Young, Black, and Beautiful:

Dark Skinned Participants in Colombian Beauty Pageants

by Stefan Khittel

“You loved me as a loser but now you’re worried that I just might win. You know how to stop me but you don’t have the discipline. How many nights I prayed for this: to let my work begin.”

Leonard Cohen

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Introduction:

In this paper I want to discuss the possibilities of agency for a marginal group: black beauty queens in Colombia. Before getting on with the serious business of weighing the evidence for or against such possibilities, I shall define more clearly some key terms of the problem posed. Let’s start with the easiest one: Colombia.

The case for Colombia as a nation is easy to argue for from a political sciences positivist’s point of view: nation as another word for state. Unfortunately the nation-building process in Colombia has had a long, bloody and rather divisive history. As Drisha Fernandes Domeq pointed out in her paper presented at the Meeting of Colombian Historians in Bogotá, which took place last year, the national beauty pageant is an intrinsic part of the nation building process. The notion of Colombia is highly contested and it takes a host of measures to keep the country as a single entity. Still today there is a strong sense of regionalism alive throughout the country and from time to time there is an upsurge of separatist ideas, even in the 1990s. In a certain way, the National Beauty Contest enacts an entity which has to be imagined. Thus, Colombia for the sake of this paper will be treated as the symbolic unit which frames the beauty pageants at a “national” level. I shall show that the geography of such a Colombia may include parts of Italy or the United States while excluding certain parts of “Colombia” (as a state).

The term “marginal group” is something of an empty signifier which has had a wide range of applications. I use this composite term for any set of persons who are set apart – by themselves or by others – from mainstream society in mass media representations or the depictions of themselves. The notion of hegemony may come in handy for the purpose of clarifying what is at stake in making out marginal groups. Marginal groups might be considered as the bearers of counter-hegemonic discourses and actions. There is the spectre of collective action lying dormant in the group concept. Wherever you make out a group, be it marginal, the possibility of collective action becomes real.

1 To mention just a few books on the topic: David Bushnell’s “The Making of Modern Colombia: A Nation in Spite of Itself”, makes it clear from the start that troubles usually prevailed in this process. Charles Bergquist’s “Coffee and Conflict in Colombia: 1886-1910” exemplifies the period of the Panamanian secession and the 1000 days civil war in early 20th century. There are innumerable books and essays by Colombian authors converging at some points as the difficulty to make a nation-state out of the colonial heritage.
The word black meaning “of dark skin-colour” has suffered from many politicised debates and it is difficult to use it in English without the connotations from racism and anti-racism and political meanings. Nevertheless, I hope to make it clear from the start that I’ll use the word as a synonym for “dark skinned person” in the Colombian context, where dark skin is usually associated with African origin and slavery.

This leads to the explanation of agency, a word which is a sort of fad in today’s anthropological debates. In 1989 the search for the revolutionary subject has finally ended and the revolution as the ultimate goal altogether. This left open room for “new” concepts to fill these gaps: Civil society, participation, democracy and last not least; agency. Whereas “agent” during the cold war had that bitter taste of espionage and counter-espionage and the political left-wing debates ran about revolution, class-warfare, the struggle against imperialism and the search for the revolutionary subject. The sociological counter model of that time was Talcott Parson’s actor-system model, where the actors “acted” within the frame of a social system, which could/should not be changed, but in a slow evolutionary mode. By now both models have vanished and the “actors” which appear from time to time are rather synonymous with agents. To me the agent seems to be a hybrid model construed from the roots of the revolutionary subject cum systemic actor cum enlightened individual. It depends then on how the scientific writer/researcher is oriented in his/her views by the aforementioned political concepts. For me, as I shall show, the agents in this case, the black beauty queens fulfil all three criteria but I find the point with the beauty queen as revolutionary subject as most intriguing.

Finally, in this introductory chapter I present the following chapters. The next chapter is a brief overview of the connections between the representations of race, gender and female beauty in Latin America. I only present the important features linked to my paper. The following chapter takes a glimpse at the print media usage of blackness and whiteness in Colombia, with special reference to girls. The messages from this chapter shall be elaborated for the beauty pageants in the following and then comes the centrepiece of this article: six case-studies of hotly disputed elections and/or dethronements of queens, from 1996 to 2001. After that I go on to re- pose the question of structure and agency in the setting of beauty contests. The concluding chapter takes one more look at the agent
as actor/revolutionary-subject dilemma and proposes a new (or maybe not that new) approach to agency.

