The Politics of Ugliness

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A Prelude: Jamaica Kincaid's Ugly Tourist

> A tourist is an ugly human being. You are not an ugly person all the time; you are not an ugly person ordinarily; you are not an ugly person day to day […] An ugly thing, that is what you are when you become a tourist, an ugly, empty thing, a stupid thing, a piece of rubbish pausing here and there to gaze at this and taste that. (Kincaid 2000, p.14, 17)

Jamaica Kincaid, in her polemic *A Small Place,* establishes the tourist as a neo-colonizer, and as such 'an ugly, empty thing, a stupid thing, a piece of rubbish' (p.17). Writing of her home island, Antigua, Kincaid recognizes that ugliness is worn, it does not adhere to the skin, since a tourist is 'not an ugly person all the time; […] not an ugly person ordinarily; […] not an ugly person day to day' (p.14). Ugliness is worn but it is not worn lightly, it is a political site in that it functions to communicate and mark inequalities.

Kincaid elucidates, in the context of a *neo*-colonial global moment, several insights that lend themselves to my consideration of ugliness. First, for Kincaid, ugliness is not solely an aesthetic designation; it is instead a label that functions *politically*. Kincaid's ugliness is political in the sense that it serves as a marker of a set of binarical hierarchies and inequalities (between the presumably Western, white, and relatively wealthy tourist and the presumably poor, black Antiguan). It is also political in the way it establishes ugliness as a culturally contingent category based on relationality (Kincaid's ugly tourist is only ugly qua tourist and in relation to

Antiguans who do not have the luxury to travel). Second, Kincaid's ugliness has a *performative* dimension. The tourist is 'not an ugly person day to day', the tourist is only ugly in so far as she performs the role of the tourist, leaving her home to 'escape' from the mundane and to, perhaps unwittingly, neo-colonize (p.14). Most saliently, Kincaid's ugliness is also used *strategically* against the dominant white privileged subject. In this sense, ugliness can help navigate inequalities; it can be used to talk back against systems of privilege. Rendering white tourist subjects ugly, Kincaid deploys the category of ugliness in a strategic reversal of dominant economies of viewing, in which the white body usually occupies a space of beauty. In other words, Kincaid labels 'ugly' the white Western subject who historically has been the namer of ugliness, thus interrupting stable and safe understandings of beauty/ugliness, as of white/black (race), and rich/poor (class).

Introduction

Most people are afraid of ugliness, ugly bodies, and inhabiting ugly zones. Indeed, to be labeled 'ugly' is a source of pain and discomfort. In this essay I argue that ugliness is a *political* category informed by inequalities and hierarchical binaries *and* that ugliness can be deconstructed and deployed strategically by way of Judith Butler's notion of *performativity*. First, I will discuss the ways in which beauty/ugliness are interlocked hierarchically with other binaries. Next, in the bulk of my essay, I will discuss three ugly 'specimens' or 'bodies' – the unaltered body, the monstrous body, and the dirty body – in order to map out the ways in which certain bodies come to be regarded as 'ugly'. In my final section, I will suggest techniques for strategic feminist deployments of ugliness.

As I mentioned in my reading of Kincaid, ugliness is *political* in at least two ways: (1) it denotes and bookmarks inequalities and hierarchies, serving as a repository for all that is 'other' in our culture and (2) ugliness is necessarily contingent and relational, it is never an individual concern but rather exists because bodies are compared to one another, and because they are evaluated in accordance to the 'norm'.

When I refer to ugliness as potentially *performative,* I am referencing in large part Judith Butler's articulation of performativity in relation to gender: as created through the repetition of acts which then congeal to form the gendered (or in this case *ugly*) subject (2006, especially p.192). Considering ugliness in terms of performativity allows for it to be detached from the 'pre-discursive' body and understood in terms of specific 'styl[izations] of the flesh' (p.177). It also opens up spaces for divergent and strategic repetitions, which may disrupt a normative viewing of beauty and ugliness. So, while Kincaid deploys ugliness by turning it away from herself (and towards the dominant white tourist subject), I am implying an 'embrace' of ugliness – as a political feminist tool. Facing ugliness as a political category, we avoid fleeing from it on the basis that it is a solely aesthetic and personal slur.

