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Beauty: What Makes Us Dream, What Haunts Us

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In recent years, feminist anthropologists have contributed to an interdisciplinary debate on beauty, which focuses on gendered desires, affectivity, and projects of self-making amid a global boom in beauty products and services. Drawing on the emergent field of critical beauty studies and ethnographic research on middle-class femininity in urban Turkey, this article explores the salience and potential of beauty as a feminist keyword in anthropology. It argues that despite men's increasing investments in beauty, beauty continues to be tied to "women" in existential ways. Moreover, while beauty still means work for women, this work is often outsourced to female migrant or racialized workers. Beauty norms and body images materialize in intimate encounters and particular settings. In Turkey, the recent extension of the urban beauty economy has created spaces of possibility and aesthetic desires for ordinary women to "take care of themselves." With its neoliberal emphasis on self-care, the urban beauty economy has fueled the emergence of new female subjectivities and affective desires. Finally, the article argues in favor of a relational feminist ethnography and pedagogy of beauty, which is conscious of what we define as beautiful, desirable, harmful, or healthy and what the implications are of doing so.

Keywords beauty work, body images, cosmetic surgery, femininity, feminist critique of beauty, Turkey

Far from being simply in the eyes of the beholder or skin deep, beauty is a global, consistently growing multibillion market and a long-standing keyword of feminist debate.[1] Even in its supposedly disembodied form—the Kantian "sublime"—it is strongly gendered (Wolff 2006). Thus, it is hardly surprising that, from its very beginning, the feminist debate about beauty was formulated as a critique: early feminist engagement with beauty emphasized the objectification of the female body in patriarchal consumer society and by the "gaze of the Other" (Young 1980); it analyzed a double standard of beauty, with those gendered female being taught to constantly self-monitor (Bartky 1988); and it focused on the pain and costs of beauty as a "myth" and as "work" for women that they were expected to complete in a "third shift" after their first shift as wage earners and their second shift as homemakers (Wolf [1991] 2002).

In anthropology, disparate sets of research—for example, on fashion (Hansen 2004; Luvaas and Eichler 2019), beauty salons (Black 2004; Furman 1997; Ossman 2002), and beauty pageants (Cohen, Wilk, and Stoltje 1996)—touch on questions of gendered beauty and beautification, but they have little unity. Moreover, and in contrast to the largely "negative hermeneutics" (Felski 2006,

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273) of the feminist debate of beauty, (classical) anthropology tended to emphasize the ritual, even magical, aspects of beauty and beautification (Taussig 2012, 44), as well as its multisensoriality and sociocultural embeddedness (Turner 2017). Nevertheless, it would be wrong to pit anthropological approaches to beauty against feminist ones: on the contrary, anthropological studies have recently contributed much to the emerging interdisciplinary field of critical beauty studies within a queer or postfeminist framework. They have analyzed gendered subjects' desires, body images, and practices of beautification as deeply affective projects of self-making, embedded in transnational yet also particular cultural, social, and mediated "beautyscapes" (Holliday et al. 2015).

In what follows, I illustrate the salience and potential of beauty as a feminist keyword within anthropology amid the ongoing boom of the increasingly global beauty market. Written manifesto-style, the following five postulates draw on feminist and anthropological debates on beauty, as well as my own ethnography of middle-class femininity in urban Turkey (Liebelt 2019, forthcoming). By doing so I wish to make an argument for a relational feminist ethnography and pedagogy of beauty, which is conscious of what we define as beautiful, desirable, harmful, or healthy and what the implications are of doing so.

