

BOOK REVIEW ESSAY

From Big Screens to *Pasarelas*: Studying Beauty in Latin America

Adriana Estill

Carleton College, US
aestill@carleton.edu

This essay reviews the following works:

Making Up the Difference: Women, Beauty, and Direct Selling in Ecuador. By Erynn Masi de Casanova. Austin: University of Texas Press, 2011. Pp. xix + 239. \$55.00 cloth: ISBN: 9780292723863.

Dolores del Río: Beauty in Light and Shade. By Linda B. Hall. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2013. Pp. xvi + 358. \$60 cloth. ISBN: 9780804784078.

Queen for a Day: Transformistas, Beauty Queens, and the Performance of Femininity in Venezuela. By Marcia Ochoa. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014. Pp. xi + 277. \$24.95 paper. ISBN: 9780822356264.

Of Beasts and Beauty: Gender, Race, and Identity in Colombia. By Michael Edward Stanfield. Austin: University of Texas Press, 2013. Pp. x + 280. \$60.00 cloth. ISBN: 9780292745582.

Beauty and the Beast. By Michael Taussig. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012. Pp. x + 172. \$18.00 paper. ISBN: 9780226789866.

Introduction

In 2000, Peg Zeglin Brand's edited volume *Beauty Matters* suggested the need to expand the study of beauty into a thoughtful interdisciplinarity where "Kant rubs shoulders with Calvin Klein."¹ In its attention to "matters" as a verb that gets at the importance but also the materiality of the workings of beauty, the collection of essays marked and measured the ongoing attempt to provide contextualized and historical studies of beauty—its value and uses, its production and mobilization, its cultural force and meaning.² Placing the various disciplinary voices into conversation involved moving beyond philosophy and art history, where the study of beauty had long dwelled, and looking to other fields. In the two decades prior to the publication of *Beauty Matters*, social scientists were making up time for the years they had "shunned beauty as trivial, undemocratic, and all in all not a proper subject for science."³ Summarizing three decades of social science research, Linda Jackson's meta-analysis highlights two important findings: "Democratic or not, physical attractiveness has an important influence in almost every realm of behavior," and attractiveness still cannot be defined although it can be measured.⁴ In other words, there are measurable "attractiveness effects," but what counts as attractive is not so easily qualified. In a similarly wide-ranging overview of the semiotics of beauty, sociologist Anthony Synnott reviews the history of the trope that beauty equals goodness and then

¹ Peg Zeglin Brand, introduction to *Beauty Matters*, ed. Peg Zeglin Brand (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000), 5.

² The book title invokes influential texts like Judith Butler's 1993 *Bodies That Matter* and Cornel West's 1994 *Race Matters*.

³ Nancy Etcoff, *Survival of the Prettiest: The Science of Beauty* (New York: Anchor Books, 1999), 22. Etcoff compares the late entry to the topic of social scientists to the long-standing attempts of philosophers and artists to qualify and quantify the nature of beauty.

⁴ Linda A. Jackson, *Physical Appearance and Gender: Sociobiological and Sociocultural Perspectives* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1992), 2.

considers the modern symbolic values of beauty: as status symbol, genetic luck, aesthetic goal, and social power.⁵ In the 1980s and 1990s, feminism fueled studies of beauty that sought to understand how it served as a tool of oppression, made powerfully dominant through patriarchal and capitalist circuits of meaning. Many of these texts had activist leanings as they hoped to recuperate individual agency within heavyweight cultural forces.⁶

While this groundwork produced a steady stream of interest and engagement with studies of beauty in US academia, no comparable turn toward beauty happened in Latin American studies.⁷ The texts reviewed here are a welcome addition to the field and will hopefully lead to further research in their various fields and national contexts. Two are ethnographies that develop their analyses from substantial interviews, surveys, and participant observation. Erynn Masi de Casanova's *Making Up the Difference* examines women's labor within a cosmetics direct selling organization; she considers the way in which the cosmetics company and the kind of beauty that it sells shapes sellers' and buyers' home and work relationships. Marcia Ochoa's *Queen for a Day* provides detailed insight into how beauty and glamour are invoked to structure femininity for transgender individuals and beauty queen participants; their ongoing juxtaposition lays bare the constructed and yet materially vital performance of femininity. Two of the books reviewed are histories. In *Dolores del Río*, Linda Hall marshals an impressively extensive archive in order to puzzle together a compelling story of the film star's life, with a particular focus on considering how del Río's beauty contributed to her success. Michael Edward Stanfield covers more than one hundred years of Colombian history in *Of Beasts and Beauty*. Depending principally on an archive of popular magazines, he points to the important role that beauty pageants have filled by exemplifying and symbolizing order, purity, and morality in the face of the economic, social, and physical violence of the nation-state. Finally, anthropologist Michael Taussig offers a series of thought-provoking meditations on scenes from his fieldwork in Colombia. Theoretically and narratively beguiling—indeed, posed within the frame of the fairy tale—Taussig's work urges us to consider how beauty is produced in tandem with the economic devastation, agricultural exploitation, and ravages of the nation's long civil war.