Hierarchical Binaries: Beauty/Ugliness and All the Rest

In a peculiar sense we all know what 'the ugly' is through intuition. But in another sense, ugliness exceeds descriptions. As Nina Athanassoglou-Kallmyer adroitly discusses, ugliness has often 'served as the all-purpose repository for everything that [does] not quite fit', it has served as a marker of 'mundane reality, the

irrational, evil, disorder, dissonance, irregularity, excess, deformity, the marginal: in short, the *Other*' (2003, p.281, emphasis added). While ugliness is a fluctuating category, contingent upon specific contexts and norms, it is certainly established as the negatively coded half of the beauty/ugliness binary.

Binaries such as beauty/ugliness are ugly in themselves because they are not simple horizontal couplings, they are 'never the face-to-face of two terms, but a hierarchy and an order of subordination' (Derrida 1982, p.329). I have chosen to refer to them as *hierarchical binaries* to flag this 'order of subordination' and likewise 'order of privilege' (p.329). Also, it is never the case that binaries exist in isolation, rather they tend to map onto other binaries In predictable ways, forming interlocked binary-crystals –

> It is not just male and female, masculine and feminine, or nature and culture, but also town and country, matter and spirit, body and mind, capitalist and worker – our entire philosophical set describes natural and social phenomena in terms of oppositional characteristics. (Jordanova 1999, p.37)

Beauty/ugliness thus never operate independently, but map onto race, class, and gender, forming a network through which we can discriminate, incriminate, and render ugly. Yeidy Rivero, in her consideration of the Colombian sitcom *Yo soy Betty la Fea* (the precursor to ABC's *Ugly Betty*) agrees, indicating that 'the dichotomy between 'beautiful' and 'ugly' […] is broadly informed by *intertwined* Eurocentric, patriarchal, racial, Western/Christianized ideologies' (2003, p.68, emphasis added). Some of the specific binaries that most readily interlock with beauty/ugliness include: self/other, man/woman, human/animal, organism/machine, real/fake, white/black, rich/poor, clean/dirty, able/disabled, whole/fractured, young/old, healthy/ill, thin/fat,

tall/short, smooth/rough, regular/irregular, pure/mixed and perfect/imperfect.

Donna Haraway emphasizes that binaries serve as formulas for domination, that 'they [are] systemic to the logics and practices of domination […] domination of all constituted as others' (1991, p.392). Territories of ugliness can be occupied by an arrangement of individuals, by *anyone* who does not easily comply with prescribed norms of appearance and behaviour. Thus, whenever the label of 'ugly' is applied (or any one of its multiple synonyms i.e. hideous, grotesque, repulsive, plain *or* monstrous), we can be sure that it is referring to whatever is 'other' in our culture. So, while there are no essential features that all ugly bodies share, they *do* share territories external to dominance and privilege. As Butler points out, 'unlivable', 'uninhabitable' zones, such as those occupied by the 'ugly', are *needed* to 'circumscribe the domain of the subject' (1993, p.2-3). Ugliness thus provides zones of '*dis*identification' that subjects of 'beauty' are *reliant* on (p.4).

Although ugliness may be theorized as an abstract category, it is in fact applied as a term to 'real' bodies regularly. From the bodies that are regarded as 'ugly', constellations form, mapping onto categories such as gender, race, class and ability. Thus, binaries are not at all abstractions but embodied realities; as Butler testifies, 'discourses do actually live in bodies. They lodge in bodies, bodies in fact carry discourses as part of their own lifeblood' (Meijer and Prins 1998, p.282).

Before I move on, I would like to specify that ugliness relates to *women* in particular. Binaries are, I must emphasize, especially violent to 'women', '[assigning] a positive trait to mankind and an opposite or negative trait to womankind' (Mosher Stuard 1998, p.142). Most hierarchical binaries readily map on to man/woman in

ways that function to disadvantage women. Also, at the root of binaries is Aristotle's conviction that a woman is a 'deformed man', a man improperly developed and inverted (qtd. in Dean-Jones 1994, p.191). Rosi Braidotti reminds us that women are discursively regarded as marks of abnormality and difference, functioning to '[confirm] the positivity of the norm', the man (1997, p.67). Women thus function discursively as *ugly* variations of the male norm. And, as studies indicate, 80 to 90 percent of North American women come to dislike some aspect of their bodies (Rice 2009, p.233). Writing on vagina aesthetics, Joanna Frueh, recognizes that '[u]gliness […] looms large in both cultural and women's consciousness of vaginas', fueling the rise of female genital cosmetic surgeries (2003, p.145). This imagining of women's genitals as inherently ugly suggests that women themselves are especially vulnerable to being understood as ugly. Indeed, it may be that women's ongoing efforts to beautify their bodies through incessant alterations is a crystallization of their efforts to escape such presumed ugliness.