Beauty Is Tied to Femininity in a Tragic Way

For those who wish to be recognized as "women," norms of outer appearance and standards of feminine beauty play a quasi-existential role. They do so, I argue, in a tragic way. While those gendered male increasingly also sculpt their bodies into shape, engaging ever more visibly in beauty (Barber 2006; Miller 2006), and mass-mediated body images affect all genders, they do so in different ways. Within feminist theory, much has been written on beauty as an external symbol of femininity that is intricately linked to female identity and the self (Bartky 1990). It is, however, important to note that "being, becoming, practising and doing femininity" (Skeggs 1997, 98) can mean very different things for those presenting as women, depending on their age, class, nationality, or racial categorization (see Craig 2006). That the making of femininity may involve not only beauty work but also collective struggle becomes clear when looking at the process from the perspective of working-class women (Skeggs 1997), Black women (Craig 2002, 2006; Tate 2009), or trans women. The example of trans women shows that femininity is not simply socially constructed but tied to particular material becomings, consumption choices, and somatic technologies that may facilitate a (visual, social) recognition as feminine. Thus, a growing number of trans women opt for facial feminization surgery, with some even preferring it to genital surgery (Plemons 2017). In their ethnography of the procedure, Eric Plemons reads facial feminization surgery as "the material result" (10) of a shift in the conceptualization of sex/gender norms, away from a model of binary distinctions and genital-centric definitions of sex toward a performative model that rests on the recognition of and neoliberal willingness to invest in femininity/masculinity. In *Queen for a Day*, Marcia Ochoa (2014) investigates how this willingness is commonly shared by trans sex workers and by beauty pageants, who perform distinctively Venezuelan types of "spectacular femininity."

In present-day Turkey, competing ideals of femininity are tied to different practices, identities, situated contexts, representations, and desires of what it means to be "properly" Muslim and feminine in an increasingly authoritarian political regime and conservative gender climate. It is the urban, cisgender, and secular middle-class female body that has long been the unmarked category in Turkey, against which other women have been measured and found wanting. In Istanbul's white- and

pink-collar service sectors, "employable femininity" (Dahl et al. 2018) has recently shifted toward a more sexualized look that relies on intensive beauty consumption, including facial fillers, injections, and cosmetic surgery. For individual women, investments in beauty are often a balancing act, one that may be required within competitive job and marriage markets, indulged in for pleasure, but also one possibly risky due to beauty's sexual connotation in a conservative gender climate. Whether rendered as sexual or cultural outsiders, consciously Muslim or secular, poorer or upper class, within an authoritarian political climate and amid the privatization of health and media and a normalization of violence against women (Kandiyoti 2016), *all* persons rendered female are subject to public scrutiny and risk sanctions for violating gendered norms of respectability by the way they look or behave in public. At the very least, as noted by Dahl and Sundén (2018, 273-74), "the default mode of ideal femininity is failure," with this failure resulting from not just gendered but intersectional oppression as well as temporal "layering." Hence, beauty is tied to femininity in a tragic way: as a site of struggle and a somatechnological orientation toward an ultimately unattainable ideal.

Beauty Means Work for Women, but This Work Is Often Outsourced to Female Migrant or Racialized Workers

In recent years, scholars have described processes of commercialization and professionalization in intimate services that are closely tied to a postcolonial, gendered, and racialized global economy. In the Global North, beauty service work, along with other intimate and body-centered services such as caring for children or the elderly, housework, and sex, is increasingly outsourced to paid service workers, typically migrant women or those from the lower social strata of society (Boris and Parreñas 2010; Kang 2010). In her book on Asian-owned nail salons in New York City, Milliann Kang (2010) criticizes the feminist take on beauty work as something women are forced to engage in for ignoring "the many women who do not do their own beauty work. Instead, they pass off sizable portions of [it] onto the shoulders of less-privileged women" (15). Whereas Korean immigrants in New York City are channeled into the niche of the Asian nail salon, Brazilian women in Berlin are channeled into body hair removal by "waxing" (Lidola 2015) and young British Pakistani women in the United Kingdom seek employment in growing "Asian" eyebrow-shaping or threading businesses (Clarke 2018). Beauty service work in the Global North has thus come to resemble a "professional ghetto" for marginalized and racialized women, which reproduces through immigrant networks and self-selection but is also shaped by labor market restrictions and processes of racialization.

