

Producing Beauty in Brazil

Vanity, Visibility and Social Inequality

Thaís Machado-Borges

“I think I’m too short and too chubby but everywhere I go, there is always someone who says, ‘Gee Simara, you smell so good!’ Why is that? I’m not beautiful, but I have vanity. So the little vanity I have makes me visible to other people. With my appearance, if I didn’t have vanity and take care of myself, I would be lost. That’s what I think about me. So, I’m not beautiful but I do whatever I can to make people see me.” (Excerpt from the documentary film *Vaidade*, 2002)¹

Simara, one of the interviewees in Fabiano Maciel’s documentary (2002) about vanity is a woman who earns her living reselling beauty products to people living close to gold-digging settlements in the Brazilian part of the Amazon forest, in the state of Pará. Simara travels hours by boat in malaria-infested rivers and arrives with perfumes and beauty products that she resells to women and men who work in the region. But why would people living under very harsh and poor conditions want to buy perfumes and cosmetics? Don’t they have more urgent needs to be seen to?

In academic debates, beauty, vanity and a preoccupation with physical appearance have long been associated to mass culture, femininity, frivolity and imposed consumption (Brownmiller 1985; Code 1991; Morgan 1991; Wolf 1991), practices understood to be far away from the everyday-life struggles of poor people. This article, part of a larger research project on women and bodily practices in Brazil, draws on ethnographic fieldwork conducted between 2006 and 2008, among lower-income and middle-class women in

1 All translations are mine unless otherwise noted.

Belo Horizonte, southeastern Brazil,² a city 3000 km away from Simara but nevertheless still close to the perfumes and cosmetics she resells.

In this article, I argue that the context of social inequality that so pervasively characterizes Brazilian society sets the stage for the production of bodies and beauty. As will be shown, different forms of body work are used to gain visibility and to stress and/or erase social differences.

I will first set out the complex interrelation between Brazilians' preoccupation with the body and physical appearance and the context of social inequality in which the production of beauty takes place. I will then move on to explore the complex entanglements of beauty, vanity, visibility and social inequality through an analysis of the narratives of two women who earn their living by working with the production of beauty. Throughout this text I pay special attention to social class and to issues concerning beauty and the access to and control of material and symbolic resources (Skeggs, 2005:973).

Social inequality, consumption and the reading of bodies

I may as well begin with the same story I told some of my informants, to introduce them to the subject of my ongoing research. It is about Meire,³ a then nineteen-year-old woman I met in 1997 when I was doing fieldwork for a project on Brazilian soap operas or *telenovelas*. Meire worked as a live-in babysitter in the same building where I was staying. Six days a week, from early morning until bedtime, she took care of Clara, a one-year-old baby. In our conversations, Meire was very aware of class differences. In talking about her consumption habits and her intense social life, she marked her social positioning as being different from that of her colleague babysitters who also lived and worked in the same upper-middle-class building.

One evening, I met Meire sitting by herself on one of the benches in the building's playground. Something that happened in the elevator earlier that day had upset her. In the building where we lived, just as many other

2 Ethnographic material was gathered during different periods of fieldwork, between 2006 and 2008. Besides participant observation, I have also conducted several interviews with self-identified middle-class and lower-income women (university students, secretaries, teachers, cleaners, maids) and with diverse professionals of the beauty industry (plastic surgeons, hairdressers, body-oriented therapists). The research on which this article was based was funded by the Swedish Research Council (Vetenskapsrådet). I thank the reviewers of *Vibrant* for their comments on previous versions of this text.

3 In order to guarantee the anonymity of my informants I use pseudonyms throughout this article.

residential upper- and middle-class buildings all over Brazil, there were two kinds of elevators: the “social elevator” (or *elevador social*, which in our building was decorated with marble floor and mirrors) and the “service elevator” (*elevador de serviço*, which was not decorated at all). All the inhabitants of the building could use either of the two elevators, but there were also rules (some explicit and some implicit) concerning the ways the elevators should be used by servants and non-residents. An explicit rule was that the service elevator should be used to transport things (like groceries, furniture, suitcases and the like). A not-so-explicit rule was that workers, cleaners, maids and nannies as well as people coming from the outside whose errands were not of a social kind – such as electricians, plumbers, food deliverers, should take the service elevator.⁴ That day, Meire had taken the social elevator.

On her way up she met a neighbor, a woman in her fifties who asked Meire if the other elevator was out of function. When Meire answered that it was working, the woman remarked that Meire should in fact have used the service elevator. It became clear to Meire that this woman was not seeing her as an equal. On the contrary, this neighbor recognized Meire as someone who had no place among marble and mirrors. Meire got upset. She told me she answered the neighbor’s comment by asking, “Why are you saying this to me? Is it because I am a mere domestic servant (*uma empregadinha*)? Deep inside our bodies, you and I stink just as much. The only difference is that you have money. But, deep inside our bodies, we both stink!”

There are, in Brazilian Portuguese, several expressions similar to the one used by Meire. Two possible examples are “Underneath the skin the color of our blood is the same,” “Beneath the surface, we’re all alike.”⁵

As Barbosa (1992) and DaMatta (1978) point out, expressions of this kind are generally used by a person who experiences that her rights as a human being have been denied, generally because of her (supposedly) inferior social status. Such expressions emphasize the body as a shared biological ground, a common denominator among human beings and a sign of human (if not legal then at least moral) equality. When used, their intended effect is to point out that people who occupy different positions in the hierarchies of class and race should nevertheless receive the same kind of treatment, and be seen as morally equal.

4 This kind of discrimination is forbidden by Brazilian law.

5 I use the latter expression as the title for my ongoing research project.

It is not a mere coincidence that these expressions are used in Brazil, the country with the most unequal income distribution in Latin America (Luna and Klein 2006:240) and one of the most unequal societies in the world (Valle Silva 2003; Vinod 2006). As Luna and Klein (2006:241) suggest, in Brazil, “despite the continual decrease in the variation in health and education indices between the richest and the poorest members of the society, the levels of inequality in income and resources remain persistently high and show little change.”

