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Past and Future Perfect? Beauty, Affect and Hope

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Bios

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Abstract

This article engages with and draws on what have been called two recent ‘turns’ in feminist theory: to beauty and to affect. While much feminist research has concentrated on the beauty industry, where beauty is conceived as a series of economic, social and cultural practices, we suggest that beauty should also be understood as an embodied affective process. Our focus is on understanding the conceptions of beauty that emerged in our own empirical work with white British

girls (Coleman 2009) and mestiza Mexican women (Moreno Figueroa 2006). We suggest that for the girls and women in our research, beauty is an inclination towards a perfected temporal state which involve processes of *displacement to the past* and of *deferral to the future*. We draw on Colebrook's (2006) discussion of the relationship between feminist theory and philosophies of aesthetic beauty and on Lauren Berlant's notions of 'cruel optimism' (2006, 133-137) and 'aspirational normalcy' and argue that beauty can be seen as an aspiration to normalcy that is, simultaneously, optimistic and cruel. Beauty is seemingly characterised by its inability 'to be' in the present and is thus positioned as temporalities that have passed or have yet to come. Through these displacements and deferrals, beauty is understood as both specific and imaginary, and as promising and depressing. Following on from such a conception of beauty, we make a distinction between optimism and hope and argue that while, in Berlant's terms, optimism is that which is cruel, hope might involve a different way of thinking about how beauty might be experienced in and as the present.

Past and Future Perfect? Beauty, Affect and Hope

In my life what has been most important is the issue of beauty... (Paulina)

[H]opefully [...], all the things I don't like just go away and it like just works out that I look really good (Fay)

How long have people thought about the present as having weight, being a thing disconnected from other things, an obstacle to living? (Berlant 2006, 24)

In a special edition of *Feminist Theory* (2006), Colebrook argues in her introduction that renewed interest in the 'question of beauty for feminist politics [...] is not so much moral – is beauty good or bad for women? – but pragmatic: how is beauty defined, deployed, defended, subordinated, marked or manipulated, and how do these tactics intersect with gender and value?' (2006, 132). In this paper we explore the 'pragmatics' of this feminist 'return to beauty' and explore the problem of beauty through another 'turn' in feminist cultural theory to affect. We argue that affect is a productive way of exploring beauty because it emphasises not only content but also *process*; that is, it is not only necessary to examine specific beauty practices (of make-up, hair styling, dieting and cosmetic surgery for example) but it is also important to see beauty as an embodied social, cultural and economic process.

Taking an approach which attends to the ways in which 'the lure of beauty seems inescapable' (Felski 2006, 278), we suggest an understanding of beauty as *hope*. Our interest is in exploring hope as 'an empirical question' (Back 2009); as the above quotations from Paulina and Fay indicate, we examine how hope is attached to beauty and is experienced and understood in everyday life. Our focus is on understanding the conceptions of beauty that emerged in our own empirical work with white British girls (Coleman 2009) and mestiza Mexican women (Moreno Figueroa 2006). We draw on Colebrook's (2006) discussion of the relationship between feminist theory and philosophies of aesthetic beauty and on Lauren Berlant's notions of 'cruel

optimism' (2006) and 'aspirational normalcy' and argue that beauty can be seen as an aspiration to normalcy that is, simultaneously, optimistic and cruel. We suggest that for the girls and women in our research, beauty is equated with a sense of perfection; beauty is an inclination towards a temporal state whereby, as Fay explains, 'all the things I don't like just go away and it like just works out that I look really good'. In particular, we focus on the temporalities of these inclinations and suggest that the girls and women experience beauty as temporal processes of *displacement to the past* and of *deferral to the future*. Beauty is expressed from the present but is not located there; beauty is seemingly characterised by its inability 'to be' in the present and is thus positioned as temporalities that have passed or have yet to come. Through these displacements and deferrals, beauty is understood as both specific and imaginary, and as promising and depressing. Following on from such a conception of beauty, we make a distinction between optimism and hope and argue that while, in Berlant's terms, optimism is that which is cruel, hope might involve a different way of thinking about how beauty might be experienced.

The research we discuss here are two separate projects which address, in different ways, questions of embodiment, image and visibility. One project, by Moreno Figueroa (2006), focuses on the significance of the role of emotions in revealing Mexican women's lived experiences of racism and explores the importance of mestizaje (racial and cultural intermixing of Spanish and American Indigenous people) in relation to Mexican discourses of race and nation. The other project, by Coleman (2009), explores the ways in which thirteen 13 and 14 year old British girls experience their bodies through images and argues that bodies and images are not separable entities but rather that images make possible particular knowledges and experiences of bodies. Both projects involved focus group and individual interviews and involved visual methodologies; Moreno Figueroa used personal photographs during life-story interviews to guide women's telling of their lives and also to discuss the relationships between racism, bodies and visibility and explore how they see themselves and how others see them and Coleman used personal photographs and magazine images to stimulate discussion and an 'image-making session' to produce visual, as well as verbal, experiences of bodies. While neither project enquired specifically about beauty and appearance, such issues emerged as important in the participant's accounts. For example, the women in Moreno Figueroa's research

