

Beauty and the Beast: Commodification and the Women's Bodies Are Not Playing Fields Campaign

UQ Union Women's Rights Area, 2004

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Campaign History

The “*Women's Bodies Are Not Playing Fields*” Campaign was initiated by the UQ Union Women's Action Collective as a response to an advertisement in the local press that publicised Heat One of the *Search for Miss Bronco*, presented by Jim Beam and to be held at a local hotel. The *Search for Miss Bronco* is a derivation of the *Miss Manly Eagle* competition and is essentially a series of bikini parades, which are judged by a panel which includes rugby players. “Miss Bronco 2004” received cash, a holiday and a free modelling photographic session for her portfolio. It seemed contradictory that the management of the Brisbane Broncos rugby team would run a beauty contest concurrent with allegations of rape pervading sport. The Women's Rights Area perceived the contest to be a denial of the continuum of violence against women; a continuum of a hierarchy of behaviours, sexual assault by a group of men being the most severe. At the other end of the continuum is a series of behaviours that political scholar Nancy Fraser describes as “the ‘feminine’... [being] disparaged, trivialized, objectified and demeaned in a stereotypical fashion”. In this way women are denied their full humanity, which provides the ability to act violently towards women (Mooney, 2000: 223).

The Collective believed that if the NRL was serious about tackling the problem of players' behaviour, then it would need to address the entire masculine culture within sport including events such as the *Search for Miss Bronco*. Thus the aim of the Campaign was the cancellation of the competition as the result of the Campaign's education of its sponsors and spectators concerning the reasons why NRL clubs should not be involved in this kind of cultural activity. To this end the Collective wrote letters addressed to contest sponsors and managers of the NRL and Brisbane Broncos. The Collective also sent out media releases informing recipients of our planned protests outside venues during heats of the Miss Bronco competition.

David Gallop, CEO of the NRL, in a written reply, defended the *Search for Miss Bronco* with his observation of the ubiquitous nature of similar representations of women “in advertising, music videos and other community outlets far removed from Rugby League” (Gallop, written correspondence, 2004) and with his reminder of NRL’s initiated research project which would investigate into attitudes, within football culture, towards women. The Collective maintained that the NRL research project did not provide sanction for a sexist beauty contest.

Our letter to the Brisbane Broncos prompted their marketing department to visit the Union and request suggestions regarding ways in which the *Search for Miss Bronco* could be made more acceptable to UQ Union. This response was arguably exemplary of the ways in which liberal feminist discourse is incorporated into beauty contests.

Interviews with contestants are riddled with statements about self-confidence, assertiveness, the importance of careers, and perhaps most important, “individual” choice. The pageants themselves change according to changes in dominant collective notions of gender, notions that are influenced by (and occasionally give credit to) mainstream liberal feminist discourse....[Thus].... [b]eauty pageant contestants perform an elaborate balancing act between representing themselves in terms of liberal personhood and individual achievement and participating in a competition dedicated to the display and maintenance of the ideal feminine form (Banet-Weiser, 1999: 25).

Whether or not concessions by Bronco management to liberal feminism would have been effective would be determined by whether the performance semiotics of the Miss Bronco competition are received predominantly through the body or through language. The Collective believed that the emphasis would be on the female body as indicated by the image of a bikini-clad model on the contest advertisements. The event was primarily based on the conflation of alcohol and male voyeurism of the feminine form and thus it surmised that linguistic subversions would not be effective. The Collective therefore refused the opportunity to provide suggestions on how the pageant could be modified and instead requested its cancellation. Bronco management stated that this was not possible as they were under contract with Jim Beam. The Collective suggested that in the light of recent rape allegations and well-founded criticisms of football culture, the contract should be re-negotiated. Again Bronco management refused. It appeared that money had taken precedent over ethics.