The big picture of race, gender, and female beauty in Latin America:

The topic of race and gender is an explored one, especially for the case of Latin America. I don’t want to recapitulate everything which has been said about it. I draw on the works of Peter Wade and Thomas E. Skidmore to elucidate the cases for the black and white debate in Brazil and Colombia and the former author also for the debate about indianness in Latin America. Alberto García and Nina Friedemann for the cases of blacks in Venezuela and Colombia and the eminent work of Joel Streicker on Cartagena is useful not only as a *pars pro toto*, but gets us into the heart of the symbolic and geographic space to be analysed.

During colonial times the caste-system was the basis of hierarchies. There was a place in it for each and every possible “racial” combination. In the late 18th century the caste system was weakened by various bourbonic decrees of simplifying the system and the possibility to appeal against being called a “negro” if one were of a higher status. Independence in the first half of the 19th century cleared the way for a further weakening the distinction, as the highest category, the *peninsular*, was eliminated and the ideals of the French Revolution, such as equality and fraternity, made their slow way into Colombian society. The abolition of slavery, by 1852, was based on such principles and further opened up the society to egalitarian ideas, even in their elite circles. I describe this process for Colombia, but it was fairly similar in most Latin American countries. Latin America is a patchwork of different peoples, united mainly by the influx of Spanish and Portuguese oppression of the heterogeneous and diverse indigenous peoples and the subsequent massive “import” (abduction) of African labour. Together with the homogenising influence of modern ideals such as democracy, progress or capitalism, the diversity could be hidden behind the veil of similar institutions, such as the modern state, Spanish and Portuguese as official languages and many more.

The situation of women was characterised by the lack of homogeneity and the will of the oligarchies (be they Spanish or Creole) to unite the variety under the umbrella of the image of a modern, slightly Mediterranean type of womanhood. The white women were considered as the others
of (white) men, as were the indigenous and African males. The indigenous women and the African women were integrated at the margins\(^3\) as twice the others. They had stereotyped roles to play, which are shown today mostly in telenovelas from the continent. The beauty of indigenous and African women was exoticised and pigeonholed as beauty-for-having-sex-with. The lower classes across Latin America never complied with this script written by their superiors, and even the elite broke their own prescription when it came to love and, for instance, the “mongrel children” were freed together with their (black) mothers. Especially the situation of enslaved women in or close to the “big house” was highly ambivalent. Peter Wade shows that even today the idea of “whitening” through a lighter skinned partner seems somewhat attractive to black women, or at least the image is deeply rooted in Colombian society\(^4\).

Representations of black and white girls in Colombian mass media:

We cross over to the local mediascape, to borrow a term used by Appadurai, and arrive at the representations of girls and young women in the Colombian mass media. I pick the print media for obvious reasons, as they are the easiest accessible type and also the easiest to be provided with illustrative examples. I also focus more on mainstream and high-quality media than on the yellow press as racist, sexist and stereotyped versions of the female could be expected from this side.

I shall now develop a few theses on the construction of the white/black chasm in Colombian print media and take to analysing a few pictures (tables 1 and 2) and their framing. For reasons of mere space this cannot be exhaustive and does not pretend to be so. In other articles and books most of the general background has been investigated (Wade 1993, Figueroa & San Miguel, 2000). I begin with the thesis of the image nature-black people versus city-white people (culture would have been nicer, but, alas, doesn’t work that well anymore). We can appreciate the two little girls playing on the beach, facing towards the ocean (photo 1, table 1). This, indeed is an innocent picture. It reminds one of holidays, of nature, of having had a nice time in some great place. But why do two black girls

\(^3\) I’m tempted to write: “firmly integrated at the margins”, because mistresses, whores, slaves and washerwomen made the dream of the idle life for a true lady possible.

\(^4\) I personally could not confirm the situation described by Peter Wade (1993), but this might be due to the fact that I started to visit Colombia (1990) when Peter had already finished his fieldwork for his 1993 book. A
appear in the picture? All you have to know is that the Pacific area in Colombia is considered a zone of black people. Thus, it is not at all necessary to spell out the reason, why there are two little dark skinned girls there. Every single person in Colombia knows this. The other link to nature is somewhat more fought over. Images of the “dirty, lazy, superstitious nigger” prevail sometimes and make it necessary to take counteractions, or create counterimages.

