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### Fleshly beauty

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## **Fleshly beauty: an anthropological perspective**

Alexander Edmonds  
University of Edinburgh

### **Introduction**

This chapter presents an anthropological perspective on the beauty of the human body. I engage with studies of beauty in the social sciences and humanities, including my own ethnographic fieldwork in Brazil. This work might broadly be called “social constructionist” in that it has demonstrated enormous variation in beauty norms. It often entails critique since such norms can inscribe social inequalities. I also take up this volume’s invitation, however, to “go beyond” the relativist approach that has dominated much discussion of aesthetics. My aim is to explore the generative capacity of beauty to alter social life in ways that are not entirely predicted by cultural symbolism or other inequalities. I ask: what affects and wider social effects are set in motion by beauty?

As a heuristic (a “device for discovery”), I suggest the term *fleshly beauty*. The connotations of *fleshly* – as opposed to the more abstract *bodily* -- direct attention to aspects of beauty I want to highlight here. A morally charged word in the Judeo-Christian tradition, *fleshly* refers to the substance of the body, but also to appetites and desires. It invokes an opposition to the spiritual or rational, and implies the body has agency “of its own.” More archaically, but also useful here, *fleshly* refers to bonds of blood and sex between people. *Fleshly beauty* is thus in part an *inherited* property of the body, linking generations. The flesh also draws sexual partners together, who cleave to each other and in the biblical phrase “shall be in one flesh” -- another property of beauty relevant here.

The term *fleshly beauty* suggests the important relationships between beauty and strong affects, such as desire, fantasy, arousal, shaking knees, among others. Philosopher Elaine Scarry (2001) points out that in the classical world, a glimpse of a beautiful person imperilled the observer, rather than the observed, suggesting the risks of beauty were quite different to contemporary ones. In the *Phaedrus* Plato describes a man who after beholding a beautiful youth begins to spin, shudder, shiver, and sweat. Of course, the perception of a beautiful person does not always create such affects. Due to the amazing plasticity of human sexuality, the responses beauty provokes may be sublimated, transferred to an object, expressed through art, etc. But one salient aspect of the beauty of the person is that it has a special power to provoke erotic affects, though not all beauty does, and not all such affects involve beauty.

I argue it is important to consider these relationships between beauty and erotic affect, though philosophy and social science have often neglected them. Anthropological philosophy in the eighteenth century proposed that beauty must not prompt egoistic behaviour or be too closely linked to practical activity. I use the term *fleshly beauty* to signal a break from this philosophical argument and a focus on “interested” responses to beauty. Twentieth century social sciences also largely passed over the erotic dimensions of beauty. These fields broke with the Kantian project of investigating aesthetics as a universal human faculty of judgment, and instead embedded aesthetics within variable cultural contexts.

However, the focus of social sciences on symbolism and inequalities also led to neglect of beauty's capacity to create affects -- such as attraction or emulation -- which can contravene utilitarian logics or social classifications.

In this chapter I investigate beauty as a domain of the human that gives rise to powerful affects and important social effects. This generative capacity of beauty is rooted in the flesh and cannot be entirely explained by other systems of status and social differentiation, such as pedigree, age, ethnicity, or wealth. My aim is to develop a practice perspective that sheds light not just on aesthetic norms, but on what beauty means and does in everyday social life.

## **Beauty in anthropological philosophy and social anthropology**

Kant did not devote much space to the beauty of *people*, as opposed to nature or art, but what he did write illustrates the problem that such beauty poses for the philosophy of aesthetics. Like Freud would later, he unsurprisingly writes from the perspective of the male gaze on feminine beauty, but he also foreshadows Freud's (1953) understanding of beauty as sublimated sexual impulses: "This complete fascination [with the "form and features of the fair sex"] is really overlaid upon the sex instinct." (Kant 2003: 86) Kant does not elaborate on this point and seems only to concede it so that he can introduce distance between sexuality, which entails interested, egoistic behaviour, and real beauty, which cannot.