There was not enough preparation time between the advertisement and Heat One of the contest to organise a substantial protest rally. Nevertheless three women from the Collective entered the Indooroopilly Hotel on March 18 during the bikini parade and distributed leaflets headlined *Bad Taste Broncos* amongst the crowd. The three women were evicted by hotel security but after the women had successfully handed out leaflets to most of the (mainly male) crowd. The Collective was prepared for the next heat of the contest held at City Rowers pub in the Brisbane CBD. The Campaign had expanded to include activists from QUT and Griffith. Subsequently, fifty protesters picketed outside City Rowers. The prominence and timing of the protest, which concurred with investigation of rape allegations, prompted national media coverage.

Media Response

The Courier Mail responded to the protest with a front-page photograph of a heat winner of the Miss Bronco competition accompanied by the headline “Protest Beauty: They’re All Just Jealous”. The featured contestant like many of the protesters was also a student at the University of Queensland. By choosing to focus on this particular entrant, *The Courier Mail* constructed an opposition between a UQ student and the UQ Union Women’s Rights Area; a binary of the haves and have-nots, a class system with status endowed upon those women within the debate who fulfil the criteria of desirable object within the heterosexual economy. This is evidence, I believe, that in our culture, beauty is “a signifier of difference”(Peiss, 2001: 13).

This was not the first time that media reports have surmised that protests are fuelled by envy. Scholar Bonnie J. Dow notes that the view that protests are “a desperate bid for attention by neurotic unattractive women” has been a major thread in media responses to feminist protests to the Miss America pageant from 1968 until the present day (Dow, 2003: 129). Media coverage also usually fails to understand how beauty contests may be exploitative when the female contestants themselves do not feel exploited. This belief informs the media’s choice to interview participants so that they will defend the contest.

Despite feminist insistence that the target is the pageant and what it symbolizes and not the contestants themselves, the easiest narrative for

journalists to construct is one in which feminists are pitted against specific women and in which those specific women are eager to defend themselves (Dow, 2003: 144).

Dow analyses this view as a reification of feminism from a critique of patriarchy to a practice of individualism (Dow, 2003: 129) in which the media views feminism as legitimate only when it enables individual achievements within existing social hierarchies (Dow, 2003: 145). This rhetoric conveniently shifts the gaze to “the female contestants and the feminist critics of the contest rather than on the political dimension of the contest itself”(Tonn, 2003: 154).

The emphasis of beauty contests as an opportunity for individual achievement was exemplified when Broncos' CEO Bruno Cullen was interviewed by Channel 7. Cullen deflected attention from the political implications of the *Search for Miss Bronco* with his argument that the contest helped to “kick start” entrants' modelling careers. This reveals a current perception of beauty contests as an empowering mechanism befitting the entrepreneurial emphasis within Western late capitalism. The supposed opportunities provided by the Miss America pageant were also given similar credibility when an academic professor in 1998 described the event as “a legitimate, structured entry into society that gives women the visibility and potential for big bucks that professional sport does for men” (quoted by Dow, 2003: 141). Dow analyses this response:

The peculiar logic to this strain of argument is thus clear: the pageant, while it relies on patriarchal values vis-à-vis the importance of women's appearance, is actually a vehicle for women's empowerment in a culture in which the playing field between men and women is not yet even. What gets lost here, obviously, is the possibility that continued feminist activism dedicated to expanding women's opportunities might be a better solution to this problem than the perpetuation of the pageant system (Dow, 2003: 142).

Outcome

More protests were held to coincide with subsequent heats but virtually ended with the cessation of media attention. It was difficult for campaign protesters to remain motivated in the midst of stubborn male sporting culture with financial interests and to persuade the media and rugby management that the *Search for Miss Bronco* was symptomatic of a football culture that denigrates women. Nevertheless, the Collective was grateful for the support of Laura Fraser, Women's Officer of the National Union

of Students (NUS), who spoke about the Campaign at a meeting of *Project Respect* in Melbourne. The Collective also established links with *Football Fans Against Sexual Assault* (FFASA). Thus, while the Campaign was unsuccessful in the cancellation of *Search for Miss Bronco*, it did create awareness of the issue and facilitated the establishment of women's networks.