discussed beauty in terms of racialised perceptions of their bodies which are a product of cultural and historical understandings of *mestizaje* as a way of perfecting and ‘improving the race’ through mixing and of gendered ideas about femininity: the whiter the prettier, the darker the uglier. In addition, these women also talk about beauty in terms of emotions: mainly experiences of shame, feeling inadequate and aspiring for a normalcy that ‘should/could’ be granted by such process of proper racial mixing. For the girls in Coleman’s research, beauty was alluded to in terms of what might be characterised as a general dissatisfaction with their present appearance, and a hope that they would feel better about their appearance in the future, or as a satisfaction with their present appearance and a hope that this feeling would continue into the future.

It is clear then that our projects raise different understandings of and feelings towards beauty. Our aim is not to suggest that the experiences of beauty discussed are equivalent or uniform but rather to draw attention to some points of connection which coalesce around ideas of temporality and to examine these connections through the notions of hope, optimism and normalcy. The article is arranged around some key themes that we see as arising in both projects: (i) the displacement of beauty to the past; (ii) the deferral of beauty to the future and; (iii) in the concluding sections, wider issues concerning the ethics of hope, beauty and temporality. In order to contextualise these themes, we first outline our argument concerning the relationship between recent work on beauty and on affect drawing on the contributions that feminist scholarship has made to understandings of the complexity of beauty.

Beauty, affect and inclination

It is clear from Paulina’s statement above and from the strong tradition of feminist scholarship surveying its various aspects, that ‘[f]or women, beauty has always mattered – in a personal way, and as an inevitable, and underlying socio-political framework, for how they operate in the world’ (Brand 2000, 5-6). Recent feminist work has identified how approaches to beauty tend to circulate around the dichotomies of pleasure-pain, active-passive, affirmation-suffering, liberation-oppression. Felski (2006) suggests that such feminist analyses have converted the ‘positive’ aspects of beauty into their more ‘negative’ counterpoints. She raises

concerns about this ‘compulsion to immediately translate aesthetic surfaces into political depths’ without ‘teasing apart the multifarious socio-political meanings of texts while also crafting richer and thicker descriptions of aesthetic experience’ (2006, 281). Questioning the arguments claiming that concerns, practices and experiences about beauty are either superfluous, ‘wrong’ and/or a source of pain, here we follow Felski’s aim to engage in a feminist task that explores beauty as *both* ‘positive’ and ‘negative’. Only in this way, she argues, ‘can we continue to reckon the political costs of being beautiful while also doing justice to the reasons why, all of us, women included, continue to seek out and take solace in beauty’ (2006, 281).

Felski’s point that beauty is both framed socially, economically and politically and experienced aesthetically is key to our conception of the relationship between hope and the girls’ and women’s understandings of beauty. In particular, Felski’s argument that beauty is a ‘lure’ which ‘seems inescapable’ (Felski 2006: 278) leads us to examine the relationship between beauty and hope not so much in terms of specific beauty practices or ‘body work’ (Davis 1995, Gimlin 2002) but as an embodied affective process or inclination. Colebrook’s discussion of different philosophical conceptions of aesthetics is helpful here as she draws attention to how beauty has been understood both as that which is tied to pleasure, utility and the furthering of life (as Hume argued) and as that which escapes or exceeds utility and the beauty industry (as in the Kantian tradition) (2006, 133-137). Both understandings of beauty, Colebrook argues, are relevant for contemporary feminist work. On the one hand, seeing beauty as that which is either emerging from, or useful for, the nurturing of life enables an attention to the ways in which ‘the beautiful may have been defined through a series of gendered and sexist examples and assumptions’ (2006, 134) and thus to the specific ‘interests it serves and how it has been valued’ (2006, 136). However, ‘[o]n the other hand, the experience of the beautiful *as feeling* can neither be explained away nor reduced to its political uses and abuses’ (2006, 134). While feminist empirical sociology and cultural studies has tended to focus on beauty as an industry (for example Black 2004, Craig 2006, Holliday and Sanchez Taylor 2006) we are also interested in beauty as that which cannot be contained within these practices.

As a hope, beauty can be understood in terms of Kant's conception of aesthetic beauty as Colebrook explains it: 'whatever the actual experience and industry of the beautiful may be, there is also a critical capacity and imperative to discern the genesis and irreducibility of the beautiful' (2006, 133). As such, for Kant, '[t]he "aesthetic" concerns nothing more than *feeling*: not a feeling of the body but of the mind experiencing itself, being given a sense of its own "supersensible" power' (2006, 133). The conception of beauty as feeling has resonances with what has been called 'the affective turn' (Clough and Hailey 2007) in (feminist) social and cultural theory (see for example Ahmed 2001, Ahmed 2004, Probyn 2005, Riley 2005, Sedgwick and Frank 2003). In particular, our understanding of affect here draws on work which Patricia Ticineto Clough describes as engaging with 'the line of thought from Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari back through Baruch Spinoza and Henri Bergson' (2007, 1). According to this tradition, affect 'refers generally to bodily capacities to affect and be affected' and 'is linked to the self-feeling of being alive – that is, aliveness or vitality' (2007, 2). Such a conception of affect – as embodied feeling – clearly connects with Colebrook's account of aesthetic beauty. Our argument here is that beauty works as an affective aesthetic *feeling*. Despite its organisation into an industry which serves a particular set of interests and gives value to specific body practices, beauty is continually sought out and taken solace in.

