

The Biopower of Beauty: Humanitarian Imperialisms and Global Feminisms in an Age of Terror

The first haunting images transmitted from Taliban-occupied Afghanistan . . . showed us, if anything, that clothes and appearance are not trivial. . . . Where vanity had been eradicated, so had women's voices; where reverence for beauty had been denied, so had education; and where vision-obscuring burkhas were forced upon women, there was no hope for a humane future.

—Francesca Stanfill (2002, 154)

When you save someone, you imply that you are saving her from something. You are also saving her *to* something. What violences are entailed in this transformation, and what presumptions are being made about the superiority of that to which you are saving her?

—Lila Abu-Lughod (2002, 788–89)

Between talking-head interviews and documentary footage, the transitions in Liz Mermin's 2004 film *The Beauty Academy of Kabul* linger on smiling, happy women laughing as they maneuver around chairs and mirrors in a brightly lit salon. In these transitions, the absence of discernible or translated dialogue underscores at once the ordinariness of the scene (this could happen anywhere) as well as its extraordinary pleasure (but it is happening in Afghanistan). These moments thus perform a repetition with a difference. They testify that a dedication to beauty might nurture a horizontal relationship among women brought together as a

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community of care. The details that distinguish this scene from any other are its geography and its history. With the aid of their U.S. benefactors (the story goes), the Afghan cosmeticians at this salon look after the welfare of the beautiful and the good, those precious, life-affirming things suppressed by Taliban rule. And yet such detail is made to confirm the universality of a familiar theme: that beauty acts as a salve to the soul and that the beauty salon operates as an oasis amid the ugliness of war.

Acting on the hope that beauty can engender a new world order, in 2003 the new nongovernmental organization (NGO) Beauty without Borders opened the Kabul Beauty School, administered by North American and European fashion industry and nonprofit professionals. Mary McMackin, a long-time aid worker who had been ejected from Afghanistan by the Taliban, teamed up with Terri Grauel, the hairstylist she met while sitting for a *Vogue* profile, to discuss what they might do to help the reconstruction effort. Aware of the clandestine salons operating under the Taliban's censorious gaze, McMackin proposed that they open a beauty school and convinced the women's ministry in Kabul to lease the necessary infrastructure to the Body and Soul Wellness Program (the project's original moniker). *Vogue's* iconic editor-in-chief Anna Wintour was instrumental during the initial rally. Industry stalwarts followed her example, donating cash as well as shipments of makeup and hair products, training videos, and curricula. American hairdressers and cosmetologists, Afghan-born and otherwise, joined the volunteer faculty, inspired that their skills might prove useful, even lifesaving, to Afghan women. "This isn't just about providing lipstick," project director Patricia O'Connor repeated in interviews. "It's about restoring self-esteem and independence."¹

With beauty thus recruited to go to war, I am concerned with the biopower of beauty in the geopolitical contexts of neoliberalism and human rights discourses at the turn of the millennium. Here, my guiding questions emerge in the ever-widening field of theoretical and structural antagonisms between transnational feminist theories on the one hand and liberal and neoliberal political philosophies and institutional exercises on the other, as programs of empowerment are increasingly inseparable from deployments of structural and other forms of dominance. The ideas in which we traffic—including that of beauty, which is so often aligned with truth, justice, freedom, and empowerment—must be interrogated not as

¹ As noted in a September 30, 2003, synopsis of Jill Colgan's series of reports on the ABC News Foreign Correspondent Web site, <http://www.abc.net.au/foreign/stories/s953439.htm>.

unambiguous values but as transactional categories that are necessarily implicated and negotiated in relation to national and transnational contests of meaning and power. In this essay, I ask that we extend our imagination to think about the distribution of beauty and the attachment to it within and between an empire's subjects and citizens as a part of imperial statecraft. That is, I ask how hearts and minds are recruited through the appeal to beauty and how not only state but also feminist invocations of women's rights as human rights are made meaningful through such an appeal and all that it is imagined to promise.

What is happening when the promise of beauty to educate and to liberate is elicited simultaneously with the urge to go to war and to destroy? How are women in general, and the burqa-clad bodies of Afghan women in particular (an image that condenses and organizes knowledge about Afghanistan and its forms of gender), produced as a population through the traffic in beauty? What notions of beauty engender a measure but also a medium of personhood and rights? How can this chain of associations, which produces beauty as a prerequisite, a pathway, to good governance be explained? Deliberately alluding to the transnational organization Médecins sans Frontières (Doctors without Borders), Beauty without Borders sutures disparate but connected forms of liberal and neoliberal power with the production of a subject not only in relation to rearticulations of feminism and civil society but also in relation to empire, through an assemblage of new strategies and technologies, deeply embedded notions of beauty and virtue, and democratic linkages of self to world. It is beauty's entanglement with humanitarian imperialisms and global feminisms that requires us to expand what it could mean to foster life in the long shadow of neoliberalism and war.

Beauty matters

In my invocation of the difficult and unwieldy concept of beauty, I focus on discourses of beauty that traverse philosophical inquiry as well as realms of culture and commerce, which are not, as we shall see, necessarily distinct.² In doing so, my attention focuses on beauty's force, especially in relation to the moral and to an idea of the human, on three registers. The first register is the promise of beauty, a central quality quite apart from any particular representation of beauty. This promise is necessarily future inflected, and if, as Jacques Derrida argues, "a promise must promise to be kept, that is, not to remain 'spiritual' or 'abstract,' but to produce

² This section's title borrows from the collection *Beauty Matters* (Brand 2000).

events, new effective forms of action, practice, organization, and so forth” (1994, 112), then what are the events, actions, et cetera, that beauty holds out as a possibility? In this regard beauty is especially imagined as a redemptive promise, such that the act of naming someone or something as beautiful can draw that person or thing—once an outcast, perhaps—into a relation with others, with the world. This promise points to a second register, the distribution of beauty. Distribution must imply beauty’s absence or negation by the presence of ugliness, as well as by the cartographic and classificatory practices that let us know where beauty and ugliness can each be found. Also implicated are beauty’s epistemic grounds, through which distribution informs knowledge formation, and vice versa, hypostatizing the areas in which we are told we might find beauty or ugliness and imparting lessons about persons with differentiated access to the beautiful or the ugly that are symptomatic of other politics—temporal distance, moral distinction, or brute force, for instance. Finally, I focus on a third register, beauty as pragmatic, as a series of techniques brought to bear on the production of selves and sentiments that often invoke the renewed distribution of beauty’s promise for a more fair future. The attachment to beauty thus implicates tacit but also suppressed knowledges, stirring emotions, trivial details, and ostensibly minor events in the macropolitics of sex and gender, race and nation, bringing together grand gestures and everyday governance under beauty’s domain.

