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Political Economy of Embodiment: Capitalizing on Globally Staged Bodies in Nigerian Beauty Pageants and Vietnamese Sex Work

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Abstract

How do various stakeholders capitalize off of display workers' bodies? This article uses a comparative-case approach to examine two different sites—beauty pageants in Nigeria and high-end sex workers in Vietnam—where women's bodies are differentially staged with varying degrees of visibility. Theoretically, this article develops the concept of *political economy of embodiment* to account for a network of people onstage, backstage, and offstage who capitalize off displayed bodies in qualitatively different ways. Beauty pageants in Nigeria take place on highly visible national and global stages. Contestants' bodies signal African beauty as being fashion-forward, which propels and integrates Nigeria into international arenas of diplomacy and trade. High-end sex workers in Vietnam work on a stage that is hidden from the general public yet open for a select group of Vietnam's elites. Sex workers' bodies are on display to project an ideal of Asian ascendancy in Vietnam's market.

Keywords

body and embodiment, global and transnational sociology, sex and gender

For many scholars, women's bodies are crucial empirical sites to examine global cultural and capital flows (Edmonds 2010; Hoang 2015; Otis 2012; Wilk 1995), as gender travels through different relational circuits of power. The expansion of "visual technologies, commodity consumption, urbanization, and spectacularization [since] the 1920s has ushered in a multitude of new occasions, sites, and ways for women to be on display in the glare of the public eye" (Tice 2006:147). In many ways, bodily display workers (Mears and Connell 2016), whose bodies are often on exhibition on various stages, embody these intensified processes. Although scholars have highlighted how body work is increasingly critical to personal success and organizational structures (Entwistle 2009; Gimlin 2007; Mears 2014; Shilling 2003), less work has been done on how this labor reflects and constitutes changing body-centered industries, national representations, and global political economies. We address this gap by asking, "How do various stakeholders capitalize off of display workers' bodies?"

We provide a systematic analysis of the different groups of workers, aesthetic industries, and political and economic elites who capitalize on the same bodies in qualitatively distinct ways.

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This article uses a comparative-case approach to examine two different sites—beauty pageants in Nigeria and high-end sex workers in Vietnam—where women's bodies are differentially staged with varying degrees of visibility to understand the political economy of embodiment. Importantly, Nigeria and Vietnam are two ascendant countries in the new global economy with rapid growth rates in their respective regions. Beauty pageants in Nigeria take place on highly public national and global stages, as contestants compete in top pageants around the world. Contestants' bodies signal complex shifting aesthetics that position African beauty as fashion-forward to promote a global-African ideal, which propels and integrates Nigeria into international arenas of diplomacy and trade (Balogun, forthcoming). High-end sex workers in Vietnam, in contrast, work on a stage that is hidden from the general public, yet open for a select group of Vietnam's political and economic elites. Sex workers' bodies are on display to project a Pan-Asian ideal of Asian ascendancy and confidence in Vietnam's market to help business elites broker relationships of trust through male bonding rituals (Hoang 2015).

Theoretically, this article develops the concept of *political economy of embodiment*, which we define as the various labors and forms of compensation that bodily display work engenders, notably in ways that allow various stakeholders to materially shift and symbolically reposition themselves in the political economy. We look empirically at the networks of both producers and consumers who capitalize on women's displayed bodies in different ways. On the *production side*, body laborers (e.g., hairstylists, makeup artists, manicurists, tailors, plastic surgeons) get paid through material and symbolic means for helping both pageant contestants and sex workers achieve their desired aesthetic looks. Body laborers who work on beauty pageants often gain symbolically through free publicity and advertising. In contrast, body laborers for sex workers—who have less public visibility because they work in an underground economy—receive direct cash payments. On the *consumption side*, we examine how a group of political and economic elites further capitalize on these bodies to promote diplomacy and confidence in their countries as sure bets for domestic growth and foreign investment. Politicians and businessmen alike use these women's bodies to counter negative portrayals of their nations as corrupt and authoritarian to project a new image of their countries as eager and ready to compete in the global economy. This article makes a sociological contribution by centering the political economy of embodiment, which has implications for the material, cultural, and economic value of women's bodies on display. Through multiple differential systems of exchange among display workers, body laborers, and elites, these stakeholders destabilize global hierarchies around embodied ideals that once privileged Western superiority and the political economy, while reinforcing local hierarchies around gender and class.

Bodies on Stage: Display Workers, Body Laborers, and Nationalistic Consumers

This article brings the literature on gender, nationalism, and global capitalism into conversation with scholarship on body labor and display work. In bringing the different literatures together, we develop the concept of political economy of embodiment to illuminate how different stakeholders capitalize on display worker's bodies to shift their material and symbolic positions. To develop our concept, we first outline the existing scholarship on gender, nation, and globalization, which highlights the centrality of women's bodies to national cultural representation and global economic restructuring. We next review multiple concepts linked to embodiment, to highlight how a focus on display work and the political economy that surrounds it are ripe venues for analysis.