As we have suggested then, beauty is, in Berlant's (2002) terms, a bodily 'inclination' or 'tendency'. In a discussion of what she characterises as the sensual pleasures/pains of eating, sex and intelligence (or 'smartness'), Berlant argues that such 'dense moments of sensuality' (2002, 85) 'produce something not uncomplicated or amnesiac, but something that *as yet has no content, just inclination*' (2002, 85-86 our emphasis)ⁱ. Taking up Berlant's conception and drawing on the notions of affect and aesthetics introduced above, we want to suggest that beauty, as it emerged in our research, is such a bodily inclination; not located *in* anything (as content) but a process which *exists as* and is *produced through* the relations between bodies, things, memories, dreams and hopes. Understood in this way, for the women and girls in our research, beauty involves a bodily inclination towards a more hopeful temporality. In this sense, and as we develop further below, hope is an embodied affect; that is, hope is the feeling that inclines towards the beautiful (where the content of what is beautiful might not yet be clear) and that provides a sense of being alive. As such an

inclination, hope is a productive way of understanding how beauty is located in times other than the present. An inclination suggests that bodies are tending towards a time (and space) other than where they are presently located. In the following two sections, we unpack the discussions of beauty that emerged in our research. First, we attend to the ways beauty is experienced in the past and present and in the following section we examine the deferral of beauty to the future.ⁱⁱ

Beauty and the past

Central to our conception of the relationship between hope and beauty is the way in which beauty is not a ‘thing’ which can be experienced in the present but is that which is *felt* in different temporalities. In the research data we use here, various accounts of appearance, the body and beauty emerged in relationships with the past. For example, some of the participants in Coleman’s research indicated how moving to a new school and becoming a teenager had focused their and other’s attention on their appearance:

Fay: [...] it’s sort of like secondary school really because before that you know you’re just happy cos things like [appearance] don’t matter, just happy playing and being a child, you know now [...] you meet new people and new attitudes towards you that you never really experienced before [...] and it’s like different attitudes and different ways of looking at yourself I think when you come up here

In this extract, Fay discusses her present as a time when things like appearance ‘matter’ in contrast to her explanation of her past as a time when she was ‘happy’, ‘just enjoying being a kid’. Fay links being at secondary school, ‘different attitudes and different ways of looking at yourself’ and not being happy any more. While she does not describe her present as being unhappy, she does point to the difficulty of being happy because she is unaware of her body and her appearance. Whereas in Fay’s past happiness was unconnected from her body and appearance, a condition of being happy in her present necessarily involves what she looks like.

Anna, also makes links between beginning secondary school and ‘bothering’ about her appearance:

- Beckie: so do you think the way you feel now, is that new, or have you always been sort of feeling like that?
- Anna: I never was really bothered about what I used to look like until [...] secondary school, I think that puts a lot of pressure on, and year 7 and 8 were always what I looked like, year 9 I sort of think, sort of stopped and thought well hey, it's my life it's no-one else's so I can look like what I want to look like and it's not, erm, what's the word, it's me, it's no-one else, I've got to control it to make myself happy
- Beckie: ok, and do you think, are you succeeding in that or is it hard?
- Anna: well yeah cos whenever you think you feel good, someone always puts you down
- Beckie: Really? And is that in school or out of school?
- Anna: anywhere really, people do put you down, even if you think they might just be looking at you cos they think you look ok but you think they're putting you down, cos sometimes you look at someone you think looks nice but then people think you're looking at them saying they look horrible or something

Again here we see a present in which happiness has become bound up with Anna's appearance. Anna explains that this 'puts a lot of pressure on' which she is currently trying to 'control [...] to make myself happy'. However, this is difficult to achieve as while she may 'feel good' about what she looks like, other people's gazes are interpreted as about her being seen as 'horrible'.

There are clearly many issues that could be unpacked from Fay's and Anna's comments concerning the role of adolescence, secondary school, the gendered gaze and what seems to be the increasing visibility of their bodies through a focus on appearance (see Coleman 2009, Moreno Figueroa 2006). What we are interested in here are the temporalities of beauty (in terms of the girls' appearance, how they think they look and how they think others think they look). While neither Fay nor Anna describe themselves as beautiful in the past, they do depict their pasts as happier, at least in part because they were not 'bothered' about their looks. There is, then, an inclination to beauty in the past.

