (1993) emphasized this issue by saying: "The difference between the mainland and the island is emphasized by separate Olympic teams, separate entries for beauty contests –Puerto Rican Dayanara Torres is the reigning Miss Universe – and tariff protection for its fine mountain coffee" (p. 12A). These news entries evidenced how cultural nationalism provided by the participation in international events played a major role not only in the debates but also in the decision-making process of the Puerto Ricans during the referendum.

In 1998, five years after Dayanara Torres' triumph, the island had its third and last locally organized plebiscite. A total of 46.5% of Puerto Ricans voted for the Statehood but 50.2% of the voters checked None of the Above, the option backed by the pro-commonwealth party amid complaints that the pro-statehood party manipulated the phrasing of the choices in statehood's favor. The 2012 plebiscite was the last time Puerto Ricans were questioned about the status of the island; this time, 61.16% voted for

Statehood over Free Association⁵ (33.34%) and Independence (5.49%). This is the first time the Statehood was favored by a majority. However, it is important to acknowledge, that the Commonwealth formula was not included among the options and that, in discontent, over half a million ballots were turned in blank (27.41%), which made the results inconclusive since none of the options garnished a majority of votes.

The aforementioned results reveal that throughout history, even though the formula of Statehood has maintained solid results, Puerto Ricans have leaned toward the Commonwealth status or the options backed by the pro-commonwealth factions like “None of the Above” or blank ballots.

6. Decolonization and Anti-Militarism at the Universal Stage

Puerto Rico’s participation in Miss Universe is possible only through a territorial situation. It could have been possible, of course, as an independent country like most of the cases. Yet, the pro-independence movement has never tried to use Miss Universe as an excuse to make their nationalistic argument. This would seem like a logical decision if we consider that Miss Universe is a U.S.-based organization that uses a universalist approach to select an ideal citizen in accordance with the American standards of beauty. Conversely, the pro-independence movement has used the occasions that Miss Universe was celebrated on the island as scenario to voice their ideologies.

At the time Marisol Malaret was selected, the Movimiento Pro-Independencia (in English Pro-Independence Movement) was going through a questionable reputation because of a connection with the Fuerzas Armadas de Liberación Nacional (in English, Armed Forces of National Liberation, FALN). The FALN was a Puerto Rican undercover paramilitary group that, through direct action, advocated for complete independence for Puerto Rico. At the time of its dissolution, the FALN was singled out as responsible for more than 120 bomb attacks on U.S. targets between 1974 and 1983. In fact, Miss Universe

⁵ According to the Free Association, Puerto Rico should adopt a status outside of the Territory Clause of the Constitution of the United States that recognizes the sovereignty of the People of Puerto Rico. The Sovereign Free Associated State would be based on a free and voluntary political association, the specific terms of which shall be agreed upon between the United States and Puerto Rico as sovereign nations. Such an agreement would provide the scope of the jurisdictional powers that the People of Puerto Rico agree to confer to the United States and retain all other jurisdictional powers and authorities.

as an event was a target of the FALN two years after Malaret was selected as Miss Universe in 1970.

The interest that the triumph of Marisol Malaret generated on the island prompted the international pageant organizers to coordinate the celebration of Miss Universe 1972 in Puerto Rico. This celebration was a historical event because, for the first time, the pageant was going to be broadcasted live outside of the continental U.S. The Dorado Beach Hotel was selected as the venue to host not only the Miss Universe competition but also the Miss USA pageant celebrated a week before.⁶ The Dorado Beach Hotel was the perfect location not only to set the glamour of the pageant but also to showcase the model of capitalism in the Spanish Caribbean. The hotel recalled an era of opulent travels to the island during the '60s and '70s, when the Hollywood elite and social jetsetters used to visit the island for some time in the sun (Fitzimmons, 2012). However, the celebration of Miss Universe 1972 was not free from the anti-colonial tensions that were simmering on the island.