Issues Arising: Positivism and Commodification

The Campaign also helped the Women's Rights' Area to identify discourses and practices, which were a challenge to the Campaign's success. While the Campaign was grateful for the opportunity to form an association with FFASA, it could be argued that the organisation shares discursive links with football culture. This of course is understandable, as the organization is comprised of football fans. However, it is worth considering whether their proposed activities will facilitate a change in sexual abuse within football culture. FFASA is a Sydney-based organisation, which amongst other initiatives encourages AFL and NRL players and supporters to wear purple armbands; purple being the internationally recognised colour for women's rights to demonstrate their support for female victims of sexual assault. It is useful to cite Canadian scholar Roberta Spark's political analysis of the White Ribbon Foundation (WRF) in relation to the work of FFASA. The WRF was launched in Canada in 1991 by the Men's Network for Change and was a response to the massacre of fourteen female engineering students at the *École Polytechnique* in Montreal in 1989. Spark argues that WRF

exonerates male brutality by assigning categories of 'good men' who wear the White Ribbon, and 'bad men' who beat, rape and murder women and children. ...[Spark] argues that those categories are false dichotomies because it is the ordinary man who beats his wife or molests his daughter in their private home, and it is the everyday male who sexually harasses employees or co-workers in the public sphere (Spark, 1994: 4).

Criminologist Jayne Mooney argues that the focus on the criminal and the belief that there are "good" and "bad" citizens demonstrates an explanation of violence based on positivism. Positivism is a school of philosophy that emerged in Austria and Germany during the 1920s and was concerned with the logical analysis of scientific knowledge. During the 1930s the leaders in positivist theory immigrated to the States, which may account for its influence today. The application of positivism to criminology focuses on the criminal instead of the crime.

Positivist approaches to..violence [against women] to a large extent mirror those of crime in general. Thus, the early work individualized the problem: it focused on the pathological and deviant characteristics of the male perpetrator and frequently also of the woman victim. Those involved in violent relationships are presented as certain 'types' who are different from 'normal' members of society. Their behaviour is presented as being caused by factors which reside within them (Mooney, 2000: 44).

Positivist explanations of abuse also include "biophysical factors such as alcohol" (Mooney, 2001: 45). A feminist critique of such analysis might view the emphasis on substance abuse as a means of deflecting emphasis away from the violence against women as a result of socially embedded patriarchal codes of control.

Somehow, we do not want to consider our own potential to abuse or even consider that some of the acts we engage in ...are violent or abusive. If we persist in believing that violence and abuse are the products of aberrations or sickness and therefore, believe ourselves to be well, then our acts cannot be hurtful or abusive (Mooney quoting Gelles and Cornell, 2001: 50).

Further

violence may, paradoxically, be seen within individual positivism to be functional to the maintenance of social order, in so far as the social order is patriarchal in structure. It can be regarded as a response by the man to 'readjust' the maladjusted woman (Mooney, 2000: 48).

Because violence is an acceptable means of social control, within our culture, it is not seen always seen as a matter of social injustice.

I can only conjecture how a positivist analysis might be applied to group sexual assault. With regard to the accusations of rape by football players, the media reported that the women who cast themselves as victims are actually predatory due to their initiated contact with the players (Carlyon and Davies, 2004:). In addition, journalists have defended players' behaviour, demonstrated by sports writer Wayne Bennett who thought that fining and banning NRL player Mark Gasnier for making a lewd phone call was overlooking the rights of football players:

Gasnier made a stupid mistake after a NSW bonding/drinking session which went on far too long. He's not the first, nor will he be the last, alcohol-affected young man to do something dumb and completely out of character (Bennett, 2004: 44).

Bennett's positivist view normalises sexist and abusive behaviour from drunken men. This exists in stark contrast with the fact that sexually provocative women are negatively labelled "predatory". Is the sexual encounter that becomes gang rape an

attempt by the men involved to recast the political dynamics? Are the football players concerned using rape as a means of punishing the woman for viewing the football player as a sexual object? Are the men reminding her through the act of rape that it is the role of men within patriarchy to in fact render the woman a sexual object and not visa versa?