The gender and nationalism literature examines how women's bodies are differentially positioned to represent their nations, either as cultural bearers of tradition or as countries on the assent in the new global economy (Casanova 2004; Enloe 2004; Kondo 1990; Yuval-Davis 1997).

Connecting women's bodies to nations in Latin America, Richard Wilk's (1995) work on beauty pageants forges connections between the everyday politics of nation states and the cultural politics of aesthetics by paying attention to the tensions between the local and global circulations of culture and difference. Similarly, Kamala Kempadoo (2004) argues for an understanding of sex work in the Caribbean that is grounded in daily realities and recognizes how sexual labor connects to national imaginaries, global capitalism, and commodified exchanges.

Women's bodies can be used to symbolically challenge Western hegemony (Jafar and Casanova 2013). In Nigeria, for example, multiple forms of embodied, idealized femininities within the beauty pageant industry both challenge and strategize against "international standards" to sustain a broader "African rising" narrative that positions Nigeria as increasingly important to the global political economy (Balogun 2012). And, in Vietnam, sex workers' bodies are used not only to project an image that highlights the country's global assent but also to chart out a distinctly "Asian" future (Hoang 2014). Much conventional scholarship assumes a one-directional diffusion of Westernization and whiteness, ignoring the complex interplay of local, national, and global forces at work. Several scholars challenge this one-dimensional frame by decentering globalization through new methods of referencing that do not start with the West (Chen 2010; Hoang, Cobb, and Lei 2017; Iwabuchi 2014). This article contributes to this growing pool of scholarship that questions mainstream global beauty ideals as being dominated only by the West. We build on this scholarship that addresses the tensions within these new non-Western dominated models of embodiment. In doing so, we highlight a broader array of actors who capitalize on these women's bodies on both the production and consumption sides of exchange. Interregional ideals provide competing alternatives to Western standards of beauty, simultaneously creating untapped markets for producers and new aesthetic ideals for consumers looking to capitalize on differently staged bodies. These stakeholders fuse embodied practices and nation-building projects to merge into the contemporary global economy.

Ashley Mears and Catherine Connell (2016:335) argue that late capitalism has led to the prominence of *display work*, a specific type of aesthetic labor in which the "primary exchange of bodily capital is for the purpose of visual consumption. . . . The primary reason for their compensation is in *showing* their own bodies." *Display workers* invest heavily in their appearance for others' consumption. This article, builds on the concept of display work by advancing a theory to account for *both* the production and the consumption of bodily display work, emphasizing the symbolic and material capital that this labor engenders.

Related to this literature on display work is scholarship that examines body labor or the services and products workers use to *produce* and enhance the aesthetics of *others*, which emphasizes bodily contact, emotional exchanges, and persistent inequalities within the service-sector economy (Kang 2010; Lan 2003; Otis 2016). For display workers, such as sex workers and beauty contestants, body laborers can boost *body capital* (Mauss 1973[1935]), which refers to how the bodies that are worked on become valued in competitive consumer contexts (Hoang 2018a; Wacquant 1995). This process does not exist in a vacuum; rather, the development and consumption of body labor signify and are shaped by a nation's shifting place in the global economy (Hoang 2014:517).

Much of this existing literature focuses on the service economy to shed light on cultural meanings and economic valuation of aesthetic labor to workplace and organizations. By bridging the gender literature on nation and global capitalism to scholarship on body and aesthetic laborers, we are able to investigate how economic exchange takes place at various levels of analysis. We center the concept of *political economy of embodiment* by analyzing relationships among different kinds of actors within this aesthetic field, including the following: women who labor over their own bodies in display industries (bodily display workers), a network of others who labor over their bodies (body laborers/producers), and the group of elites that further capitalize on

these bodies through their consumptive practices (body consumers). By examining these interconnected relationships, we take into account an entire network of people onstage, backstage, and offstage who capitalize off displayed bodies in qualitatively different ways.

Scholarship on gender and global capitalism highlights how women's labor is becoming increasingly central to economic development through service work, domestic labor, manufacturing, knowledge economies, microfinance, and the informal sector (see: Radhakrishnan and Solari 2015). Saskia Sassen's (2001) macro analysis of bifurcated labor markets in global cities illustrates how high-skilled professionals, who command global financial centers, depend on low-skilled support service personnel to operate. A rich body of literature describes the ways that women in the service economy engage in sex work, care work, emotional labor, and intimate labors in their exchanges with different clientele—see multiple chapters in Eileen Boris and Rhacel Salazar Parrenas (2010). We deepen this literature by showing how a wider network of body laborers and consumers capitalize on women's display work, in the national projects that showcase and capitalize on their beauty as symbolic images that illustrate the rise of the global South. The production of women's beauty relies on an important, but sometimes invisible network of body laborers, who produce their aesthetic choices for display, and a network of highly prominent elites, who consume shifting embodied ideals to further their political and economic ends.

