beauty and the norm
debating standardization in bodily appearance

The past decades have seen a global boom in the body aesthetics services with profound effects on people’s bodies worldwide. The global beauty and fashion industries disseminate mass-mediated images of men and women, whose bodies bear startling similarities in spite of their differences in shade and attire. At the same time, an emerging anthropological literature has analysed beautification and aesthetic body modification as tools for social positioning and climbing, with standards for bodily appearance continually on the rise. Against this background, scholars have warned against an increasing regularization of the human body, indeed a ‘pervasive smoothing out of human complexity and variation’ (Garland-Thomson 2009).

As powerful ideological tools, the standards of normalcy and universality that were set in the nineteenth century, such as the body mass index or “average man” (Quetelet 1842), continue to not only describe, but also prescribe human bodies today. With their help, generations of women, people of colour, the handicapped and the poor have been viewed, measured and evaluated and they were almost always ‘found wanting’ (Garland-Thomson 2009). On the background of the popularization and normalization of medical techniques for aesthetic body modification the pressure to ‘correct’ aspects of the body that defy the norm - deformations, in the language of medical experts - is ever increasing. Indeed, the basic motivation for aesthetic surgery has been described as the desire to “pass” (Gilman 1999).

On the other hand, social anthropologists have documented that in their quest for beauty, modernity or progress, bodies are embedded in collective fantasies that are neither exclusively local nor global, but may be both. Techniques for lightening or tanning the skin, depilation, loosing weight, reducing or augmenting breasts or the size of the nose may travel, but in order to understand their relation to ideologies of race, class and gender as well as global trends, it is crucial to analyse the multiple meanings of their appropriation in specific locales. Not least, physical beauty carries in it a form of power, a promise of social mobility that, if made accessible for everyone ready to subject themselves to the demands of the market, may be seen as challenging established power hierarchies (Edmonds 2007). By the help of aesthetic techniques and on a subjective level, aesthetic surgery aficionados, trans-people or beauty queens may strive to become not ordinary, but outstanding, even spectacular (Ochoa 2014).

This workshop aims at bringing together ethnographic and conceptual approaches to the study of beauty and the norm from social anthropology, queer studies, gender studies and disability studies in order to debate standardization in bodily appearance. We invite contributions that engage with
ethnographic methods in their research in a variety of geographical locations, addressing one or more of the following questions:

- What is the relation between beauty practices and the norm?
- Are there ethnographic indications for rising standards of bodily appearance and in what ways are these related to ideologies of race, class, age and gender?
- What happens with people whose bodies defy or are found lacking in reference to what is considered an ordinary appearance?
- What does the increasing consumption of aesthetic body modifications mean for the particularities of our bodies, our everyday lives as well as for the ways we determine what is good, beautiful, healthy and “normal”?

The workshop will be addressed by Prof. Rosemarie Garland-Thomson (Emory University), and by Prof. Alexander Edmonds (University of Edinburgh).

Each participant will have 20 minutes for presenting her/his work. Apart from academic papers, we also call for contributions from artists in a variety of formats, such as performances, installations, photographic essays or video works; for these, limited exhibition space will be available.

A limited amount of financial support for accommodation and travel will be made available. The workshop will be held at Iwalewahaus, which offers barrier-free access.

Please send your abstracts (max. 500 words) and a short CV to beautyandthenorm@uni-bayreuth.de by June 5th, 2015. Accepted papers will be announced no later than June 15th, 2015.

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