

ANGELA B.V. McCracken

THE BEAUTY TRADE

Youth, Gender, and Fashion Globalization



The Beauty Trade

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By Angela B. V. McCracken

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The Beauty Trade

Introduction: The Beauty Trade

Everybody line up! The show is about to start.

Places! The show is about to start.

You have to show a look, have a look, or give a look.

Faces.

Beautiful.

No one *ugly* allowed (laughing) . . .

Fashion is the art, designers are the gods.

Models play the part of angels in the dark.

Which one of you would ever dare to go against that beauty is a trade and everyone is paid?

Fashionista, how do you look? (refrain)

New York, London, Paris, Milan, Tokyo, I think it's in Japan, Asia, Malaysia,
Las Vegas to play, LA, if you pay my way . . . (refrain)

Who are you wearing?

Sean John, Calvin Klein, Donna Karan's fashion line.

Valentino, YSL, Ferragamo and Chanel.

Halston, Gucci, Fiorucci, don't forget my Pucci.

Fendi and Armani, God, I miss Gianni.

Kenneth Cole, Michael Kors, Mr. Ford I can't afford.

D&G and BCBG, looking good is never easy.

Alexandre Herchcovitch, Naomi Campbell—such a bitch!

I wanna be *delgada* [tr: thin] to fit into my Prada.

Oscar de la Renta.

Louis Vuitton.

Imitation of Christ, beauty has a price . . .

—Jimmy James, *Fashionista*, 2006

Jimmy James's single *Fashionista* is a club hit in 2006 and 2007 in Mexico's second-largest metropolitan area, Guadalajara, Jalisco, and while it makes my feminist red flags go up, a crowd of youth move rhythmically to its repetitive beat at almost every nightclub I visit, sweat to it in exercise classes, shop as it plays in fashion stores, blast it out of their car stereos, and dance to it at disc-jockeyed celebrations such as weddings, first communions, and *fiestas de quince años*. There is a small set, maybe ten, of electronic pop hits that show up on almost every disc jockey's list, and this is one of them.

Similar in beat and style to all the rest, one might question whether it has any social significance at all in this Spanish-speaking country. Except for two words—*fashionista* meaning fashionable woman or girl in several languages, and *delgada*, meaning “thin” in Spanish—James's call to his audience to make itself fashionably beautiful in face, clothing, body shape, and poise, and at a hefty price, is sung in English. The song is one of a long series of global pop hits that are played repeatedly one year and infrequently thereafter. The tune and its lyrics might reasonably be considered inconsequential, social-scientifically-speaking, in urban Mexico.

On the other hand, some would include *Fashionista* among a list of cultural forms, like Miss Universe beauty pageants and *Baywatch*, that illustrate how the fashion and pop industries replicate manufactured, commercial aesthetic ideals globally, contributing to the dispersion, or even imperialism, of a global, universal, Eurocentric beauty ideal (Moskalenko 1996; Li 1998; Altman 2002; Cudd 2005). In this view, globalization is creating a universal beauty ideal based on Western ideals of thinness, Whiteness, Anglo-American facial features, and consumption that erodes local culture to the detriment of women. A new global beauty ideal enslaves women to consumption, poor self-image, and dangerous dieting. Both beauty and globalization are categories of analysis that are often attributed powers of relentless domination and imperialism over women's bodies (Wolf 1991), and non-Western cultures (Moskalenko 1996). Local discussions of Western beauty imperialism are often used to decry globalization for corrupting women, and lead to a backlash of discourses of control and religious piety for women (Ong 2010: 183-199).

In actuality, the social significance of *Fashionista*, as well as the industry and fashionistas that populate its verse, is more complicated. Discourses on fashion and beauty like *Fashionista*, and the institutions and images that it cites, are neither irrelevant nor omnipotent to cultural globalization. Rather, the song is part of a global political economy of beauty wherein production, marketing, distribution, and consumption are intertwined with the construction of gendered bodies, youth cultures, social identification, the blurring of distinction between public and private spheres, and the generation of fashion entrepreneurialism. Perhaps most surprisingly, the

global political economy of beauty is responsible for the spread of diversity, not uniformity, in beauty cultures. The global political economy of beauty is not defined or even significantly characterized by the monolithic spread of Anglo-American beauty ideals corrupting youth's innocence. To the contrary, the globalization of beauty is a phenomenon propelled by youth, eager for belonging and originality, using every mechanism at their disposal to connect with something bigger. The global economy of beauty is not a monolithic imposition on women and young people, but a phenomenon generated by young people, mostly women, laboring in, teaching, and consuming beauty. At its heart, the global economy of beauty is both shaped by and shaping intimate practices and imaginations, leading to unexpected outcomes and transformations, as opposed to an externally imposed globalization of Western commercial beauty ideals and practices.