The Ugly is Political: Exploring Ugly Bodies

In the previous section I situated ugliness in the beauty/ugliness binary, proposing some ways in which it relates to other binaries, and most especially how it is easily mapped onto women. In this, the bulk of my essay, I will discuss several ways in which we can understand ugliness and 'ugly bodies'. Throughout, I suggest that bodies are ugly because they are politically transgressive – threatening binarical order and hierarchies. Specifically, I will speak to three 'specimens' of ugliness: the unaltered body, the monstrous body, and the dirty body. These categories should be understood as analytic tropes, and not as inflexible and permanent constructions.

There are many areas of overlap between the 'bodies' I here specify. I have chosen these 'bodies' in particular because I have found that they are essential to constructions of 'difference', 'abnormality', and 'ugliness'. Certainly I could have articulated instead categories based solely on race, class, gender, ability (i.e. 'the racial body', 'the classed body', 'the disabled body', etc.) but I wanted to demonstrate how these, in the contemporary moment, function as part of an interrelated web. In other words, binaries *intersect* to create 'ugly specimens' or subjects. In the contemporary context, when sexism and racism, especially, are viewed as remnants of a dark past (as opposed to pervasive and systemic contemporary everyday occurrences), 'ugliness' becomes a marker of ongoing privilege and oppression. Bodies are always 'ugly' for politically salient reasons.

Ugly Specimen I: The Unaltered Body

While feminists have been hesitant about deploying the term 'ugly' in their work, they have often, as an effect of discussing 'beauty', touched on that which does not fit readily into the realm of normative beauty. Sandra Lee Bartky, in *Femininity and Domination,* discusses what she names the 'fashion-beauty complex', which provides outlets for women's narcissistic indulgence through the power to buy, shop, and consume. This complex provides a profitable site for the capitalist patriarchal economy to prosper (1990, p.39). Yet this complex fuels and is fueled by women's insecurities about themselves, their sense that their bodies, when unmodified, are *ugly*. Likewise, Naomi Wolf identifies a 'beauty myth', which, through feeding women's anxieties and insecurities about their bodies, effectively fuels an industry while diverting women's attention away from social change (1997, p.10, 17).

Since beauty is by all accounts temporary and in need of constant elaboration, articulation, and expansion, the body project is never finished. It is *process*-based, founded on constant and vigilant repetition.

> I must cream my body with a thousand creams […] oil it, pumice it, powder it, shave it, pluck it, depilate it, deodorize it […] There is no "dead time" in my day during which I do not stand under the imperative to improve myself. (Bartky 1990, p.40)

Because the ideal is unachievable, shifting, and distant, future work is always incited. Beauty maintenance requires repetition, and beauty's 'regulation […] is perpetual and exhaustive' (p.80). Like Butler's notions of gender as 'performative', as a set of 'stylized repetitions' congealing to provide the 'appearance of substance', beauty practices are also based on repetition (2006, p.185, 179, 192). In order for a subject to be regarded as beautiful, vigilant and constant repetition of certain practices is required. This repetition of beauty practices is 'panicked', to borrow Butler's phrase, because it is driven by a fear of the unaltered, unmodified feminine body, and by a fear of ugliness (1991, p.23).

Even the perfectly controlled and modified body will be exposed as 'imperfect', 'flawed', 'plain', or 'ugly' at some point between repetitions. Also, exact repetition is impossible and there will always be an 'occasional *dis*continuity', the 'possibility of a failure to repeat, a de-formity, or a parodic repetition' (Butler, 2006, p.173, 179). In these moments between repetitions or in a failed repetition, even the most accurately modified feminine body is exposed as 'ugly'. Either her make-up is incorrectly applied or momentarily removed, or her hair is unstyled or untreated, or she has neglected her exercise routines, or blemishes have appeared…

there are just so many ways to fail. And as Kathy Davis, writing on plastic surgery, acknowledges, '[w]e […] cannot bear to imagine women's bodies as ugly' (1999, p.462).