Since Dave Hickey’s provocation, “the vernacular of beauty, in its democratic appeal, remains a potent instrument for change in this civilization” (2009, 30), beauty has come to theoretical prominence, especially among feminist scholars hoping to complicate earlier censures of the beautiful as suspicious, trivial, or submissive. And indeed, recent scholarship on the ethical and moral force of beauty, arguing that an attachment to beauty might be imagined as a means of connecting individuals to the world, inadvertently demonstrates how beauty’s force can become a medium through which forms of power connect beauty with morality and biopolitics with geopolitics. These reconsiderations of beauty’s force often return to Kantian aesthetics, elevating a formal, disinterested beauty to arouse a direct “feeling of life’s being furthered” (Kant [1790] 1987, 98). But one recent entry naming beauty as an ethical opening unintentionally illustrates its dangers. Elaine Scarry’s *On Beauty and Being Just* (1999) aims to rescue beauty from its enemies on behalf of beauty’s mandate to love truth and pursue justice. Scarry proposes that the encounter with beauty stimulates the senses and provokes a desire to sustain the beautiful in order to prolong its presence. Our attachment to its presence, she claims, induces in us a “heightened attention” that “is voluntarily extended

out to other persons or things. . . . Through its beauty, the world continually recommits us to a rigorous standard of perceptual care” (1999, 81). Scarry’s generalized, unlocatable “people,” in whom she invests the promise of beauty’s attachment, “seem to intuit that their own self-interest is served by distant peoples’ having the benefit of beauty” (123). This is how beauty exerts a distributional power (with potentially geopolitical dimensions): extending life in all directions, traversing distances between the viewer and the object of her gaze, pressing the attention given to the beautiful thing into new forms toward other (if less beautiful) things, rescuing beauty from the past and preserving it for the future. For Scarry, an education in beauty that alerts us to the “aliveness” of all persons is necessarily an education in justice.³

But Scarry’s concern for training individuals who are responsive to the beautiful, and for building imagined communities committed to its care, suggests for me how an attachment to beauty might recruit beauty as governmentality, as a mechanism of internal and external monitoring that replicates the form, and the norm, of beauty’s promise. The measure and the means through which beauty takes up the ability to “make live” by making beautiful enter into the realm of the biopolitical, from the level of the individual guided in the recognition and care of beauty to the establishment of an attachment to beauty that one emerges from to engage with the world (Foucault [1975–76] 2003, 241). Acknowledging with delicacy that “the surfaces of the world are aesthetically uneven,” Scarry imagines that the pressure beauty exerts toward the distributional, toward the reproductive act of aliveness, might remedy aesthetic inequality and social asymmetry (1999, 110). But as Rita Barnard observes, Scarry “sh[ies] away from the very possibility that one person might find another’s beautiful person or thing not simply ‘lack[ing] the perfect features that obligate us to stare,’ or ‘less endowed with those qualities of perfection which arrest our attention,’ but, quite simply, *ugly*” (2006, 106). In thus marginalizing those aesthetic judgments that might have fueled racist disgust, for instance, as errors of imperfect vision, Scarry cannot account for how to judge, let alone redress, this aesthetic unevenness. Nor can Scarry explain how to parse the judgments that acted as alibis in so many colonial and imperial encounters from her (supposedly) more

³ In her work, but particularly *On Beauty and Being Just*, Scarry uses the term “aliveness” to describe another’s sentience and its perceptual recognition by another. This sentence need not be human, as Scarry uses the term; it also resides in the “beautiful object” whose aliveness inspires replication. I use aliveness not as a given quality, as she does, but as an analytic under review.

fair assessment. Diverting attention from those imbalances of power that are inevitably at stake in the business of measurement, care, and instruction, Scarry's vantage point reveals how an education in beauty might dangerously contribute to the annihilation of its antithesis, ugliness, as a prerequisite.

That is, we can see how beauty as a measure of moral character and feeling, which has a clear geopolitical dimension, also functions to regulate moral character and feeling, especially as a geopolitical exercise addressed to the individual and the collective as power's problem and beauty's mandate. As a glimpse of a desirable future, beauty is imagined to inspire contemplation, to foster respect for aliveness, to jar a viewer into "unselving" (Scarry 1999) on behalf of the world. But these are not neutral mandates. When beauty is called upon to tell us something significant about the paths and places that the good and the moral might be found, the partisan nature of beauty's perception becomes all too clear.

To take beauty seriously is to elaborate on its force as biopower, to which the hope that beauty might enliven us all would seem to lead. If, as Michel Foucault notes, biopower is concerned with the management of life, with "an intensification of the body, a problematization of health and its operational terms," then the attachment to beauty as a philosophical consciousness about the cultivation and distribution of the good as an aesthetic but also a political issue—as a matter of dignity, for instance, for the burqa-clad Afghan women—would have us expand Foucault's original conception of biopower to include beauty as "a question of techniques for maximizing life" (1990, 123). That is to say that beauty, as a discourse and concern about the vitality of the body but also of the soul, can and does become an important site of signification, power, and knowledge about how to live. And as such, beauty might become a form of right living that, when administered by regimes of expertise, can and does replicate other commitments, other investments—in U.S. imperium, for instance, which may go by the name of democracy—through which "death becomes," as Jasbir Puar notes, "a form of collateral damage in the pursuit of life" (2007, 32). This is war by other means.