Of the economically active people in the country, 60 percent earn less than US\$ 150 a month (Bethell 2000). In 1999, 34 percent of the Brazilian population (approximately 54 million persons) was considered poor. Of these, 22 million were considered indigent (Luna and Klein 2006:209-210).

The poverty encountered in many parts of the country stands in stark contrast to the wealth of upper- and middle-class neighborhoods. The richest 20 percent of the Brazilian population earns twenty-nine times more than the poorest, and the top 10 percent of the population accounted, in 2001, for 50 percent of the all the salaried income in the country (Luna and Klein 2006:209; World Bank 2002).

Brazil also ranks high when it comes to preoccupation with the body, beauty and physical appearance. In 2007, more than 700 thousand persons underwent some kind of plastic surgery in the country. It was estimated that in 2001, with a population then of about 180 million inhabitants 207 persons out of 100 thousand had a cosmetic intervention. During the same period it was estimated that in the US, the country that ranks number one when it comes to absolute numbers of performed cosmetic surgeries, 185 persons out of 100 thousand underwent some kind of cosmetic surgery (Veja 2002). These numbers would certainly be higher if less intrusive procedures such as laser treatments or injections of Botox and other substances were included in the statistics (Veja 2008).

In 2007 alone, Brazilians spent US\$ 22 billions on hygiene and cosmetic products making the country the third largest consumer of cosmetic products in the world (ABIHPEC 2008). Still according to these statistics, Brazil is the third largest consumer of diet medicine in the world (abril.com 2008).

It is estimated that approximately 1.6 million women work as door-to-door sellers of beauty products produced by well-known Brazilian and international manufacturers of cosmetics and personal care products (ABIHPEC 2007a). The president of the Brazilian Toiletry, Perfumery and Cosmetic

Association (ABIHPEC) refers to these 1.6 million women as an “army of beauty soldiers.” As De Ferreira (2008:36) points out, this army of beauty has surpassed the number of soldiers in the Brazilian Army and Navy. It is also important to point out that the majority of women in this army of beauty have other badly paid jobs which they try to supplement by working as resellers of beauty products. This estimated 1.6 million accounts for women who are registered resellers. As I came to know during fieldwork, there are women who resell the products of a reseller. For instance, Sabrina, a fifty-year-old woman who earned her living cleaning the homes of middle-class households, resold the beauty products of a registered reseller. As a re-reseller she divided her sales commission with the woman for whom she resold – 40 percent for Sabrina, 60 percent for the woman. “I earn just enough to buy some products for me and my daughters,” Sabrina said.

Still according to the ABIHPEC (2007 b), lower-income women spend, in proportion to the salary they earn, more of their income on hygiene and cosmetic products than women with higher incomes.⁶

How come the body and its appearance occupy such a huge place in the hearts and minds of so many Brazilians? In what follows, I argue that Brazilians’ preoccupation with the body and physical appearance reflects and remakes the problems and vulnerabilities of Brazilian society.

In their everyday lives Brazilians experience a climate of increasing social segregation. One does not have to talk more than five minutes with an urban middle-class Brazilian before one gets into the subject of urban violence and pervasive social insecurity. Every person has a story to tell – either about personal experiences or about how an acquaintance or a friend of a friend experienced violence up close. Caldeira (1996, 2000) illustrates how the organization of urban space reflects and reinforces this climate of segregation and insecurity. Constantly avoiding potentially dangerous encounters with socially and economically excluded people, middle and upper classes isolate themselves with the help of security systems, gated communities, fences, barbwire and alarms. Meanwhile, they still depend on the poor for manual services and everyday tasks such as babysitting, cooking, cleaning and washing. An ambiguous relationship of dependency and avoidance, intimacy and

6 The regulated minimum salary in Brazil is, since March 2008, R\$415 (approximately US\$196). Six kilos of meat were estimated to cost R\$52.56 and seven liters of milk R\$14.18 in September 2007 (in <http://www.portalbrasil.net/salariominimo.htm>, accessed October 6, 2008).

distrust is established between people from different socio-economic backgrounds (Caldeira 1996:311). Within this context of pervasive social inequality, Brazilians' everyday lives are marked by the constant reading of bodies: Who is/could be/looks dangerous? Who should be avoided?

Poor working-class women are painfully aware of these readings. Sandra, a thirty-two-year-old woman, owner of a beauty salon in one of Belo Horizonte's oldest *favelas*, explains her experiences:

“You go to a fancy shopping mall, like the one that is close to this neighborhood. Once you're in there the securities will look at you, observe all of your steps. It's as if you had a 'P' on your forehead. A 'P' that stands for 'poor.' And everybody sees it. The securities follow you, observe you, and make sure that you won't feel at ease.”

In a study of the understanding and practicing of citizenship in Brazil, Holston (2008) points to the fact, also acknowledged by other studies (Barbosa 1992; DaMatta 1978; Goldstein 2003; Velho and Alvito 1996), that the country has a national citizenship that is universally inclusive in membership but utterly unequal in its application. In other words, different kinds of treatments are applied to different kinds of persons.

As rapidly industrializing countries tend to adopt high consumption standards and as consumption is identified as a model of happiness and well-being (Bauman 2007), the act of consuming goods and certain kinds of practices becomes a means to claim social visibility.

Dowdney's study about children and youth in organized armed violence in the city of Rio (2007:77) reinforces this idea. The economically marginalized are just as affected by intensified consumption as other socio-economic groups: “For many children growing up in poor communities, the ability to own a pair of Nike shoes, designer clothes and a gold chain is worth risking your life for.” In a context of social inequality, consumption comes tightly connected to struggles for citizenship.

In a study of black youth culture in the city of Salvador, Brazil, Sansone (2003:92) suggests that “consumption has been turned into an instrument to gain civil rights (*cidadania*) and consuming (conspicuously) makes one feel like a *cidadão* (citizen).” While in the best of all possible worlds the configuration of citizen-consumers might lead people to bring a consumer mentality to their relations with politicians and the state – as a consumer you demand

a certain quality from the products and services you buy (Cohen 2001), in an unequal country such as Brazil this configuration might imply that citizenship is determined by one's status as a consumer – exclusion from consumption leads to frustration and hinders participation in society (Machado-Borges 2007).