Attentive to the specifics of Latin American history, politics, economics, and culture, together these texts build on—explicitly or implicitly—the questions and themes that have come to contour the study of beauty in general. These include the gendered workings of beauty; how beauty is understood at the intersection of self and society through the concept of body work; how beauty is performed and staged; the role that beauty plays in developing national identities and its relationship to modernity and social values; how the flip side of beauty—the ugly, the infirm, the racially marked—produces values and ideals as well.

Gender Matters

In order to study the production of beauty, scholars have found it to be essential groundwork to consider the asymmetrical use of “beauty” as a meaningful category. As John Berger's *Ways of Seeing* establishes, “Men act and women appear. Men look at women. Women watch themselves being looked at.”⁸ Each of these texts establishes beauty's attachment to and production through femininity (and attends to how masculinity rejects or has little need of discourses of beauty), examining how beauty values and expectations are unequally tethered to the cis-female body. Yet the scholars vary in their calibration of the nuances of gender and beauty. Arguably proffering the most nuanced definitions because of her field of study, Marcia Ochoa's ethnography strives to consider how the “accomplishment of femininity” works within both transgender communities (*transformistas*) and cisgender beauty pageants (*misses*) in Venezuela.⁹ Explicit in Ochoa's

⁵ Anthony Synnott, “Truth and Goodness, Mirrors and Masks—Part I: A Sociology of Beauty and the Face,” *British Journal of Sociology* 40, no. 4 (1989): 607–636.

⁶ Particularly influential were Susan Brownmiller, *Femininity* (New York: Linden Press, 1984); Wendy Chapkis, *Beauty Secrets: Women and the Politics of Appearance* (Boston: South End Press, 1986); Nancy Friday, *The Power of Beauty* (New York: HarperCollins 1996); Robin T. Lakoff and Raquel L. Scherr, *Face Value: The Politics of Beauty* (New York: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1984); and Naomi Wolf, *The Beauty Myth* (New York: Anchor Books, 1991).

⁷ There are a few exceptions, although most published within the last ten years: Colleen Ballerino Cohen, Richard Wilk, and Beverly Stoeltzje's edited volume *Beauty Queens on the Global Stage: Gender, Contests, and Power* (New York: Routledge, 1996) includes one essay on Guatemala and one on Nicaragua. Also see Alexander Edmonds, *Pretty Modern: Beauty, Sex, and Plastic Surgery in Brazil* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010). Literary critic Elizabeth Gackstetter Nichols's work includes “Decent Girls with Good Hair: Beauty, Morality and Race in Venezuela,” *Feminist Theory* 14, no. 2 (2013): 171–185, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1177/1464700113483243>; and *Beauty, Virtue, Power, and Success in Venezuela, 1850–2015* (Lanham, MD: Lexington, 2016). Also see medical anthropologist Lauren Gulbas's work, “Embodying Racism: Race, Rhinoplasty, and Self-Esteem in Venezuela,” *Qualitative Health Research* 23, no. 3 (2012): 326–335, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1177/1049732312468335>.

⁸ John Berger, *Ways of Seeing* (London: BBC and Penguin Books, 1972), 47.

⁹ The phrase is one that Ochoa takes from Harold Garfinkel's work; see *Studies in Ethnomethodology* (New York: Prentice-Hall, 1967).

framing is that the fashioning of gender must be understood through the unexpected comparison that points out the similarity of tools used by transformistas and misses and how these groups “create possibilities for themselves through beauty and glamour,” even if these possibilities yield vastly different results. For the misses, these constructions and performances lead to a success on the runway that is not necessarily marked by submission to a dominant beauty ideal but rather by agency and control of one’s self-image. For the transformistas, a highly self-referential and self-conscious performance of femininity is needed to “call attention to the contradictions surrounding their presence on the avenida” (231). Ochoa’s ethnography reveals the fungibility of femininity, and how beauty values serve to reinforce and establish it.

To some degree, Casanova’s work reveals a similar approach to gender. Her work relies on Ecuadorean demographic data that documents differences between men and women’s economic participation in the labor force; this data leads to a fairly traditional social understanding of gender and ideals of heteronormativity, traditional family structures, and cis-women’s restricted social roles. Challenging these normative understandings, however, her study of Yanbal, a direct selling cosmetics company, allows her to examine women as workers within a company that sells traditional ideas of femininity and its relationship to beauty even as the executives and sales force struggle against these gendered norms. She highlights “moments of empowerment”—occasions when “constraints of traditional gender roles are temporarily lifted” (19).