Wolf recognizes that beauty exceeds appearance (the aesthetic), politicizing it as a site of benefit for some (the money makers) and harm for others (women). The fear, of course, which drives the beauty industry, is that of the unmodified body as ugly, as unacceptable in our heterosexual economy. A body less modified is at times jarring (unshaved legs), at times too sloppy (bra-less breasts), and in general just dull or plain (an unmade-up face). On the other hand, bodies which more accurately repeat cultural beauty ideals are provided with better prospects for success, even better paying jobs (Rice 2009, p.238). In the Colombian *Ugly Betty* (as in the ABC sitcom for the most part), the protagonist needs to shed her ugliness in order to advance both in her profession and in heterosexual love (p.71). Ugly bodies are actually worth-less.

And while all bodies are in need of modification to avoid ugliness, some bodies are figured as in need of *more* modification – they are 'uglier' in the raw. Susan Bordo describes the ways in which dominant beauty ideals are centralized around white ideals. For instance, Bordo discusses how eye contact advertisements have played on the 'ordinariness' of the brown eye to sell blue contact lenses, and how this must be considered in the context of 'racist body-discriminations' (1997, p.342). While eye and hair modifications are often designated as playful and chic, they present certain eye and hair types as more desirable, and these ideals are intimately referential of a white, upper-class brand of beauty. Similarly, Eugenia Kaw demonstrates that '[t]he types of cosmetic surgery sought by women in the United States are racially specific', since Asian-American women most frequently select the 'double-

eyelid' surgery which allows for a 'wider' more 'beautiful' Caucasian-looking eye (2003, p.184, 185). Still other bodies cannot be modified enough to fit and must at best approximate the ideal. Susan Wendell discusses the manner in which 'beauty' and indeed normalcy are marked by able-bodiedness:

> Most people with disabilities cannot even attempt to make their bodies fit the physical ideals of their culture […] they must struggle harder than non-disabled people. (2009, p.249)

But Wendell recognizes that the real reason people are 'upset' by the very presence of bodies that do not conform is that these bodies 'draw attention to the disciplines of normality', and are 'constant reminders to those who are currently measuring up that they might slip outside the standards' (2009, p.247).

The unaltered body is ugly not because of some inherent flaw, but because it is a politically transgressive entity. This is true in two interrelated ways. First, the unaltered body challenges practices of consumption, upsetting the economy, threatening mega-systems of capital accumulation, and capitalism itself. Second, the unaltered body disrupts performances of femininity, beauty, and binarical gender differentiation. It is a more ambiguous body, less 'marked' by certain performances of femininity. This body is thus ugly in its lack, its plainness, blandness, and ambiguity. But it is ugly not solely for aesthetic reasons but also for its deeply political implications. For the unaltered body reminds us that consumerism and femininity are a performance, even a sham. This 'ugly' body unveils the needlessness of modification. The *beau ideal* of the ugly, unaltered body is none other than 'the feminist'. 'The feminist' is ugly because she does not adequately perform her femininity. The ideal, imagined feminist – the 'caricature of the ugly feminist' (Wolf

1997, p.18) – does not shave her legs or armpits, does not wear make-up or groom herself, and is 'seen as the enem[y] of the stiletto heel and the beauty parlor – in a word, as [the] enem[y] of glamour' (Bartky 1990, p.41). In short this feminist fails at performing femininity and is as a consequence 'ugly'. But, as I have been arguing, she is rendered ugly not simply because she lacks 'aesthetic appeal', but more intricately, because she functions as a transgressive figure who upsets neat gender divisions and performs incorrectly.