In contrast to the accounts above, some of the women who participated in Moreno Figueroa's research raised issues about the concern with beauty in relation to both the past and present. Here, then, the case of Patricia illustrates the relevance of beauty and appearance across different temporalities:

Patricia: I feel insecure because of how I look. I mean my problem is that. So I remember in the nursery I was happy and everything, but I was kind of shy because of how I looked, can you imagine?

Whereas Fay and Anna describe insecurity in their presents but not their pasts, Patricia's memories of her past are already tempered with insecurity and a particular sense of her body. There is a part of Patricia's account which complements Fay's and Anna's explanation of their pasts as a time when they are just happy 'being a child'. However, Patricia also points to shyness and lack of confidence in her past, when she was a child, in clear reference to the appearance of her body: there has never been a time that she can remember when she was not aware of, nor unconcerned with, her body. It is important to note at this point that Patricia is discussing her bodily appearance in the context of research on experiences of *mestizaje* and racism and it is her 'racialised' appearance that she is highlighting as producing her insecurity. The experience that Patricia describes and the narrative produced are framed through the research questions so we cannot be sure what kind of narratives would have emerged had she just been asked to reflect on her time in the nursery. Would she, for example, just talk about the 'happy and everything' part of her account or would the 'racialisation' of appearance inevitably emerge? However, in the account that Patricia does give, it is clear that her past is marked by how she looks and she implies her appearance is somehow not pleasant, perhaps not beautiful or not beautiful enough. This points towards a possible distinction between what aspects of the body matter and when they do so. So while perhaps the issue of beauty did not matter in Patricia's childhood, a sense of what a racialised body 'is like' and 'feels like' was already evident. Patricia's inclination to beauty is complex; while the lure of beauty is inescapable – how she looks is of central importance – there is no sense of what Felski terms 'solace' in the past.

In other parts of Patricia's interview the relevance of skin colour is emphasised:

Patricia: This is my little cousin [...] me and her were the same age, maybe a month apart, but I never managed to make friends with her, because, well, the barrier [...] was our physical appearance. I wasn't [...] the colour [...] - I mean the power of all this is incredible - because my colour prevented me from relating with my family. I don't get on with them at all [...] and when I'm with them, I feel very uncomfortable, I feel very inferior

Patricia's description of her past and present 'uncomfortable' relationships with her cousin and her family more widely, where she 'feel[s] very inferior', is founded upon 'the barrier' of her skin colour and a sense of subordination and deficiency. She is aware of her position out of the boundaries of familial normality where the rules of a racialised beauty are clearly in operation. In her discussion of racially and sexually marked and unmarked bodies, Peggy Phelan argues that when trying to understand the basis for distinctions between 'blackness' and 'whiteness' (or in the Mexican case, between 'indigenous', 'mestizas' or '*güeras*'ⁱⁱⁱ), 'the focus on the skin as the visible marker of race' (1996, 10) and a key criteria for understandings of beauty (at least in the Mexican case) becomes significant. Whilst skin colour cannot contain all the possible meanings of 'race', it does become a crucial filtering surface that marks the body, as Patricia points out, indicating that she has a different relationship to appearance and temporality than Fay and Anna, and therefore, a different relationship to the hope that beauty might involve. While Patricia is inclined to beauty, in the sense that she places her appearance as central to her happiness, her present is no more hopeful regarding beauty than Fay's and Anna's; 'I feel insecure because of how I look. I mean my problem is that'.

Although Patricia's comments are characterised by 'racial' marking through skin colour and the impossibility of being unaware of her bodily appearance, there are other accounts in Moreno Figueroa (2006)'s work pointing to a different experience. Consider, for example, Paulina's comments on when she was most happy:

Paulina: For me, going to the U.S. was huge, very liberating, I was so happy. It was great not to be with my family. [...] So then, going to live there, to prove

myself that I could do things on my own, that I could do a Ph.D. [...] because for good or bad, my identity never was [...] I never was the pretty one, nor the seductive one, or something like that, my little space in life was to be the clever one and dedicate myself to academia, but even in that area I had lots of insecurities and lack of self-esteem. So then for me to be able to do the PhD was really important.

In this extract, Paulina explains that her most liberating and ‘happy’ time in the past was moving to the United States to study for a Ph.D. and ‘to prove to myself that I could do things on my own’. Part of the reason for this liberation and happiness, she suggests, was that ‘dedicat[ing] myself to academia’ was ‘my little space in life’. What is interesting here is how Paulina implies that an academic identity is distinct from being ‘the pretty one’ or ‘the seductive one’. To be ‘the clever one’, according to Paulina, is to not have to construct her identity through her bodily appearance. Indeed, while she implies that her insecurity about her appearance remains, she explains that the importance of completing a Ph.D. was in overcoming such insecurities: ‘even in that area I had lots of insecurities and lack of self-esteem’. For Paulina, then, academia is used as that ‘little space in life’, a space of normality where she can be ‘clever’ and where she believes her body and its appearance, somehow, does not matter.