Hall’s biography thoughtfully locates Dolores del Río within both Mexican and US gendered norms of the time period, acknowledging that because of her power and fame del Río “was able to engage in behaviors not initially acceptable for young women of her social class in Mexico” (6). Hall asserts that del Río’s beauty was key to her success, enabling Hollywood (and the United States) to overlook her Mexicanness. For Hall, then, del Río’s beauty—perceived as feminine and exotic—served as a primary and principal source of power as it provided access to career, marriage, and a sort of independence, all of which were unavailable to most women of the period. Stanfield similarly establishes that, for the long-term historical view that he takes, beauty is women’s singular power in a world in which they have not much else. Colombians value beauty, he suggests, because “the terror of the beast—violence, insecurity, racism, poverty, and the perceived illegitimacy or inadequacy of government—reinforces gender roles (women should be beautiful and men should be powerful) as it closes options for reform and liberation” (2). While Hall is interested in how del Río leverages this gendered power for her own means, Stanfield asks us to consider how beauty, as a gendered power, is produced in antithesis to and in the service of “the beast,” always and already a conservative force. Within this framework, femininity is a fairly static characteristic, even as expectations for beauty sometimes shift.

While Michael Taussig’s *Beauty and the Beast* also begins from the premise that to understand Colombia it is necessary to think about both the beast and the beauty, he emphasizes that glamour and terror operate synergistically. In working through the “cosmic surgery”—the profusion of manipulations of bodies in order to survive—he suggests that “aesthetics is as crucial to the tough guys and the state as it is to bigger breasts, face lifts, or willowy thinness” (ix). Of the five authors reviewed here, Taussig deconstructs most fully the inadequate binaries that link beauty’s demands with cis-female bodies. He calls our attention to the excess (*dépense*, Georges Bataille’s term for “too-muchness,” p. 3) and luxury that suffuse and produce contemporary aesthetics, whether “designing a new body, a new face, a smile for a paramilitary mass murderer, an airplane, a spark plug . . .” (6). Beauty, says Taussig, is infrastructure for all of these even though most of us perceive it solely as ornament.

Between Self and Society

Because beauty is profoundly gendered as female—though not inevitably or naturally so, as Ochoa’s and Taussig’s work make clear—a dominant approach to understanding the production of beauty values through feminized bodies acknowledges that body work (those practices undertaken to match one’s self to one’s body, or one’s body to social expectations) occurs at the individual level but is only made coherent at the societal level.¹⁰ While early scholarship in the field presumed that body work was undertaken subconsciously and through engagement and submission to oppressive discourses, contemporary scholars generally reject the “cultural dope” model and seek to understand individual motivation, involvement, and pleasure in body work within a framework of recognizing the social, cultural, and economic rewards of doing body work

¹⁰ Readings like these—see Susan Bordo, *Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture, and the Body* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993) for one of the classic texts in the field—rely on connecting feminism’s critiques of patriarchal structures with Foucault’s work on docile bodies and micropractices, the combination yielding a theoretical framework for understanding the intersection between individual engagement and social discourse in a set of practices to discipline the body in order to achieve acceptable femininity and beauty.

effectively.¹¹ Both ethnographies (Casanova and Ochoa) have at their core the aim to locate individual motivations and meaning-making within larger social structures in order to understand better how women and men engage with structures of femininity and beauty. Hall's biography is deeply invested in understanding Dolores del Río as an individual with personal agency, caught within a star system and a bicultural set of expectations. Stanfield and Taussig, on the other hand, are more invested in sweeping landscapes of beauty's operations; glimpses of individuals disappear within the comprehensive narratives that each proffers of Colombian beauty politics.

Hall struggles to understand Dolores del Río beyond the cultural dope model, but her attempts are often frustrated by the lack of archival evidence. Placing del Río's quest for beautification within the context of Hollywood and its demands, Hall narrates del Río's whitening and presumed cosmetic surgery not principally through del Río's records (because there is not much there) but through what we know of her cohort and their own need to beautify in particular ways in order to be successful. Indeed, while Hall focuses on better describing del Río's quest for love and economic success (both journeys that often involve, Hall suggests, the trade of beauty for stability or comfort or power), she also offers insight into the female friendships—in Hollywood and in Mexico—that were so formative and important to del Río. These glimpses of formative female support networks help Hall make the case that gender is produced within larger social systems that contain the possibility of acquiescence (the suggestion that del Río had her nose done like other Hollywood stars of the period) or of resistance (the limning of del Río's friendships with Frida Kahlo and Tina Modotti as providing her support against the establishment).