Veiling beauty

What promise does a beauty school hold for a politics of life, for recognizing—but also rendering recognizable—the aliveness of others? The task of responding to this question can be facilitated first by Claire Colebrook's comment that "what is beautiful *is* bound up with questions of how one ought to live and what interests one ought to have" (2006, 134) and

second by Didier Fassin's concept of humanitarianism as a politics of life, or what he understands as the evaluation of human beings and the meaning of their existence, "in that [humanitarianism] takes as its object the saving of individuals" and "making a selection of which existences it is possible or legitimate to save" (2007, 501). I argue that in the establishment of a beauty academy in Kabul, we might discern ideals of beauty-as-freedom within transnational contexts of neoliberalism and geopolitics and discern the production and articulation of criteria establishing the attachment to beauty as a meaningful foundation for evaluating the implementation of a humanitarian regime.

Implicated as the absolute negation of life, the burqa—a regressive and premodern remnant, a metonym for a barbaric Islam, a shorthand for the subjugation of women, a violation of the "basic principles of international human rights law" (U.S. Department of State 2001)—condenses deprivation, deindividuation, and deficiency. The iterations of the veil generally, and here the burqa specifically, in these and other contests of meaning about aesthetic and political ideals, moral economies of bodies, political principles and concepts of the self, and powers to make live or make die, reveal the ways biopolitics and geopolitics come to work together to produce new imperial and feminist subjects as well as to promise new forms of action, new events—such as war (Ahmed 1992; Abu-Lughod 2002). It is commonplace, if critical, to comment as Fassin (2007) does that no Western military intervention into another country is now pursued without a humanitarian component. In the campaign to render U.S. ambitions commensurate with a global human rights regime, George W. Bush's administration called upon women's rights—the absence of which was signaled by the burqa—for a regime change in Afghanistan, releasing the "Report on the Taliban's War against Women" on November 17, 2001 (U.S. Department of State 2001). First Lady Laura Bush, in a radio address to the nation on that same day, borrowed the language of women's rights as human rights on behalf of the U.S. war on terror, insisting that "the fight against terrorism is also a fight for the rights and dignity of women," a fight, in other words, against the monsters who want to "pull out women's fingernails for wearing nail polish" and "impose their world on the rest of us" (Bush 2001).

Discourses of beauty as coextensive with humanity, futurity, morality, and, as we shall see, security are not entirely new since, as veiling discourses demonstrate, aspects of this chain of associations have been iterated before. The "other" has often been found under the sign of the ugly—which is to say the morally reprehensible, not necessarily to the exclusion of the aesthetically pleasurable—as the limit of the human and as the enemy of

beauty. Ugliness, furthermore, has a civilizational dimension. Here we might turn again to the fraught nature of Kantian aesthetics, which espouse formal disinterestedness but also imperial disgust as categorical principles to discern the presence of the beautiful and the ugly.

In his essay “On National Characteristics So Far as They Depend upon the Distinct Feeling of the Beautiful and the Sublime” ([1764] 1991), Immanuel Kant argues that different nations have different aesthetic and moral sensibilities, which, significantly, also manifest different gender and sexual forms. The beautiful and the sublime are for him qualities of the highest aesthetic and moral feelings, which the European alone has mastered in his cultivation of agreeable women. The African, on the other hand, “has no feeling beyond the trifling” (110), and stupidity and moral decay are particularly visible through the ugliness of appearance that Kant attributes to the black body (113). It should be no surprise, he argues, that “in the land of the black, what better can one expect” than “the feminine sex in the deepest slavery” (113). The “inhabitant of the Orient” is also bankrupt, with “no concept of the morally beautiful” (112). Perversely given to secrecy and opacity (which Kant abhors), “a woman [there] is always in a prison, whether she may be a maid, or have a barbaric good-for-nothing and always suspicious husband” (113). This moral judgment does not necessarily exclude the possibility of aesthetic or sensual pleasure in the veil as exotic or the covered woman as an erotic figure. But for Kant, beauty in its ideal form is a morality through which the good and the true are made “visible as it were in bodily manifestations (as the effect of that which is internal)” ([1790] 1987, 72).

What Arjun Appadurai might call beauty’s “traffic in criteria” (1986, 54) directs our attention to the symbolic plentitude and epistemic grounds of the concept of beauty through which we again witness the expulsion of the inhabitant of the Orient, that place of ugliness where woman is always in a prison, from the realm of the beautiful and the good. Thus even the seemingly incontrovertible idea that beauty “confer[s] on us nothing beyond the capacity for humanity” (Donoghue 2003, 44) is caught in this war of assessments, which often depends on other premises about ways of being in the world that for some persons guarantee or assure the principle of human dignity and for others reify their sexualization or racialization.⁴ In this, beauty bears the weight of what Minoo Moallem calls “civilizational thinking,” a “powerful modern discourse influenced by the Enlightenment and the idea of progress dividing the

⁴ Donoghue is quoting from Friedrich Schiller’s *On the Aesthetic Education of Man* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1954).

civility of the ‘West’ from the barbarism of the ‘Rest’” (2005, 161). In the familiar oppositions that organize such thinking, the burqa operates as anticivilizational, a life-negating deindividuation that renders the Afghan woman passive and unwhole, while beauty acts as a life-affirming pathway to modern, even liberated, personhood. In a *Vogue* article titled “Beneath the Burqua,” this noncoincidence of beauty and the burqa bears a revolutionary charge within the political and epistemological terrain from which the reporter scrutinizes both, with amazement: “But the third, the bravest, the leader of the gang, rolled back the nylon to reveal a young girl in her twenties named Sahaila. Her hair was dyed blonde; she wore pink lipstick and blue eyeliner. She stared at me defiantly, a smile twitching at the corner of her lips, Ah you see, she said, I am a person after all” (di Giovanni 2002, 254). The reporter’s astonishment, while it would seem to accord the Afghan woman a degree of unguessed-at agency, nonetheless appropriates what is assumed to be irreducibly foreign for an existing schema of civilizational thinking and modern femininity. Only with lipstick and eyeliner, as Moallem wryly notes, does the Afghan woman achieve legible personhood (2005, 186).