What seems to us to emerge from these very different accounts is that beauty in the present is a difficult, if not impossible, experience. While there are different ways the girls and women recognise and (attempt to) ‘control’ the importance of beauty in their presents (by constructing an identity which is distinct from beauty, by thinking ‘well hey, it’s my life it’s no-one else’s so I can look like what I want to look like’, or by identifying different ‘attitudes’ and ‘barriers’), and there are crucial differences in the experiences of beauty in their pasts, the inclination to beauty, the inescapable lure of beauty, is ever present. In the following section we examine how the inclination to beauty involves a deferral to the future.

Beauty and the future

Beckie: do ever kind of imagine your body and yourself in the future at all?

Fay: yeah sometimes, I just think what I’ll be like when I grow up

Beckie: and what would that be like?

Fay: just hopefully it, all the things I don't like just go away and it like just works out that I look really good

Beckie: ok, so what would it look like in the future?

Fay: well, you've got to have the right figure and everything, that I won't, sort of, all the stuff that comes with being a teenager, like spots and that, all that goes away, and I think that's about it really, just like the figure really and I think skin

In this extract taken from one of Coleman's individual interviews, Fay describes her future as when 'it like just works out that I look really good'. According to Fay here, then, the future is a time of perfection, a time that she can look forward to 'hopefully'. The future that Fay describes is one that is imagined through looks and appearance. That is, in imagining herself 'grow[n] up', Fay understands her 'body' and 'self' in the future through what she looks like. This lens of appearance through which the body is imagined in the future is key to our argument here. We want to suggest that, for the girls and women whose comments are explored in this section, the future is perfect, a time of beauty, or, at least, a temporality that is more beautiful than the present.

The links that Fay makes between the present and the future are important to consider. Fay describes the future as a time that is in some ways disconnected from how she understands her body in the present; 'all the things I don't like just go away'. Indeed, later on in the interview Fay goes on to comment explicitly on how her future is connected to her present:

Beckie: so how does that relate to how you feel about your body now?

Fay: well, it's what I wanna change now, what's wrong with me now and what I want to change and I don't know I suppose it's only over the last few years I've started feeling insecure about myself, I mean I don't remember being little and thinking 'oh you know', so I just hope those insecurities and stuff go away

Beckie: ok, so how you feel about your body now, is that better or worse than how you used to feel about your body?

Fay: probably worse than how I used to feel cos I never used to, even if there were things wrong with me, I never used to think they were wrong with me so it's worse now I am aware of it, but then in a way, I don't know, in a way it's better cos you know that at least you can try and sort it out or whatever, that you weren't walking round looking stupid or whatever

In considering the relations between her present and future, Fay highlights the insecurities she has about her body in the present and points to how her imagination of the future involves 'what's wrong with me now and what I want to change'. We can take from this that for Fay, her present body is impossible to sustain as an imagination into the future. Fay cannot imagine her present body in the future but instead conceives a body that is changed, that looks different. In making this comparison between her present body and future body, Fay refers to her past: 'I don't remember being little and thinking "oh you know"'. As we suggested in the previous section, the past is understood here as a time when Fay was unaware of 'what's wrong' with her body and could be happy, whereas the present is understood as a time when Fay is too well aware of her body, and is insecure about her body because of this awareness. The present is also a time when Fay is aware of her possibilities of action: a time when it is possible to intervene 'cos you know that at least you can try and sort it out or whatever'. The present is thought of as a platform for the happy future and such a platform is hopeful and embraced in terms of what can be done in it. The present is the time where the body can, hopefully, be changed in order to be possible in the future.

For Paulina, the present is also seen as a time which is in some way not as bearable as the future might be. However, whereas Fay describes being unaware of (the problems with) her body in her past, Paulina discusses how she was constantly made aware of her body in the past:

Paulina: In my life what has been most important is the issue of beauty, because I always say, joking, that I'm the daughter and the mother of the beautiful ones. My mother had the kind of beauty that could stop a train, and it's not that my sister and I are ugly, but just ordinary.... For

example when I was a kid, the neighbours would say things like: ‘Oh these girls, with such an attractive mother’, so my sister and I grew up with that, but when my daughter was born, you know what people would say to me? ‘Oh, so beautiful!’ Then they would turn, look at me, and say: ‘She must be exactly like her father!’ And I used to think: ‘Why they don’t say: what a beautiful girl and that’s it?’ Do you know what I mean? It was a terrible thing, and I grew up with those issues, I don’t think that I’m ugly, but I always carry the ambivalence of what feminine beauty is about and that undoubtedly is something... my sister even had a nose job and me, just a while ago, I had a photograph taken in Canada, I was also thinking of having a nose job too.