Both Casanova's and Ochoa's work, dependent on extensive fieldwork and interviews, place great importance in understanding how their subjects understand their own body work. In the case of Ochoa's work, this allows her to delineate the common ground shared by transformistas and misses, both groups engaged in processes by which they can "*sacar el cuerpo*" (bring out the body), a phrase that, Ochoa argues, demonstrates the "active participation of *transformistas* and *misses* in producing their feminine bodies" (170). Both Ochoa and Casanova find it necessary to understand these bodies *in place*, something that Casanova discusses beautifully as a way to understand "the places that people hold within webs of social connection that span and sometimes overrun the space of the city" (xi). Casanova's work adds a great deal to our thinking about agency with regard to beauty politics, since the direct selling group Yanbal is mainly run by women. She situates her study in relationship to a lack of literature on direct selling organizations (DSOs) and, in particular, ethnographic data that help us understand the everyday lives and perspectives of distributors. For beauty scholars this is helpful because the understanding of women as only consumers is a dominant one. Within Guayaquil, Casanova's work reveals, women distributors are also positioned as informed consumers well able to shape economic processes, if not the beauty norms themselves. Within the DSO world of Yanbal, the selling of beauty provides idealized images but also accessible models of what it means to look "*bien arreglada*"; but, Casanova emphasizes, to not achieve this look and do this body work means to be seen as a body that has no social mobility.

The Stage and the Spectacular

Scholars of beauty often point out that individual body work need only offer access to "the average"; that is, in order to be perceived as attractive, one must simply demonstrate that one has the time, energy, and money to do body work. Casanova's finding on the importance of appearing "*bien arreglada*" reinforces this point. Yet beyond the everyday workings of beauty, scholars continue to focus on beauty pageants, film glamour, and other "spectacular" productions of beauty because those images and processes wield great power, particularly in the development of regional and national identities, as examined in the next section.

For Hall, the question of the spectacular and the performative are particularly troublesome because of her investment in ensuring that she portrays del Río with both "agency and humanity," countering the "constructed image" and star text that are a product of the spectacular (4). Yet challenging the constructed image proves to be complicated and even impossible given the archive, as Hall details throughout the biography, culminating in the chapter "Icon" as she discusses the easy way in which Mexicans, like US Americans, "conflate[] the woman with the actress and her roles" (287).

¹¹ Debra Gimlin, *Body Work: Beauty and Self-Image in American Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002). For the debate over women as cultural dopes in these beauty processes, see the introduction to Kathy Davis, *Dubious Equalities and Embodied Differences: Cultural Studies on Cosmetic Surgery* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2003).

In contrast, Ochoa engages the spectacular as a way to understand—at a number of different “politics of scale”—the production of femininity and beauty. In the first part of her book she looks at the way in which the transnational circuits of beauty pageants provide a stage on which national beauty politics are performed. The second section “describes a *scenic* scale in which women are staged,” comparing cis-gender pageants with those targeted for transformistas and gay men as well as how sex work on Avenida Libertador in Caracas operates as a stage too. In her final section she considers the relationship between the spectacle of femininity and that of Venezuelan politics.

Stanfield’s wide-ranging field finds its center in working through the play between Colombian politics and Colombian beauty pageants. While Stanfield doesn’t place much emphasis on the theory behind the relevance of the beauty pageant and its staging of national identity and values, his topic reveals the importance of the performative.¹² It would be worthwhile to build on his research by thinking through the gendered performances that lead to the binaries that he sees, where masculinity and the state offer chaos and violence, and femininity and beauty provide morality, civility, and hope. Using a lens of performance theory places Stanfield and Taussig into greater conversation with each other, even though neither uses this vocabulary. Instead, Taussig uses the language of “cosmic” surgery and the fairy tale narrative. These are alternative ways of thinking through the desires that inform cosmetic surgery—the hope that we can “create a new inside by changing the outside,” that is, we can stage our bodies into a new understanding of self (44). Taussig’s work illuminates how cosmic surgery may be most visible to us at the individual level, but, as he puts it, “the state itself has existed as an exercise in extreme makeover” (46).

Making Up the Nation

As the quote from Taussig makes clear, the workings of beauty, visible in and on individuals, take on spectacular visibility and then national significance. Echoing Mimi Thi Nguyen’s recent challenge that we think of beauty as one of the “transactional categories that are necessarily implicated and negotiated in relation to national and transnational contests of meaning and power,” each of the texts under review here tracks the workings of beauty as a measure of progress, modernity, and democracy.¹³ Each of these monographs powerfully situates and is attentive to how the workings of beauty contribute to nation construction. Hall situates del Río within both Mexico and the United States, asking why the movie star had binational and bicultural appeal; in both countries she experienced moments of enormous cultural power as well as repercussions for her fame. Ochoa situates the transformistas and misses carefully within Venezuelan history, place, and politics. Casanova does the same with Yanbal, making sure to specify not just Ecuadorian economics but also its geographical and historical particulars. Taussig’s and Stanfield’s use of the “beauty and beast” fairy tale might seem to argue for universal implications in their understandings of beauty, but both anchor that fairy tale within Colombia proper.