Ugly Specimen II: The Monstrous Body

Monstrosity denotes anything that is horrifying, ambiguous, or hybridized, 'the in between, the mixed, the ambivalent' (Braidotti 1997, p.61). Monstrosity may be characterized by excess *or* absence; it is

> excess, lack, or displacement […] [t]here can be too many parts or too few; the right ones in the wrong places or duplicated at random. (Braidotti 1999, p.290)

Monsters are also unpredictable; it 'will never be known what the next monster is going to look like', it 'moves, flows, changes' (1999, p.300). Thus, like ugliness, the monstrous is culturally contingent, reflecting cultural anxieties, fears, and fascinations. It is a category of ambivalence, 'both horrible and wonderful, object of aberration and adoration' (1997, p.61-62). Finally, monsters share with one another an inherent capacity to blur boundaries and binaries.

> Many monsters are category errors; they contradict standing cultural concepts. They may be living and dead at the same time […] or they may be incongruous fusions of the animate and inanimate. (Carroll 2000, p.40)

Because they do not at all fit into binary oppositions but rather occupy ambiguous spaces in between, monsters also imply that pre-established categories are a farce, and altogether useless. In this sense, monsters are themselves 'failed repetitions', 'de-formities', they are embodied failures of re-production (Butler, 2006, p.173, 179).

But I wish to emphasize that monsters are both representations and *actual bodies*. For instance, *women* are particularly monstrous, because their bodies are subject to dramatic changes in pregnancy and childbirth. Women's bodies deny a set form and are prone to leaking and transforming, they are 'morphologically dubious' (Braidotti 1997, p.64). Also, monsters are tied to the feminine because a search for their origin always leads to the maternal body (Braidotti, 1999, p.291). Women's monstrous bodies can only be understood in the context of hierarchical binaries, which privilege the fantasy of a whole, impermeable male subject at the price of a perceived leaky, unstable woman's body. The monstrous body is feared because it does not conform to binarical systems. It exists in the interstices of binaries, between categories. For instance, woman's body at childbirth denies easy binary divisions confusing inside/outside and self/other; it is a confusion of two bodies, which were recently one. Women's bodies, as sites of binary and boundary blurring are 'ugly' and disturbing.

Like women, 'racialized' bodies are likewise often figured in terms of ugly monstrosity. Nöel Carroll speculates that 'nonbeauty [ugliness] […] is somehow an inadequate instantiation of the concept of human being' which, when applied to 'racial others', is indicative of them figuring as 'beneath or outside ethics' (2000, p.37, 52). Ugliness here becomes a mark of racial sub-humanity or 'primitivism'. One specific historical instance of the application of

'monstrosity' and 'ugliness' to an actual black body is the case of Saartjie Baartman (anglicized as Sarah Bartman), the 'Hottentot Venus'. Originally from the cape of South Africa, Baartman was brought to London in 1810 to be publically displayed on account of her large buttocks, which was medically stigmatized as 'steatopygia' (Hobson 2003, p.88). Janell Hobson emphasizes that the popularity of the London and Paris shows, which featured Baartman, is a result of the performative situating of her as a 'freak' (2003, p.90). Significantly, Baartman was regarded as emblematic of black women in general and 'Baartman […] came to signify the "ugliness" of her *race*' (2003, p.94, emphasis in original). Anne Fausto-Sterling likewise observes that Baartman's popularity as a 'specimen' or 'spectacle' was possible because of current-day anxieties about women and the 'savage other' (2001, p.361). Thus, Baartman's perceived monstrous ugliness was part and parcel of the larger mechanisms of colonization and racism. Understanding black bodies, such as Baartman's, as 'ugly' allowed them to be exploited without moral regret, since their monstrosity enabled them to be viewed as subhuman, 'beneath or outside ethics' (Carroll 2000, p.52). Interestingly, Jasbir Puar and Amit Rai observe that labels of monstrosity are similarly deployed against Muslims in the post-September 11 context to justify politics of racial hatred and quarantining:

> The monsters that haunt the prose of contemporary counterterrorism emerge out of figures in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries that have always been racialized, classed, and sexualized. The undesirable, the vagrant, the Gypsy, the savage, the Hottentot Venus […] shares a basic kinship with the terrorist-monster. (2002, p.124)