To this end he makes a distinction between "very pretty persons completely without moral feeling" (88), who appeal only to "course natures," and those who are truly "beautiful." The latter category of women have a "moral expression" in their appearance, which can only be recognised by a "fine taste." Kant also introduces another aesthetic hierarchy, not of taste, but of race, when he discusses the desire of Turks, Arabs and Persians to "beautify their races" through the "fine blood of Circassian and Georgian maidens" (91). His comments reproduce conventional wisdom about women, class and "blood," but they also reflect larger philosophical goals in his investigation of aesthetics.

For Kant the pleasure derived from beauty does not produce a desire to do anything in particular but rather is merely contemplative. His distinction between true beauty animated by moral feeling, and mere prettiness, which provokes a "course" sexual response, preserves a notion of aesthetic judgment as "disinterested contemplation." Kant's emphasis on the importance of disinterest in aesthetic perception was, of course, enormously influential in philosophy, but was also taken up by later racial anthropology. The German fin-de-siècle anthropologist Carl Heinrich Stratz argued that only Nordic women could be truly beautiful, because they alone did not arouse mundane sexual interest (Hau 2003: 83). Both Kant, and the later, explicitly racial anthropology, could be said to remove beauty from the ordinary realm of sexual interest in order to explore a "purified" and universal faculty of aesthetic judgment.

In twentieth century social anthropology discussion of beauty focused more on cultural artefacts and performance than on the beauty of the human body. Ethnographies of body modification, though, make many passing references to beauty practices. These works could be said to be social constructionist in that they show how body modification expresses cultural symbolism. For example, among the Sudanese Nuba, scarification signals a

woman's passage through puberty and motherhood. This analytic focus contributed to the ethical project of Boasian cultural relativism. In the accounts of travellers the body modification of non-Europeans was a potent mark of savagery. Thus, showing how even the most disfiguring practices (such as neck elongation, foot binding etc.) have a "meaning" makes them seem rational, or familiarly human, not savage.

In fact earlier philosophical discussion of aesthetics had also rationalized savage beauty. Hegel (2008: 171) found the body alterations of non-Europeans to be "barbarous, tasteless, and entirely disfiguring," yet he also conceded there was a "rational ground" to such practices. They stemmed from a "human need" to alter "natural form," thus opening the door to a humanising perspective on the beauty practices of others. Levi-Strauss also rationalized body modification in that he related it to a near universal "horror of nature" (1973[1956]). Caduveo Indian facial paintings "confer human dignity upon the individual; they ensure the transition from nature to culture, from 'stupid beast' to civilised man" (1973[1955]). Levi-Strauss' interest in body modification was, however, subservient to his aim of investigating abstract sets of relationships present across ritual and mythological systems (1983).

The main thrust, however, of ethnographic accounts of body modification was to focus on the ritual context that made a particular practice meaningful. These analyses often entailed a relativizing critique that delinked body modification from racial and aesthetic hierarchies. This was an important critique to make given the fact that physical anthropology and eugenics buttressed its racial science with appeals to aesthetic taste. For example, German anthropologist Blumenbach chose the term *Caucasian* in 1795 to denote the highest evolutionary stage of man precisely because of conventional wisdom, also expressed by his contemporary Kant, that peoples from the Caucasus region were exceptionally beautiful (Gould 1981).<sup>1</sup> The intellectual blind spot, however, of social anthropology's treatment was that it tended to downplay the aesthetic, and even more so, erotic properties of the flesh.

An exception, one of the only full-length anthropological monographs on a beauty norm, is Rebecca Popenoe's (2004) excellent work on the Azawagh Arabs in Niger. This group practices "fattening" --feeding milk and porridge to adolescent girls until they become not so much plump as "obese" in Western terms, though Popenoe's point is that this medical and stigmatising label is far from Azawagh understandings of fat. The book could also be said to be a constructionist account of beauty ideals in that it analyses how they "partake of cultural values that operate in several domains" (189), such as marriage endogamy and symbolism about health.