In his introduction, Stanfield poses the question in a larger way: “How and why has beauty in modern American republics reinforced notions of development, modernity, and a white pigmentocracy inherited from European colonialism over the last half millennium?” (1). For Stanfield, as for Taussig, the “beast” is the nation-state in disarray: questions of illegitimate statehood, violence and insurgency, *narcotraficantes*. For Taussig, it is also a shift from locally based agricultural production to major agribusiness interests. Each of them suggests—in works that came out nigh simultaneously—that the valuation of feminine beauty was a necessary and dysfunctional partner to the beast. While for Stanfield beauty stands as a beacon of goodness in contrast to the frequent violence of the state, Taussig sees the two stitched together in terms of modernity and its relationship to consumption and the makeover.

In similar contrast, while Taussig focuses on cultural narratives that insistently stare at the synergism of “glamor and terror” (ix) and wonders why we are fascinated by stories of beautification and makeovers gone wrong, Stanfield’s history provides a straightforward albeit greatly compressed overview of “the social, cultural, and political importance of feminine beauty in Colombia from 1845 to 1985” (1). Acknowledging the unwieldiness of his scope, Stanfield emulates the breadth and approach of Lois Banner’s groundbreaking study of US beauty that likewise attempts to outline the beauty politics of one country. Like Banner’s classic

¹² For fleshed out theorization of the relationships of pageants to nationality and nationalism, see Sarah Banet-Weiser’s *The Most Beautiful Girl in the World: Beauty Pageants and National Identity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), and Colleen Ballerino Cohen, Richard Wilk, and Beverly Stoeltje, eds., *Beauty Queens on the Global Stage: Gender, Contests, and Power* (New York: Routledge, 1996).

¹³ Mimi Thi Nguyen, “The Biopower of Beauty: Humanitarian Imperialisms and Global Feminisms in an Age of Terror,” *Signs* 36, no. 2 (2011): 361.

text, this book provides grand overviews that will be increasingly useful for scholars who follow as they fill in the gaps.¹⁴

And in a study with an ambition this large, it should be no surprise that there are gaps. Stanfield sees beauty as representing “the feminine and social constant opposite institutional, elitist, dysfunctional, and often violent male order/chaos” (2). This frame imposes a fairly essentialist gendered reading—unlike Taussig’s analysis of the cooperative and intertwined functions of violence and beauty—that fails to nuance the conceptualization or the workings of beauty as thoroughly as it could. Part of this stems from a gap in Stanfield’s literature review, which omits scholarship on the United States that could have been useful to his work on race and beauty in Colombia.¹⁵ In a study that focuses mainly on tracking the understanding, reception of, and meaning of beauty pageants in Colombia (contextualizing these for each historical period), Stanfield is aware of, but makes scant use of, formative works in the field, citing them but not engaging with their analyses of the nationalistic and decolonial projects in which beauty pageants often engage.¹⁶

Given Stanfield’s overarching claim that, in Colombia, beauty “is feminine, moral, virtuous, civil, uplifting, peaceful, and hopeful” in contrast to the chaos and violence of masculine rule, it follows that beauty pageants are insistently posited as antidotes and/or alternatives, in spite of the fact that Stanfield’s use of the Colombian periodical *Cromos* (his principal, and longitudinal, primary source) shows that the business of nation building and the work of beauty culture were deeply intertwined. Building his findings primarily on periodical sources for each period of time, Stanfield offers a detail-filled and copious narrative that would be more powerfully instructive if theorized more consistently. For example, as he traces the rise of consumer culture, he might have engaged with histories of gender and consumer culture¹⁷ or theories of gender-segmented marketing.

While Stanfield examines the historical development of beauty pageants, Ochoa uses the Venezuelan beauty pageant to better understand how beauty and glamour work for both beauty queens and transgender women as a set of symbolic resources that articulate Venezuelan femininity. At its heart, Ochoa’s monograph asks us to consider the constructedness of femininity and, in thinking through how transgender women evoke and use it, to see its connections to the policing of gender and social violence against those who do not fit its demands. Ochoa describes persuasively why her attention to Venezuelan femininity is best understood through critical frameworks of queer sexuality, transnationalism, and diaspora. Her introduction richly and fully describes her engagement with these fields in order to arrive at her framework. While her narrative is often dense, the prose is also deeply engaging and warm. As befits an ethnographer, Ochoa places herself carefully and gracefully within her fieldwork. She does not hold back from large claims that require paradigm shifts: “The process of modernity extinguishes humanity yet creates possibilities for existence. This contradiction frames the long project of modernity in Latin America” (15). In extending this contradiction, Ochoa places her monograph in conversation with a number of scholars of beauty who, in other spheres, contend with the way beauty has been wielded as a presumptively modernizing and colonizing force.¹⁸

Divided into three principal parts, Ochoa’s text begins at the global scale, examining the transnational circuits in which she understands the Venezuelan beauty pageant (thus contextualizing in a way that Stanfield does not) and considering how transgender identity in Venezuela is produced in relationship to international, cosmopolitan ideals. Ochoa suggests that glamour “allows its practitioners to draw down extralocal authority, to conjure a contingent space of being and belonging” (89). In this formulation, transformistas’ embrace of an aesthetic of glamour channels transnational meanings. Next she moves to a local scale, juxtaposing the beauty pageant runway (in all its forms—from the regional to the transformista) and transformistas’ sex work on Avenida Libertador in order to consider the public staging of femininity. Her third section

¹⁴ Lois W. Banner, *American Beauty: A Social History...Through Two Centuries...of the American Idea, Ideal, and Image of the Beautiful Woman* (New York: Knopf, 1983).