It may be difficult for FFASA to persuade football teams to show support of the victims of sexual assault when no charges have been laid. How can football players be persuaded to object to what they believe is non-existent? The absence of charges was preceded by a strong sentiment of denial from managers of football teams. For example, Malcolm Noad, Chief Executive of the Canterbury Bulldogs, assured the media that he was “reasonably confident no players would be charged”(Honeysett et al, 2004: 3). It is disturbing to think that football club executives have so much faith in their status within the dominant culture that they can pre-empt the outcome of a police investigation. His confidence also demonstrates how positivism informs responses to rape allegations. The view that only “sick” or “bad” men rape women disavows that within Western culture violence against women is normal.

In addition to the way in which positivism may account for the denial of a continuum of abusive behaviours, commodification also limited the effectiveness of the Campaign. This was evident in what I understood to be the most challenging obstacle to the “*Women’s Bodies Are Not Playing Fields*” Campaign which was the Collective’s inability to take action against Jim Beam due to its sponsorship of the *National Campus Band Competition*. The Collective had contemplated instructing the Union to ban from the university campus both the sale of Jim Beam bourbon in the Union bar as well as any publicity that featured the Jim Beam logo. However, meetings between the Women’s Rights Area and the Union’s Marketing Officer and Activities Organiser resulted in the Collective being told that the ban of Jim Beam from campus would result in the cancellation of the Band Competition at UQ. Commodification, it appeared had stalemated the Campaign. Hence this issue deserves further examination.

David Kirk and Jim McKay define commodification as “the process by which objects and people become organised as things to be exchanged in a market”. McKay and

Kirby argue that whereas cultural activities were once assessed on intrinsic worth, they are now based on their marketability (McKay and Kirby, 1992: 10). For example, while it may be argued that the representation of women in sport is influenced by the perception that it is a masculine activity (Polley, 1998: 105), the commodification of its televisual representation may also determine the way in which women are portrayed. To achieve televised coverage that is entertaining, sport needs to take on spectacular proportions, prompting the need for pre-game concerts, guest commentators and cheerleaders, for example. The *Search for Miss Bronco* was a means of selecting cheerleaders for the club's rugby matches. Instead of organising private auditions, the management of Brisbane Broncos cleverly commodified the selection process, or more accurately, the Manly Eagles originally, in the form of a beauty competition that was run in conjunction with the rugby season.

It is clear that brand names have permeated the University of Queensland. For example, the Boeing Company not only has its Managing Director as a member of the University's Senate Committee but the Company also has naming rights to Professor Peter Lindsay who is the "Boeing Professor of Systems Engineering" at UQ. It is also interesting to compare the ways in which commodification impinges on student union activities. While UQ Union does not organise beauty contests (it did however, during the 1960s in conjunction with the national *Miss University* competition), many Union activities, such as the *National Campus Band Competition*, rely on the consumer ethic of instant gratification. Women may not be parading in bikinis but the career-seeking musician may be perceived as being exploited. The Union Activities Organiser, in justifying its use of Jim Beam sponsorship used exactly the same rhetoric as the Broncos; "We are providing an opportunity for those wanting a break in the industry". This identifies the moment of stalemate for the "*Women's Bodies Are Not Playing Fields*" Campaign. The Collective did not want to be responsible for preventing UQ students from participating in the *National Campus Band Competition*. In order for the Campaign to be effective it would have required the support of the organisers of the Band Competition. This seemed unlikely because their publicity campaign had already commenced.