The other link, I say, is drawn between black people-community-tradition and white person-individual-progress. These images are valid for boys and girls, but I found the photos 2, 3, and 4 in table1 illustrative. Whereas the group posing in photo 2 is said to represent the community values, the girl in picture 3 is after the universal goal of individual progress and the society is only the envisioned beneficiary. Tönnies Gemeinschaft concept is what characterises the Black Communities as depicted by the law in Colombia. Even if the values defended by the community seem positive to us, we might wonder, why then the community is talked about in terms of boys (niños!) and the corresponding value is fraternity! Another glimpse at the picture confirms the female identity of the three girls. In a variation of Erich Fried one might rehearse: a community is a community is a community... There is no way out of this place into society at large; you better feel comfortable with your lot as you are. There is another small but intriguing point that adds: the temporalities change: the girls (or boys) are already practising the eternal values of the communities, whereas the albino-type girl is going to be useful member of society. Progress is inherent in whiteness, blackness stands for re-enacting eternal truths or traditions (as fraternity?) – a stalemate in a negative sense!

Let’s look at the seemingly contradicting photo 4: The setting is Palenque, a famous maroon village close to Cartagena. A staged fight between two Palenquera girls is portrayed. Though this village can hardly be called a “natural” place, it reiterates the symbolic geography of Bolívar – the departamento of both Cartagena and Palenque. The girls normally train and/or work in Cartagena and come back for weekends and holiday or to visit friends. Palenque is the “natural” place for blackness and not Cartagena and the girls are transferred into “their” setting (community) via the photo. Then

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5 As Michael Taussig 1987 wrote: There are two lowlands in Colombia: The Amazon side and the Pacific side: The former is most often imagined as the centre of indiannes, the other of blackness, but both are equalled with
there is the problem with the naming of the two boxers: Why can they be addressed by their names? Well, the only way to get media attention for a black person is through sports. Close to eighty percent of the black persons actually mentioned by name in mass media in Colombia have a connection to sports. This may be football-stars, their trainers, baseball-stars, athletes and boxers. The rest are most prominently musicians and other artists – depicted as egregious examples of their communities - and then very few politicians; if they represent the black community or then if they are extremely corrupt.

*Images of beauty pageant contestants as construed by the media:*

The works of Drisha Fernandes Domeq⁶ are about the only writings on this subject (apart from some of my own research, e.g., this contribution). She defends the view that the media hide what they show, or in other words, through showing certain realities suppress different versions. She demonstrates that some feature of the pageant in Cartagena, the only one which she describes in detail because of its major media coverage, are reported about on and off, whereas others receive much more attention from the journalists and some don’t get any attention at all. The focus is in the regional candidates and the regions as such, some are more important than others. Each and every queen has to have achieved something, their cosmetical surgeries are described in detail and the great boy-friends are featured, too. No glamorous insignificance is forgotten, whereas more complex or difficult issues (or candidates) are left out.

Taking up the thread from the former chapter, let’s have a look at the media images of the beauty pageants in Colombia, mainly the national one in Cartagena. The simplest observation is the length of the reporting. It starts by late October and fades to a low murmur by late November. It swells to a steady flow during the epoch of the Miss Universe competition in some far away-country and then there are news about numerous other contests all around the country, among them the Miss World nature. Blackness is differentiated into dangerous city blackness (criminals, whores, etc...) and the idyllic sort natural side of blackness as it is to be found in the Pacific area.

⁶ She wrote her thesis in 1997 on this subject and read two interesting papers 1997 and 2000. Unfortunately I’m only in possession of the text of the 1997 paper read at the VII National Anthropological Congress in Bogota. Because of some weird interpretation of copyright law in Colombia it is not possible to quote from a thesis, unless an author gives him/herself the permission to do so – and s/he has to be personally present because you
competition, the Miss Coffee, and the Miss Bambuco. Of course the local and regional news-media engage in reporting from the local preparatory events, too.

Photojournalist have learned enough from all the other colleagues around the world that most pictures resemble their international counterparts. There are, however, some pictures and constellations which make a difference in Colombia. Take for example El Colombiano: The page with the exhibition of a famous Colombian Photo-artist – an obviously black prostitute is chosen from his oeuvre – is followed by a page on the side events in Cartagena. In one picture there is this blond girl in front of a group of white beauty queens; we are told that two of them are missing. The young girl shows promising signs for the future – compared to the dire present of the “decapitated” black whore – the girl wants to participate in the event, we are told, but the equally nameless hooker is forced to “participate” in the exposition because of the artist, who is named, the curator of the museum, and the staff of El Colombiano, whether she wants to or not.