Comparative Case Logic: Two Ascendant Nations, Two Aesthetic Industries

Most of the world's "least developed countries" are located in Africa and Asia, yet major multinational investment firms, such as Citigroup and Goldman Sachs, have predicted that much of the future growth in the global economy will come from Southeast Asia and sub-Saharan Africa, with Vietnam and Nigeria taking the lead. Vietnam and Nigeria are both experiencing massive economic growth and have been identified by analysts as preemerging markets. Both countries are next in line to be among the world's largest economies due to their substantial populations, expanding middle class, and increased investment opportunities. They are also undergoing privatization efforts to reduce the degree of state control over the economy. Following in the footsteps of capitalist economies on their respective continents, both have the second-fastest growing economies in their specific regions. Many dub Vietnam as the rising "dragon," following China's trajectory of rapid economic development (Hayton 2010). Similarly, Nigeria is lauded as the up-and-coming "giant" right after South Africa (Adebanwi and Obadare 2010). In both cases, the mainstay regional powerhouses (China and South Africa, respectively) are experiencing economic slowdowns, which open up the possibility of new economic centers to take their place.

These two seemingly disparate nations have some key commonalities: They both have rapidly developing economies that provide people with new opportunities to reconfigure social structures and the place of their nations in the global world. They are also both dealing with negative national reputations through economic and political reforms that attempt to combat corruption, authoritarianism, and economic instability. These broader changes in the political economy provide the context in which technologies of embodiment (Hoang 2014) take on new meanings of illustrating and confirming the rising status of their countries by highlighting access to material resources, knowledge of cutting-edge trends, and the ability to smoothly undergo a dramatic change in appearance. Our comparative approach enables us to observe comparable contemporary patterns in two countries where women have played a critical role in representing their respective nations' shifting place in the new global economy. Industry insiders view beauty pageants and sex work as industries deeply connected to each country's political-economic trajectory. By conducting research in different regions of the world, we are able to identify parallel patterns that may be prominent across newly emerging economies.

Both beauty pageants and the sex industry are sites of enhanced sexualized display of women's bodies, where appearance is a critical part of industry expectations. These two cases enable us to examine women's investments in their bodies and how the display of their bodies can become connected to larger political-economic transformations. In both realms, sex workers and beauty queens depend on a wide network of body laborers to help them achieve their beauty ideals and match clients' and owners' aesthetic desires. Pageant contestants and sex workers, however, operate in industries with different kinds of public and private stages. Body laborers who work on beauty pageant contestants operate in an industry that is legal and highly visible through public performances and media encounters. Sexual economies, in contrast, operate in the underground world of illicit commerce in many parts of the world. These are largely hidden spaces operating outside of the purview of the formal economy.

Our complementary data focus on the distinct *looks* cultivated, in part, by the body laborers who serve pageant contestants and sex workers. Body laborers play a critical role by influencing pageant contestants' and sex workers' choices about the latest trends, styles, and fashions that involve both temporary and permanent alterations to their bodies. These bodies come to represent their respective nations' shifting positions on a global stage. Nigerian beauty contestants publicly assert their positions as national trendsetters and project international belonging through pageantry, while in private, exclusive hostess bars, sex workers enable local Vietnamese elites to project confidence in Vietnam's market economy to key foreign investors from other East and Southeast Asian nations.

Although it might seem counterintuitive to compare two different kinds of industries in two vastly different regions of the world, we argue that this comparison provides analytical leverage to capture different processes along multiple dimensions, with (1) varying degrees of visibility that affect the symbolic and material profits body laborers accrue, and (2) common ways that state officials and economic elites draw on new aesthetic ideals via competing forms of non-Western referencing that encourage investment in their respective countries.

Nigerian Political Economy and the Beauty Pageant Industry

Nigeria has witnessed profound economic and political transformations since securing independence from Great Britain in 1960. The 1970s oil boom brought unprecedented wealth to the oil-rich country that fueled rapid state-sponsored industrialization and development (Apter 2005; Watts 2004). In 1972, buoyed by its newfound oil wealth, newly established indigenization policies restricted foreign investment. A worldwide decline in oil prices in the 1980s (at this point, oil accounted for 80 percent of government revenues) led to high debt burdens and devaluation of the Nigerian currency. The economy stagnated due, in part, to government corruption and mismanagement under a military regime. In 1999, following the transition to a democratic government, a new series of market-oriented reforms substantially reduced foreign debt, attracted investment, and deregulated state-owned industries.

In the subsequent decade, Nigeria's economy grew consistently at an average rate of 7 percent, with the gross domestic product (GDP) more than doubling from $348 billion in 2000 to $816 billion in 2010, when adjusted for purchasing power parity (World Bank 2011). Although oil and gas have typically dominated foreign exchange earnings and government revenues, the industry is becoming less important to the GDP, with many analysts pointing to the rise of service sectors, such as retail and consumer products, technology, media, and telecommunications, as driving the country's economic growth. Recent macroeconomic reform policies identified the entertainment industry as one of the top emerging-growth sectors. As a pioneering entertainment company, the Silverbird Group, the media conglomerate that owns the Most Beautiful Girl in Nigeria (MBGN) contest, along with television networks, shopping malls, real estate, radio stations, and cinemas, remains at the nexus of these leading sectors that contribute to the growth and

diversification of Nigeria's economy, attract foreign capital, and bring global name recognition. Silverbird executives represent a broad segment of wealthy domestic entrepreneurs who aim to make Nigeria the preferred destination for investment in Africa, tapping into capital that will secure Nigeria's place as a leader in the international political economy.