Popenoe's (2004) work in my reading seems ambiguous when discussing the relationships between beauty and sexuality. The topic does not receive much attention until her last chapter, in which she concludes that "ultimately" fatness is a "sexualised aesthetic" or in her informants' words: "a fat woman is hot. A thin woman is like a man" (190). The term "sexualised" implies the flesh is passive, *made* sexual by society. Yet, whatever traditions fatness expresses and which make it self-evidently beautiful and good, fleshly beauty also arouses erotic affects that ultimately can threaten the Azawagh cultural emphasis on controlling sexuality (Ch. 9). Sexual intercourse with unmarried women is prohibited, Popenoe notes, yet a man might steal into the fattening huts to

“please himself between a woman’s thighs” (191). Not all women “achieve” or maintain the fat ideal, and there is much instability in sexual relationships. Divorce and remarriage are frequent and extra-marital sex is the norm. Since women’s social status and wealth is highly dependent on having a husband and sons, they are under considerable pressure to maintain the bodily “heat” and sexual attractiveness that will “bind men to them, sexually and thereby socially” (183).

This point suggests that individual differences in attractiveness and the fleshly *capacity* to fatten can have major social consequences, provoking jealousy, competition, or inappropriate unions. While it’s clear that society plays a large role in shaping the Azawagh beauty norm, Popenoe’s work raises questions about what effects attractiveness (or ugliness) in a person have on the people around them. Can the beauty of the body always be read as referring to something else, or does it generate its own effects and affects that contradict cultural logics – a question I return to below.

Critique is implicit in Popenoe’s work since the Azawagh aesthetic norm is so radically different from the Western “tyranny of slenderness” (Chernin 1981). It is more explicit, of course, in feminist accounts of Western beauty norms and practices as a “major articulation of capitalist patriarchy” (Bartky 1990, Morgan 1991). Beauty practices create body alienation and forms of self-surveillance that unequally affect women (Bordo 1993) and support the financial interests of male-dominated beauty and fashion industries as well as male control of the workplace (Wolf 1991). Other critiques examine how beauty practices and norms reinforce racial or colour hierarchies (e.g. Kaw 1993, Monk 2014). Such critique -- and in the next section I discuss my own ethnographic work on in Brazil as an example of it -- could also be said to be constructionist in that it shows that beauty norms express variable power dynamics.

One problem with both the anthropological and feminist critique is that the body seems to be passive in these accounts, pliable clay moulded in the image of society. Beauty reveals something about patriarchy and racism, but so too do many aspects of social life, raising the question of whether there are any specific qualities to beauty? Does the flesh also impose some limits on the capacity of society (or history, discourse, etc.) to inscribe it? Do aesthetic judgments of, and responses to, *particular individuals* alter social life in ways not entirely determined by other hierarchies and cultural symbolism?

### **Constructions of beauty and race in Brazil**

To discuss these questions I introduce a more detailed example from my ethnographic fieldwork on beauty and plastic surgery in Brazil (Edmonds 2007, 2010, 2013). Brazil has experienced rapid growth in cosmetic surgery since the 1990s and in 2013 surpassed the U.S. as the country with the most cosmetic procedures performed in the world. Media and a celebrity-centred pop culture have aggressively promoted and marketed plastic surgery, or simply *plástica* as it is known. The provision of free or subsidised cosmetic procedures in some public hospitals, as well as credit plans, have also made the practice more accessible to the working class and *emergentes*, those struggling to “emerge” into the middle classes. I’ve argued that surgery has also been normalised and integrated in mainstream women’s reproductive health care for the middle

classes, fuelling aspirational desires to obtain a modern medical good (2010, 2013). Thus, patients from across Brazil's class and colour spectrums have limited access to cosmetic surgery, making the practice a good site for studying tensions and aspirations around beauty.

Brazil's aesthetic norms and practices are entangled with its construction of race. In the early twentieth century scholars, artists, and eventually the state rejected racial anthropology and whitening ideologies and began to embrace racial mixture as a defining feature of the nation (Schwarcz 1999, Fry 2000). Mixture, *mestiçagem*, became an emblem of "racial democracy." It was also aestheticized and eroticised, in highly gendered ways, for example in the work of Gilberto Freyre (1986) who rejected "Aryan" beauty norms and practices (Vianna 1999). Modernists embraced a vision of "the people," particularly women, as exhibiting kaleidoscopic beauty, endless variation in skin hue and phenotypic permutations deriving from centuries of mixing amongst Europeans, Africans and "Indians."