The '60s and early '70s saw a worldwide radical movement that used the rhetoric of anti-colonialism to articulate its demands. Puerto Rico was not an exception; the FALN was actively advocating for the independence of the island. The telecommunications infrastructure was a focal point for some of these anti-colonial manifestations. During the 1972 live broadcast of the Miss Universe pageant, an attack on the network antennas caused a television blackout during the exact moment of the crowning of the new Miss Universe, thus making invisible the moment Kerry Ann Wells, from Australia, was crowned as the new Miss Universe. The aim was to give a publicity effect to the pro-independence struggle.⁷

Throughout the decade, a series of other protests against the military presence on the municipal island of Culebra attracted international media attention. These protests led to the U.S. Navy abandoning its facilities on Culebra and moving it to nearby island of Vieques, another municipality of Puerto Rico. It was on Vieques where, during the late

⁶ The Miss Universe Organization is in charge of Miss Universe, Miss USA, and Miss Teen USA.

⁷ The 1972 terrorist bombings in the Dorado Beach Hotel by Puerto Rican revolutionaries attracted international attention. Based on reports from the U.S. Senate published in 1975, "...the international communists were using Puerto Rico as a bridgehead to infiltrate, disrupt and ultimately bring about revolution in the United States. As the acts of sabotage by the Armed Commandos for Liberation increased, there has been a similar increase in the Puerto Rican Independence Party and the Pro-Independence Movement and in the pro-independence forces." Retrieved from: <http://www.latinamericanstudies.org/terrorism/cuban-connection-pr-1.htm>

'90s, another incident would spark a major protest against the military that attracted not only international press but also was embodied during the celebration of Miss Universe 2001.

For over six decades, the U.S. Navy used Vieques, a municipality of Puerto Rico, as a bombing range and munitions depot, which affected the citizens' everyday life (Duchesne-Winter, 2007). However, debates emerged on April 19, 1999, as a consequence of the accidental death of a security guard, David Sanes-Rodríguez, a civilian on the military base who was killed during military practices⁸ when a missile was accidentally dropped over his location.

After the incident, in May 2000, "a broad-based coalition of church, community, government, the political left and other groups joined the 'peace for Vieques' drive" (Duchesne-Winter, 2007, p. 87) and called for an end to live bombings, the U.S. Navy's exit, and the return of military lands to the civilians. Puerto Ricans started protesting against the target practices. In 2001, the protests started to gain international⁹ renown too, and people from all over the world joined the struggle. The protests overlapped with Puerto Rico hosting its second Miss Universe pageant.

The celebration of Miss Universe in 2001 on the island served as an international forum for the event. An article published in Pageant News Bureau reveals the tensions: Actually, Puerto Rico's famed sunshine has been little in evidence this week, as torrential downpours have inundated the southwest of the island, turning it into an emergency zone. That, and the recent political unrest over U.S. Navy bombing exercises in nearby Vieques which some speculate may become fodder for protests outside the coliseum Friday night...Miss U.S.A, Kandace Krueger, was grilled on the Vieques training by the "Día Uno" newspaper. The Texan responded that unless it is proven that the bombing exercises damage nearby residents' health—as

⁸ . It was during WWII that the U.S. military acquired about two thirds of Vieques as an extension to the Roosevelt Roads base near the mainland. The original purpose of the base (never implemented) was to provide a safe haven for the British fleet should Britain fall to Germany during WWII. But after the war, the U.S. Navy continued to use the island for military trainings and as a testing ground for bombs, missiles, and other weapons.

⁹ . Singers such as Ricky Martin and Ruben Blades, boxer Felix "Tito" Trinidad, Mexican-American actor Edward James Olmos, and Guatemala's Nobel Prize winner Rigoberta Menchú and U.S. political figures such as Robert F. Kennedy, Jr., Al Sharpton, and the Rev. Jesse Jackson supported the cause. Even the former pope, John Paul II, once said that he wanted peace for Vieques.

protesters have claimed—the training should continue. (Retrieved from: <http://web.archive.org/web/20011031190127/http://www.pageant.com/universe2001/page3.htm>)

No major incident related with these tensions took place during the pageant; however, the issue was widely discussed in the press. The tensions also led the audiences to boo Miss USA Kandace Krugger during the live telecast of the competition, because she embodied the antimilitaristic sentiment that existed on the island at the moment.