The verbal aspects of media representation of black beauty queens have been treated extensively by myself in the MA thesis (2000). The resume is that black candidates are closely linked to nature, even more than their whiter companions’. Surgery on their body is either discounted or depicted as grossly exaggerated, even if they do the same things as everybody else. They are put in the usual frames like superstition: The 1999 runner-up of the Chocó contest was said to have prayed in secret for the winner to be sacked – which then really happened: be afraid of her prayers! Typical traits of African Colombians are treated not as “typical” or “African” or “black”, but simply as bad, too much or not enough: the black representatives have curly hair, which is “bad” hair, too much ass (sometimes politely put: derriere), and a tendency not to have white enough teeth to meet the expectation (she should see the dentist...) of the observer.

There is a special twist in the case of Cartagena, which hosts two beauty events at almost the same time: The National Beauty Pageant and the Reina Popular event. In the national event the elite celebrates their image of the good girls and at the same time, but not exactly at the same place, the under and lower middle class masses of Cartagena celebrate their queen. The main organiser is in both celebrations the National Beauty Committee, although the details of the popular event are organised by the committees of the town quarters. Control is usually effected through encompassment of the
popular *fiesta*. The masses are set apart spatially and satisfied synchronously, at least ideally, and can celebrate in safe distance from the rich. This carnival, as it is called sometimes, is divided not only along the line of rich and poor, but along the racial line as well. The poorer the quarters of the town the darker their skin colour. Elisabeth Cunin (2000) did a marvellous job documenting and interpreting this two-fold event. The background for this division in Cartagena’s society can be read in Streicker (1992).

Cunin describes the differential city-geographies for black and white participants in their respective pageants. The black candidates are equalled with poverty and the periphery, whereas white contestants may represent the city or the *departamento* as a whole. Skin colour overrides the actual financial means of a candidate. Though this is never spoken out clearly, no one is fooled by the official dictum. Africanness is confined to specific places in the geography in Cartagena: the poor quarters and in Colombia: the poor Chocó and the “Caribbean” island of San Andrés. Both may participate in their own spaces, and are adored for their “exotic” appearances, but they may never win a place in the departmental/national gallery of beauty queens.

Another macabre example of this allotment of exoticism is the Italian connection, as I prefer to call it. The Miss Colombia 2000 is of Italian origins (and she looks Italian anyway, even in an African exotic setting as in photo 8, table 2), as was Mónica María Urbina, an ex-Miss Colombia, who now opted for an Italian passport, invoking her peninsular ancestry. Lina María, a candidate for Miss Bogotá was unhappy about her second place and with the dire prospect of not being able to participate in the next edition of Miss Universe; she went about to file her inscription in the Miss Italy contest, to see whether she would make it on the other side of the Atlantic. She enrolled in a charity asociation, to make a great show of her good-heartedness, which got her into the (Colombian) news again – at national level!(cf. picture 7, table 2) We discern a pattern of distinction, which runs across the lines of race rather than nationality to define who counts and who does not count as Colombian. With this in mind we should be prepared to assess the six episodes in Colombian beauty pageant history.

*Six black beauty(queen)-cases compared:*
The six cases I shall take on are by no means the only ones I could have chosen, but for the sake of documentation, brevity and clarity I shall stick with these examples. The first case dates back five years now and became to be known as the first major upset (in Colombia usually called “palo”) in the history of the National Contest apparently caused by racism. The headlines made it all the way through to Caracas (the South American capital of beauty queens) and other places in Latin America. Five candidates reached the final, among them the candidates of Chocó and Antioquia – the “blackest” and the “whitest” departamento, and after the final round the dark skinned chocoan beauty had a five point edge over the milk white participant from Antioquia. And then the winner was declared to be ... Antioquia! The following weeks there was for the very first time an uproar among the journalistic scene in Colombia (and beyond) and the ugly word racism made its appearance in everyday discourse about beauty pageants. As if this wouldn’t have sufficed, about three weeks later the virreina was dethroned after allegedly having had a sexual encounter with a major drug lord behind the iron bars of a Medellìn prison. Though nothing could be proved, the runner up of the 1996 beauty event was immediately sacked and once again there was an outcry against injustice, racism and imperialism. The scandal was basically an elite affair as Zolima Bechara, the candidate was born in Bogotà (never mind she ran for Chocó) to a wealthy family of traders. To my knowledge, the girl soon afterwards married an important Spanish manager of a big bank and lives happily ever after in Spain.