Similarly, media coverage about Afghan women highlighted their perseverance in the absence of a public beauty culture. The 2001 documentary *Beneath the Veil*, which followed British journalist Saira Shah as she traveled across Taliban-ruled Afghanistan and aired in “seeming synchrony with US military strategy” more than ten times on CNN during the lead-up to the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan (McLarney 2009, 3), highlighted the salons operating secretly in private homes as rendezvous for women to gather and discuss their lives under the Taliban. In this way, as Shah describes it, the salon was “the most subversive place of all” (*Beneath the Veil* 2001). “If they are caught, these women will be imprisoned, but they still paint the faces that can never show in public. . . . Women [are] trying to keep life normal in a world gone completely mad.” Journalists noted that mirrors were covered and hidden from view; smuggled beauty products and magazines featuring Bollywood stars were buried in the backyard. Against the burqa, the hair curler or the eyeliner emerges as a political referendum on the fundamentalist regime; the Afghan woman who desires beauty thus desires a democratic future of movement, choice, and independence, where beauty is imagined to live.

Feeling good and global feminisms

At the beginning of the twenty-first century, the forces of globalization brought together disparate but not disconnected discourses of neoliberal

governance through which a biopower of beauty and a geopolitics of humanitarianism might encounter each other. In this world without borders, North American and European global feminisms have adopted the slogan “women’s rights are human rights” as a common expression addressing gendered forms of violence, which in this instance can include the apparent suppression of the body’s movement and the soul’s fulfillment. So, at what might seem on the face of it an odd convergence, I argue that the NGO Beauty without Borders, while emblematic of the instrumentalization of beauty as an index of the welfare of populations, is exemplary of emerging transnational forms of intervention and interpenetration between state institutions and social organizations.

We might begin by considering again the name Beauty without Borders, in which this group of beauty and nonprofit professionals references Doctors without Borders, the social-movement prototype for NGOs that, as Peter Redfield observes, “adopt a borderless sense of space and an ethos of direct intervention” (2005, 331). The name Beauty without Borders also suggests that within a global human rights regime, beauty circulates as a universal good, a form of healing (*The Beauty Academy of Kabul* 2004). But we should also note the timing of Beauty without Borders, the conditions of possibility that structurally link new forms of action with emerging configurations of power, in which managing the crisis in Afghanistan requires both armies and aid. How then do we attend to the distinct conceptual commitments and political investments that shape humanitarian regimes of expertise prescribing an education in beauty and in becoming beautiful?

If beauty is a category through which (particularly, especially, feminine) bodies achieve humanness and if humanness is a quality distributed unevenly through forms of civilizational thinking, then a concept of beauty informs in some important way how human rights are understood. Thus, objections to the burqa include that it hobbles the feminine body, curtailing freedom of movement, and inhibits both range of motion and access to public space. Such disabling is further joined to prohibitions against accoutrements of adorned femininity (Laura Bush’s nail polish), which are together temporalized as barriers to modernity. “Most women take for granted a trip to the local beauty salon for a cut and color. But the ability to feel beautiful on the inside and outside was something long denied to women living under Taliban rule in Afghanistan” (Blum 2008). This seemingly simple statement of denied pleasure pronounces beauty to be a right, a right made particularly visible on the body as an outward manifestation of belonging in a free society, but also an interior sense of value contingent on the former. I therefore propose that beauty becomes

a human right through the traditional concept of dignity (which itself names a biopolitical imperative; Khanna 2008) and that in its neoliberal mode beauty moves easily into forms of governmentality, guiding an individual to become recognizably human to a state power that might guarantee a woman's rights but also that she might learn to esteem the self.

Dignity is a thorny and ambiguous concept, but for our purposes we need only gesture toward the labyrinthine paths through which dignity comes to signal an intrinsic rather than an instrumental value of being human. Such dignity commonly depends on the foundational human being having bodily and psychic integrity. The burqa and its ascribed denial of the virtue of beauty, the exercise of freedom, and especially the recognition of humanity (though of course such depersonification is insidiously implicit in understanding the burqa as its denial) are imagined to violate that integrity. Linkages between political structures, forms of capital accumulation, and personal well-being—with beauty as their measure—are repeated in stories about the Afghan woman before and after Taliban rule.

Julia Reed's *Vogue* profile features a litany of dismembering violences: "In addition to being hot, [burqas] are incredibly hard to maneuver in because the mesh eye holes do not allow you to look down. 'You have no eyes to see,' one student says when I ask her what she hated the most about wearing a burqa. Others talk of constantly tripping, of breaking the heels off their shoes, of terrible headaches, of feeling as though they would suffocate" (2003, 469). Or consider the chain of associations brought together after a reporter's observation about depression and suicide under the Taliban: "Those that survived relied on the only things they had left, their self-respect and their ability to maintain what dignity they could by making themselves beautiful" (469). Thus, feeling beautiful both inside and out has become a fundamental feminist project. But for some there has never been unchallenged membership in the category of the human, let alone an expectation of wholeness or dignity. And although it is understood as the foundation of all human rights, dignity is unstable; it can go missing and be restored. So questions about how dignity might be restored are important to how this restoration, in turn, might be informed by taxonomies of humanness and technologies of power. Reed's provocative statement that "their ability to maintain what dignity they could by making themselves beautiful" directs us to beauty's importance for thinking through recent transformations of the self as the point for power's application. That is, if dignity is inherent, what allied forms of subjectification might call upon the individual to esteem herself, to maintain her own dignity, against dehumanization? The fine distinction I propose here

is this: if dignity is an intrinsic quality of being human, then self-esteem as a Foucauldian technology of the self is instrumental to its realization, to the maximization of that life.