The MBGN contest, started by Ben Murray-Bruce, an entertainment business mogul turned senator, is widely regarded as the most prominent beauty pageant on the Nigerian national scene and has sent contestants to major international beauty pageants since 1986. At the national finale, MBGN chooses five winners who go on to represent Nigeria at different beauty, modeling, and promotional contests within the country and around the world. As cosmopolitan subjects, Nigerian beauty queens are seen as publicly representing the nation's development and international belonging. The pageant's finale activities are usually held in Lagos, the port-metropolis and commercial hub, where much of the country's wealth is concentrated. Beauty queens routinely interact with the public through charity events, media blitzes, and meet-and-greets. Contestants are trained to embody "international standards" through their looks, movements, and high self-confidence. They are expected to use their beauty, charm, and hospitality to showcase the very best of the country to gain positive attention for Nigeria. Nigerian politicians and business elites use these contestants and their winnings to shift the country's image away from one that is corrupt to one that highlights global competiveness. Pageant contestants' public exposure and fame provide them with direct access to some of the nation's most powerful political officials, business entrepreneurs, and acclaimed celebrities.

Vietnamese Political Economy and High-end Commercial Sex

After the fall of Saigon in 1975, Vietnam closed its doors to the rest of the world. Following a decade of economic stagnation, lagging productivity, and rapid inflation, the Vietnamese government introduced the *Doi Moi* program of economic liberalization, effectively transitioning the country from a socialist to a market-based economy. These reforms opened Vietnam up to foreign trade, investment, and large-scale tourism, marking the beginning of Vietnam's prolonged and continuing period of growth and development. Economic growth took another shift, rapidly accelerating after 2007 when Vietnam joined the World Trade Organization (WTO). Largely unaffected by the 2008 global economic slowdown, Vietnam's economy has grown nearly 8 percent each year since WTO accession. This growth has served as a magnet for investment: Foreign direct investment (FDI) dramatically increased from $4 billion in 2006 to $11 billion by 2010 (General Statistics Office [GSO] Vietnam 2011).

The persistent weakness of Western economies in the wake of the 2008 global economic crisis became apparent in Vietnam, as the sources of FDI entering the country came primarily from Asian countries. By 2010, Taiwan, South Korea, Malaysia, Japan, and Singapore were the top five investors (GSO Vietnam 2011), and they began to play a major role in structuring Vietnam's economy. Capital from these sources overtook both Western investments and overseas remittances, giving an Asian face to wealth in Vietnam for the first time. Stratification in the sex market mirrors that of the economic field more generally. Thus, despite the relative prestige of Western transnational businessmen in other parts of the world, they did not represent the most elite segment of the market for commercial sex. Rather, by 2009, the highest-paying sector of the sex industry catered mainly to wealthy local Vietnamese and Asian businessmen.

Khong Sao Bar, located in the heart of Ho Chi Minh City's (HCMC) business district, services the highest-paying niche market for commercial sex in Vietnam. As one of the most profitable bars in HCMC that caters to the country's wealthiest businessmen and political officials, this bar is hidden. High-end Vietnamese sex workers entertain foreign guests, helping to cement business deals that direct foreign capital into the country, while also serving as emblems of progress and development. Vietnam's elite businessmen operate some of the nation's top finance, real estate,

and trade companies. At the time of this study, there were three madams who ran the bar and trained sex workers on how to sit, drink, sing, dance, and maintain appropriate relationships with their clients.

Research Methods

Much of the comparative scholarship in the sociology of globalization uses a top–down approach that looks at how states manage development in cooperation or competition with business elites (Marquis and Raynard 2015). This study, however, adopts an ethnographic approach to emphasize how women's staged bodies play a significant role in supporting other aesthetic industries, as well as the nations' elites who play a critical role in repositioning their respective countries on a global stage.

This article is based on ethnographic data independently collected by each author in Nigeria and Vietnam, respectively, between 2009 and 2010. Although the research was not originally designed as a comparative project, both researchers witnessed a sizable group of body laborers who supported their respective research subjects. Both researchers kept jottings during fieldwork encounters and wrote more extensive field notes within 24 hours. Ethnographic research was the best methodological choice for capturing the dynamic movements of people, capital, and discourses within both of these industries. Each author independently coded the data for themes related to the informal and formal economies that profit off of pageant contestants' and sex workers' bodily modifications, using ATLAS.ti and Nvivo. We generated a document with cross-case similarities and began to develop our conceptual framework inductively from our data.

The Nigerian data are based on a larger project that draws on 10 months of ethnographic research and 32 semistructured interviews with affiliates of the MBGN pageant, which included female pageant contestants, pageant owners and organizers (who are nearly all men), corporate sponsors, and judges. This article also includes data from unstructured, open-ended interviews with 13 affiliates of the country's premier national beauty pageant, including photographers, fashion designers, makeup artists, and hairstylists. These informal interviews took place at a variety of locations, including during fittings and on photo shoots and public excursions.