The affirmation of mixture is also present in much contemporary beauty talk and beauty work. Unlike in much of Asia, the ideal is not very pale skin (which is sometimes considered a liability in a tropical climate); rather, a large range of skin hues is seen as potentially beautiful. Cosmetic surgeons also praised the effects of European-African mixing on the female body, referencing a more erotic national beauty ideal defined by round hips, thighs and buttocks, contrasted with narrow waists, and relatively small breasts (Hanchard 1994). In pursuit of this ideal surgeons redistribute fat from the waist to the hips, or perform breast reduction surgery, which in Brazil sometimes has not a functional rationale (reducing back pain) but a purely cosmetic one.

However, beauty norms and practices also reveal the lingering presence of whitening ideologies and contradictions in the ideal of racial democracy. Elites, such as former president Cardoso, claim mixed ancestry with the expression *um pé na cozinha*, "one foot in the kitchen" – a reference to a black ancestor, a woman slave or servant. This half-joke is perhaps intended to link the speaker to "the people" via reference to the primordial scene in the national imaginary of sex between a white master and darker servant. But many women have their own stories of "one foot in the kitchen," which reflect ambivalence about the legacy of mixture. The sun is said to "ruin" pale skin while weight gain is problem thought to disproportionately affect darker Brazilians. Some women said mischievously that they had inherited a good *bunda* (butt) from a darker relative. Others referred to a nose "given" by a black ancestor that needed surgical "correction." Surgeons and patients praised some forms of mixture, but said others were "ugly," and saw surgery as a means of "harmonising" combinations of traits.

The embrace of mixture also coexists with global thinner and whiter beauty norms for women, and more recently, a "fad" for breast implants that has brought complaints of "cultural imperialism." These global norms tend to be more dominant in highbrow fashion and elite media domains. Some working class women, in contrast, criticize imported "fashions," insisting that "thin thighs are *feia* (ugly)." On the other hand, in mainstream media and everyday evaluations of appearance the dominant ideal is *relatively* European facial features and hair, or a *whitish* appearance, as you can say in Portuguese with terms such as *brancinha*. Those considered "too black" encounter aesthetic

stigma and widespread racial discrimination (Telles 2004, Winddance Twine 1998).

To counter discrimination black activists have made the embrace of a new aesthetic of “black beauty” a central component of racial pride (Fry 2002, Edmonds 2010). They have urged Brazilians to reject colour terms and instead adopt a bi-polar racial system classifying groups into “whites” and “blacks.” This identity work is often accompanied by beauty work, for example, replacing hair straightening with “black styles.” Yet while the black movement has been politically influential, older aesthetic norms and practices remain highly popular and self-evidently beautiful to many consumers. While elites affirmed mixture as a trait of the people with aesthetic and cultural value, and a later grassroots movement promoted black aesthetics, the older ideal of whitening (Skidmore 1974) persists in much beauty talk and beauty work. Thus, beauty norms could be said to express a cultural logic of race with deep roots in colonial society as well as more recent aspirations and anxieties.

### **The generative capacity of beauty**

So far this analysis has fallen broadly within the social constructionism of social anthropology and feminist critique. I now turn to the generative aspects of fleshly beauty I have not yet addressed. My aim is to analyze tensions between, on the one hand, beauty – as a fleshly property of the person– and on the other hand, the logics of social classification.

Paul Ricoeur (1970) points out the importance of a “hermeneutics of suspicion” in social sciences and humanities to investigate the hidden structures underlying social life, be they economic, political or symbolic. He points out, though, that this mode of analysis is sometimes complemented by a “hermeneutics of retrieval.” This kind of interpretive work entails crossing barriers of culture, class, or history in order to see social life from an actor-centred perspective. As I began analysing my fieldwork material my focus was on the veiled social and historical processes that constructed beauty norms. I was left, though, with a sense of dissatisfaction. I had understood something, I thought, about how beauty practices and norms reflect contradictions in Brazilian health care and in its constructions of race and gender. But was there something that Brazil might teach about beauty?