As the twentieth century witnessed the ascension of theories for rehabilitating damaged selfhood as a “science of democracy” (Rose 1998, 116), the rational capacity to evaluate and esteem oneself according to these schema expanded into the field of the social and became normative in creating modern subjects. Self-esteem thus constitutes what is arguably a fundamental intervention in contemporary governmentality and in liberal feminism’s foundational maxim, “the personal is the political.” Barbara Cruikshank, reflecting on Gloria Steinem’s (1992) turn to “revolution from within,” identifies self-esteem as a technology of the self through which a direct causation between feeling good and doing good is made clear (1999, 87). Directed at purposes as specific as eliminating welfare dependency and as comprehensive as nurturing whole personhood, self-esteem in its gendered dimensions informs the will to empower through the transformative capacities of beauty for not only emotional well-being (feeling good) but also cultural competency (doing good): providing business-appropriate attire for low-income women, donating prom dresses to poor high school girls, granting makeovers to chemotherapy patients, or, in this instance, bestowing an education on Afghan women in the modern art and commerce of beauty. While the missions of these makeovers are not the same, they have in common techniques of esteeming the self and the premise that such techniques empower their target populations to correct, if not social harms and structural inequalities, then at least their own capacities for coping with dignity.

I begin to trace here how beauty is instrumentalized as a pathway to feminine solidarity, in which the everyday care of the self and the dignity such care entails emerge together as a common concern. The integrity of the feminine body and psyche becomes the goal of multiple forms of global sisterhood, including its iteration as global feminism. In examining global feminism, then, as generating technologies of the self on a pathway to human rights, of particular concern are the trajectories producing knowledge and compelling empowerment tactics that come into existence at the intersection of biopolitics and geopolitics, especially those that connect self-esteem to liberal governance. Connecting passivity to poor self-image and empowerment to a guided progress, global feminism, in its claim to universal applicability, comprises a set of discourses and practices that elides the structuring violences of geopolitics and transnational capital in favor of a liberal ideal of women’s freedom that celebrates individuality and modernity (Kaplan 1999; Grewal 2005). In doing so, global feminism

often draws on North-South disparities and discourses of patriarchal states or “backward” cultures through which a politics of comparison constructs Western women as ethical and free and as saviors of oppressed women around the world through whom we might identify continuities with the imperial past and other nationalist recuperations.

Consider *Vagina Monologues* playwright Eve Ensler, who authored a new tribute to the Afghan woman for her episodic play (2008). As part of this iconic feminist project, each monologue models the process of a woman finding her voice to decry shame and sexual repression as forms of damaged selfhood, and through this performance she educates other women to do the same. This is also a global feminist project, literally. Ensler’s play is performed in venues all over the world and includes monologues about “other” women and their particular plights, such as the systematic rape during wartime of women in the former Yugoslavia or the Congo. Self-esteem is not only personal; it is, as the *Vagina Monologues* illustrates so well, also a civic responsibility. Freeing your own mind, as it were, is the first step toward freeing others. This is the key premise behind V-Day, Ensler’s nonprofit organization, which raises funds and consciousness “to end violence against women and girls” through benefit performances.⁵ At New York City’s sold-out 2001 V-Day gala, Oprah Winfrey performed the audience-rousing monologue “Under the Burqa” while an Afghan woman, presumably empowered by Winfrey’s reading, unveiled herself dramatically onstage. The Feminist Majority Foundation newswire noted that she did so “as vocal sounds of pain and agony filled Madison Square Garden,” a not-so-subtle mode of captioning, cueing the audience to feel horror at the wounds hidden “under the burqa” (2001).

Here the *Vagina Monologues*’ concept-metaphors of shame and sexual repression are imposed on hijab in general and on the burqa in particular and, in the liberal feminist mode of consciousness-raising, are employed in the name of feminine solidarity. In this schema of intelligibility the uncovering of a woman’s face, through the efforts of others, returns her to humanity (Butler 2004; Moallem 2005). This V-Day event also promoted the purchase of a swatch of blue mesh, a metonymic fragment of a burqa, in a fund-raiser for the Feminist Majority Foundation. Such a purchase would evidence solidarity with Afghan women in the garment’s deconstruction: “This swatch of mesh represents the obstructed view of the world for an entire nation of women who were once free.”⁶ This fantasy of substitution and subtraction, in which we might imagine that

⁵ This quotation is taken from the V-Day Web site, <http://www.vday.org/home>.

⁶ This item was found in Feminist Online Store, but the URL is no longer active.

every swatch purchased here in the “free” West led to the decrease of burqas elsewhere, thus enacts a symbolic unveiling of the Afghan woman, returning her to beauty, freedom, and the world. Such gestures of disclosure are familiar. Against the opacity of the veil, to be granted visibility is understood as a political achievement by liberal feminisms. But for all the humanness that such gestures seek to restore to the Afghan woman, as Caren Kaplan notes, the “apparently progressive gender politics articulated through liberal discourses of equality and self-empowerment may participate in the *reobjectification* of the ‘gendered subaltern subject’” (1999, 143). And, as Judith Butler observes, such visual tropes seek “not only to produce an aesthetic dimension to war, but to exploit and instrumentalize visual aesthetics as part of a war strategy itself” (2004, 148).

The dramatic uncovering of the Afghan woman enacted through global feminisms’ stagecraft can easily turn to statecraft, connecting the maximization of the feminine self to the instrumentalization of human existence. The premise of women’s rights as human rights, duly summoned as humanitarian motive, informed news reports commemorating, in sometimes soaring prose, the military venture as the uncaging of Afghan women: “Then imagine the unexpected pleasure, two weeks ago, of suddenly being able to take off that imprisoning garment and experience the world as you once did, unencumbered. Your oppressors have fallen from power, and you are free” (Gardner 2001). Nor is shared sentiment the only point of contact between global feminisms and humanitarian imperialisms: there is politics too. The thirty-year anniversary issue of *Ms.* magazine included a special feature about the magazine’s new ownership by the Feminist Majority Foundation, examining “how the international feminist community mobilized around the plight of Afghan women,” through which “the Feminist Majority positioned itself as the primary force behind the shift of U.S. policy toward the Taliban” (Farrell and McDermott 2005, 43). And indeed, after the U.S. invasion, Feminist Majority Foundation president Eleanor Smeal stated triumphantly, “We will never again think of ourselves as unable to affect foreign policy” (Brown 2002, 66). What the Feminist Majority Foundation, and arguably Beauty without Borders, usefully illustrate here is this: that what might be called global feminisms is more than an attachment to the form of a global sisterhood and the righteous love it solicits. The global feminist NGO, at least in this instance, also manifests an attachment to liberal statecraft and its instruments of rule—including the monopolization and delegation of violence on behalf of freedom and democracy—for “other” women’s liberation.