While Miss USA was the anti-heroine, Miss Puerto Rico Denise Quiñones became the heroine when she won the 2001 edition of Miss Universe and, by default, became the advocate of the “peace for Vieques” movement. Carmen R. Lugo-Lugo (2012) argues that Miss Universe served as an additional platform to make the case for Vieques internationally. She states that “Soon after being crowned Miss Universe in 2001, Puerto Rican contestant Denise Quiñones expressed her wish for peace for Vieques” (p. 222). The *Register Guardian*, from July 17, 2001, covered her first visit to the island after moving to New York to live as Miss Universe:

The caravan ended at the governor’s mansion where Quiñones met with Governor Sila María Calderon (2000–04). Quiñones said she planned to talk with Calderon about U.S. Navy bombing on the Puerto Rican island of Vieques, which she opposes. The beauty queen said she also hopes she can meet with President Bush when she next visits Washington to discuss the Vieques issue with him. (p. 2A)

Later that year, according to the Global Non-violent Action Database (2011), other celebrities, including musical artist Ricky Martin, academy award nominee Rosie Perez, and world-boxing champion Felix Trinidad, joined Denise Quinones to visit the protester camps in solidarity with the cause. In addition to a global ambassador for the Vieques cause, on September 13, 2002, Miss Vieques, Carla Tricoli won the title of Miss Puerto Rico and became not only the first and only Viequense to win the crown, but also an additional local voice for the cause. On May 1, 2003, the Department of Defense transferred its land in Vieques to the Department of Interior, which was later declared a wildlife refuge.

7. Final Remarks

Lares is a mountain municipality of Puerto Rico's central-western region. Its name comes from El Grito de Lares (The Lares Outcry), an 1868 uprising that took place there and that was brought on by a pro-independence faction of the population who wanted the island to gain its freedom from Spain. The movement lasted less than 24 hours. However, even though independence was ultimately not gained, El Grito de Lares was still an immensely significant event in the history of Puerto Rico that had influence in shaping the island's current cultural and political identity. Every September 23rd—considered by many a national holiday—a mostly pro-independence group of followers visit the town to commemorate the event in a cultural festival. But in spite of how historically rich the town is, it was a beauty queen who defined a big part of the current cultural idiosyncrasy of the municipality.

For example, one of the slogans for which Lares is known reads: “Pueblo de Mujeres Hermosas” (in English, Town of Beautiful Women).¹⁰ Historically, the slogan makes sense. The first Puerto Rican woman to compete in the first edition of Miss Universe in 1952 was Marilia Levy, from Lares. In addition, throughout the years, several other women from the town have won the crown of Miss Puerto Rico while others have made it to the semifinalists.¹¹ However, the slogan was coined in the year 2001 in honor of Denise Quiñones, who represented Lares in the Miss Puerto Rico pageant before becoming Miss Universe. Besides the slogan, a monument with a mural of Quiñones is the welcoming structure at the entrance of the town. The big paradox lies in having a beauty queen, Denise Quiñones, become a big advocate of antimilitarism as an intrinsic part of the Peace for Vieques movement while producing an epistemological shift in the history the pro-independence movement of her hometown that prompted Lares to evolve from being La Ciudad del Grito (City of the Outcry) to Pueblo de Mujeres Hermosas.

In a spectacle-driven society, the figure of a beauty queen who fights a battle for cultural visibility and manages to achieve a symbolic sovereignty for Puerto Rico is a

¹⁰ Lares is also known as “Ciudad de los Cielos Abiertos” (The City of Open Skies) and “Pueblo del Grito” (The Town of the Revolt).

¹¹ Miss Puerto Rico 1996, María del Rocío Arroyo, and 1997, Lydia Guzmán, both from Lares, won Miss Puerto Rico Inc. However, none of these ladies went to Miss Universe, because the franchise holder of the pageant lot the rights to send a representative to Miss Universe in 1995. Then, Miss Universe Puerto Rico 1999, Brenda Liz Lopez, represented Lares.

reason for celebration. Every year, Miss Puerto Rico will step onto the universal stage and scream “Puerto Rico” during the parade of nations. This is the moment that I refer to as a micro-battle for symbolic independence in the battlefield of popular culture. Juan Duchesne-Winter (2007) would argue that this is an example of “Puerto Rican neo-nationalism [that] embodies a mutation of historical nationalism...that discards the anti-colonial liberation project, and embraces the identity politics of cultural affirmation” (p. 87). The Miss Universe pageant is the space to mediatize the cultural affirmation while the liberation project happens in the semantic disruption that became visible in the sash that says Puerto Rico, and not Commonwealth of Puerto Rico.

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