The second item in the search for a change in attitudes towards race in Colombian beauty competitions is the rather more intricate case of Yudy Arletys. She was born at the coast of the Chocó and got in touch with beauty contests in her early youth when she studied at high school in Quibdó, the capital of the departamento. There she was elected the Inter-College Queen and after that she became popular among the local (male) elite or whoever considered himself to count as such. When she went to Cali to follow her professional career she was sponsored by the Quibdó-expat community in that town. After various runs in minor pageants she went for the departmental crown in 1998 and she

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7 In August, September 2001 she is participating in "Miss Italy World" in Italy, where all the beauty queens are united who have Italian fathers or grandfathers (mothers and grandmothers don't count).

8 The line of argument from the drug lords against the extradition to the USA was normally the imperialism argument which they shared with right wing nationalist and left wing guerrilla forces, all of them afraid of being judged and incarcerated for many years, respectively the rest of their lives in the US, something a really big fish in Colombia never faces as a real threat.
reached second place. From there she moved on to the National Tourism Beauty Pageant which she won – the first time a black girl a beauty pageant of national importance, though not one of the two big events (The National Beauty Pageant and the Miss World Colombia contest). The president of the jury was the brother-in-law of the newly elected Colombian president Andrés Pastrana. After competition there were rumours that a particularly close relation with the jury helped her to win the prize. Though there were no immediate sanctions, she was not the girl which was sent to the Canary Islands to represent Colombia in the international competition to follow from her title.

In 1999 she tried successfully to go for the title of Miss Chocó. When she was preparing to participate in Cartagena (in the national event) she was rejected by the Director of the National Beauty Commission, Raimundo Angulo. The grounds on which this decision was based were never revealed – a standard procedure – but nasty rumours had it, that the relation with the president’s in-law to a degree damaged her chances in the contest. There was also the even worse assumption found among some of her former supporters, that her pictures appeared in a call-girl catalogue in Cali. Whereas she herself denied the former allegations, she made no reference to the second issue. Whatever truth lies behind these filthy suspicions, the result was that a girl replaced her who didn’t have any chance to win in Cartagena and because San Andrés didn’t send a candidate that year, there was no danger that there could be a black beauty queen.\(^9\)

The other year, 2000, there were some events that challenged the hegemony of the ideal of white beauty in Colombian beauty pageants even more. There was the creation and propagation of a separate event of Miss Black Colombia. All participants had to be conscious about their African heritage. Thus, beauty was not seen as skin deep, but as representing the essential values of a community, in this particular instance of the black community in Colombia. In the picture (table 4, photo 13) the representatives of not typically “black” departamentos are depicted. As can easily be observed the contestants are of various shades of skin colour, but rather in a middle range between

\(^9\) The information is taken from a variety of sources: Newspapers as El Espectador – Bogotá, El Universal – Caracas, the weekly magazine Semana and personal sources which in this case cannot be revealed.

\(^{10}\) As the nature of the details suggest, most of them were investigated by myself. Though intrigued to a certain extent by the intricacies of cabal and love in Colombia I tried to focus on the background of racism and gender-oppression. We had an interview session in 1999 shortly before she went on to win the Miss Chocó title and then
black and white. The aim of the pageant is not mainly to produce a darker skinned beauty queen, but rather to strengthen the pride in African heritage of the African Colombians. The winner goes on to South Africa to the Malaika pageant.

At this point I insist on examining again the photo of the candidates, which also fits well with the other candidates not in the frame. Most girls are, as mentioned above, not of very dark skin. A participant of an earlier version – not a highly publicised one, without connections to any international event – complained about the light skin colour of the winners: “One assumes that this was a competition for blacks, but then, in the end, we, the light skinned girls, won all the prizes and the tar-babes lost again.” Blackness in this context is defined as anything not as white as the average winner of the national beauty contests. The question of hegemonic struggles inside a supposed “community” of African Colombians is not asked. For this very reason there are critical assessments about this type of fortification of black pride in Colombia. That all candidates have straitened hair is just a further indication of this contest as an elite creation within the context of certain upwardly mobile black intelligentsia and/or new bourgeoisie who follow the fads of US and Caribbean based African American fashion industries. This kind of competition is supported by many of the traditional elite, probably because the threat of toppling the establishment in power is minimal. The organisers are, or pretend to be, part of the elite and struggle for their recognition as racial individual-other in Colombia.