¹⁵ Stanfield points to an absence of US histories on beauty except for Banner’s work, strangely overlooking Kathy Peiss’s impressive and thorough *Hope in a Jar* on the history of cosmetics in the United States as well as Julie Willett’s work on beauty salons, Elizabeth Haiken’s history of cosmetic surgery, and Maxine Leeds Craig’s history of black women and beauty pageants in the United States.

¹⁶ He cites both Banet-Weiser’s *The Most Beautiful Girl in the World* and Cohen, Wilk, and Stoeltzje’s *Beauty Queens on the Global Stage*.

¹⁷ For example, Joanne Herschfield’s *Imagining la Chica Moderna: Women, Nation, and Visual Culture in Mexico, 1917–1936* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008).

¹⁸ Nguyen, “The Biopower of Beauty”; Margaret Hunter, “Buying Racial Capital: Skin-Bleaching and Cosmetic Surgery in a Globalized World,” *Journal of Pan-African Studies* 4, no. 4 (2011): 142–164; Kathy Peiss, “Educating the Eye of the Beholder: American Cosmetics Abroad,” *Daedalus* 131, no. 4 (2002): 101–109.

drills down to the body, examining in detail what it takes to accomplish femininity (to “sacar el cuerpo”). Ochoa powerfully connects analytically the bodies of the misses (pageant contestants) and the transformistas, showing how both groups—on the surface different—engage similarly in the art of the spectacle to stage femininity and beauty.

Announcing her work as a queer diasporic ethnography, Ochoa situates herself as field worker and scholar within a well-fleshed-out theoretical frame that still manages to be intensely introspective and intimate. In one breath she lets us into her history and family; with the next she invites the reader to consider the perverse modernity that requires and makes possible malleable bodies, and that requires the violence we do to our bodies that also makes possible their survival. As Ochoa says, Venezuela herself is a transformista. In this metaphor, Ochoa argues that beauty and glamour and feminine makings are not frivolous; rather, they structure national narratives.

Similarly attentive to the violence required by modernity that produces nationally legible bodies and beauties, Taussig’s work suggests that Colombia, like many other sites, is now home to the postmodern consumer who has a “norm-defying and norm-transcending body” (136). He anchors this particular postmodern body within Colombia’s agribusiness, narco-business, and in general the speedy change from rural to urban-centered lives. Taussig is curious about how the shift away from the land, from caring for the land, produces an excess of attention and care to the new generations “who carry this new history on their bodies” (73). For Taussig, then, national imaginings are related to how individuals understand their bodies as productive or consuming tools.

While focused on Colombia’s particulars, Taussig does not ignore the ways in which Colombia’s beautifying culture operates in relationship to other Latin American countries like Brazil or Venezuela, as well as within postcolonial and imperial relationships like the one between the United States and Latin America. For example, pointing out that “the new thinness amount[s] to an imitation of what we might call the white body,” Taussig also underscores the way the “Afro-inspired *pompi*” continues to matter; the Colombian (national) body is a site where beauty operates with racial and economic codes.

Similarly attentive to transnational and imperial dynamics, Hall’s *del Río* navigates beauty ideals in Mexico and the United States, revealing the differences in gender nationalisms as well as the ways in which *del Río*’s racialized body does or does not affect the degree to which Hollywood can imagine and desire a “dark female lover.” Hall’s work is not entirely consistent on the role that race plays. For example, Hall touches on a number of ways in which *del Río*’s beauty presented difficulties for US filmmakers and audiences, principally issues of color and the relationship of these to social status and class. However, Hall hesitates to confirm the connection between these social structures and the beauty work that *del Río* did or the way in which her beauty was perceived, in part because while she traces evidence of *del Río*’s whitening, she places this in relationship to the publicists’ continuing presentation of *del Río* as Latina/Mexican. Thus, for Hall, this whitening has little to do with deracialization. As she says, “It seems reasonable to suggest that the ideals of beauty that were developing in Hollywood . . . were exotic foreigners with slender noses” (17).

Hall’s resistance to acknowledging forces of racialization seems to stem from her understandable desire to establish *del Río*’s individuality and agency. Hall reads beauty as power that establishes *del Río*’s success in film and in her personal life. For example, when she provides an overview of *del Río*’s love life in her early forties, she remarks, “one of the world’s most beautiful women, the object of fantasy for men all over the globe, was still alone” (251). This framing reveals Hall’s conceptualization of beauty as a power that only wanes with aging, and it is a frame that is ultimately inadequate, whether to understand *del Río* or to better understand how beauty works and is used.