The Vietnam data draw from a larger project based on 15 months of ethnographic fieldwork on HCMC's sex industry, which includes 25 semistructured interviews with female sex workers, male clients, bar owners, and madams. This article largely focuses on 12 unstructured, open-ended interviews with affiliates of the highest-paying niche market of the Vietnamese sex industry, including plastic surgeons, tailors, and makeup artists. All interviews took place backstage in the bars, as these body laborers came through to provide women with free consultations or brought the services to them backstage while hostess workers got dressed for work each day.

The first empirical section of the paper examines *the look* to which display workers aspire. The second section outlines how body laborers help craft these embodied ideals on their respective stages and the material and symbolic profits that the various *producers* in this field gained. The third section addresses how *consumers* capitalize off of these staged bodies to project a new image of political transparency and economic confidence in their respective markets.

Onstage: The Look

Empirically, we draw on two cases, beauty pageants in Nigeria and high-end sex workers in Vietnam. Although these two cases are located in very different regions of the world, as we outlined in greater detail above, both Nigeria and Vietnam are ascendant countries that are

Table 1. Political Economy of Aesthetic Labor in Beauty Pageants and Sex Work.

Bodily display workers	Degree of visibility	Producers: Body laborers profits	Consumers: Elites projections
Beauty pageants	Public	Symbolic	Political diplomacy
Sex workers	Hidden	Material	Economic confidence

experiencing rapid economic growth rates in their respective regions. They are also countries where the individuals we studied draw on local and regional non-Western modes of referencing, thereby contesting Western hegemony. Pageant contestants and sex workers use their bodies for economic mobility, investing in their looks to gain status and economic capital. Body laborers have particular motivations and incentives that enable them to profit from their expertise in transforming the bodies of women in different beauty industries. Not all of those offstage and backstage actors, however, capitalize on these bodies in the same way. The major point of difference lies in the nature of work itself. Pageant contestants' bodies are on public display for the whole world to see and involve the production of communal representation. As a result, *body laborers* in these highly visible industries primarily reap symbolic rewards in the form of publicity for their brands as contestants promote their products on a global stage.

In contrast, sex workers participate in economic exchanges that commodify intimacy within underground economies that are sometimes accessible to only a select group of elites. Because body laborers cannot garner the same types of symbolic benefits through advertising on their bodies, those who labor over women's bodies in these invisible industries mainly reap material benefits in the form of direct cash payments. We further highlight how high-level political officials and business elites consume and capitalize on these bodies, using them as cultural markers to project images of political diplomacy and economic confidence. Table 1 outlines the political economy of embodiment across our two cases.

For both pageant contests in Nigeria and the sex industry in Vietnam, women had to confront and cope with converging local, national, and global idealized femininities. Many of these women engaged in embodied practices that, on the surface, appeared to embrace Western standards, yet they defied such interpretations by framing their own practices as way to solidify their cosmopolitan status. Bending to workplace pressures, these display workers constantly invested in their bodies to gain upward mobility, but their bodies also signaled non-Western modes of referencing that projected their countries as ascendant nations in the new global economy. Nigerian women projected a distinctly Global-African ideal, while sex workers in Vietnam worked to craft an image of Pan-Asian ascendancy.

Global-African Aesthetic Ideals

To audition for MBGN, aspiring contestants must purchase a $33 form, which they fill out with their hobbies, career ambitions, and body measurements. The form is often likened to buying a lottery ticket and making a financial investment, because the pageant winner receives a prize package of $21,000 and a brand-new car, along with the possibility of future endorsement deals that pay up to $3,000 per campaign, as well as lavish gifts like free clothes, foreign travel, and electronics. For comparison, entry-level civil-service jobs pay about $2,500 per year for those with high-school diplomas and $5,500 per year for those with a university degree. Many contestants use the social contacts they develop through the contest as a platform to pursue their careers in entertainment fields, like modeling and acting, and some reinvest their prize money by starting their own businesses. At a minimum, contestants have a secondary-school education, as required by MBGN. Most contestants are from working- and

middle-class backgrounds, because the very poor often cannot even raise the necessary funds to buy a form, while those from more upper class backgrounds view the pageant as being "beneath" them, because it is viewed as an upward mobility strategy.

To prepare for the audition, contestants participated in a 10-day training and rehearsal period. To compete in the show, contestants cultivated a beauty queen look, which includes a full-face of makeup, silky-long hair weaves, worn in waist-length cascading waves or elaborate up dos, trendy clothes and accessories, and exclusive styling treatments. Some hopefuls independently hired beauty coaches (called groomers) who charged $1,000 for a standard two-week training package and drilled contestants on the proper ways to walk, smile, sit, and enhance their looks. Although MBGN provides them with coordinated swimsuits and matching costumes for the dance number, contestants must purchase, rent, or borrow dinner gowns, cocktail dresses, stiletto heels, purses, traditional attire, and other smart-casual outfits to participate. These costs can run as high as $1,000, but contestants typically spent about $150 to $500. The winner earns a clothing allowance for events and a year's worth of complimentary styling services, which include hair styling, manicures, facials, and waxing. The crowned queen, however, still pays out of pocket for certain regular upkeep costs, like bundles of hair weaves and wigs, accessories, and makeup, which can run $300 to $500 per month. Premium human hair from India, Peru, and Brazil and custom wigs ate up the bulk of their expenses, ranging from $300 to $800 to achieve the desired full and bouncy look, and could be reused two to three times with proper care. Beauty queens often changed up their hair, varying the length, style, and color. Although synthetic hair costs as little as $20, it is considered unacceptable, because it easily sheds, tangles, and is too shiny.