The reverse situation to a degree was the designation of a black departmental beauty queen in Cauca. This part of Colombia has the reputation of being one of the centres of the mining aristocracy of New Granada. Popayán, its capital, was considered as a pearl of colonial architecture and with the highest percentage of nobiliary in Colombia. Africans and indigenous peoples were excluded from political representation until recently. When the paper El Liberal announced that the Beauty

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11 I use black and white without quotation marks as they also stand for the traditional iconographic representations of the Caucasian and Ethiopian races: As can be easily observed, it’s hard in the times of political correctness to spell out simple assertions of skin colour.
12 Interview, in June 1999 in Quibdó, with Neyffer Panesso Mena; the interview was also used for Khittel, 2000. My translation.
13 I don’t say that this in itself is negative and the possibility of individual careers was also improved by those enterprises, but the possibilities for collective action have not been fostered by this rather individualist view of the black person disregarding class and internal racism. For the latter the book “The Color Complex: The Politics
Committee chose Mónica Caicedo Valencia, a 20 year old student from Puerto Tejada\textsuperscript{14}, to represent the departamento of Cauca, the very next day a letter from the governor’s office denied all possible links of the governor with the designation of the beauty queen, as the departamento could not afford to send a beauty queen to Cartagena\textsuperscript{15}. The governor and all the political elite of Popayán are of white descendants, at least they themselves believe, and have been involved in centuries of exploitations and conflict with indigenous and black peasants and miners in their region. Naturally all of the beauty queens the departamento had sent to Cartagena were of alabaster-like skin colour, despite the fact that the proportion of the indigenous and African Colombians living in Cauca is among the highest in all of Colombia.

Shortly after the designation of the dark skinned beauty queen (for how dark she really is, see for yourself in photo 10, table 4), an indigenous guambiano man was elected governor by popular suffrage for the first time in the history of the Cauca as a political entity! Hence the disturbed reaction of the governor is elucidated. The bad augury materialised and the deep sitting fears of the political elite became real. White supremacy ended for the time being in the Cauca, and even the intent of genocide by paramilitary squadrons doesn’t seem to work anymore. The rest of Colombia could mock this downfall of the local elite, as it did not threaten the bigger picture of racial miscegenation in the nation as a whole. The cartoon (picture 11, table 4) though shows a certain uneasiness with the new situation. Both, the new indigenous governor and the dark skinned beauty, are drawn stereotypically, as he is very short and she wears curly hair; neither of the two assumption in the drawing is correct. At least in Cartagena she made a presentation and ended up third, which is a good place for beautiful dark skinned girls. There she stirred the emotions because she was not the candidate from Chocó, who normally accompanies Miss San Andrés as the only non-white participant.

The last two examples took place at the same time, so the time frame is a synchronic one, which is important to keep in mind. First, I want to start by a preceding side-story: In May this year

\textsuperscript{14} Puerto Tejada lies in the extreme North of the departamento Cauca, closer to Cali, the capital of Valle del Cauca and is famous for its African Colombian majority. Michael Taussig began his field work as an anthropologist there.

\textsuperscript{15} It was announced on Tuesday, July 18\textsuperscript{th} 2000 and on Wednesday, July 19\textsuperscript{th} 2000 this clarification followed: “Through the daily newspaper El Liberal I noticed that a representative of the departamento Cauca for the pageant in Cartagena was ‘designated’. I have to inform the editor, that the government of Cauca was not...
the election of the Miss Antioquia took place; María Fernanda López was declared the obvious winner, because she was a sister of a former Miss Colombia. The natural course of things in Colombia. Unfortunately, she wore a combination of a panty-cum-bra/bikini for dual usage, as underwear or for swimming. When a front-page with her was published and it became known to the regional beauty committee, she was immediately sacked. The runner-up is now supposed to replace her in Cartagena in November this year.

One month later in Buenaventura\textsuperscript{16}, Valle, Adriana Riascos was elected \textit{Reina del Valle 2001-2002}.\textsuperscript{17} She was extremely happy and expressive the day of her election, when she fell on her knees and thanked God aloud for granting her the favour of winning the competition and to be able to participate in Cartagena (We can appreciate this emotion partially in photo13, table 5; photo 14 shows her in the interview after having won). Although there was a small scandal because of her being too expressive in the public arena, the sensation was that she was the first clearly dark skinned girl to win (or even get close to win) the Valle contest, which, much like Cauca has seen itself traditionally as the heart of whiteness in Colombia\textsuperscript{18}. As blackness and emotion (compare above) are linked in the consciousness about race in Colombia, thus, the display of emotion was a minor infraction.