Two aspects of the institutional landscape of global feminisms are key

to this attachment to statecraft. The first key aspect is the emergence of global feminisms within the legacy of feminist activism, which has shifted in recent decades into the nonprofits and NGOs that are at the center of transnational politics, especially as some states enact neoliberal policies that increasingly cede welfare concerns such as health care and education to private institutions and other states are identified as incapable of providing such care or unwilling to provide it. Neoliberal discourses about security and safety, as well as about civic responsibility and the romance of community, appear in the language describing nonprofits and NGOs as necessary instruments of care in a global civil society. Understood as less corrupt, more efficient, and more closely attuned to needs on the ground than states are, nonprofits and NGOs claim an organic connection to the populations who are the objects of their welfare and feminist work. But the distance between state and civil society is hardly inevitable. As Sonia Alvarez (1999) observes about the “Latin American feminist NGO boom,” feminist organizations are increasingly drawn into troubling relationships with state powers: as gender experts, providing knowledge about the biopolitical category of “women”; as surrogates for civil society, substituting the NGO and its needs for the populations they claim to represent; and as service subcontractors, advising and executing government or independent women’s programs. Global feminism thus evinces an attachment to statecraft, while *Beauty without Borders* illustrates a continuum of powers stretching between the state and civil society: war making (the business of the state) and nation building (the work of the NGO) reciprocate each other.

The second key aspect, an index of civilizational thinking as correct living, informs many of the programs through which the institutional landscape of global feminisms manifests regimes of expertise, echoing earlier histories of imperial statecraft. Such regimes recall missionary and charitable endeavors and their subsequent professionalization as social work in the early twentieth century. Disseminating presumed expert knowledge about hygiene and health, disciplined labor and household management, moral rectitude and right living, these groups’ curricula sought to programmatically train targeted populations to transform their conduct as well as their sensibilities.⁷ Such operations in governmentality, those forms of action and relations of power that aim to guide (rather than coerce) the conduct of others, enjoin their subjects to exercise freedom correctly. Contemporary modernization and development regimes

⁷ As demonstrated in Ware (1992), Jayawardena (1995), Mindry (2001), Rankin (2001), and Grewal (2005).

shift their emphasis away from imparting home maintenance skills to women and toward encouraging the use of these skills to set up small home- or community-based enterprises to earn income for their families or to provide a means of economic independence (Mindry 2001, 1204). The new development projects of the last two decades of the twentieth century thus sought to target and nurture a “rational economic woman,” as Katharine Rankin (2001) dubs her, through enterprises administered by NGOs, drawing on their technical-professional expertise. Global feminisms that formulate the solution as the marriage of self-esteem to entrepreneurial individualism and financial responsibility (echoing the fundamental precepts of neoliberal capitalism) here avoid the problem of the third-world woman’s subaltern status as an object of knowledge by grooming her as an agent in her own transformation—a manageable and comforting body laboring to become beautiful, for instance, to claim her freedom.

Thus continuous with earlier projects of governmentality, *Beauty without Borders* interpellates a potential liberal feminist subject who seeks to esteem herself in collaboration with development regimes that represent women in the global South as needing modernization. The U.S.-led effort to build and oversee the Kabul Beauty School is thus typical of knowledge formations informed by civilizational thinking and shared by global feminisms, development programs, human rights regimes, and military humanitarianisms. These formations include linear notions of progress and cartographies of beauty in its Kantian but also modernizing dimensions, through which the global North appoints its agents, whether armies or aid workers, as saviors of oppressed peoples elsewhere. Here we see ideas of beauty within imperial and transnational contexts of neoliberalism and geopolitics. New feminist subjects are created on the foundation of historically embedded discourses and practices of orientalism, feminism, and imperialism, and on the grounds of new empowerment technologies and notions of beauty as a universal human need, but also as a measure of health, and through health as a pathway to competency. Beauty becomes not only a measure of moral feeling and human being, a signifier for the choices offered by liberal modernity and a metonym of women’s rights as human rights, but also the medium through which a woman might access all these and more.

An education in beauty

As a program of correction and transformation the makeover emerges as the metaphor for, but also the form of, an education in beauty. Consider

the tagline for *The Beauty Academy of Kabul* (found on the DVD cover), “After decades of war and the Taliban, the women of Afghanistan need a makeover,” or the *Vogue* cover story titled “Extreme Makeover” (Reed 2003). The popular description of the Kabul Beauty School as a makeover powerfully evokes Foucault’s argument about technologies that act to recruit individuals as subjects, through which we might regard the makeover as more than a feel-good excavation of real-me, inner beauty brought to the surface. Even in its domestic incarnation, makeover discourse acts to rescue and modernize persons whose aesthetic sensibilities or taste competencies are deemed temporally or socially inappropriate. The makeover targets the failure, or the inability, to exercise sovereignty over the self, linking this deficit of discipline to poor self-esteem and unfulfilling engagement with loved ones, colleagues, and communities (as both cause and effect). As such, those makeover experts who intervene claim not only to improve the fashion victim’s appearance but also to instruct her on how to evaluate and regulate her body (as a sexual body, a laboring body, and a civic body) in the future. Through instruction on the proper care of the self, this makeover imperative produces normative notions about what counts as healthy versus pathological bodies, converting social and moral statements into truth statements about the self—for instance, that your beauty choices necessarily reveal something about your character or competency—validated then by the signs of parascientific expertise.