Consumption in general, and consumption through the body (diets, fashions) and around the body (visits to spas, beauty treatments, cosmetic surgeries), associated with education and work, are symbolical and material means to position oneself within contemporary Brazilian social hierarchies of gender, class and race.⁷ The idea that physical appearance can denote class, with the implication that modifications in one's physical appearance can be seen as markers of social status extends throughout Brazil. The body and the home, as anthropologist Roberto DaMatta once suggested (1978:155) become the ultimate arenas for establishing social hierarchies: beauty, cleanliness and other easily naturalized aspects such as tastes, preferences and feelings, work as markers of admission into desirable groups and of differentiation from undesirable ones (Bourdieu 1984; Skeggs 2004).

So, the question presents itself: if the body works as an arena for establishing and perpetrating social hierarchies, does the use of techniques to modify it work as a way to widen (or diminish) the gap between women from different classes; a way to establish and perpetrate or maybe even question or challenge distinctions among women?⁸

Vanity, visibility and social inequality in the narrative and practices of beauty workers

Consumption focused on the body is, in many parts of southeastern Brazil, referred to in terms of production. One can say that a person is “produzida” (produced), meaning dressed up, styled and nice. I have elsewhere (Machado-Borges 2008a) discussed “produced bodies,” i.e., bodies that go through

7 See O'Dougherty (2002) for a study of consumption among members of the Brazilian middle class.

8 Of course women are not the only ones who work with beauty and worry about their bodies and physical appearance. However, they make up the largest share of consumers of plastic surgeries and cosmetic products. It is estimated that 70 to 80 percent of the persons who undergo plastic surgeries are women. My exclusive focus on women was an attempt to circumscribe the project's ethnographic sample. Had I had the opportunity, I would have expanded my sample to include male informants and their opinions and experiences about physical modifications.

a variety of treatments (surgical or not) that supposedly lead to improved modification. Throughout fieldwork I gradually became interested in paying more attention to a network of agents (hidden and visible laborers) involved in the process of bodily modification. Bodies are being produced, maintained and cared for not only by plastic surgeons but also – and mainly – by the work of nurses, facial- and body therapists, hairdressers, manicurists, pedicurists, maids, sellers of beauty products and of an enormous variety of treatments that combine grooming with caring.

It is to the particular narratives of Sandra and Simone that I now turn, and through them to an investigation of the entanglement of beauty, vanity, visibility and social inequality.

Both Sandra and Simone are hairdressers who have their own beauty salons. As will be shown, despite their similar class origins, their narratives present important differences with respect to the social class of their working places and their clientele.

Sandra was thirty-two when I first met her in 2006. She described herself as being a light brown brunette (“*morena clara*”). Her hair was dark blond with highlights and chemically straightened. Sandra was married and had no children at the time. Simone was a thirty-six-year-old white brunette with wavy brown hair. She was married to a truck driver and mother of two children. They both lived in different parts of Belo Horizonte, the city where I conducted fieldwork for this and previous research (Machado-Borges 2003).

Like Brasília, Brazil’s capital, Belo Horizonte was planned and built to become the capital of the state of Minas Gerais. The city was inaugurated in 1897. It has today a population of approximately 2.5 million people spread through a mountainous landscape. It is estimated that about 25 percent of this population, i.e., more than 500 thousand people, live in *favelas* and *aglomerados* – low-income urban settlements, most of them situated in the periphery of the city (Libânio 2004). In the south-central part of the city, a few meters away from upper-middle-class and middle-class areas, one finds two of the major and oldest settlements of the city, both of them built on and around mountains: the *Serra* (Mountain Range) and the *Barragem* (Dam). In 2002, it was estimated that the population of these two settlements was 72,116 people (Libânio 2004:61). According to recent studies aiming at writing down the history of urban settlements (Cruz 2007; Pereira 2002), both *favelas* had their origins in small farms situated on the outskirts of larger farms

or factories. The first dwellers in these settlements were former slaves⁹ and lower-income workers. With increasing urban migration,¹⁰ the city received people from rural areas who moved to the capital in search of better opportunities and settled in these neighborhoods. As the city expanded, these two *favelas* gradually became surrounded by middle- and upper-class buildings and houses. The contrast in standards of urbanization between poor and wealthy neighborhoods is astonishing.

Looking through her kitchen window, Sandra, the owner of a tiny but always crowded beauty salon located in the front room of her own house situated in the *Barragem favela*, let me know that she was aware of this contrast. Jokingly using terms that would bring to mind those of a real estate broker she commented, “Look at my privileged view. From this window I can see the poor and the preppy sides of the city.”¹¹ And indeed, by looking to the right from Sandra’s window I could see the artificial dam that separates the *favela* from fancy upper-middle-class skyscrapers. To the left I could see the smaller houses of the *favela*, tightly built into each other, in a variety of forms, angles and materials.

Sandra was born in the countryside and moved to Belo Horizonte with her family when she was a little girl. After some time, her family settled in the *Barragem*. Sandra still lives and works in this same neighborhood. The house where she now lives with her husband is, by local standards, very comfortable and well-off.

As previously mentioned, Simone’s story has many points in common with Sandra’s. She also came to Belo Horizonte with her family at the age of seven. Her family settled in the *Serra favela* and, through the years, worked their way out of there. Simone lives in a lower-middle-class neighborhood and owns a salon in what Sandra would have called “a noble area” of the city: a middle-class neighborhood situated a few blocks away from the *Serra favela* where she once lived.