The Collective's inability to continue its activism against Jim Beam demonstrates the extent to which commodification is endemic within student unions. New York

journalist John Seabrook argues that marketing is no longer separate from culture. It has become such an accepted part of life that no-one who inhabits the culture of Western late capitalism can imagine an alternative scenario. This became evident when the UQ Union's Marketing Officer told the Collective that marketing "is a normal part of life". This assertion was disconcerting for me because it appeared that marketing was not only perceived as part of culture but also a part of nature. Seabrook further asserts that "[t]he brand is the price of your admission to this subculture" (Seabrook, 1997: 163). Jim Beam's slogan for the *National Campus Band Competition* is "the label behind live music". The price of the Competition is the Jim Beam logo. From the representations of women promoted by Jim Beam, it could be argued that the Company is supporting the phallogocentric music subculture; a subculture, like football which also bears allegations of rape as evident in the testimonies of Courtney Love (Krenske and McKay, 2000: 1) and Tori Amos, for example. But due to Jim Beam's sponsorship of the Band Competition and its associated national exposure, there is no option to tease out this phallogocentric subcultural thread. The brand takes on the personality of a ruthless dictator. To refuse "him" is to refuse any participation in culture: no brand name, no "gig". This seems a cruel choice for any burgeoning youth with a conscience. Accepting sponsorship as a means of revenue raising is one thing but what happens when it becomes a non-negotiable straightjacket formula?

This predicament is rendered ironic when the Union's Activities Officer made a stance against the "pressure selling tactics" of The Wilderness Society on campus:

On 24th March this year, The Wilderness Society were officially banned by the University of Queensland for breaching stall policy as well as complaints by students to UQ Union for their pressure selling tactics (including offering to walk students to their nominated bank ATM's to get money out if they said they didn't have any funds on them at that point in time).....

This along with breaching the agreement to not have representatives of stalls "roving" on Market Day, 25 February has now resulted in the **Wilderness Society being banned for 1 year** to not have a stall at any Market Day, (2004 Mid-year Orientation or Orientation for 2005), nor be present on general University Market Days on Wednesdays of each week

[N]ot only are there proper channels for charities/societies & stall holders to come on to campus but it is very unfair for students to be pressured in this way (Humphries, email correspondence, 2004, emphasis from the original).

The Union is able to renounce bullying tactics from The Wilderness Society but chooses to do nothing to challenge the faceless bully in the form of a multinational corporation that insists on demeaning women.

In addition to Jim Beam's entrenchment in the student band scene, and the subsequent limiting of the "*Women's Bodies Are Not Playing Fields*" Campaign, there are other examples in which corporate sponsors have stifled university culture. One such example concerns Coca-Cola's exclusive sales rights at Kent State University in the States. The Amnesty International club on campus organised a boycott of its products because of its business dealings with a Nigerian dictator. Their student council denied the club funding for a human rights speaker from the Free Nigeria Movement on the basis that he would speak negatively about Coca Cola (Klein, 2001: 97). Similarly, in York University, Canada, an anti-smoking group was prohibited from passing out pamphlets at the University's tennis tournament, which was sponsored by a cigarette company (Klein, 1001: 97-8).

The "*Women's Bodies Are Not Playing Fields*" Campaign demonstrated the Australian rugby league teams' unwavering financial and cultural investment in stereotypical constructions of women. If Bonnie J. Dow's summary is correct, then regrettably little has changed with regard to media coverage of feminist protests against beauty contests. In addition the Campaign has revealed the way in which positivism may not be a useful discourse in illuminating the dynamics of violence against women. Perhaps what is the most disturbing is that commodification has such a strong hold over all subcultures that it is difficult to challenge football culture for accepting sponsorship from a company that also finances student unions. The only redemption at this point within late capitalism may be the relentless and critical analysis of union sponsorship practices in order to ensure a functional relationship between the cultural and financial departments within student unions. Moreover, we must give ourselves the option to refuse sponsorship instead of resigning ourselves to its necessity. It is also important to question implications of national sponsorship on the basis that it may belie localist concerns. Eighteenth century British MP William Pitt would not have experienced a culture of marketing. Nevertheless his words are an applicable reminder:

Necessity..is the plea for every infringement of human freedom. It is the argument of tyrants; it is the creed of slaves (Ralston Saul quoting William Pitt, 1997: 115).

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