Fashionista itself hints at the global economy to which I refer, as it reveals a complex beauty industry: beauty as a trade, fashion cosmopolitanism, global branding, the imperatives to be considered beautiful, fashionable, and thin, and historically new forms of sexual dancing. The song hints at a global economy of beauty that includes the highly valued: designers, models, celebrities, art, originality, brands, consumers, cities, thinness, and investment in beauty with the exhortations that "Looking good is never easy" and "beauty has a price." Ugliness is also present, though the "ugly" are explicitly excluded from the song's fantastic images of club dancing, shopping, modeling, designing, traveling, and selling; the ugly are not allowed. So, too, are the lesser-valued aspects of the global industry of beauty excluded from the song: manufacturing, copying, brand piracy, direct-selling, second-hand reselling, the out-of-fashion, the counter-cultural, the fat. Yet together both the highly valued and the lesser valued participants and processes in the beauty and fashion industries make up the *politics*¹ of the global beauty industry.

The politics of the global beauty economy, however, are not defined by straightforward winners and losers. To the contrary, innovative youth, women entrepreneurs, and multinational companies all enter into the trade with something to gain: social identification or differentiation, extra income, and even fun. For example, young women seek a sense of confidence, belonging, and advantage in finding employment and romantic partners by learning to put on cosmetics in accordance with fashion trends. This point of view on the global economy and globalization is therefore an antidote to the widespread assumptions about inexorable globalization causing cultural obliteration and the corruption of femininity, in the tradition of several feminist critiques of globalization studies (Ong 2010; Freeman 2000, 2001, 2010; Bergeron 2001; True 2003).

And yet, the benefits of participation in the global economy of beauty are highly uneven. The power relations evident in its construction are not defined by those with power and those without, but rather in the privileges associated with the identities, institutions, and ideologies that it rewards. Thus the global economy of beauty, through its intimate involvement in the production of gendered subjects, social belonging and differentiation, and capitalist entrepreneurialism, is primarily political because it is a product of, and reproduces, gender, race, class, and national power. Gender² is particularly relevant to the global political economy of beauty because beautification and fashion are central to the construction of gendered bodies, so the global beauty industries are playing an important role in constructing gender difference and, by extension, gendered³ power. As a popular method of social identification and differentiation, youth participation in the global beauty economy creates both fashion trends and their globalization, reproducing gendered and racial divisions.

At the same time, as it is a product of youth cultural practices and highly fluid across geographic boundaries, the global economy of beauty is susceptible to disruptions of hierarchies of privilege. For example, rather than spreading a Western Anglo-American ideal of thinness and beauty that wipes out local beauty cultures, the global beauty economy is actually responsible for more colorful, multicultural ideals of beauty in Mexico than have been known in recent history. Additionally, the scope and forms of commercialization of beauty products and services has facilitated the widespread involvement of women in capitalist entrepreneurialism. Finally, the enormity of beauty commercialization and women's participation in it is contributing to large-scale blurring of boundaries between public and private spheres, especially for women.

The developments in the global economy of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries that are commonly referred to as globalization⁴ or global restructuring provide several reasons to inquire into how global flows of goods, information, and ideas about beauty circulate and how gendered bodies are constructed under transforming social, cultural, economic, and technological conditions. Beauty products, images, and ideas have become a significant part of the global economy; beauty product distribution is global, reaching even regions with little infrastructure; mass media and product advertising are increasingly translated and broadcast across languages; migrants increasingly cross borders. News media frequently report the global dispersion of skin lighteners, plastic surgery procedures, and body ideals. In academic scholarship, the global spread of beauty products, media, and Anglo-American standards of beauty in non-Western countries are frequently cited as examples of cultural globalization and

cosmopolitanism.⁵ And yet, despite repeated reference, the globalization of beauty products, practices, and ideas is rarely explored as an issue of global political and economic importance. An area of intense media coverage, and a frequent point of reference for the argument that the world is shrinking, culturally speaking, the global beauty economy is fascinating to many, but remains little understood.

Why should the globalization of fashion be taken seriously for its political economy? Because understanding the political economy of the global beauty industry can inform us both about privilege and power in the beauty industries, and about gender and intimacy in the global political economy. Feminist scholarship on beauty practices has long argued that beauty products, ideals, and practices are fraught with the politics of gender, race, and social hierarchy. A political economy perspective adds to the understanding of material and ideological patterns of privilege within the beauty industries. This is important because women historically are the principal consumers, tastemakers, producers, and often-time entrepreneurs in the beauty trade (Jones 2010; Peiss 1998), but are frequently seen as exploited ideologically (Bartky 1990) and materially through their participation in beautification and its related industry (Wolf 1991). This presents an interesting question: are women or men benefiting from or being exploited by the beauty industry? Is it empowering or undermining women's agency? A political economy perspective, by focusing on power in the industry, can help to unravel the apparent paradox between women's high-volume participation in and supposed exploitation by the beauty economies.