Consider this encounter of tough love between Debbie Rodriguez, a volunteer from Michigan, and the initial cohort of women enrolled in the school. In this scene, which appears in the documentary film, the brassy, bossy Rodriguez demands, “All those who have make-up on, stand up! You know what? You’re stuck in a rut, guys! You’re stuck in a hole of the past that you can’t get out of, and my God, before I leave here, you’re getting out of the hole!” One of her students grimly counters, “In your country there’s no fighting. You don’t have to worry, you can talk back to your husbands. Women in Afghanistan aren’t free like that” (*The Beauty Academy of Kabul* 2004). The ways in which this scene sketches out the pledge of beauty, defining the coordinates of freedom as well as the violence of ugliness, are multiple. On the one hand, we seem to witness the repudiation of the U.S. expert and the gaps in her knowledge. On the other hand, it would seem that both student and teacher agree that making someone beautiful is tied to making live and is inextricable from a tense of the future. And that this makeover especially carries with it, as Angela McRobbie observes, the “expectation of improvement of status and life chances through the acquisition of forms of cultural and social capital” (2004, 99) only reiterates the form’s usefulness at the convergence

of disciplinary power and biopolitical investment. As a regime of expertise, beauty instruction circulates both techniques and dispositions that enable individuals to govern themselves and their fates (to learn to be “free like that”). Or, as Rodriguez asserts loudly, “You can’t have fuzzy perms, bad hair color, and bad haircuts. It’s your jobs as the most progressive hairdressers, the most trained and educated hairdressers in Afghanistan, to set the new trends. . . . If you guys don’t do it, how can Afghanistan change if you guys don’t change?” (*The Beauty Academy of Kabul* 2004).

It is as such that the makeover attends minutely to the distribution of appropriate affect and reproductive acts on the premise that beauty and its promise to make live establish a necessary continuity between interior life and social order. Or, more simply, one must be beautiful inside and out in order to be true to oneself and, importantly, to be transparent to others. Where such schema appear as empirical and cultural issues, the assertion that certain forms of bodily comportment structure access to a better life (as defined by liberalism) coincides with the sociological concept that Pierre Bourdieu has called *habitus*, those specific techniques and knowledge formations that shape and occupy bodies to negotiate arenas of existence (Bourdieu 1977; Craik 1994). We would do well to recall here what Ann Laura Stoler (1995, 2002) has taught us, that the intimate domains—sentiment, domestic arrangements, sexual practices, the everyday care of the body—figure importantly in the management of imperial rule and the making of selves. The governmentality of the Kabul Beauty School makeover coincides with “the ultimate aim of colonial mimicry,” which, as Paroma Roy observes, “is not simply to constitute natives as objects to be studied; it must also produce natives as self-reflective subjects, who know themselves as others (the colonizers) know them” (1998, 39). Thus enlisting multiple discourses of knowledge as power, the makeover that Beauty without Borders offers is much more than cosmetic.

The burqa-clad woman addressed by human rights regimes and global feminist discourses can achieve status as a subject only through a civilizing process defined by twinned, and entwined, attachments to beauty as a politics of life. In the first, a commitment to beauty, through which she inhabits normative prescriptions for gender and sexuality as the realization of her human wholeness, becomes the guarantee of her dignity and the substance of her claims to rights. In the second, that same commitment shapes the wish to extend an enlivening beauty to others, to constitute a community of care among disciplined subjects who serve their own self-interest in sustaining the beautiful, the substance of a democratic polity.

Such romance with community, which the beauty salon so easily conjures in its most intimate dimensions and which liberalism so eagerly

enshrines as a political form, is conjured in the *Vogue* feature via the specter of the literary salon: “For decades, beauty salons were refuges where Afghan women were able to speak freely” (Reed 2003, 465). Moallem’s conceptualization of the civic body is especially helpful here. Both preinvasion and postliberation discourses, as Moallem might argue, “commemorate specific bodies—through gendered and heterosexist practices, gestures, and postures—serving not only to facilitate modern disciplinary control of the body but also to create gendered citizenship, both national and transnational” (2005, 59). The Afghan woman is thus being educated in more than beauty’s technical skills; those technical skills are actually civilizational. The makeover the Kabul Beauty School promises also recruits the body and soul to become both the subject and the agent of her own care under neoliberal capitalism and an enduring war.

This imperative manifests itself in the school’s curriculum in important ways. Most obviously, U.S. expertise works to shape Afghan women through specific, and specifically modern, standards of the beautiful. The school’s instructors reported that their students needed to learn a disciplined regimen, “shocked at what these women did to their hair and faces” (Ghafour 2004, 17). These seemingly trivial details and minor events, the in-class struggles to curl one way or cut another, nonetheless remind us that the macropolitics of comparison and criteria (including dichotomies of natural and artificial, educated and ignorant) are invested in even the micropolitics of what counts as good hair. The agents of beauty drew implicit, sometimes explicit, connections between eyeliner application or perming solution and the assessment of disposition and competence.

Having berated the students for their failure to boldly stride forward to meet the nation’s needs, Rodriguez also found the extravagant eye shadow and bouffants of Afghan brides to be reminiscent of drag queens, an evaluation that might be understood as a symptom of temporal politics. The reference to drag queens irreducibly locates this “other” femininity in a nostalgic past. The author of the *Vogue* feature notes that “makeup is applied with heavy-handed enthusiasm by those denied access to it for so long (Hanifa, for example, though almost always in her shirt and tie, wears glitter on her cheekbones and eyelids and shiny purple on her lips)” (Reed 2003, 472). The implication is that whereas Afghan women once suffered from withdrawal, they now suffer from undisciplined bingeing in a suddenly opened market. Such discourses (perpetuated by both volunteers and journalists) also attribute an adolescent femininity to Afghan women, reporting bewilderment at both the heavy hand and glitter—an artificial femininity conjured up in the theatrics associated with the drag queen. Together these discourses connoting play and fantasy are made to

stand for a lack of reason or control; this lack is countered by the natural, modern femininity in which the school attempted to instruct its students, to demonstrate to them the correct exercise of freedom.