Moving into a “retrieval” mode I began to think more about the inherited aspects of attractiveness, which were often the object of everyday commentary. Conversations about appearance suggested a kind of aesthetic lottery of birth. The inheritance of beauty, in this view, is a highly random and unpredictable matter. Some traits were particularly valued, such as straight hair. Kin often praised *beleza* (beauty) in a family member, but might also worry about its consequences. Some siblings were said to “come out” with markedly different “colours” or combinations of facial features and hair, which could lead to embarrassing “scenes,” for example, when a mother with a lighter daughter is mistaken for her nanny.

Brazil’s colour hierarchies reflect racial domination; however, they are not entirely congruent with aesthetic hierarchies. Just as some poorer people are said to be more beautiful than richer ones, so too some darker people are said to be more beautiful than lighter people. I realized, again in a “retrieval”

mode, that beauty has a hereditary logic of its own, one which is not reducible to other social hierarchies, and which mattered to my informants.

While the inheritance of beauty is unfair in that it rewards people without regard to their merit, I argue that the relationship between beauty and social hierarchy is more complex than it might appear at first. Scarry (2001) points out that a major contemporary critique of beauty is that it entails hierarchies of taste and judgment that conflict with egalitarian ideals. Scarry, in fact, argues *against* this critique of beauty, maintaining instead that beauty *is* compatible with “justice.” Scarry has, in my view, correctly identified the modern (or really quite recent) ethical ground of beauty, though I disagree with her defence of beauty, at least when it applies to persons.

Beauty is indeed highly *undemocratic*. Sociologists and economists have shown that “lookism” can have social and emotional consequences comparable to racism (though in multi-ethnic societies these two forms of discrimination often overlap) (Hammermesh 2011, Harper 2000, Anderson et al 2010). The benefits of beauty should not be exaggerated and indeed women judged “too attractive” can also be punished for this attribute (Wolf 1991). Still, attractive men and women on average enjoy a wide range of benefits -- in school, work, sex and romantic love, that is, in three major domains of the modern self. These benefits are unfair in that they do not reward moral qualities of the person. However, the very unfairness of the inheritance of beauty also endows it with a capacity to confer benefits to those excluded from other systems of privilege.

Returning to the perspective of my informants it seemed that nature exhibited to them a kind of black humour – or a “just injustice” – in sometimes passing over those most “deserving” and sometimes gracing those denied the privileges of birth or wealth. The inheritance of beauty can be said to operate as a “double negative”: it allocates power unfairly, but can disturb other unfair hierarchies. While beauty is unfair in that it appears to be “awarded” to the morally undeserving, it can also grant power to those excluded from other systems of privilege based in wealth, pedigree, or education.

For many of the poorer Brazilians I knew part of the appeal of beauty – either inherited or enhanced -- was that it seemed to offer a means to, almost magically, bypass the myriad obstacles they otherwise face. In Brazil many dreams of social mobility center on the body. For boys the odds of becoming a professional footballer are remote indeed, yet this dream remains remarkably widespread in part because it represents a form of success that does not need money or wealth to attain. It seems to lie within the means of those without means. Perhaps the nearest feminine counterpart to these hyper-masculine icons are Brazil’s *artistas* (celebrities): actresses, models and dancers. Talent may or may not be perceived to contribute to their success, but nearly all are known for the perfection of their bodily *beleza* (beauty), discussed in detail by the Brazilian media. Their dreamlike, almost overnight attainment of great wealth and glamour seems to arouse the widespread dream of becoming such an artista. Modelling talent searches get enormous turnout across the country, while some NGOs, such as “Lens of Dreams” in City of God favela, give teenagers lessons in modeling. Fashion models hardly seem like good “role models” for disadvantaged youth in part because their success does not require hard work, but rare genetic endowment. Yet perhaps the very fact that bodily beauty seems



to be inherited “blindly” – or partly independently of other status markers -- may explain its democratic appeal.

Modelling of course often simply remains a *sonho*, dream, and in urban peripheries many women concentrate their energies on finding an alternative to what was practically the default job for their mothers and grandmothers: domestic service (Goldenberg 2000). The most accessible escape route from this social destiny is work in the expanding informal and service economies. Beauty and youth are less explicit job requirements here, yet women job seekers said these traits are often informal hiring criteria in the fashionable boutiques, bars and hotels that surround many of Rio’s favelas. These bodily qualities can become all the more salient for poorer women as they can help offset the disadvantages of relative darkness, low education, or a favela address.