Simone’s salon has two floors, and is divided into four separate spaces – one for waiting, the second one for washing, the third one for blow-drying,

9 Slavery was abolished in 1888 in Brazil.

10 Nowadays, according to Luna and Klein (2006:226), only 19 percent of the Brazilian population lives in rural areas.

11 In Portuguese: “A minha vista é exclusiva. Da minha janela eu vejo tanto o lado pobre como o lado nobre da cidade!”

dyeing and cutting, and the fourth one for treatments that deserve more privacy (waxing, massaging and facial treatments). The salon, whose façade is made of thick glass bricks, has a huge sign bearing its name. The entrance of Simone's salon is constantly locked, and clients have to beep themselves in, through a door bell. Simone and her business partner have more than ten female employees who clean the salon and wash, condition, dye, cut, blow-dry, wax and massage clients. It is not unusual to see a woman being attended to by two or three workers at the same time – hands, hair and feet are taken care of by three different persons.

Just like Sandra, Simone started working at a quite young age. She wanted to have a profession but did not have time or money to spend on studies. So she decided to take a hairdresser course – “It's a short course and you're ready to start working after a few months.” Simone reckons she has been working with beauty for seventeen years, eleven of which have been in her own salon.

Like that of so many women who work with the production of beauty, both Sandra's and Simone's decisions to work as hairdressers are embedded within a certain socioeconomic context – they could not afford to be away from the job market, so they could not choose a profession that required several years of study. They were also aware of certain market demands and planned their careers accordingly.

My conversations with the coordinator of popular and low-priced professionalizing courses for beauty workers reinforce this idea:

“When we announce certain courses, there are women sleeping over night at the school's entrance just to make sure that they get to register themselves. There is an enormous demand for courses in the area that we name 'personal image' because they know that once they've finished the course they increase their chances of getting a job.”

Moreover, as Sansone (2003) points out, the educational level of young low income adults is higher than that of their parents, they are acquainted (generally through the media) with the status symbols of the upper and middle class but their access to these symbols is still restricted. Their work positions are unstable and there is a stronger reluctance to accept unskilled, manual work. For women, one of the main alternatives is, as Sansone (2003:36) puts it, “a conspicuous use of the body, charm, and beauty (or knowledge of how to create beauty) either by working as seamstresses, manicurists, or

hairdressers (beauty parlors are springing up like mushrooms everywhere in Brazil) or by ‘catching a man.’” For women like Sandra and Simone, working with the production of beauty was a way to achieve a certain economic and symbolic autonomy: they manage to earn money on a regular basis, and, in contrast to many other women who take low-wage jobs in the homes of wealthier families,¹² they are their own bosses.

In a study about the constructions of black identities in “ethnic salons,” i.e., beauty salons directed to an Afro-Brazilian clientele, in the city of Belo Horizonte, Gomes (2006) presents a series of interviews with low-income women where the topic of career options is discussed. The way Gomes’s informants talk about the reasons why they chose to work with beauty are very similar to – if not the same as – the ones told by Sandra and Simone.

Put within a context of explicit social inequality, the link between the production of beauty and class becomes quite evident. In the case of Sandra, Simone, and the “army of beauty soldiers” who resell beauty products throughout Brazil, the production of beauty can no longer be seen as an activity superfluous to survival.

In what follows, I will take a closer look at these women’s understandings of their own practices: their salons and their clienteles illustrate how beauty, when produced within a context of social inequality, comes entangled with struggles for authorization and legitimacy and a search for social visibility.

Where can I park my car? On struggles for authorization and legitimacy

In spite of coming from quite similar backgrounds, Sandra and Simone had different ways of thinking when they decided who they would like to beautify. When Simone told me her story, I could notice in her narrative a clear plot about change from poverty to a more middle-class life style with which she seemed to identify:

“I have never felt ashamed to tell people that I lived in a *favela* and that I worked in ‘family households.’¹³ People used to say ‘Oh, I couldn’t tell! You don’t

12 According to Vidal (2006), in 2001, the country had almost 6 million registered domestic workers.

13 In Portuguese, “*casa de família*” is a euphemism generally used among poor working class women to say that they worked as maids in the houses of wealthier families. The term carries also a moral

look like...’ And I say, ‘I don’t look like what?’ People have many stereotypes about *favela* dwellers. And I think that sometimes people in *favelas* start behaving like these stereotypes. They create a certain barrier. Like we also create them in our everyday lives. So we have people in the *favela* with a feeling of anger and resentment, and we stand on the other side, totally afraid of confronting this barrier. I know that most people who live in *favelas* come from the countryside and move to the city in search of a better life. But it is a mess there. You live in a crowded place; the houses are glued into one another. Can you survive in a place like that? My parents had such a faith in life and they really believed ‘Today our lives are no good, but they will become better.’ Sometimes I wonder why some people get involved with violence and misery, while others, who also live in *favelas*, don’t. Is it one’s personality, or one’s upbringing? I was seven-years-old and both my mom and dad left for work and I was alone with my younger brothers, looking after them. I saw drugs and violence from up close but somehow our family was never affected by them. Both my mother and father had great faith in life. They worked hard and they had a dream. My mother used to say ‘This is not a place to raise my children.’”

Simone worked first as employee in different salons until she managed to open her own business in a middle-class neighborhood, in partnership with another woman.

Sandra, on the other hand, made a different decision:

“I first thought I would have my salon outside of this neighborhood. Because, since most poor people also have black ancestors, and Afro hair, I thought, ‘I will open my salon in a noble area because I will earn money and I won’t exhaust myself working all day long straightening other people’s hair.’ Because you know, those that have straight hair want to have curls; those who have curls want their hair straight. But I saw that salons in noble areas do not always have lots of clients. And I saw that here, in this neighborhood, there are people who sometimes choose not to eat in order to fix their hair. I would have a nice clientele here and I wouldn’t starve. I wouldn’t go through tough times.”

Very *en passant*, Sandra links social class with bodily practices, and hair texture with beauty ideals and Brazilian discourses of race and gender (Caldwell 2004; Gomes 2006).

undertone that classifies the person’s working place.

Hairstyles, as Gimlin (2002:40) puts it, are often used to convey status and indicate class since they are the materialization of certain tastes and aesthetic preferences. The position of lower-income women who work with the production of beauty is therefore a difficult one: through their work they are supposed to inscribe certain values upon bodies. Sometimes, depending on their clientele, they might not be recognized as having the values that they themselves claim they can create. Sandra was very aware of the dynamics of power and status at play in the production of beauty. By telling me about the case of the maid with beautiful hair, Sandra went straight to this point:¹⁴

“As I told you: most of the people here [in the *favela*] work in ‘family houses.’ So, when a maid comes to your home with a hairstyle that is more beautiful than yours, you will say, ‘Gee, Maria, your hair looks beautiful today! Where did you do it?’