In this extract Paulina places herself in-between her mother and her daughter; she is, in some ways, a present between a past (her mother) and a future (her daughter). This past and future is understood through beauty as Paulina describes both her mother and her daughter as beautiful. In contrast to the past and future, her mother and her daughter, Paulina describes herself as ‘not ugly, just ordinary’. She describes how she is, and has been made to be, aware of herself as not beautiful, as being somehow problematic to the flow between the past and future. This is not just a present situation, as with for Fay, as the ‘ordinariness’ of Paulina’s body has been marked out for her in the past; ‘Oh these girls, with such an attractive mother’. With comments such as these, it is as if Paulina is pointing to how her mother and daughter are described as beautiful as unviable options for her; Paulina and her sister grow up knowing that people will not say of them when they are older, ‘Oh, so beautiful!’

However, despite this non-beautiful past and present, the way in which Paulina imagines her body in the future is interesting because, through ‘thinking of having a nose job’, she invests some hope in a more beautiful future. In contrast to Fay who sees her future as one where what is wrong with her body ‘just go[es] away’, Paulina sees the future as one where what’s wrong can be *made to* go away. In line with our interest in points of connection rather than differentiation between our research projects, it is not our intention here to engage in a discussion which grounds the versions held of the futures by the teenage girls in Coleman’s research and the women in Moreno Figueroa’s research in their age; we do not, for example, mean to do a

comparative study and argue that it is because Paulina is older than Fay that she is ‘wiser’ about what the future might hold and how the future may be controlled through making things happen. What we are interested in is how for both Paulina and Fay there is hopefulness for the future, understood through the possibilities of being beautiful. Taking up their comments, then, we want to think about hope and optimism as processes which seem indicative of the complicated and conflicting problem of beauty for feminist theory.

Drawing on our explanation of affect not as things but as inclinations, we suggest here that, through beauty and embodiment, Fay and Paulina are inclined towards the future in a hopeful and/or optimistic way^{iv}. That is, despite the insecurity, the ordinariness, the problem of the present, what they might or might not do to their bodies in the present, the future is hoped for as a better – more beautiful – time. In a similar way, Catherine and Tina, participants in Coleman’s research, are also inclined towards the future which they see as a happier time. More specifically, they explicitly draw attention to the relationship between hope, optimism, normalcy and beauty:

Beckie: so in the future your body will be, you’ll be happier with it?

Catherine: yeah, happier

Beckie: what do you think?

Tina: I don’t know, it depends whether I get taller and like stuff, if I stay this height then I’m just gonna be that little fat girl but if I get taller then I think it’ll be better

Catherine and Tina present here a case that being happier with their bodies is closely linked with beauty and its implied parameters of normalcy (being taller for example). However, what is interesting here is that their image of this happier future is somewhat vague. The relations between this point in the present (of being, in Tina’s words, ‘that little fat girl’) and the future that will ‘be better’ are imprecise and not straightforward. There is no sense of how such a future will be achieved. Instead, the future is a temporality which is inclined towards; not as a particular content nor through a specific set of practices, but rather through a feeling that ‘it will be better’. Such a vague image of the future, or such a feeling that it just will be better, is also what seems to be at stake in Fay’s and Paulina’s descriptions of a better, more

beautiful and more normal, future: ‘the right figure’, ‘skin’, a different nose. It is perhaps mistaken to suggest that Fay, Tina, Catherine and Paulina do not have more precise notions of what will make them beautiful and how they will achieve beauty that were not expressed in their interviews. It would also be mistaken to suggest that simply by having precise notions of beauty and plans to become beautiful the relations between the present and future are straightforward. However, what we are interested in here is how beauty is understood as something that is not possible in the present but might be possible in the future.

Beauty, optimism and hope

So far we have suggested that the ‘lure’ of beauty, for the girls and women discussed above, involves a temporal displacement to the past or deferral to the future. We have argued that an attention to beauty not only as specific practices but also as a bodily inclination is crucial in order to explore what Felski, among others, has identified as the contradictions inherent in contemporary understandings and experiences of beauty. Indeed, as Colebrook proposes, *both* philosophical accounts of aesthetic beauty that emphasise how ‘the beautiful may have been defined through a series of gendered and sexist examples and assumptions’ (2006, 134) *and* those that see beauty as feeling, irreducible to utility and industry, are necessary for feminist theory. To explore the relationship between beauty and hope further, we want to take up these different conceptions of aesthetic beauty and map them on to the ways in which we see both optimism and hope as important to understanding the experiences of beauty that emerged in our research.

Berlant’s notion of inclination, on which we have drawn so far, can be helpfully considered in relation to two other of her concepts; ‘cruel optimism’ (2006) and ‘aspirational normalcy’ (2007). Berlant defines the latter concept as ‘a desire to feel normal and to feel normalcy as a ground of dependable life, a life that does not have to keep being reinvented’ (2007, 281). Normalcy is a position which is not derided but desired by those who do not have access to it. Berlant’s focus on normalcy is interesting for our argument here given how feminist work on beauty has identified ‘feeling normal’ as a key impetus for women’s decisions to have cosmetic surgery (Davis 1995) and to engage in bodily practices including dieting, exercise and beauty treatments (Gimlin 2002). Drawing on this work, then, we can partly understand the

girls' and women's inclinations to the past and the future as an aspiration to *feel normal*. Feeling normal in the cases we have discussed might involve feeling as if their looks were unimportant (as with Fay's and Anna's inclination to the past, for example, or with Paulina's identification with academia), feeling as if in the future they will look more beautiful (as in the case of Fay, Paulina, Catherine and Tina's experiences discussed in the previous section) or feeling as if skin colour and bodily appearance did not matter in a racist culture (as with Patricia as an example of the women who participated in Moreno Figueroa's research).