Another month and a day later, the candidate from Valle was refused by the National Beauty Committee, presided by Raimundo Angulo. All (press)hounds of hell were unleashed; the governor of Valle – perhaps mindful of what had happened in the neighbouring \textit{departamento} - stated that Adriana had to go for the crown in Cartagena and that he would never send someone else. The mayor of Cali followed suit and almost a week later the head of the Valle Beauty Committee, herself descendant of "royal" ancestry (photo 17, table 5), had to convene a press conference to defend Raimundo’s decision, as it was perceived by the press and by many people in the street as well. The vice beauty queen was repeatedly interviewed and when she stated her desire to run in Cartagena was dubbed “egocentric”. The queen herself found herself in Santa Marta at the time of her relegation, but had to

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\textsuperscript{16} The location is important, as Buenaventura is the second city in Valle and the biggest town in Colombia (apart from Cartagena itself) with a huge African Colombian majority.

\textsuperscript{17} \textit{Reina} is the Spanish word for queen.
give interviews on the rejection and, of course, the issue of racism turned up. There were rumours – as is always the case – that she dressed a fairly transparent body at the Bogotá Fashion event earlier this year, though it was never demonstrated with a picture.

Three days before the official announcement of the elimination of the candidate from Valle, there was an “election” taking place in the private setting of the first lady of Bolívar, the departamento whose capital is Cartagena. There she picked the candidate for her governmental entity. Among the five candidates who presented themselves there were two Reinas populares (cf. Above). Especially Cindy Herazo Tous had won the hearts of the locals two years earlier when she won the local competition for the whole of Cartagena. When she was invited to the main pageant – as all Reinas populares de Cartagena are – she was taken for the Miss Universe 1999

The confusion did not last long, but the press took notice of the incident. Two years later she went for the big thing – and was not designated by the first lady. Instead the girl designated is from Barranquilla, a neighbouring town in eternal competition with Cartagena for primacy in the coast area of Colombia.

News leaked slowly into the public sphere, first through radio and local television and then also print media and the internet fora. The Reader’s Box on the Internet of the El Universal became the battleground first over local hierarchies, but then in brief time over the question of racism in the beauty contests, especially in Cartagena. For about a week this was local news, but then there it became breaking news, when the combination with the Valle case was made. The big broadcasting corporations, Caracol (liberal) and RCN (conservative), and El Tiempo regularly reported on the issue of the “Cartagena election” as they mockingly called it

There was also an unusual media presence in the popular demonstration against the politics of/in the National Beauty Committee and their local outlet (for the demonstration see picture 18, table 5). The very same day this (minor) event was aired twice on national TV and for three days there was reporting on it in El Tiempo. Raimundo himself had to send an e-mail to the Reader’s Box in El Universal to deny all allegations of unfairness, trafficking of political influences or simple corruption.

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18 It might be a curiosity, but there are many regions in Colombia to consider themselves as the heartland of the “white” race in the country: Popayán, Cali, Medellín, Bucaramanga, and to certain extent also Cartagena, although this might seem highly contradictory (see footnote).
19 The first Miss Botswana to be sent to a Miss Universe competition, Mpule Kvalegbo.
20 The coast in general and Cartagena in particular are notorious for vote rigging and electoral fraud.
The quest for revolution: Structural change or agency?

So, what are the stakes in this game? There surely is a lot of money in the pot, but the purely economic drives are not considered in this paper. The bigger picture for race or ethnic diversity has changed over the years. The 1991 constitution abandoned the unitary, mono-ethnic, mono-cultural, modern state in order to erect another version on the bases of plurality, participation, ethnic diversity in a generally “postmodern” fashion. This tendency is not restricted to Colombia or Latin America, but runs through the nations on a planetary scale. A consensus not seen before is reached, that a kind of egalitarian equality for each and every “community” has to be reached. This feeds on the recent history of the USA, which on a global scale still sets the pace for hegemonic ideas. On a global scale this gets interesting where different “ideologies” clash. The journalist writing frantic defences of the beauty of Colombian women, especially Reinas. The coincidence of two black Miss Universe in a row, elicited interesting reactions from the Colombian side. A journalist actually thought that this amounts to a conspiracy against the Colombian participants in particular or at least against Latin American female contestants in general. In the same line there were articles which simply deny reality: every dark-skinned girl is automatically ascribed to the African continent, whereas all Caucasian looking women are not from Africa. The confusion about the black Venezuelan contestant and the South African beauty queen of Indian origins is understandable, though the sashes “Venezuela” for an African and “South Africa” for a non-African participant were rather hard to explain, but, anyway,....