In Istanbul, beauty service work has long offered employment for those women whose exceptional life circumstances, including migration, divorce, or the death of the family's male breadwinner, forced them to take up employment. Nevertheless, women's life circumstances upon entering the sector are diverse, and to reduce them to the economic alone fails to explain the multiplicity of their reasons for entry. Thus, the sector relies on workers who work long, strenuous shifts for hardly more than the minimum wage because they hope to rise in the hierarchy of the salon and eventually become beauty entrepreneurs themselves. In today's popular wisdom, beauty service work is no longer just a niche of temporary employment for poor, uneducated migrant women but a viable profession for beauty school graduates in the context of therapeutic care and medicalized wellness. While until recently employment in beauty was considered a niche for rural-urban migrant women, in particular from the Kurdish regions with little education in Turkey, amid a rise in nationalism, beauty therapists are now heralded as female entrepreneurs and the aesthetic vanguard of a "beautifying Turkey" (Liebelt, forthcoming). In popular urban neighborhoods, beauty

service workers sometimes function as harbingers of the contemporary urban (beauty) economy and teach women what it means to become not only beautiful but modern, self-reliant, and urbane. Encouraging women to go beyond routine procedures such as body hair removal, eyebrow plucking, and the covering of gray hair and have regular facial treatments, more fancy or permanent makeup, extensions or Brazilian blowouts, beauty service workers actively craft urbane femininities and give individual women the feeling of being part of a mundane world of beauty.

Beauty Norms and Body Images Circulate Globally but Materialize in Particular Settings

This point is crucial even if it may not be directly linked to gender, because for too long the feminist critique of beauty has neglected (local) ramifications of race and class, starting from the position of "a racially unmarked, implicitly heterosexual woman of an unspecified class" (Craig 2006, 162).

The global beauty market has often been described as dominated by Western or "Caucasian" ideals of beauty promulgated by the mass media and multinational players. From such a perspective, beauty practices such as skin bleaching or toning, hair straightening, or so-called "ethnic plastic surgery"—for example, Asian Americans' "double eyelid surgery" (Kaw 1993)—are attempts to mimic hegemonic Western or "Caucasian" beauty ideals. Despite this, beauty markets remain highly fragmented, such that for global beauty entrepreneurs it is the "persistence of local differences, not the homogenization of global preferences, [that] is most striking" (Jones 2010, 3). Ethnographies have shown how young people in villages and small towns across the world dream of partaking in the "global" world of beauty by shaping their bodies and consuming beauty products and services with different results and significations (e.g., Taussig 2012; Waters 2016). But they have also shown that, in some settings, norms of gendered beauty seem diametrically opposed to and seemingly unaffected by the global beauty industry (Popenoe 2004; Turner 2017).

It is important to note that in the quest for beauty, modernity, or enhancement, fantastic body images are not *determined* by Western or "global" images (Jafar and de Casanova 2013). Instead, different styles of bodily appearance and their alteration are tied to historically produced and socially situated affective imaginations of multiple modernities and urbanity. For example, whereas an earlier literature singled out double-eyelid surgery as a form of ethnic plastic surgery aimed at westernization, more recent literature has described that within South Korean surgery practice, the procedure is not commonly associated with Western, white, or "Caucasian" aesthetics (Holliday and Elfving-Hwang 2012; Leem 2017). Holliday and Elfving-Hwang (2012, 59) show that South Koreans' surgery decisions are the outcome of negotiating "multiple discourses," including local significations and resistance to Japanese colonial influences. Moreover, they argue that the notion of the "western body" as it circulates in South Korea "has little in common with *actual* western women's bodies" (58) but is linked to an already "mixed" globalized body image.