Afghan femininity, while persevering through decades of war and poverty, is perceived as nonetheless lacking those qualities key to modern feminine personhood. The *New York Times* states the case: “They have no one to teach them [to look beautiful] and nowhere to lay their hands on a decent comb, let alone the panoply of gels, rinses, powders, liners and colors that spill from the shelves of the average American drugstore” (Halbfinger 2002). Organizers point to the dilapidated state of secret salons to emphasize the need for rescue and intervention. Hairstylist Terri Grauel told the *New York Times*, “I was just appalled by the lack of sanitation. They’re using rusty scissors, they’ll have one cheap comb for the whole salon and they don’t sanitize it. . . . They’re doing it, but they really need the education. They don’t have any technique whatsoever” (Halbfinger 2002). It is this uncivilized state of affairs that also accounted for the fact that, according to Grauel, Westerners in Kabul go elsewhere for their needs: “There will be NGOs, diplomats, people from all over the world going there to rebuild Afghanistan. Do you think that they would have their hair cut by someone who was not Western-trained?” (Lei 2002).

By its nature, then, the Kabul Beauty School staged scenes of instruction (which doubled as scenes of shaming and affirming integral to the makeover genre) in which the students were disciplined to first recognize and then compensate for their assigned lack, understood as a symptom of civilizational failure. “Purity” and “modernity” were watchwords for the beauty school’s curriculum, through which, as Paula Black might observe, “the beauty salon is made use of to police the boundaries of an ‘acceptable’ bodily state” (2004, 74). This bodily state is twofold, multiplied: the body of the beauty student and the bodies she shapes in her salon must conform to the modernizing principles and criteria that inform the intervening regimes of expertise. But while Western discourses subscribe to universalist principles, particularist practices define their assessments. The cosmopolitan West is identified as the standard against which to measure cultural competence (as if bad hair never happened there!), the standard knowledge formations and aesthetic sensibilities that circumscribe some persons as particular sexualized and racialized selves. Thus articles about the school emphasize the rigorous regimen of training (videos, 300-page instruction manuals, and standardized testing) vetted and administered by U.S. experts. Scenes described by reporters or documentarians linger on the technical skills the students daily rehearsed on

mannequins or on one another under the watchful eyes of their teachers. That the students learned through imitation draws attention to the way that hairdressing and aesthetics involve intensive training of the body's rhythms, the mind's measures. The desire for beauty is not enough; the creative techniques and tools that Afghan beauticians developed are not enough. The free West must submit these to evaluation, regulation, and modernization. After all, this is the heart of regime change.

But there is a moment in *The Beauty Academy of Kabul* that both tests and underscores the parameters of the freedoms promised by empire's beauty. In her interview, student Hanifa, in her buttoned-down shirt and tie, is prompted by a male figure offscreen (possibly her husband or a handler) to agree that the U.S. military presence is a welcome one. Hanifa's seemingly prompted testimonial ("What do you want me to say?") suggests that the Kabul Beauty School and its location, within the array of social institutions and private forms of association that enact power and governance through its curriculum, are absolutely essential for justifications of state intervention and imperial violence. Beauty as a moral but also biopolitical category becomes inseparable from those disciplinary powers mobilizing military operations on behalf of regime change, enacting an ideological but also a practical repudiation of the fundamentalist other. That is, beauty is positioned as the means and the ends of a civilizing process that necessitates waging war, in which death is "a byproduct, a secondary effect of the primary aim and efforts of those cultivating or being cultivated for life" (Puar 2007, 32). It is with this understanding that *Vogue* editor-in-chief Anna Wintour can claim, in an editorial, that the Kabul Beauty School was a part of a U.S.-sponsored reconstruction effort (2003, 88). The biopower producing forms of gender works with the sovereign power of U.S. empire to wage enduring wars on behalf of beauty against the burqa.

Finishing lesson

The Kabul Beauty School, although defunct in the absence of continued funding, allows us to understand the biopower of beauty through a set of compelling, connected, but not commensurate discourses about the signals, sensations, and mandates beauty is believed to emit and the uses for which its promises—to make alive, to make live—are pressed into service.⁸ Thus implicated in the partisan vocabularies of the moral and

⁸ For several years after its initial class, the school (alongside her private salon) continued to be operated by volunteer Rodriguez. She has authored a controversial, best-selling memoir

the human, discourses of beauty gesture toward possible futures and powerful consequences—a profound instance in which the political work of governance is being reconstituted at the intimate level of the self, governance minutely secured and subverted by right and wrong dispositions: too much or not enough knowledge, the gaps between prescription and practice. Such gaps include the noncoincidence of referentiality—that the burqa means this or that the loose curl means that—which also applies to my reluctance to assign unmodern or otherwise nonnormative beauty an oppositional charge. Following Rey Chow, who proposes necessary cautions against the intellectual or political instrumentality of a native who can evoke truth because of her material deprivation or purity, we should also refuse to attribute desire or uncorrupted meaning to the oppressed, which would “in turn become . . . recoded . . . as political resistance (to processes of bourgeois mythification) and as truth per se” (2006, 53). A warning, but also a glimpse of hope, at the conclusion of this essay: green and purple eye shadow might construe a refusal of both the Taliban’s fundamentalism and Western expertise, but we should not devalue the seductive quality of a bright eye or a polished fingernail. And what is nonetheless clear from the convergence of commerce and philanthropy is that the fashion and beauty industries traffic in more than image and commodity—or that this traffic in image and commodity is not merely representative of more “real” historical forces but is itself a process generating new cultural economies within the systematic, but also incomplete, structures of empowerment and dominance.

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and speaks to book clubs, to universities, and in other venues about her mission to rescue Afghan women from bad hair and worse circumstances. Rodriguez’s efforts have garnered appalled reviews from school founders Grauel and O’Connor, who question the veracity of her account, as well as her motives. See Ellin (2007).

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