The MBGN contestants' glamorous image represented the very best of the nation as a whole. They cultivated a *Global-African* look that universalized Nigerian aesthetics to stand in for the African continent and strived to have "international standards" appreciate the importance of Africa in general and Nigeria in particular. Mr. Abe, an executive at Silverbird, noted that Nigeria's presence at international pageants was vital, because their absence would alarm other pageant directors around the world, and its presence allowed MBGN to "show what we Nigerians can do" on a global stage. Participants viewed others on the African continent as unstylish "villagers" who looked to Nigeria for the latest fashion trends. Although global luxury and mid-market brands are in high-demand in Nigeria, Nigerian pageant insiders often pointed to the increasing importance of Nigerian-made brands. Doyin, a contestant, directly linked her growing Nigerian pride to beauty pageants, because she realized that people around the world were "listening to our music, watching our films, and wearing our designs." Doyin referenced the country's booming Nollywood and Naija-pop music industries, as well as MBGN's official clothier, who has a showroom in Lagos and New York; was featured in *Vogue Italia*; and has dressed A-list celebrities throughout Africa and in the United States in her fashions made from West-African Ankara print and embellished with beading, rhinestones, and crystals. Through these examples, participants pointed to Nigeria's global relevance.

Pageant organizers insisted that the contestants strived toward fulfilling international standards of beauty, which they acknowledged had been previously dictated by American and British definitions due to their control of international pageants. They insisted that these pageants had been forced to change as a result of the increasing participation and success of contestants from the developing world. For example, Mr. Tim, one of the pageant's owners, discussed how Africa is the next frontier of beauty:

> If you are looking at [international] pageants today, Americans never win. . . . I will tell you why, because Americans are so programmed from birth, they are so mechanical that there is no natural

> beauty in an American woman today. Now the world is looking for natural beauty, and guess what the future is? Africa! African beauty is becoming exciting. All of a sudden, we are becoming the future.

Pageant organizers claimed that Western beauty queens were plastic-looking, unusually pin-thin, and plain. In contrast, African beauty was seen to be more natural, striking, and shapely. In fact, Nigerian pageant participants did not see Western countries, but instead, Latin American countries as their main rivals. Today, Asian beauty contestants are seen as gaining momentum in the international pageant circuit. During a media interview, Joy, the reigning MBGN beauty queen, was asked point blank if she had been intimated by South American contestants during the recent Miss World competition. In response, she complained that those contestants "weren't real" and lamented the rise of "enhancements" in pageantry as displacing "natural beauty." Although plastic surgery was generally frowned upon and not commonplace among contestants during the period of fieldwork, minimally invasive aesthetic procedures like laser skin resurfacing and body contouring are now gaining popularity among some Nigerian beauty contestants. Moreover, plastic surgery is becoming more socially accepted and readily available, with local private clinics springing up since 2012.

Pan-Asian Aesthetic Ideals

Sex workers in the *Khong Sao* bar were rural-to-urban migrants who came from poor backgrounds. Outside of the sex industry, they would typically make $200 to $300 a month. Sex workers in Vietnam earned roughly $2,000 per month, comprising tips for joining men at their tables and $150 to $200 for each sexual encounter. These earnings were very high in the local economy, as white-collar professionals with master's degrees in finance typically earned roughly $1,000 to $2,000 per month. Many sex workers reject jobs in manufacturing and other service sectors as not being lucrative enough to propel their economic mobility.

Like Nigerian beauty contestants, sex workers in Vietnam worked to construct a distinctly non-Western ideal. They adopted regional standards pushing for a Pan-Asian aesthetic. In this bar, women worked hard to lighten their skin. They claimed, however, that they had no desire to look Western. In fact, they worked deliberately to de-Westernize their bodies. Nhung, for example, said, "In the past, everyone wanted to look Western, but that is old [*sen*]. Now the new modern [*hien dai*] is Asian." In this bar, looking "Western" was not synonymous with looking modern or following an international standard of beauty. In fact, Western women were considered unattractive, because they were considered too overweight, wore clothes that looked messy [*bay hay*], and looked too masculine. For instance, Huong explained,"[They] look like men, [with] squared bodies and saggy boobs. Asian women have smaller bones, smaller waistlines, small hips, and boobs that fit their bodies. When you are smaller, you look gentler, softer, and more feminine."