The significance of attractiveness for relationships is more complex, but here too beauty is sometimes seen as a resource that generates important social effects. In some Rio favelas women joke about pulling a *golpe de bau*, a treasure chest coup, or seduction of a wealthier “crown” through a combination of cunning and physical attractiveness (Goldstein 2003). In an environment where men are often expected to have multiple relationships, and women’s income is unpredictable, attracting and keeping a male partner is often seen as an essential means to accessing diverse resources. Attractiveness often is given a more explicit value in sex work. For example, *travesti* (transvestite) sex workers measure precisely how much an improvement to their bodies (achieved with female contraceptives and silicone injections) translates into money earned on the street (Kulick 1998). Yet, beauty is also valued in a wider range of relationships beyond sex-for-money exchanges, and can be converted into resources that are not only material (Bernstein 2007). Brazil has a vibrant youth culture -- often body centred and cutting across class distinctions -- that is well connected to a booming tourism sector. In its cosmopolitan cities youth of all classes often have opportunities to mingle with the middle class, and sexual and romantic encounters, both gay and straight, bring not only material benefits but also new experiences, travel, and cultural resources (Parker 1999). The relatively open sexual and youth cultures of Brazil also contribute to a highly competitive “market” of relationships in which body work is undertaken in order to “compete.” Beauty is not seen as a luxury but as something essential, which “does put food on the table,” as one working class woman put it, reversing an old Brazilian proverb, *Beauty does not put food on the table*.

The patients who sought cosmetic surgery in public or charity hospitals often expected to get immediate, material benefits from their operations: earning more income, forming relationships, “entering TV” (as an actress or model). Other patients wanted surgery to protect themselves from vulnerability in a competitive, uncertain world of work and relationships. Such motives disconcerted surgeons (at least the more ethically minded ones) and psychologists who work at clinics to screen out problem patients, and who believe the only good reason for cosmetic surgery is to raise *auto-estima*, self-esteem. Some women “learned” this psychotherapeutic rationale through their interactions at the clinic, while others rejected it, seeing surgery as a means to “get somewhere in society.” These patients did not see beauty as a condition of the body that prompts disinterested contemplation, but on the contrary various *interested* responses, not all of them desired.

My argument is not that beauty is empowerment, as others have indeed argued. Catherine Hakim (2010), for example, provocatively claims that women's "erotic capital" is so valuable because demand for it is high: men want sex more than women do, on average; since beauty contributes to erotic capital, it confers power (see Green 2013 for a critique). Yet, many of the benefits promised by the inheritance or enhancement of beauty fail to materialise. Beauty is interlinked with youth and inherently transient. In contrast, cultural capital, such as education, tends to accrue value over time. The value of many aspects of beauty (such as relative lightness) is determined by power structures. Moreover, it is not always clear who owns whatever benefits *do* flow from bodily or sexual capital, Ashley Mears (2014, 2011) argues. Many of the profits that derive from women's beauty in fashion and entertainment industries are appropriated by men. Beneath its glittering surface, there is indeed much about beauty that is "suspicious."

Thus, perhaps the actor centred perspective I have tried to "retrieve" here is simply a form of false consciousness. Political organisation or self-development might bring more lasting rewards than attractiveness. However, I believe that my informants also had insight into the role of attractiveness in the forms of exchange mandated and incited in consumer capitalism. Beauty is not only a "superficial" or "skin deep" attribute of the person. It also generates effects in work markets and in the unpredictable field of love and sex – effects that may take on even more importance for those unable to gain other forms of social recognition. The capacity of the attractive person to redirect the gaze of society at her or him can also seem to reveal the contradictions in the liberal ideology that work and education are viable means of social mobility for all. Some elite women I knew expressed bathos at what they called the "vanity of their maids" -- the care their servants took with their nails or even their attainment of *plástica*. Such "vanity" though also testifies to the desire among working class women to negate the indignities of domestic service and, more generally, the invisibility of poverty. Beauty norms do not only inscribe inequality; rather the fleshly capacities of their bodies seem to provide limited escape from the injustices that are everywhere around them and of which they are well aware.