‘I did it up hill [in the *favela*].’

‘Really?’ That is: ‘How come you did it up hill? Why doesn’t my hairdresser do the same thing? I pay her a lot...’

You understand? But I really think it is awkward to have madams in my salon. I prefer to have people from my own circle. Because they arrive here...like the other day, when a madam asked, ‘Where can I park my car?’

‘Anywhere! Just pick a spot right here, in the middle of nowhere!’ [laughter]”

As mentioned earlier, consumption in general, and consumption through and around the body, are symbolical and material means to position oneself within contemporary Brazilian hierarchies of gender, class and race. In the particular case described here, the production of beauty is definitely connected to power struggles. It is a way to stress differences, to create and maintain social distance.

The production of beauty might also lead to struggles concerning authority and legitimacy – do women coming from different social classes agree on the same definitions of taste and beauty? And even if they do agree on a definition of beauty, are women whose access to material resources is limited really capable of materializing beauty in someone else? Once more, Sandra’s commentaries and experiences are incisive:

14 Sandra was a walking example of Bakhtin’s (1970[1963]) polyphony and/or *heteroglossia*. She often colored her statements and opinions with examples of small dialogues which she reproduced and commented on using different voices and intonations.

“There is really this kind of prejudice here: ‘Poor people should look ugly, and I, the *patroa* (the female employer), must look beautiful, because I can afford to do that. I have the money to pay for that.’ There are some rich women that come up here and ask me, ‘How much for your progressive hairstyling?’ [The term for a hair treatment with formalin (among other ingredients) that straightens the hair and the hairstyling lasts for three to four months]. ‘Your hair is short, so it costs 60.’

And the woman goes, ‘Gee!’ That is: ‘Is it going to work? Is she really able to do it properly? Because it is so cheap...I think I’d rather pay 170 because I don’t trust her. She is too cheap.’”

Through this dialogue Sandra illustrates what Bourdieu (1984:473) called an “attributive judgment,” i.e., the practice of class-ifying someone by speaking to her in a certain way, and thereby marking one’s position as belonging to another class.

While Sandra’s encounters with middle-class women are retold as moments of confrontation when her authority as a hair professional is questioned and challenged, Simone’s encounters with her middle-class clientele, because they take place in a middle-class environment, seem to go more smoothly. Through the years, Simone has learned to meet her middle-class clientele with a performance that combines two useful tools that seem to circulate well in middle-class arenas: expertise and emotional work.

Using her register of expert, Simone started an indirect dialogue with Sandra. Do cheaper hair products have the same effect as expensive ones? She was telling me about the immense variety of beauty products available in the market:

“Take, for instance, all the products to straighten hair that contain ammonia. You can buy some for 15 or 20 *Reais*, and there are others that cost between 80 and 100 *Reais*. Do they straighten hairs? Yes they do, but there is a difference in the way these products are made. It’s like with minerals – you can have a precious stone that is cut and one that is not. They have the same components, but cheaper products can be rougher. That is the difference, in my opinion.”

Using her register of emotional worker she commented:

“When a client wants to have her hair cut, when she wants to have her make-up done, there is always something else behind it, something other than just the physical image.”

Simone sees her work as having a social and psychological character:

“There are clients who arrive in the salon and want you to talk to them. Through the years you learn how to identify different kinds of personalities by looking at the person, listening to her tone of voice...and then you grow in your work and hopefully you also become a better person.”

The combination of expertise and emotional work allows Simone to see herself if not as socially equal to her clients, then at least as being in the position to help them with an important aspect of their lives. When successfully performed, expertise and emotional work make clients feel that they are being heard, pampered and seen.

Who does what?

Despite their coming from different social classes, the core clientele of Simone's and Sandra's salons, that is, the ones who frequent their salons with assiduity are women who generally have passed their thirties. These women, both Simone and Sandra explained, have jobs and, due to their age, have to take better care of themselves.¹⁵

Both salons have more clients at the end of the week (especially on Fridays and Saturdays) and during yearly celebrations like Christmas, New Year's Eve and Carnival. Among Simone's clients, those who had more economically stable situations also had regular patterns for visiting the salon. Every third month they cut split ends, once a month they dye and condition their hair, wax underarms, legs, and maybe bikini lines. Every second week they have their pedicure, while their hands are manicured every week. Many of Sandra's clients are not able to make such regular visits, though Sandra did mention the same time schedule for these bodily practices. She also added that because many of her clients work in family houses, they prefer to have a pedicure rather than a manicure. According to Sandra, they think it is a waste of money to have a manicure on Saturday and then have to wash and clean, ruining their nails, on Monday, so they prefer to invest money on a pedicure because when they work, their feet are not as exposed to water as are their hands. So they get more for their money. As Lock and Farquhar

¹⁵ It is beyond the scope of this article to discuss the issue of women and ageing.

(2007:241) suggest, bodily practices are regulated by everyday life's rhythms and tasks, and anchored within certain spaces.

Another frequently asked practice among women in both salons was to have one's hair straightened (either chemically or through hairstyling). As Sandra commented: "I've straightened the hairs of so many women that I think I lost my sense of smell. Because of all the chemicals, you know."

Here we return to the question of hair texture and discourses of gender and race. Historically, discrimination on the basis of race and color is illegal in Brazil. However, a closer look at the Brazilian situation reveals a dilemma: on the one hand, there are no polarized races, but a complex taxonomy that classifies people according to their appearances rather than their genealogies. As Gomes (2006:22) notes, hair texture and skin color are some of the criteria to determine whether a person is black, white or of any other color gradation.¹⁶ The myth of racial democracy, i.e., the harmonious mixture of Africans, Amerindians and Europeans, is still alive and works many times as a trademark of Brazilianness (Fry 2000). On the other hand, statistics (IBGE 2002) show that white Brazilians are still far more educated and earn much more than the nonwhite population. The average income of the nonwhite population, according to the 2001 census, was a little less than half that of the whites. So, in spite of a strong belief in the myth of racial democracy, nonwhites remain poorer and less socially mobile than whites. Nonwhite skin color, frizzy or nappy hair can be seen as a burden, an obstacle to be transposed (Goldstein 2003).