Instead, the workers wanted to look like the women from Hong Kong, Korea, or Japan. Local sex workers began to modify their bodies to conform to international, Asian standards of beauty. Imaginations of the *modern girl* (Weinbaum et al. 2008) from fully developed capitalist societies within Asia began to gain a stronger presence in the international global economy. Women lightened their skin, accentuated thick and straight eyebrows, and worked to look like Korean pop stars. When business was slow, the women sent off the male bar attendants to purchase Korean and Japanese magazines from street vendors, so they could learn the latest styles. In contrast to Western magazines, like *Vanity Fair, Vogue*, and *Cosmopolitan*, which were available in the local market but near absent in the bars, Korean and Japanese magazines provided women with idealized feminine bodies that they sought to emulate. When asked why Korean and Japanese magazines were so popular, the women explained that the models had smaller frames and bodies that were more petite compared with the models in Western magazines. Asian magazines also had

lengthy articles about the various kinds of skin-care products and cosmetic surgeries developed and produced specifically for Asian women. As Thuy, a 24-year-old sex worker explained, these surgeries and skin-care products are designed to bring out their "natural" beauty and enhance their Asian features. As in other parts of Asia, unsuccessful surgeries are often defined as producing an unnatural or Western appearance (Holliday and Elfving-Hwang 2012).

In conversations with workers about trying to look Korean or Japanese, many of them talked about how they believed the global center was shifting away from the West and toward Asia. Blonde hair and blue eyes were desires of the past. Sex workers pointed to the Dream Girls, a famous group of five singers from Korea, as their feminine ideal. The irony behind this way of contrasting Asian versus Western bodies is that all of the Dream Girls had reconstructive surgery to build nose bridges, construct double eyelids, and lighten their skin, changes associated with Western standards of beauty. On the surface, the Dream Girls' reconstructive surgeries seem to emulate Western standards of beauty, but Dai, a 19-year-old hostess worker, explained the critical difference:

> When women use skin lightening creams for the face and body, people think they want to look like white people in America or Europe, but actually, the true skin color of women in Asia is white. When a baby is born in Japan, Korea, or Vietnam, what color is their skin? It is fair and white, right? Dark skin is from going out in the sun a lot. We are just trying to bring out our natural beauty. No one wants to look Western here anymore. In the West, the women, even the models, are a lot fatter and their bodies are much more squared. They look hard instead of soft and feminine the way true Asians do. People come to Asia for beautiful Asian women, not for women who look Western.

Dai's clarification points to an international standard of beauty that is much more nuanced than the one associated with Western ideals. Beyond skin color, Dai's comment also illustrates the very attempts to resist Western ideals and highlight ideals that are regionally specific, and in this case, distinctly Asian. Although one might interpret these bodily modifications as Westernizing practices in the East, *localized discourses* that intersect with more globalized practices of cosmetic surgery help explain why such practices cannot be explained simply in terms of Westernization. This deliberate focus on aspects of Western standards of beauty that the women work to avoid illustrates how local, regional, and global ideals converge in women's practices.

These Global-African and Pan-Asian ideals mark a shift in international standards of beauty as they intersect with local and regional ideals. Although these practices might easily be read as Western, our data complicate this interpretation. Participants do not view beauty ideals in such a one-dimensional way. Rather, they see themselves as striving toward an international ideal in which regions like Asia and Africa are beginning to have a greater influence. The point here is not to dismiss the cultural influence of the West, but instead, to provide some nuance to emphasize how international standards are evolving toward centering African and Asian beauty ideals. In Nigeria, this involves redefining African beauty as exotic and unique, while in Vietnam, cultural ideals are shifting away from the West and toward an ideal type based on East Asian pop stars. In these ways, globalization creates new possibilities for alternative standards of beauty, whether Asian or African, that both emulate and rival Western standards of attractiveness.

Backstage: Producing the Looks

Beauty pageant contestants and sex workers both rely on influential networks of beauty professionals to help them achieve their desired aesthetic. *Body laborers* profit off these women's bodies by helping them *produce* the appropriate look to display on stage. In this way, these different

women support entire beauty industries that seek profits from working on these women's bodies. Body laborers include hairstylists, makeup artists, manicurists, tailors, and plastic surgeons. On the whole, the labor processes of these body laborers, while critical to the consumption of display workers' bodies, are generally invisible. Body laborers rely on the product of their labor to gain material and symbolic rewards in the form of additional cash and increased visibility of their businesses, in which these laborers are compensated differently based on how public or open the women's bodies are onstage. Importantly, this economy of display work draws in male and female body laborers from a wide range of classed backgrounds. They include low-level technicians like manicurists and hairstylists as well as highly trained professionals like plastic surgeons who are paid vastly different sums for their services, which we outline below. Yet when considered alongside each other, those who labor in the underground sex economy receive direct cash compensation, while those who labor on women's bodies that have a wide public reach often get symbolic gains through free publicity and advertising.