As we suggest that beauty works as a lure through which bodies are inclined to a past or future temporality, we think it is significant to examine how the present temporalities of the girls and women are difficult. That is, the aspiration to normalcy in the past or future involves an attachment that *both* offers promise and entails cruelty and compromise. To understand this we turn to Berlant's concept of 'cruel optimism' which refers both to an 'attachment' to 'compromised conditions of possibility' and to how this attachment produces 'something of the continuity of the subject's sense of what it means to keep on living on and to look forward to being in the world' (2006, 21). Berlant's cruel optimism, then, is not so much concerned with the *content* of the attachment (with what the attachment *is* or *is to*) as with what the attachment itself makes possible; an ability – a *compromised* ability – to live on and to look forward to being in the world. Here we can conceive the girls' and women's present in terms of such a cruel optimism; in displacing beauty to the past or the future there is a promise that it is possible to 'keep on living' and, at the same time, a compromise of what 'being in the world' involves.

Exploring beauty through the concept of cruel optimism, then, helps us to account for both the 'positive' *and* 'negative' aspects of beauty as conceived in feminist theory and in philosophies of aesthetics. It indicates how the bodily inclination towards beauty enables the ability to keep on living on. And, at the same time, through its attachment to a condition of possibility that is not in the interests of those bodies, such a bodily inclination towards beauty necessarily compromises that ability to keep on living on. Taking up Berlant's argument here, we can conceive the understandings of beauty that emerge in our research as an attachment which makes possible a difficult (unbeautiful) present through a displacement or deferral to the past or future.

According to such an approach, *the attachment to beauty is simultaneously a compromised condition of possibility and a means of making this compromised condition bearable*. That is, by attaching to beauty, girls and women both limit their conditions of possibility (for example by experiencing the present as difficult) and live and look forward to extended conditions of possibility and normalcy ('when I was/am beautiful, life was/will be better').

Cruel optimism, then, necessarily involves a difficult present. That is, *optimism is an attachment* to a past or future temporality, and it is this attachment that makes the present both difficult and bearable. In this sense, the optimism of Berlant is closer to the conception of hope that Ghasson Hage (2002) proposes, than the one we will propose here. For Hage, according to capitalist values and interests, hope is opposed to joy; '[i]nstead of living an ethic of joy, we live an ethic of hope, and that becomes an ethic of deferring joy which fits in very much with the idea of saving and deferring gratification' (2002: 151). Indeed, Berlant explains the concept of cruel optimism through three examples 'of the suspension of the reproduction of habituated or normative life. These suspensions open up the "impasse" as a name for the transitional moment between a habituated life and all of its others' (2006, 23) and render the normative, disappointing rhythm of life clear. The present, as suspension, thus takes on an impossibility and Berlant asks, 'How long have people thought about the present as having weight, being a thing disconnected from other things, an obstacle to living?' (2006, 24)

In Berlant's terms, we can understand the present for the girls and women involved in our research, as an obstacle to living through the suspension or deferral of beauty to a different temporality. Understood through cruel optimism then, the present in its difficulty is *both* 'disconnected from other things' *and* attached to an other temporality. However, for us, the question remains of whether such an understanding of beauty accounts for all of what is being explained in the extracts above. Can the inclination to beauty be captured completely with the concept of cruel optimism? It is in this sense that we would like to introduce a notion of hope in contrast to the conception of optimism drawn on here. While for Berlant optimism is necessarily cruel and while for Hage the 'ethic of hope' is the deferral of joy, we suggest an alternative notion of hope, as that which is, or which might be, detached from deferral

and compromise and which is, instead, closer to the aesthetic attention to beauty as *feeling*. Of course, we are not suggesting that such a notion of hope is what is ‘really’ at work in the experiences of beauty discussed above. Not are we suggesting that the bodily inclination to beauty is outside of gendered and sexist interests and values; it is necessary, as both Berlant (2006) and Hage (2002) argue, for a critique of political economy to run ‘alongside’ a feminist analysis of beauty. However, we propose a notion of hope in order to focus attention on how, as Colebrook puts it, ‘hope is structural to feminism’ and this hope ‘maps out some future that is at once other than the present and yet referenced to an unfulfilled actuality of the present’ (Colebrook: this volume). If hope for a future which is ‘other’ to the present is ‘structural to feminism’, is there a way of thinking differently – more hopefully – about the experience of beauty? What is the ‘unfulfilled actuality of the present’ that might make this different future possible?