### **Beyond aesthetic relativism?**

In this chapter I intended to respond to the volume's invitation to think "beyond a purely aesthetic and relativist stance." But has my analysis actually done so? I argued that racialised and other status hierarchies are not congruent with aesthetic hierarchies. This lack of congruency is important because the perception and response to fleshly beauty creates affects and effects not entirely predicted by other forms of social domination and symbolism.

One objection to my argument, however, is that such affects and effects are themselves constructed, and therefore my analysis has not "gone beyond" the relativist stance. In one sense, but only a trivial one I believe, this objection is true. All phenomena are socially constructed in the sense that they can only be represented through symbolic means. There is no beauty "in itself" apart from what is perceived by a social being. But this notion of social constructionism is as reductive as the biologism that says all human action is caused by chemistry.

A constructionist logic can be applied recursively to itself to show that its account of the world-as-constructed is also constructed, and hence a partial view. As Donna Haraway (1988) points out, seeing *makes* a world according to the capacities of a particular eye (human, fly, robot, etc.). Like any form of seeing, constructionism leaves some things in -- and others out. As anthropologists we may never entirely be free, as it were, of the worlds we construct in our scholarship; yet we can investigate our intellectual blind spots, glimpse them obliquely.

In this chapter I asked: in what ways are the inheritance of beauty and responses to it *not* determined by social hierarchy and cultural meaning? Social constructionism grants agency to the abstraction of Society (or History, Discourse, Biopower, etc.). We might also ask how this agency becomes entangled with -- and sometimes limited by -- other agencies, even if they are unknowable "in themselves." One example of such agency is fleshly beauty, which can be perceived through effects it generates that are not rigidly determined by other forms of social organisation.

The beauty of youth, male and female, redirects the gaze and interest of society, away from the wisdom, spiritual powers, and social capital of their elders. It could be said to impose some limits on the ability of social structures to reproduce themselves in the next generation. A woman may (illicitly or not) choose the beautiful male youth over the elder man her family or social group prefer for his wealth or status. Such "fatal attractions" may be more or less rare depending on social structure and individual daring, but they nevertheless have the potential to subvert the "rules" of marriage and alliance. The social effects of beauty can, in some situations, limit the powers of elders, injecting unpredictable dynamism to generational relationships and social reproduction.

If Nature is democratic in its relative blindness to status markers when it allocates beauty, it is even more democratic in its indifference to such markers when it takes beauty away through physical decline. Aging, like beauty, is also a social construction. Yet aging entails the diminishment of physical properties of the body, including beauty, strength, and sexual and reproductive powers. This biological process can stand in tension with social aging: the power and wealth that generally accrue to higher status people as they pass through the life course can be undermined by their physical decline (another "just injustice" of beauty).

For this reason perhaps *plástica* provokes much black humour and social aspiration in Brazil. When surgery "fails," it is seen as a futile effort to counter biological levelling, exposing the fact that despite all her disadvantages the poor *moça*, "girl," will still be more beautiful than the rich *senhora*. Such failures reinforce a feeling that youth, beauty, and physicality are precious resources, available to all, and not the privileges -- unlike so much else in life -- of the wealthy and high born. On the other hand, when *plástica* succeeds, it is seen to pile on unfairness to the unfairness of social hierarchy, allowing the rich to seemingly free themselves from the depredations of Nature. Some working class women vehemently assert their "right" to *plástica*, as if the prospect that they would be denied the medical escape from aging that has become routine among the middle class would be a final, unbearable injustice.

Of course it's also true that beauty norms are to some extent culturally embedded, and cannot be easily disembedded. The Azawagh beauty norm is an example. Yet fleshly beauty also "travels" remarkably well. In globalised

markets of sexual relationships – such as romance tourism, online apps, and “arranged” transnational marriages, etc. – attractiveness is a primary currency, one that has an exchangeable and mobile value. Even aside from such phenomena of consumer capitalism, historically beauty has been legible across great social gulfs. It can spark the cross-class “fatal attractions” mentioned by Bourdieu, undermine political alliances, or cross ethnic divides. The capacity of a beautiful person to cause happy, or often tragic, events is a major trope in Western myth and art (from the Trojan wars to Georgian novels and Brazilian *telenovelas*). Sociologically, though, we have paid much less attention to the role of beauty in the attraction and bonding which are, after all, necessary for social life.