Bodies which we perceive as monstrously ugly also include those disfigured by illness or circumstance. According to Braidotti, such productions of monstrosity are connected to environmental, technological, or toxicity-based causes (1999, p.292). Again, these bodies are perceived as monstrous and ugly not because they are 'aesthetically displeasing' but because they are jarring, because they unsettle hierarchical binaries through inhabiting ambiguous spaces in between. As Wendell argues, in the context of the visibly disabled, such bodies are 'constant reminders to those who are currently measuring up that they might slip outside the standards' (2009, p.247). Thus not only do they blur binaries and boundaries, but disfigured bodies also remind us of the impermanence of life, the reality of mortality, and the fact that sooner or later each one of us will become 'ugly;' 'everyone who does not die suddenly *will* become a member of the subordinated group' (p.249, emphasis in original). Charles Feitosa, in an unpublished essay, puts it even more bluntly: '[w]e oppose ugliness as we oppose death; in opposing ugliness we are fighting against our own mortality' ([n.d.], p.4).

Monstrous ugliness is thus in a certain way, the most disheveling ugliness, an ugliness with the greatest power to shock. The ugliness of monstrosity and monstrous bodies is politically transgressive in two senses. First, it serves as an index for global and personal traumas (wars, pollution, and illness). Thus it is an embodied sign reminding us of various illnesses, viruses, and political unrest. Second, it reminds us of our own mortality, and the inability to remain 'beautiful' permanently. In this way it demonstrates the regulatory aspect of normative ideals, the actual impossibility of conforming to these ideals, and the limits of hierarchical binaries. Monstrous bodies are ugly because they resist

simple classification and demonstrate the limits of systems of classification (such as binaries). Also, monstrous bodies serve as embodiments of failed performativity. They actually are living reminders of the 'regulatory fiction' of body and beauty ideals (Butler 2006, p.185).

Ugly Specimen III: The Dirty Body

Anthropologist Mary Douglas, when discussing dirt, reminds us that it does not merely cause aesthetic discomfort, but that it is a symbol of cultural anxieties. Douglas articulates that 'all margins are dangerous' and that '[t]he mistake is to treat bodily margins in isolation from all other margins' (2002, p.150). In other words, dirt and dirty bodies are dangerous because they mark social margins, and embody that which is despised culturally. Dirty bodies are dangerous, because they escape easy classification and because they escape order; they exist, like monstrous bodies, in between binaries and at the margins of society. 'Dirt' may be compounded from any number of things: matter emitted from the orifices '[s]pittle, blood, milk, urine, faeces', puss, vomit as well as anything that is considered 'waste' – sewage, garbage, left-overs, slime, grime, mud (2002, p.150). Julia Kristeva, discussing our reaction to waste as 'abjection', recognizes the breakdown of the self and other binary that this involves. For instance, 'the corpse, the most sickening of wastes, is a border that has encroached upon everything' because it is an 'I' that has lost its 'I-hood' and is now taken over entirely by new lives (maggots and the like) (1982, p.3, 4). For Kristeva, as for Douglas,

> [i]t is thus not lack of cleanliness or health that causes abjection but what disturbs identity, systems, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-

between, the ambiguous, the composite. (Kristeva 1982, p.4)

Kristeva points out that the dirty body serves as a reminder that one could, and likely *will* become, ugly, unruly, and out of place at one point in life (Meagher 2003, p.33). In short, the dirty body is ugly because it is 'matter out of place', because it is an embodied instance of disorder, binary confusion, and ambiguity (Douglas 2002, p.44).

One such body that is regarded as 'dirty' and ugly is the *menstruating body*. Menstrual blood is considered dirty because it expunges things from within, blurring (much like the body during childbirth) categories of inside and outside, self and other, dead and alive. Like Kristeva and Douglas recognize, we cannot treat the ugliness and dirtiness of the menstruating body as somehow pre-cultural, but must recognize it as indicative of cultural attitudes. Thus, the dirty, ugly menstrual body plays out cultural discomfort with women, their bodies, and with the confusion of boundaries in general. This is best evidenced by cultural practices of hygiene and concealment, which are fixated on disguising and indeed erasing the presence of menstrual blood (Lupton 2003, p.36). For instance, over the course of the past century women's menstruating bodies have become progressively 'dirtier' in the sense that they have required more and more maintenance. Joan Jacobs Brumberg identifies that while at the turn of the nineteenth century women were expected to change their sanitary napkins twice daily, by the 1950s this had increased to six times daily (1993, p.125). This progressive shift runs parallel to the increased medicalization of women's bodies in general, characterized by increased medical control of their reproductive functions (typically by male physicians and in the space of the clinic/hospital) (p.106). Thus we must be wary of

treating dirt and ugliness as pre-cultural concepts and remember that they are culturally dependent, open to change, and invested in larger political shifts.