As all solid truths about race seem to dissolve, there are tiny crevices appearing, which can be used by persons to act on. Take for instance the Cartagena incident; following from a long line of different, but in a way contingent events, the possibility to stage a protest opened up: a protest which was transmitted into the homes of millions of Colombians, who might sense a different distribution of power. The black beauty queen in Cauca exalted the change in this distribution and made it

21 This is the present outcome (as of August 7th), but further sequels can be expected.
22 Money feeds on the myth everything is corrupt in Colombia. There may be some corruption, but a lot more suspicion about it. The aim to make everything less corrupt (who should do it, if everybody is corrupt? A general assumption may be that the only person not corrupt is the one who speaks) spills over into a strategy of harmony, where the elite fights itself in a sort of shadow-boxing.
23 Ideology is a very fought over term; I try to use it in a rather broad sense, embarking everything from marxian
perceptible. The site of Buenaventura and a Black Beauty queen in Valle are equally a sign of shifting hegemonies. The governor is rather on a salvage mission to save his popular support, but then again he digs new channels in the dam that supposedly contain the white-beauty current: His publicly insisting on describing the National Beauty Committee as racist, was the bait for the mass media that could be utilised by the actors – instigators of popular protest in Cartagena, until then protesting rather underground. Although I won’t go as far as to say that the beauty queens make the thread of their actions, they actively can chose from a range of possibilities.

I take a brief look at the six cases above and assess the agency: The first is still an example for no major effort to act. Zolima chose not to speak, not to act publicly, but to emigrate literally to another country and take a route envisioned by authors like Peter Wade or Thomas Skidmore; she certainly did act, but the action was a solitary one, without compromising many people. Yudy followed suit in many respects, but at least tried very hard to stay in the model and beauty queen business, in spite of her misfortune. The separate pageant is rather not a useful tool to fight the hierarchies or hegemonic structures in Colombia, but as I explained above, it’s unlikely that this is the intention of its promoters. It is a collective action model for individual action, rather than the other way round. In other words, it is about how to get faster into the system, not by changing it, but by “cloning” it. Miss Cauca was rather only there to defend her position in the beauty business and she fared well, but did not change much – at first sight; then there was also the election of an indigenous governor and it grew into a sign of the times.

Finally the last two incidents share the high profile of the actions set publicly by beauty queens: the exuberance in gestures and interviews made a star of Miss Valle, despite – or because of – her dethroning. The popular protest against the first lady’s decision in Cartagena is lead by a former Reina popular (Ana Milena Torres), who is also a law student finishing her career. The girls who wish to participate have a harder stance, as they don’t want to waste their chances on uncertain projects, but still are there in the background to move their pawns.

Conclusion: From the revolutionary subject to actors:
The real socialist states in the Eastern European provinces have vanished. The revolutionary subject, so much alive during the 1968 students and workers revolt-debates, has turned into a haunting spectre the ageing revolutionaries tell their grandchildren about when they cannot be persuaded to go to bed and other instances of obstinate behaviour. Is there any hope to reanimate it? Well, it seems that a new interpretation of the actor models, not in a systemic perspective, but as bearers of something like agency can recover some of the positive traits. We have to abstain from falling back to hailing the enlightened individual, a tendency which is congruent with many intents of neoliberal scholars to describe the world. Ultimately these intents shall fail. Nevertheless, there is no reason for recessing from the search for an agent in this world, as things change and more importantly so: systems also transform\textsuperscript{24}! Now we have to set about finding these agents of change. I agree that popular movements – more often denominated social movements – are a fine starting point. However, many an anthropologist looks for his/her special agents in their private fields, I am no exception to it: Peasant movements\textsuperscript{25}, women’s groups, indigenous people and the urban poor are some of the more frequent victims - who cannot avoid being studied - of our frenzied search for the agents or actors of change – deep down in the hearts of many a researcher there lies still the romantic vision of an individual-cum-revolutionary subject.

In this paper I tried to suggest that we might as well start with the “royals”. We then train our investigative eye to spot the small signs of transformation or interstices in the world of media representations. Eventually we can reach the interesting cases in our life-world studying up or horizontally. If we ask politely and patiently accumulate knowledge and practice we shall gain entrance to new stages hitherto (almost) unredeemed by professional ethnographers. I have argued that this type of research – as presented here - may alter our perspectives on agency and social change and add to our classical fields of exploring the downtrodden of this earth. Thus, still clinging to a dream of a world more just and egalitarian, let me conclude with the ancient revolutionary slogan: The Queen is dead, long live the Queen!

\textsuperscript{24} Some critics might say: The description of systems varies; others: there is never anything worthy of being described as system, it is an illusion.

\textsuperscript{25} My personal predilection, I admit.
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