In addition, a political economy perspective is useful for understanding how privilege in the beauty industries is tied up with the global political economy. Due to the importance of beauty products, images and ideas to the global political economy, there is now a need to understand the politics of beauty in the context of a process of economic, political, and cultural globalization. As beauty ideals and practices are contextually dependent on cultural norms and expectations, globalization has changed the context within which beauty cultures and politics operate. The globalization of fashion has introduced foreign practices and products into local beauty cultures. The arguments about Western beauty imperialism generally come from observations of this globalization. The consideration of a global political economy of beauty is therefore an opportunity to explore the feminist argument that the politics of the market economy cannot be understood in isolation from reproductive work (Benería 1982; Mies 1986; Elson 1991; Bakker 1994; Barker 2005) and cultural economies (Ong 2010; Peterson 2003, 2009), as well as the claims that there is a new beauty imperialism. By taking a global political perspective on the beauty trade, this

book exposes how the process of beautification and youth social identification through fashion are driving forces of globalization, and how beauty globalization is shaping and transforming gender norms, consumption, and labor in Mexico.

Feminist scholars have already begun to explore the political economy of globalizing beauty industries. Feminist scholarship on labor in the fashion and apparel industries exposes how Northern women's increased fashion consumption contributes to demand for Southern women's labor in the apparel industry (Collins 2003; Enloe 2004). Shop-floor analyses explore how export-oriented fashion industries exploit existing and create new gender and racial hierarchies (Salzinger 2003; Elias 2004). Seager (2003) illustrates the heavy concentration of fashion and cosmetics consumption in the North, even as it proliferates in less developed regions. True (2000) argues that the spread of Western beauty media to Eastern Europe has had contradictory consequences, introducing both Western gendered notions of beauty consumption and feminist discourses of empowerment. Others have begun to explore how the changing context of globalization intersects with historical beauty ideals and practices, creating new ideals of beauty tied up with nationalism, cosmopolitan ideals, and gendered hierarchies (Cohen et al. 1996; Niessen and Brydon 1998; Adrian 2003). These insights into the globalizing beauty industries reveal that beauty production and consumption are closely tied to intersections of global, national, local, gendered, and other axes of privilege and power.

Not only is political economy important to the study of power in the beauty industry; the beauty industries are also key to understanding the global political economy. Grasping how power and privilege operate in the beauty industry is especially helpful in understanding and illustrating how gender, race, and identity are integral to the global political economy. Consider the potential consequences to factories, advertising, chemical laboratories, chemical plants, regulators, lobbyists, television, public relations, magazines, publishing, salons, beauty schools, beauty services, distributors, retail sales, and direct sales if the \$274.8 billion US dollar global cosmetics and toiletries industry were to collapse. Or consider the collapse of the \$1.1 trillion USD clothing and footwear industry (Euromonitor 2008, data reflects 2006). A shock of this magnitude would ripple throughout the global economy, with unknowable consequences. But, one might say, so would the collapse of the untold-billions global industry in illegal narcotics, or the multibillion dollar economy in soft drinks. What distinguishes a hypothetical collapse in the beauty industry, however, is its unique set of politics that are distinctly shaped by gender, race, nation, competing identities, and visions of modernity. Without things like hair gel and eye shadow and butt-lifting, the embodied expressions of gender dichotomies, and

the almost all-female workforce, the beauty industries would be substantially deflated. The global cosmetics industry is unique due to the unique politics of the global political economy of beauty. That is, the configurations of gender, race, and national power in the global economy of beauty necessitate attention to the gender, race, social, and national politics implicated in its success.

In order to understand the political economy of beauty in relation to global flows, this book asks how beauty images, products, and ideals circulate in the industry. It also asks: Who benefits from the beauty industry? How do adolescents experience and act on the globalizing beauty industry? Are youths' norms of beauty and gender shifting in ways that signify changes in gender, race, or national identity constructions?

Furthermore, in focusing on beauty images, products, and ideals, the book addresses the widespread but virtually unexplored assumption that the global beauty industry is a monolithic, Western-centric trade that is eliminating local beauty cultures. In order to evaluate this popular assumption, the book traces beauty product and image consumption, inquiring as to how products and images come into use. Tracing the circulation of beauty products, images, and ideas in Guadalajara begins with the popular practice of the *quince años*, a coming-of-age celebration for fifteen-year-old girls, within which the process of beautification and the presentation of the beautiful Mexican *señorita* are the most important features.

From the vantage point of urban Mexico, I further ask: Do beauty products and images enter local markets from Anglo-American centers of power, creating a homogenous global beauty culture? How do beauty products come to be adopted into people's intimate beautification practices? Does beauty product consumption include an explicit or implicit consumption of "global beauty?"