The ugliness of dirt is also often applied to the site of the 'poor' body, the non-upper-middle-class body. In her discussion of ugliness, Athanassoglou-Kallmyer directs our attention to the way ugliness is often ascribed to the marginal – 'the politically, economically, and socially disenfranchised' (2003, p.283). Such associations between ugliness and poverty are characterized by a politically situated belief that the lives of the poor are 'dirty' both in terms of personal hygiene as in terms of their 'dirty' conduct and behaviour. Rivero notices that in the Colombian *Ugly Betty*,

> performance of "beauty" required more than simply
> having the economic resources to buy products or
> transform the body. To become/be "beautiful" women
> had to learn to and incorporate the "tastes" and practices
> of the upper classes. (2003, p.67)

More than anything, this demonstrates the cultural belief that the practices, appearances, and customs of the 'wealthy' are more correct, advanced, 'clean', and 'beautiful' than those of the 'poor'. Again, I am emphasizing that the compatibility between the poor body and the ugly, dirty body demonstrates a political investment in endowing some bodies and their practices as more valuable, worthy, 'normal', and 'beautiful' than others.

The dirty is ugly in the sense that it represents the marginal and rejected aspects of culture – 'matter out of place' (Douglas 2002, p.44). Dirty bodies are 'ugly' because they are politically transgressive, marking the margins of the social body, which we would rather ignore. Cultural obsessions with 'dirt' function to keep binaries rigidly in place, suggesting that their dismantlement will lead to widespread disorder, filth, and contagion. 'Dirty' bodies are

ugly because they embody those practices and appearances which we would like to see expunged from our society altogether.

Performing Ugliness Strategically

In this, the final portion of my essay, I wish to suggest that we move away from a reactive formulation of ugliness by divorcing it from the beauty/ugliness binary. While ugliness is commonly dismissed as an undesirable state of the body, I wish to propose that 'ugly bodies', off all sorts, reappropriate the label and deploy it strategically. I think that this is possible by way of Butler's performativity. In this final section of my essay I will employ Derrida's deconstruction alongside Butler's performativity to propose how we might deconstruct the beauty/ugliness binary and strategically deploy ugliness.

Earlier in this essay I discussed binaries as interlocking systems of hierarchical oppositions. Also, throughout this essay I have regularly invoked binaries as pervasive systems, which organize our understanding of ugliness. Jacques Derrida offers us a strategy for unhinging binaries from one another, so that we can move beyond them – deconstruction. This involves 'an *overturning* of the classical opposition and a general *displacement* of the system', also known as reversal/displacement, or inversion/displacement (1982, p.329, emphasis added). In other words, the binary is first interrogated, then reversed, and finally done away with. Deconstruction, however, requires ongoing work and any displacements achieved are at best temporary and provisional. 'A breach in this oppositional structure is only temporary, and can only sustain itself for a short time', as feminist philosopher Elizabeth Grosz writes (2005, p.7).

Butler's 'performativity', which acknowledges the necessarily laborious and repetitive nature of identity construction, is a meaningful way of thinking about both ugliness and deconstruction. It reminds us that binaries exist as long as we collectively and individually repeat them. If, on the other hand, we turn our back on binaries through turning them on their side, we partake in an active and strategic deconstructive *process*. Butler uses drag as the example par excellence of gender binary deconstruction, suggesting that the body in drag performs gender 'differently' and thus engages in a temporary and dramatic binary confusion – 'parodic repetition' (2006, p.186, 189). I see the possibility for ugliness to be also deployed in this way. Rivero observes this performative aspect of ugliness in the Colombian *Ugly Betty*, noting that ugliness is rendered in the sitcom as a 'staged representation', 'an impersonation' (2003, p.72). While the characters in the show shift from performances of 'ugliness' to performances of 'beauty' in problematic ways that suggest 'everyone can be beautiful', the show unwittingly emphasizes the constructedness of beauty and ugliness.