Even if race is a basic dimension of social hierarchies, it was not openly

16 The Brazilian population census is based on self-identification when it comes to the criteria of race/skin color. This is the way the informants mentioned in this paper inscribed themselves within the Brazilian color/racial gradation:

Meire, 19, babysitter: *morena clara*. *Morena* is an ambiguous term that may signify brown or brunette. Here I translate *morena clara* to light brown/brunette.

Sandra, 32, owner of the beauty salon in the Barragem favela: "light brown/brunette." Her hair was dark blond with highlights, when we last met in July 2008.

Simone, 36, owner of the beauty salon in a middle-class neighborhood: white brunette with brown, wavy hair. Her business partner was also called Simone. In order to avoid confusions, clients and employees used to call them Simone, the brunette (my informant), and the blond Simone.

Suzana, 32, journalist and regular client at Sandra's described herself as black and commented that some people would describe her as light brown/brunette but that she would correct them and say she was black. Last time we met in July 2008 she had just had a progressive hairstyling and the color of her hair was light brown.

Sonia, 35, cleaner, described herself as black. Her hair was chemically straightened (no progressive hairstyling) and short.

discussed as an issue in Sandra's and Simone's salons.¹⁷ Contrary to a few existing salons in Belo Horizonte (Gomes 2006), where blackness is discussed and a wider variety of hairstyles and hair kinds is allowed, in Sandra's and Simone's salons, hair was often permanently or momentarily straightened and this practice was discussed not in terms of race but in terms of consumption, i.e., of having the material means to access to symbolical resources. The link between straight hair and a certain kind of raced and classed femininity (closely associated with symbolic whiteness) was enacted in these women's practices but not explicitly uttered with words.¹⁸

Social class with highlights of gender and race was, on the other hand, a constantly discussed topic.

While some of these bodily practices were described as being a part of a woman's vanity rituals, there were other bodily rituals that were regarded almost as moral obligations like taking daily showers, keeping fingernails and toenails clean and neat, and shaving or waxing underarms.

"To wax or shave one's underarms is an obligation," Sandra told me with vehemence. "If you don't...it's like a crime. People will think you're crazy. Really crazy. If you don't, you're out of reality!"

As Boddy (2006; 2007), Durham (2006) and Collins (2007) have suggested from other ethnographic material, oftentimes moral value is juxtaposed with hygiene practices and tethered with gender.

Talking about beauty

Although an unshaved underarm or leg seem to be beyond Sandra's and Simone's imagination and were thought of not as part of beautifying practices but rather as hygienic ones, and despite acknowledging quite similar schedules for the maintenance and production of beauty, neither Sandra nor Simone admitted to being a committed follower of beauty imperatives. In fact, both drew a line separating beauty ideals that circulate in the media from everyday-life beauty concepts.

This is the way Sandra discusses the subject:

17 See Goldstein (2005) and Sheriff (2000) for a discussion on how racial matters are discussed or avoided in everyday situations.

18 I have elsewhere discussed in more detail the issue of bodily modification and race (Machado-Borges, 2008b).

“People in the media criticize even top models. They told Gisele Bündchen [Brazil’s most famous and best-paid top model] that she had cellulite. They saw cellulite on her! Then we start to notice these things. We start to learn that that is called cellulite, that ‘everything that is out of place is a ‘left-over.’ Because you see lots of magazines, lots of television, and you might not want to follow a beauty pattern, but whether you want it or not it is there and you are aware of it. You learn that fat is ugly and that thin is beautiful, that saggy breasts are ugly and gravity-defying ones are beautiful... The beauty ideal in the media is someone like Gisele Bündchen. But that is not really the ideal in the streets. ...I don’t think there is one beauty pattern. At least not here in the hill. We’re all so mixed and blended. There is a lot of diversity, lots of different beauties.”

Sandra makes a clear-cut division separating media and street ideals and tastes. The ideals circulating through Brazilian media seem to offer less variety than the ones circulating in everyday life.

Like Sandra, Simone also separates media patterns from everyday-life patterns. Just like the teachers of professionalizing courses on beauty with whom I talked, Simone offered an alternative approach to beauty and the body. Instead of emphasizing the beauty of a person as a whole by saying, for instance, that someone is beautiful, they divided the person’s body into parts that could be considered especially beautiful. The idea promoted is that every person has at least one bodily part that is beautiful and should be emphasized. This fragmentation of the body (Lock 2007; Sharp 2000) into potentially beautiful parts may be interpreted as a reflection of discourses that circulate within the domains of medicine and especially of cosmetic surgery, where certain bodily parts are valued as commodities to be bought or capital to be exposed. Using her register of expert and emotional worker Simone comments:

“There is a beauty pattern that comes from the media. Every time I can manage, I try to combat this ideal and take it away from my clients’ heads and mostly from young adolescents’ heads. In my opinion, every human being is beautiful. Sometimes you meet people with an aggressive, even ugly visual. But then you start looking at her and you see something beautiful. You see, for instance, that this person has wonderful eyebrows. So I try to valorize the beautiful things they have. I don’t work reproducing one kind of beauty pattern.”

Indeed, the effort to add value to certain bodily parts seems to be quite a widespread practice even in other parts of Brazil. Simara, one of the

participants in the documentary about vanity mentioned at the beginning of this article (Maciel 2002), expresses this idea when she talks about her pride in having a gold crown on her front teeth:

“One day, my mother, that is, the woman who raised me, promised that she would give me three grams of gold so that I could make myself a ring. I was glad when I heard that, but I was already interested in having a gold crown on my front teeth. I thought that if I had this gold crown I would become more beautiful. Because I was a little girl that no one noticed... [Nowadays] every person that looks at me says that my beauty is in my teeth.” (Excerpt from an interview in Maciel 2002)

Situated within the cultural and economic context of gold-digging settlements (Larreta 2003), a gold crown (which in other parts of the country would not necessarily be considered as beautiful) works in Simara’s case as a symbol of social and economic status.