While an earlier beauty industry was centered in London, Paris, and New York, recent ethnographies have analyzed new regional, if not global, industrial hubs of beauty in Rio de Janeiro (Edmonds 2007, 2010; Jarrín 2017), Tehran (Kaivanara 2020), Beijing (Hua 2013), and Seoul (Holliday and Elfving-Hwang 2012; Leem 2017). Thus, in urban Brazil cosmetic surgery thrives in a self-proclaimed "postracial" society in an encounter "between global media and medicine and a distinctive logic of aesthetics and race" (Edmonds 2007, 374). This logic celebrates *mestizaje*, or national "mixedness," in a self-portrayal of Brazil as a beautiful nation—though *whiteness* remains an unmarked ideal. Rather than creating room for women to maneuver by making it possible to conform

to one of many different models of gendered appearance, the ideal of "mixedness" places additional pressures on women to conform to the demands of femininity by "harmonizing" their bodily features through surgery (Jarrín 2017, 134). Similar to Rio de Janeiro, where northeasterners hope to become upwardly mobile by "getting rid of the noses that mark them as rural migrants" (Jarrín 2017, 135), there is an imagined national geography of beauty in the Turkish metropolis of Istanbul, where the large influx of domestic migrants from the Black Sea and southeastern Anatolia has led to surgical forms of social distinction, as well as investments in beauty for success in the professional or marital markets. Female breasts and noses, as well as their surgical modification, are imbued with specific meanings in the city, with large breasts, for example, connoting both erotic femininity and rural backwardness, depending on who has them and at what point in their life course.

Aesthetic techniques may travel globally; however, to understand their embeddedness in particular value regimes and representations, it is crucial to analyze their multiple and changing situated meanings. In her nuanced reading of the politics of skin bleaching, also known as shade shifting, in the Black Atlantic, Shirley Tate (2016) shows that beauty practices may be understood as active critiques of global inequalities even when they are clearly embedded in them. Thus, she rejects interpretations of skin bleaching as "colonial" forms of mimicry, arguing instead for a decolonial perspective on whiteness and bleaching. She observes that, whether intended or not, beauty practices such as bleaching (or nose surgery, for that matter) contribute to the *making visible* of global inequalities.

The Engagement in Beauty Brings Forth New Female Subjectivities and Affective Desires

In the early 1990s, Naomi Wolf's feminist classic *The Beauty Myth* ([1991] 2002) triggered a heated debate and indeed opened a long-term gulf between feminist approaches that focused on women's creativity and agency in choosing particular beauty practices, on the one hand, and approaches that emphasized the dominating and oppressive aspects of beauty as a "myth" for women, on the other. Among Wolf's most vociferous critics was Kathy Davis (2003), who claimed that "feminists have tended to view such women [those who engage in aesthetic body modification] as the duped and manipulated victims of the feminine beauty culture" (80). Rather than structural oppression, (post)feminist thought in the early 2000s linked beauty with female self-expression, self-care, and active investment in sexual identity. Indeed, as Rebecca Popenoe (2004, 187-97) remarks in her ethnography on the fattening of Arab girls in Niger, the desire and sexuality often inherent in beauty practices are surprisingly absent from many studies on the topic. This has clearly changed with recent works thinking beauty through affect theory and exploring the role of beauty in accumulating "erotic capital" (Hakim 2011), "aesthetic capital" in neoliberal times (Elias, Gill, and Scharff 2016), or "affective capital" in Brazil (Jarrín 2017). From such a perspective, beauty is not primarily a disciplinary process regulated by patriarchal force but an affective force that may function to displace or disturb existing power hierarchies through the creation of hyperfeminine bodies. For example, Rebecca Coleman and Mónica Figueroa (2010) analyze beauty as an affective aesthetic feeling indulged in by British girls and Mexican women that is intricately tied to their conceptualization of the future "as a more hopeful temporality" (361).