Deploying ugliness strategically, in ways that engage in binary deconstruction, may take several forms. First, there is something already transgressive about the presence of 'ugly' bodies in the public. Certain bodies in certain places function as 'space invaders', according to Nirmal Puwar, because they disrupt the homogeneity of those spaces and challenge the position of the male body as the somatic norm (2004, p.67). Thus, the presence of a monstrous, dirty, or unaltered body in certain contexts is actually deconstructive and disruptive to binaries in itself. As Mary Russo, writing on the carnivalesque indicates,

> in the everyday indicative world, women and their
> bodies, certain bodies, in certain public framings, in

certain public spaces, are always transgressive –
dangerous, and in danger. (1997, p.323)

Second, ugliness may be deployed strategically, through an
active and exaggerated performance of ugliness in public spaces.
Since the production of beauty requires not only a specific
appearance but also a certain code of behaviours, feminists may
strategically enact 'ugly' behaviours as a means of deconstructing
binaries such as beauty/ugliness, clean/dirty, public/private, and
man/woman. Bartky refers to 'disciplinary *practices* that produce a
body which in *gesture* and appearance is recognizably feminine'
(1990, p.65, emphasis added). These disciplinary practices function
to prescribe the

> body's sizes and contours, its appetite, posture, gestures
> and general comportment in space and the appearance of
> each of its visible parts. (p.80)

An excessive performance, performative confusion, or
complete disregard of these normative behaviours and practices thus
allows for a disruption of the conventions of beauty. Karina
Eileraas, in 'Witches, Bitches, and Fluids', explores the performed
ugliness of punk and rock girl bands such as Hole. They deploy
ugliness through ugly shrieks and wails (1997, p.127), ripped
stockings and smudged make-up (p.129), ugly stage aggression
(p.129), and the presence of ugly, dirty bodily fluids (p.132). In such
ways, Eileraas argues, some girl bands perform ugliness, dismember
femininity and normative feminine behaviours, and actively
deconstruct spaces of beauty/ugliness and masculinity/femininity
through 'parad[ing], parrot[ing], and parody[ing]' (1997, p.135). It
is exactly such multidimensional and excessive performances of
ugliness, which create spaces of binary ambiguity and flux. Through
acting ugly, and 'doing' ugly, ugliness is privileged as a site of

expression and as an effective feminist tool for unsettling prescriptive norms of behaviour.

Finally, ugliness can be deployed strategically through the very act of performative self-naming. At the beginning of this essay, I discussed Kincaid's strategy of deploying ugliness *against* neo-colonizers. Edwidge Danticat, on the other hand, provides an instance of the reappropriation or 'embrace' of the category of ugliness through a deployment of it onto *herself*. Speaking of the multiple oppressions that Haitian women face, she rallies around a Haitian idiom:

> we must scream this as far as the wind can carry our voices. "Nou lèd, nou la!" We are *ugly*, but we are here! (2003, p.27, emphasis added)

Through applying the label of ugliness onto herself (and 'her people'), Danticat immobilizes anyone who might want to hurt her by way of using the term 'ugly' against her. She performs ugliness strategically, through 'embracing' the category, deploying it in her own name, and reassembling it as something to be proud of. Acknowledging the political implications behind 'ugliness' – such as racism, colonialism, sexism, and poverty – Danticat refuses to be immobilized by ugliness or by people who may use the term against her. Instead, she exploits it to her own uses, performs it, and deconstructs its meaning through reconfiguring it as a site of pride: as a site of presence, struggle, and endurance.

Coda: 'There's No Power Like My Ugly'

Throughout this essay I have argued that ugliness should be understood as politically situated and intimately connected to hierarchical binaries (and the oppressions and inequalities that they inform). Tracing certain 'ugly bodies', it is clear that in reality, no

one is safe from being regarded as 'ugly' at some point during their lives. While ugliness is in this sense ubiquitous, I have also demonstrated that certain bodies (such as women, the 'poor', the non-white, and the 'disfigured') are especially prone to being labeled 'ugly'. Finally, I have proposed that feminists perform ugliness as a means of deconstructing hierarchical binaries and disrupting norms of femininity – 'There's no power like my ugly' (Hole, qtd. in Eileraas 1997, p.122).

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