By posing the classic feminist question of who benefits from the beauty industry, I begin to explore privilege and power, again interrogating the assumption that local cultures or local gender norms are obliterated by global beauty industries. In this spirit, I ask whether global beauty norms and practices reinscribe colonial race and gender relations, for example through image and consumption, instead of force and occupation? Is the beauty industry empowering or exploitative? Is agency exercised in beauty? At the same time, these questions address beauty industry claims that women benefit from their involvement in the beauty trade. These questions address marketing claims that beauty makes life better, the Mexican government-mandated disclaimer on all cosmetic and hygiene ads that "health is beauty" (*Salud es Belleza*), or claims by direct-selling cosmetics firms that they offer women a path to economic empowerment.

The questions of how beauty products come to be adopted into people's intimate beautification practices and whether their consumption includes an explicit or implicit consumption of "global beauty" are guided by the puzzle of how local consumption relates to globalized production, marketing, and distribution in the beauty industries. Of additional interest is whether and how the use of beauty products, images, and ideas are linked to ideas of global beauty, and whether that has identifiable significance for the construction of subjects, gender norms, social hierarchies, and ultimately the global political economy of beauty.

PLAN OF THE BOOK

Chapter one provides a framework for exploring the global political economy of beauty through gender lenses.⁶ Weaving together the concept of beautification as a social and identity-forming process; feminist global political economy; methods of ethnographic inquiry; and the popular practice of the *quince años*, it establishes both the empirical and theoretical tools that readers will need to begin to understand the global political economy of beauty and how it is shaped by and shapes beautification on the ground.

Chapter two explores in more depth the *quince años* and the beautiful *quinceañera*. Commonly compared to a Western-style wedding without a groom, the *quince años* is a Latin American coming-of-age tradition that marks a girl's passage to adolescence. It bears resemblance to commercial weddings in many ways, and also includes a growing list of symbolic rituals, exchanges, and theater that establish social relations within and among the church, families, social networks, and generations.

Chapter two argues that the process of beautification leading up to the *quince* and the presentation of the *quinceañera* to her audience have replaced the church service and meal as the most important part of the tradition. By means of the beautification process and entering into heterosexual relationships, formalized in the *quince años* pageant, girls become *señoritas*, or "misses." Through a months-long beautification process, the girl's beauty makeover has become the most significant coming-of-age ritual. While the *quince* is not universally practiced in Mexico, the makeover is. As a result, the *quince* as practiced at the beginning of the twenty-first century, more than a religious rite of passage, is a special case of a now-universal rite of passage: the beauty makeover.

Chapter three develops the argument that the production of feminine beauty is intimately linked to globalization, both shaping and being shaped by the global political economy of beauty. Using the beautification rituals of

the *quinceañera* as a window on the economy of beauty in Guadalajara, the chapter explores how that process is tied to the global economy through reproductive, productive, and virtual economies. Through the specific lenses of the *quinceañera* ball gown, dance performance in the celebration, and employment of cosmetics, this chapter explores how the politics of the global economy of feminine beauty is articulated on the ground, and how beautification on the ground is shaped by global economies. The reproductive, productive, and virtual categories demonstrate the diversity of dimensions to the *quince*, as well as the usefulness of the categories themselves. The global political economy of beauty has both diversifying and reinforcing effects on traditional gendered norms in the *quince años*. Increasing individualization and commercialization of the tradition enables and encourages varied approaches to the celebration of the fifteen-year milestone. And yet the channels of production and reproduction in the celebration continue to reinforce religious and patriarchal family-based norms of hierarchy. The beautification of the *quinceañera* also sheds light on the gendered processes of globalization. The globalization of the beautifying industries is successful in large part due to gendered production, reproduction, and consumption.

Chapter four further builds on the argument that beauty economies are global, extending out into the role the reproductive economy plays in the circulation of beauty products and in the construction of youth's beauty practices and norms. The chapter further asks which identities, ideologies, and institutions are privileged in the production of the beautiful *quinceañera*, and how youth respond to the reproductive economy of beauty.

The key role of the reproductive economy in the *quince años* is as a major conduit for the social reproduction of gendered beauty norms. It contributes to the reproduction of social hierarchies that privilege masculinities; institutions such as family, culture, and religion; and ideologies of patriarchy, racism, capital commercialization, and individual consumption.

Families, particularly mothers and close female relatives, play an important role in guiding *quinceañeras* in the production of the *quince años*. The families attempt to imbue the tradition with cultural, social, and religious meaning and values. Celebrants contest and negotiate with their families in an attempt to make their *quince* special and unique. Youths' pursuit of originality propels commercialization, individualization, and changes in beautification norms in the *quince* market. Negotiations among families lead to the reproduction of some norms and values, and to the transformation of others. Notably, both male and female youth are adopting increasingly varied and personalized tastes and diverging from norms of modesty and circumspection.