Hall’s text is full of the equivocations of someone working around absences in the historical record and attempting to make sense of these gaps: Why did *del Río*’s early relationships fail? How did she negotiate being a foreigner in the United States? If, as Hall argues, *del Río*’s billing as “the perfect Latin type” established “a more inclusive definition of just who might be considered white,” how did *del Río* feel about this sublimation or reframing of Mexicanness? The gaps are unavoidable, given the limited material available to work with, and Hall certainly creates an engaging and full narrative that makes the book enjoyable to read. However, more insistent attention to the national and transnational beauty politics that at times circumscribed *del Río*’s possibilities, and at others accentuated them and made her a more viable commodity, would have provided more persuasive accountings of her life.

While the transnational meanings of racialized beauty are not fully fleshed out, Hall’s study shines when it comes to depicting how *del Río* and Hollywood used her beauty over the course of her career. Hall suggests that, for *del Río*, beauty operates as a given—a gift that *del Río* was granted of a particular legible

attractiveness—but also as a set of practices (cosmetics, fashion, poses) that del Río used, whether instinctively or knowingly, in order to produce and market her beauty. The biography offers a thorough depiction of the kinds of body work available and needed in Hollywood and then, importantly and thoughtfully, reveals how the older del Río was almost too beautiful to play the roles she received in Mexico.

Casanova's ethnography immerses the reader within a case study of Yanbal, Ecuador's largest direct selling cosmetics company, as a way to understand gendered labor, social, and economic relations and, importantly, how the nature of Yanbal's business (beauty culture) affects these issues. Situating Yanbal and its business structure within the contemporary Ecuadorian economic and political context, Casanova points out how the loss of employment in the formal sector and the rise of underemployment in Ecuador make research on DSOs essential. Given the paucity of work on the intersection of gender and DSOs, Casanova establishes a useful baseline for understanding why DSOs provide a good case study for thinking about gendered labor: operating as part of the informal job sector, DSOs's employee rosters are predominantly women. The job features high flexibility, theoretically making it a useful job for women coping with juggling with the triple burden of work, home, and community service responsibilities (28). Casanova particularly focuses on the "everyday lives and perspectives of distributors" as well as the transactions between sellers and consumers.

For scholars of beauty, Casanova's second section is most relevant. After explaining how Yanbal fits into gendered labor and familial structures, she explores and analyzes the image provided within Yanbal's promotional and sales materials as well as within and through training for sales people. Yanbal can be understood as a microcosm for the nation, offering insight into how the politics of appearance for sellers (being "bien arreglada") reflects larger discourses of social class and racial belonging. Because the "flexibilization" of labor that occurs within capitalist globalization (27) still relies on the instantiation of traditional gender roles, whether at work or at home, Casanova's analysis of how women negotiate greater economic independence with and through continuing to mold their bodies to traditional feminine standards provides a great deal of insight into the limits of empowerment discourses when it comes to women's labor, and how that empowerment is understood through materialized body and beauty norms. Indeed, as she discusses in her thorough content analysis of Yanbal catalogs, "glamorous images on its pages strengthen their claims to a professional identity and an enviable association with a respected transnational corporation" (90). Put differently, the catalogs aren't just selling the product and ideals of femininity, motherhood, and whiteness to the consumer, they're selling the seller as a worldly and cosmopolitan worker. Casanova details effectively the many tensions that the women she interviews experience and in particular how "the cultural valuation of whiteness and upper-class status is juxtaposed with the phenotypic and financial realities of most Ecuadorians" (xiv).

On the Outskirts

If beauty operates to produce the conditions and visible connections of national belonging, it is also persistently in relation to other aesthetic possibilities—ugliness, violence, the grotesque—that repel one from belonging. Taussig's focus on the aesthetic of both violence and embodiment allows him to ask what paramilitary armor and masculinized bodies or women with enhanced breasts and butts "tell us about the new body set forth in the world today" and "its relation to storytelling" (64). In staging his intervention into Colombian violence and beauty politics as a theoretical engagement invested in storytelling, Taussig sifts through the conditions that have shaped the body into an "emblem and vehicle for a way of being that has displaced work and discipline in favor of style, transgression, and eroticized excess" (x).

Working with a number of Western cultural theorists from Freud to Benjamin to Bataille's notion of *dépense* (wasting/excess/unproductive spending), Taussig's analysis culminates by engaging Zygmunt Bauman's distinction between the modern producing body and the postmodern consumer body. The latter body, in Bauman's work, is "norm-defying and norm-transcending"; Taussig argues that his history of beauty is a "history of norm-defiance and norm-transcendence . . . fashion as a new way of life oriented toward death" (136). In offering this historical narrative, Taussig argues for a need to recognize the alienation of the body from its labor and its environment as one of the important factors in better understanding the relationship between beauty and ugliness. For him, in the industrialized world with its unthinking progress, "beauty lives side by side with murder and mutilation and is exacerbated by this ugliness" (92).