Anthropology has documented variable patterns in marriage proscription and prescription. Some societies proscribe marriage with a cross cousin, or prescribe marriage with a parallel cousin. Others have inverse rules. Numerous structures also govern the “exchange of women,” putting groups into relationships as “wife givers” and “wife takers” (e.g. Black 1972). These models, however, rarely map onto actual marriage practices. There are multiple reasons for this, but one neglected one is that attraction and courtship do not always serve the needs of social reproduction or political alliance.

Ethnographers are in a good position to study the effects that beauty has on partner choice, the social conflicts that arise as a result, and the limits imposed on the powers of elders to determine youth relationships. For example, in societies where men continue to marry new wives over the course of their lives, the beauty of the male youth may give him the capacity to compete with an elder who has more status, trade relationships, or resources. The random inheritance of beauty is a parallel system for allocating power and status that sometimes reinforces, and sometimes interferes with, proscribed and prescribed partner choice.

Beauty is only one element in courtship and attraction (amongst other qualities such as wealth, wit, artistic virtuosity, etc.) Scholars, though, seem to have minimised its role in partner choice, perhaps due to European spiritualised notions of both beauty and romantic love. Consider these examples of modern cultural common sense that distinguish between “inner” and “outer beauty”: *Beauty is skin deep or the eyes are beautiful because they are a window onto the soul*. Both these statements reflect Kantian distinctions between a coarser physical and a more spiritual beauty of the person, one that is animated by “moral feeling.” Fleshly beauty seems to be too superficial or transient a basis for lasting love and partnership. And it probably is. Yet anthropologists and historians emphasise that the social expectation that romantic love *should* accompany marriage or life long partnership is far from universal (Jankowiak 1995, 2008). It was not historically an expectation in Brazil. The model of enduring romantic love between married “partners” is still seen as foreign or unfamiliar in some regions, and significantly denoted with the English word *lovi*, instead of the Portuguese *amor* (Rebhun 1999).

What seems to be more widespread than “lovi” in the ethnographic and historical record is an affect that resembles more the English folk category of the “crush,” a transitory state of infatuation. This swoon-like affect blends intrusive thoughts of the beloved, overwhelming feelings of desire, and often perceptions of his or her radiant beauty (Harris 1995). It implies feedback relationships

amongst attraction, erotic pleasure, and perceptions of attractiveness, with each of these affects reinforcing each other. Beauty could be said to be “generative” in the sense that it is often integral to experiences of attraction and has the potential to overcome status differences or other barriers – such as the disgust provoked by too close contact with the flesh of another person – that might otherwise keep partners apart.

I have discussed some of the hitherto neglected ways that social science and humanities can contribute to understanding fleshly beauty. Much scholarship has demonstrated an impressive variability in aesthetic norms and practices as well as their risks, such as body alienation, bodily harm, and social discrimination. However, I have proposed that we also study the responses to attractiveness in everyday life.

Such responses might seem uninteresting or irrelevant for social theory, perhaps because they are seen as merely private. Yet, investigating them focuses attention on what is specific to beauty as a domain of social life. The inheritance of physical beauty can bypass other systems for allocating status, or provoke relationships that do not follow cultural logics of proscribed or prescribed partner choice. Aesthetic perceptions also have a capacity to be shared across ethnic, class and cultural boundaries, perhaps especially in the globalised markets of consumer capitalism. Beauty can generate strong affects, pleasant or unpleasant, and set in motion new relationships. Ethnographers are in a good position to shed light on these effects and contribute a richer, practice-oriented perspective on the role of beauty in social life.

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<sup>1</sup> We earlier saw how Stratz asserted the superiority of Nordic beauty, a claim that influential Brazilian anthropologist Gilberto Freyre (who had been a student of Boas) vigorously opposed, not only by countering that racial mixture was aesthetically superior to Aryan purity, but also by attacking the very notion of aesthetics as disinterested contemplation (like European Primitivist avant-gardes and other “decadents” he argued that beauty was inextricably entangled with eroticism).