Comparing my material to that presented in a doctoral dissertation about notions of body and health among upper-class women who frequent one of São Paulo’s most fashionable and expensive gyms (Berger 2006), the intersection of beauty ideals and class became even more evident. Like my informants, when Berger’s upper-class female informants talked about beauty ideals, they referred to the beauty pattern of the woman who is fit and thin that extends throughout Brazilian media. Even if Berger’s upper-class informants counterbalanced this pattern with commentaries about inner beauty or alternative beauty ideals, they consciously and determinedly strived, through their assiduous training practices, towards reproducing on their bodies the beauty pattern legitimated and circulated by the media.

I was commenting about this difference with Suzana, a thirty-two-year-old journalist, informant and resident of the *Barragem*, who is part of a small but steadily growing group of activists who work to improve life conditions in the *favela*. Suzana offered me an interesting explanation:

“Isn’t it because these ideals are closer to these women? I mean, they have the money to go to fashionable places that appear in the media. At the gym they meet people who come from the media and who are working out, together with them. So for them this media ideal is much closer to their lives. For poor people this ideal is more like a dream, it’s almost beyond their imagination.”

As Del Priori (2000:92) suggests, the worshiped beautiful body that circulates in the media is a classed body, affordable only for those who have the means (i.e., time and money) to invest on certain bodily practices.

It is nevertheless important to stress here that lower-income women do relate to and do appropriate messages and products that come from the Brazilian media flow. Both Simone and Sandra had to watch, at least once a week, some of the popular *telenovelas* – prime-time Brazilian soap operas broadcast six days a week by different television channels – in order to catch up with fashion trends: colors, clothes, haircuts and make ups. As I have discussed elsewhere (Machado-Borges 2003), what is in the media’s eye is considered to be accepted and legitimate. However, the way people repeat, appropriate and reiterate messages and consumption practices coming from the media flow, varies according to context and to one’s social and economic positioning.¹⁹

Still exploring what is at stake when Brazilian women produce beauty, in the next and final section I discuss the link between production of beauty and the search for social visibility.

The fashionable woman with no wardrobe – On attempts to become visible

Due to its pervasive social inequality, Brazil is a society where being recognized as a subject, a citizen, or simply as someone who counts, is not self-evident for the majority of the population. The sense of invisibility, of being “looked through” (Honneth and Margalit 2001) or of “not being able to do or say anything that has an effect on others” (Jackson 1998:17 here in Dalsgaard 2004:140), is a painful experience to which many if not most low-income, marginalized Brazilians can relate (see, for instance, Dalsgaard 2004; Dimenstein 2006). As Honneth and Margalit (2001:114) suggest, the act of

19 When studying the reception of Brazilian *telenovelas*, I noticed that middle-class viewers generally engaged with these programs as a source of pleasure, leisure and information, and as a means to try to reinforce or improve their positions by attempting to make their lives and their bodies – to quote an informant – as “beautiful as in the novelas.” For people who lived under harsher material conditions and who had to confront prejudice and oppression on a daily basis, *telenovelas*, besides being a source of pleasant leisure and information were also a way for many of them to find strategies (that sometimes succeeded, sometimes not) to make their voices heard, and to make themselves visible and recognizable as complex subjects (Machado-Borges 2004). Several of these strategies are related to consumption and the appropriation and circulation of legitimated goods and practices.

looking through someone implies a primary identification of that someone as not being worth recognition, not being worth a simple interaction. One's social value is acknowledged or denied in interactions – when some people look at or through other people.

Brighenti (2007:324) suggests that visibility lies at the intersection of the “domains of aesthetics (relations of *perception*) and politics (relations of *power*).” On the one hand, visibility is associated with recognition (Fraser 1995; Honneth and Margalit 2001; Taylor 1992) – the acknowledgement of the social worth of an individual or of a group of individuals. Visibility is also connected to representations. In this sense, it “breeds identification and makes it possible” (Brighenti 2007:333). The role of media in the production and spread of beauty patterns illustrates that. Visibility, still following Brighenti (2007:335), can also be connected to disciplining, surveillance and control (Foucault 1977; Scott 1990).

Depending on the social context, visibility can be both empowering (if leading to recognition) and disempowering (when articulated with surveillance and control). As we will see, the ambivalences of this concept are played out in my informants' practices. An emphasis on the body and on bodily modification can be a possible means for some people to make themselves visible. Primarily concerned with visibility as recognition, their bodily practices are also related to representations of legitimated beauty ideals and to the regulation and control of tastes and practices.

Writing about sterilization practices among low-income women in northeastern Brazil, Dalsgaard (2004:166) suggested that her informants “turned the metaphorical relationship between body and social order upside down. They wanted to structure and bound their bodies and houses in order to give structure and order to their entire lives.”²⁰ A similar argument can be developed to explain the entanglement of vanity, visibility and social inequality in my ethnographic material. As Durham (2005:208) suggests, “The body is a site of social making, and not just mapping.”

Once again Sandra had a story to tell:

“I have a client that has no wardrobe in her home. She stuffs her clothes inside boxes and things like that. It's a mess. But if you see her, you can't tell. (...) She

20 Holston's (1991; 2008) study on the auto-construction of houses among poor working class Brazilians is yet another illustration of that.

has everything that is fashion. But she hasn't got a wardrobe. She has lots of clothes and she is really stylish. But no wardrobe."

"And why do you think she does that?" I asked.

"It is because...women dress for other women. It's a competition. For instance, she is the member of a certain church. So she has to be the most beautiful woman in that church. She can't stand seeing another woman wearing a pair of heels that are higher than hers; she has to have the highest."²¹

Mustafa's (2006:4) observations about the way Senegalese women engage with practices of beautification have several parallels to my material. An observation one of her informants about Senegalese women's preoccupation with their appearances is strikingly similar to the one suggested by Sandra: "You see a woman, all dressed in a grand *boubou* but you go in her house and you will see that the children are eating porridge."