One way of thinking this through is in relation to Patricia’s practice of looking at and commenting on her photographs in her interview with Moreno Figueroa (2006). While we have discussed above how Patricia explored painful and difficult memories and experiences where the links between race, racism and beauty are in operation, she also described how looking at her photographs, as she was in her past but also while she was being interviewed, could produce different feelings:

Patricia: I also like this photograph very much. I used to like myself, and I used to like looking at myself as a child. I used to like looking at myself and taking out these photographs, to raise my self-esteem. I used to say: “Look how nice, look, I’m beautiful”. Didn’t I? These photographs cheered me up because I felt uncomfortable with myself but when I saw these photographs I used to say, “Hey! But I’m not that ugly”. I saw them many times and with that intention, maybe I was 7 or 8 years old, and I said to myself: “Hey! But I’m not that ugly”. What can possibly have made me feel like that? I felt one way and then I saw myself another way. I liked my photographs... But there was that contradiction... that's why I’m showing them to you.

Here, then, Patricia explains how, looking back, she can see that, in contrast to her memories, ‘I’m not that ugly’. For Patricia, seeing the contradictions of ‘feeling beauty’ – ‘I felt one way but then I saw myself another way’ – ‘rais[ed] my self-esteem’. In terms of our argument here, such a practice might be termed a return to and a recognition of the unfulfilled actuality of the present; a means of challenging the difficult present by re-experiencing the past. We suggest that this practice constitutes not so much ‘cruel optimism’ but hope as an ‘empirical question’, tied to everyday practices of ‘living on’ which are inclined to changing life for the better. Furthermore, Patricia’s practice indicates, we think, hope for not only a better future (as the concepts of cruel optimism and aspirational normalcy suggest) but for a better present. It is not that Patricia completely re-invents her past (as discussed above it involves pain) but rather that what is unfulfilled about the past (‘I’m not that ugly’) is re-visited and re-experienced; is brought into the present. Patricia’s present is not ‘suspended’ through an attachment to other temporalities but rather is being felt differently, at least in part, as it is lived. In this way, our ‘sense’ of hope can be conceived in terms of what Hage describes as ‘the ethic of joy’. Hage summarises Spinoza’s notion of joy as follows:

for Spinoza, joy comes from a simple change to the *better* in the state of the body. That is, it is an experience of reaching a higher state in the capacities to act, associate and deploy oneself in or with one’s environment which constitutes us as a specific “thing” in Spinoza’s language. So joy is not the experience of a static state of being, no matter how “high” that state is. Joy is the experience of a growth from one state of being to a more efficient one *as it is happening*. It is the experience of that quantum leap of the body, of the self as it is moving into a higher capacity to act (Hage 2002: 152).

Hage’s account of Spinoza’s conception of joy is significant because of its emphasis on the experience of change or movement *as it is happening* (‘I’m not that ugly’). That is, in contrast to the ‘optimism’ that is involved in and produced through the movement from a difficult present to a better – more beautiful – past or future, joy here can be understood as a temporal experience that folds the past, present and future into each other and experiences the becoming better not in an other temporality but now, in the present. This resonates with the notion of aesthetic beauty as feeling, ‘not

a feeling of the body but of the mind experiencing itself' (Colebrook 2006: 133). And, of course, it resonates with Patricia's practice whereby she is able to find beauty not only in an other temporality but also, in part, in her present re-experience of the past.

Our argument that, in the context of experiences of beauty, hope should be conceived in terms of this ethic of joy is thus part of a desire to shift the experience of beauty away from an always-already other temporality and into the present. This would be to address, in Berlant's terms, the 'weight of the present' and to 'interfere with varieties of immiseration' rather than to 'ride the wave of the system of attachment that [we] are used to' (Berlant 2006, 32). To draw on Hage's argument, if not his vocabulary, it would be to develop an 'ethics of hope' which challenges the ethic of (cruel) optimism characteristic of Western capitalism in general, and of the girls and women's experiences of beauty in particular. It would be to see hope as embedded in present daily practices as an unfulfilled actuality that might be exploited in, by and for feminist theory.

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Notes

ⁱ Berlant's discussion is focused on Mary Gaitskill's (1991) novel *Two Girls, Fat and Thin*.

ⁱⁱ In explaining beauty as an affective inclination away from the present, our intention is not to suggest that time is some kind of linear advancement that underlies a body (it is not, for example, that bodies progress from or to beauty) but rather that we understand beauty as attachments to or dispositions towards specific temporalities ('the past' and 'the future'). Temporality is in this sense a process: not something that is containable (an object) nor that develops in a logical, progressive fashion, but rather a dynamic condition through which bodies incline, in this case, to beauty.

ⁱⁱⁱ *Güera* is an adjective use to describe somebody who is perceived either as having white or whiter than skin colour or blond or light brown hair colour. It can be said of the fairest person in a given group, i.e. the family.

^{iv} In saying that there is an inclination towards the future we are not saying that the future is an object that can be aimed for. Rather, what we mean is that future is a temporal condition, different to the present. As a condition, the future is also prospective, meaning that it looks forward or is looked forward to: expected, hoped for.