In Istanbul, Turkey's largest city, the aesthetically enhanced bodies of celebrities, including influencers on social media, create spaces of possibility and aesthetic desires for women "taking care of themselves." In the past two decades, the consumption of beauty products and services,

once confined to the upper echelons of society, has become more easily available and acceptable throughout the city. This extension makes visible a changing moral economy of beauty: from a shameful sexual engagement with one's own body to a rightful desire that all women have, across the common (rhetorical) divide between cosmopolitan urban elites of the city center and provincial urban immigrants in the outer districts. Within a privatized and consumer-oriented medical sector, increasingly informed and self-conscious female patients undertake treatments not only to improve their health but to "enhance" their bodies or invest in "aesthetic wellness." Fed by the neoliberal discourse of "self-making," this extension includes older women: contrary to the earlier conception that, "once you give birth to a child" and especially "once you become a granny," there is no need for beauty and bodily self-care, anti-aging and rejuvenation products and treatments now form a major segment of the Turkish beauty and cosmetics market. Whereas cultural conceptions of aging commonly emphasize social accomplishment and increasing authority for all genders, aging "well" has become a common desire and major preoccupation of postmenopausal women in Turkey.

These processes have given rise to new female subjectivities: spending time in salons and doctors' offices requires shifting one's priorities from a self-sacrificing household and family caregiver to a more self-conscious role model of bodily self-care, a process that needs to be negotiated carefully with husbands and other close relatives. When interlocutors in popular and conservative urban neighborhoods tended to downplay their potentially disruptive, erotic, and glamorous desires for beauty, their bodily investments and daring imaginations of themselves with larger breasts, fuller lips, or fancy tattoos, which sometimes materialized in the form of digitally altered selfies, spoke of these exactly. Some of these clearly challenged norms of hegemonic femininity even when, paradoxically, they seemed to merely fulfill them.

What Makes Us Dream, What Haunts Us: Toward a Relational Feminist Ethnography and Pedagogy of Beauty

Empirically grounded research, especially the kind of ethnographic fieldwork that goes beyond interviewing to engage in participant observation, is embodied and involves questions of subjectification, affectivity, and sensuality that turn the bodies not only of those who are researched but also of the researcher into sites of mutual reflection. In feminist anthropology, there is a long-standing methodological debate on how to reconcile ethnographic research with a feminist outlook. Feminist scholars have long rejected positivist claims of an "objective" science and proposed dialogical or relational forms of intersubjectivity based on mutual understanding and empathy (e.g., Stacey 1988).

Confronted with interlocutors who invest immense efforts to fulfill or exceed standards of beauty, anthropologists doing research on beauty often share the experience of being regarded as unsophisticated and more or less consciously violating norms of beauty, femininity, or masculinity. Throughout my own research, interlocutors, especially beauty therapists, commonly reacted to my bodily appearance, often encouraging me to "do more," given my tolerance of gray hair, body hair, and more generally unfeminine looks when compared to Turkish standards. Observing beauty treatments and occasionally being treated myself triggered conversations as well as remarks on my bodily foreignness, which were often insightful and telling but sometimes also irritating. In these conversations, it became obvious that we are all affected by the forceful images of beauty. They make us dream and they haunt us, even if we consider ourselves unaffected by or opposed to them.

This creates insights but also vulnerabilities and blindnesses. The point is that even if we are positioned differently within the global world of beauty, we're in this together: images of beauty and

the normative regimes of racism, ableism, sexism, ageism, classism, etc. affect the ways we look and act and how we represent and feel about ourselves. Apart from an analysis of the political economy of beauty, this requires a relational ethnography committed to embodied and multisensorial ways of knowing. Adapting elements of autoethnography may help reflect not only on our implication in relations of power but also on the transitioning from "who I was to who I am" (Ettore 2017, 3). Not least, we also need an ethnographically informed ethical debate and, indeed, a feminist pedagogy of beauty, which is conscious of what we define as beautiful, desirable, harmful, or healthy and what the implications are of doing so. The task of a feminist anthropological approach to beauty, then, is, as Spivak (1993, 284) puts it, to "engage in a persistent critique of what one cannot not want."

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