Taussig's work echoes Nguyen's recent work on the biopower of beauty. Analyzing the Kabul Beauty School, Nguyen points out that in global "geopolitical contexts of neoliberalism and human rights" beauty operates as a transactional category (360). What she means by this is that beauty is offered and understood

as a promise—a promise of personhood, rights, and good governance.¹⁹ Nguyen sees how beauty has been wielded as a good held by Westerners that can be offered to “deserving” nations in the context of empire and war. In this instance, Afghani women’s potential beauty stands as a symbol of a nation’s worthiness to be free and autonomous. Beauty operates, then, as a violence itself, a technology that demands acquiescence of a body or bodies in order for them to be considered worthy. Taussig sees a similar merging of beauty, violence, and death, arguing, insistently and firmly, that “the realm of the aesthetic embraces bodily mutilations by paramilitaries alongside agribusiness mutilations of our Mother the earth” (152). In other words, Taussig uses his fascination with these stories of excess, taboo, and the malleable bodies of postmodern consumer society to delineate the relationship between beauty politics and violence in a contemporary Colombia caught between a masculine narco-culture, the rise of agribusiness, and the ongoing quest for aesthetic control and satisfaction.

In the other texts, ugliness sits unfortunately in more expected places: the residues of colonialism and slavery materialized through hierarchies of race and class. Stanfield begins his book by highlighting the uneven workings of race and beauty in Colombia and he provides examples that portray the dominance of whiteness as a beauty value while also offering moments when racialized beauty becomes the object of consideration and negotiation (including stories of tensions between official pageant officials and the communities that support particular candidates). Stanfield’s narrative in this area does beg for more analysis and further research of how race or racism operates in Colombia. For example, in his chapter on the 1970s, Stanfield points to the 1973 Señorita Colombia pageant as one that took place indoors at a site where “two hundred years earlier, slaves had been bought and sold” (174); two pages later, he reveals that the 1977 pageant (Miss Universe) “broke the color barrier” (177). These facts sit in tension with the acknowledgement that Colombia “would not select its first black Señorita Colombia until 2001” (177), but there is no narrative that helps the reader see how beauty politics highlight and reveal a deeper, historically sedimented racial hierarchy and why, in 2001, that racial hierarchy saw a breach.

For Casanova and Hall, there are prices to pay for not being white enough and not being “bien arreglada” enough. Hall narrates how del Río’s foreignness (and her racial not-white-enoughness) ended her career as Hollywood fashions shifted and she aged. Casanova details how Yanbal sellers and their superiors discipline each other’s appearances in order to measure commitment to their work. In other words, if taking care of oneself with these products that “have a global cosmopolitan stamp” indicates a particular adaptation to social status and cultural norms of appearance “that are ultimately local,” not taking care of oneself in these expected ways removes you from being perceived as having Ecuadorian middle-class respectability (119).

Examining how beauty produces belonging and citizenship, each scholar also contends with how the specific operations of beauty depend on the production of ugliness, and how this ugliness, unlike the humanizing power of beauty, expels one from community. Because ugliness, like beauty, is socially constructed, each scholar, in their attention to the specifics of beauty, must be equally precise in how ugliness manifests, whether through systems of race, class, or cisgender norms. Attendant to the potential of these forms of ugliness to expel one from belonging, whether from domesticity, ideals of femininity, ethnic and racial community, or nation, these scholars analyze “how people shape their looks and make up their faces to move with grace through these many spaces of their lives.”²⁰ Moving with grace, with culturally legible beauty, is easier for some than for others. Adding to the growing scholarship in this area, these monographs acknowledge and carefully unpack these hierarchies and how they restrict or permit access to the beautiful.

Author Information

Adriana Estill is associate professor of American studies and English at Carleton College. She researches and teaches primarily in Latina/Latino studies, with interests in the textual and visual production of meaning around race, gender, and place. She has published articles that look at how beauty serves as a rubric of meaning and a tool of belonging within national narratives; how resistance and belonging to place are gendered; and the ways that the mass media imagines raced communities in relationship to whiteness. She is currently working on research that traces the circulation of the telenovela on American television, examining the genre’s use, reception, and misreadings by the white American public.

¹⁹ Nguyen, “The Biopower of Beauty.”

²⁰ Susan Ossman, *Three Faces of Beauty: Casablanca, Paris, Cairo* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2002), 2.

How to cite this article: Estill, A. From Big Screens to *Pasarelas*: Studying Beauty in Latin America. *Latin American Research Review*. 2017; 52(1), pp. 173-182. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.25222/larr.95>

Submitted: 22 August 2016

Accepted: 22 August 2016

Published: 19 July 2017

Copyright: © 2017 The Author(s). This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC-BY 4.0), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited. See <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>.



Latin American Research Review is a peer-reviewed open access journal published by the Latin American Studies Association.

OPEN ACCESS 