Both Sandra and Mustafa's informant express amazement with a touch of moral reproach when talking about other women's vain choices to prioritize the production of beauty in a context of poverty. "You can't imagine what some women do because of their vanity," Serena, a forty-five-year-old teacher of body therapies, once told me as we talked about cosmetic surgery. As Fraser (2003) suggests, the cultural significance of vanity has been overlooked by contemporary critics. The notion of vanity, defined in dictionaries either as "futility" or as "the quality or fact of being vain or *excessively proud of oneself or one's qualities or possessions, self-conceit*" (Webster 1970, my italics), contains, according to Fraser, "a number of related and contradictory meanings. Traditionally associated with the feminine, vanity has occupied a powerful position in that it is both derided as trivial by masculinist culture and regarded as a natural or primary aspect of the female character" (Fraser 2003:89).

For these reasons, vanity is often not included as part of the repertoire of feminist writing. But should it be completely discarded from academic and critical analysis when it still circulates with intensity in everyday conversations? As I came to notice during fieldwork, vanity is a word that appears with frequency not only in the Brazilian media but also in my informants' conversations.

²¹ I plan to discuss the subject of bodily modification, women, sociability and competition in another paper. See Cahill (2003) for a discussion on feminine beautification and feminist practices.

Basically, there are two major ways of using this concept. One of them is to refer to superfluous and shallow practices generally connected to feminine and duped preoccupations with physical appearance. Used in this sense, where vanity is, there is also a negative moral judgment, as in Serena's statement "You can't imagine what some women do because of their vanity." Another common way of using vanity in colloquial Brazilian Portuguese has a more positive meaning. Vanity is sometimes used almost as synonymous to self-esteem, self-respect and pride. While in middle-class contexts this use of vanity can be read as a conflation between pseudo-psychological notions and consumerism, making the happiness of the beauty and fashion industries – "because you're worth it," – when it is used by marginalized, low-income women, the concept of vanity reveals yet another possible and more challenging interpretation.²²

Once again I return to Simara's self-presentation with which I started this paper: "I'm not beautiful but I have vanity. And the little vanity I have makes me visible to other people. With my appearance, if I didn't have vanity and take care of myself, I would be lost." The way Simara, the Amazonian reseller of beauty products, uses the concept of vanity seems to challenge other people's readings of herself and her body. Despite being looked through and ignored by other people, Simara insists on her worth as a person and she does that through bodily practices that inscribe value on to her body or parts of it. Granted, Simara is also indirectly contributing to making the happiness of manufacturers of beauty products. But at a personal level she is engaging in a struggle to be seen. Simara, just like many of Sandra's clients, uses the concept of vanity and engages with the production of beauty as a way to assess her personal worth.

One of Sandra's clients, a woman in her mid-thirties who works as a babysitter in a middle-class family, commented that she saved, every month, ten percent of her salary to spend on beauty. "It's my *dízimo*" she said, referring to a common practice of tithing among Pentecostal and Evangelical churches, asking their members to donate, monthly, ten percent of their earnings to the church. "But my *dízimo* goes to the salon!" she finished. Once more Sandra had a comment to offer:

22 I was inspired by Mahmood's (2001), Meneley's (2007:234) and Zane's (1998) discussions on Western feminist unilineal conceptions of empowerment and emancipation.

“I think it has to do with a certain need...the person wants to be noticed. She wants you to say, ‘Gee! You look great!’ And if nobody says anything, she wants at least to know that she is being looked at. She wants to be seen, to attract attention in one way or another. (...) And if none of that works, you’ll have to work harder, with lots of difficulties, to make yourself visible, to show up a little bit, otherwise you’re completely out. You don’t count!”

Conclusion

In this article, I have shown that the production of beauty is not simply a matter of frivolous consumption but a way for many women to earn their living. The ethnography presented here illustrated how different forms of body work are used in the search for social visibility: the decision to acquire a gold crown or to invest money on a hairstyle or new clothes instead of buying other, maybe more durable, but less symbolically loaded goods, foregrounded that.

I have also shown, through the narratives of Sandra and Simone that the production of beauty can be a means to stress and/or erase (at least temporarily) social differences.

Even if the article’s red thread is a comparative analysis of women producing beauty from distinct socioeconomic positions, it was my point to stress that the bodies and beauty that they produce are constantly “raced” (since they do relate to mainstream beauty ideals that circulate in the media and that still tend to promote symbolic whiteness as desirable and attainable) and “gendered” (since femininities are being produced and struggled for through different forms of body work).

Looking at the narratives of Sandra, Simone and other women who work with the production of beauty, I could see the entanglement of vanity, visibility and social inequality. In Simone’s middle-class salon this entanglement was spoken in psychological and emotional terms – a visit to the salon was an occasion for women to be listened to, to be pampered, to take time to care for themselves and not their families. A visit to the salon was also a way to be inserted into a group and to become locally visible (with all the ambivalences that this visibility might imply). Moreover, a visit to the salon was a way (consciously or not) to enhance social differences. As I write these words I recall the way Sonia, a thirty-five-year-old woman who worked as a cleaner in a middle-class household, automatically left the broom she was holding

and brought her hands up to her head to fix and pat her hair into place at the very moment she saw her female employer, who had just had her hair straightened and styled in Simone's salon, enter the living-room where we were standing. In a single moment, the gap that separates these women became painfully concrete.

Meanwhile, in Sandra's salon, the entanglement of vanity, visibility and social inequality was spoken in terms of priorities, of self-worth, of competition among women, and of a struggle to be seen as someone who counts. In this case, a successful visit to the salon could challenge, even if only temporarily, some social differences. Remember Sandra's example of the maid with a hairstyle that was more beautiful than that of her female employer.

By looking at the way women like Simara, Sandra and Simone relate to the production of beauty, this article foregrounds how bodily practices not only mirror inequalities found in the Brazilian society but are also a way to acknowledge, examine and confront these very differences.

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