Symbolic Gains

Through their participation in MBGN, contestants were hooked up with high-end hairstylists, couture fashion houses, top makeup artists, and groomers, who they relied heavily upon for expert advice to perfect their looks. The contestants and laborers formed a complementary service industry, in which the two groups mutually supported one another. In exchange for free or discounted services, all official sponsors of the pageant earned naming rights and promotional consideration during radio announcements and television spots 10 times daily for three weeks prior to the event, acknowledgment on all print and digital communications, an advertising spot during the televised show, a full-page ad in the event brochure, and venue branding. MBGN valued this total package at $200,000 and stipulated that this barter arrangement was a good deal for official sponsors who provided their services. Through this agreement, body workers gained national brand ambassadors that brought their products and services to a more high-end clientele and an international audience. In exchange, body laborers granted contestants a year's worth of free or discounted services, with the expectation that they would plug their brands at events and in the media. Being known as an official consultant or service provider to the latest "it girl" on the beauty pageant scene increased their business and credibility.

All contestants underwent a hair consultation for the finale. Seye, the owner of a full-service salon, brought in her team of 12 male and female hairstylists to put in nine-hour days for two days before the show, hand-sewing human hair onto their scalps, attached to their own corn-rowed, braided hair. The "fixed" hair was then arranged into chic hairstyles that could easily transition in sync with the show's many costume changes. The hair was meant to blend seamlessly with the contestants' own hairline so that it would appear as natural as possible. Although contestants had to pay for their own hair bundles ($300–$800, depending on the length and quality), Seye wrote off the cost of the hairstylists' labor, reduction in hours at her own salon, transportation expenses, and additional hired assistants that helped with shampooing and organizing the hair extensions as worthwhile business expenses. She paid her hairstylists a monthly wage of $150 to $200, but regularly charged customers $30 to $50 per weave. In Nigeria, labor is typically cheap, while customers pay a premium for consumer goods and services, meaning that owners like Seye, who was not trained as a hairstylist herself, ultimately accumulate profits. Seye also brought in manicurists ($5–$15) and eyelash specialists ($5), who provided services that contestants had to pay for out of pocket. After their official sponsorship ended, Seye racked up industry awards, held a grand reopening with the beauty queen as a special guest, and raised her rates by 20 percent. Seye was pleased by the media attention that her sponsorship brought, which included a review that stated, "This hair salon will definitely make you a Miss World out of you."

Fashion designers emphasized how important it was for contestants to wear Nigerian-made clothing, especially at international competitions. The official clothier's couture dresses cost $1,000 and up and her prominence in the global fashion industry was seen as an example of Nigeria's growing international influence and readiness to splurge on high-end clothing. Xavier, an up-and-coming fashion designer who also worked with contestants, explained how Nigeria was an untapped market for global brands, but that they would have to shift their strategy if they wanted to be successful in the country. He explained,

> African women have their own statistics. In the fashion world, it creates so many problems if you want to sell your clothes here as a designer and you are saying waistline 25 [inches], 32 [inch] hips. What African women are you going to see coming out with hips 32? Where, how, why? At least start from 40 [inch hips]. If you actually want to bring your brand to Africa, not just in Nigeria, there are some things you just have to drop. If it doesn't happen, then I am sorry, no international brand or designer is going to actually do well in Nigeria or in Africa.

When probed to explain further, he shared that the international market in fashion modeling (to which many beauty contestants aspired) was changing as a direct result of challenges from markets like Nigeria. He noted,

> Of course it's changing, because before it was all about drop-dead skinny models, but as of last year they were not picking any skinny model to be on the runway. . . . We need regular people on the runway, a little bit of body. . . . They are embracing the African moment. Everybody is increasing their size for the African market.

Fashion designers capitalized off of their associations with public beauty queens who wore their designs at international contests instead of just foreign brands, which signaled changes to international standards and Nigeria's rising importance in the global fashion market.

Ms. Ellen owned Select Pro Cosmetics, a mid-range brand with products that cost $5 to $15, that was the official makeup and styling line for MBGN. She noted that beauty queens served as a "blank canvas" upon which she could project her ambitions of growing her brand, since they "use their face[s] to roll in the money." She continued,

> I want the queen to be able to pull the crowd irrespective of where she goes. I want them to be active and bring back glory to the country. . . . We're not just looking for the face of a product, but the face of a nation.

By expressing these desires, Ms. Ellen communicated that she effectively wanted Nigerian beauty queens to have looks that would appeal to a broad base of makeup consumers, even outside of Nigeria. She wanted her brand to appeal to women with a variety of skin tones and to offer products that anyone around the world could use to build a global brand. Through Nigerian beauty queens' global visibility, Ms. Ellen sought to grow and develop her own Nigerian-based company as an internationally renowned brand that would also translate into a stamp of approval for the future direction of Nigeria as a nation.

These different service industries used public exposure and the newfound celebrity status of beauty queens to grow their own brands through conducting endorsement campaigns, advertising, and requesting contestants at their events. Although many of these returns are symbolic, there is the promise of indirect material revenue through the advertising that would help them reach new clients that would further enrich their businesses. Importantly, owners of these brands (vs. those that served solely as laborers) profited the most, both symbolically and materially. Moreover, gaining positive attention for these beauty services was seen as directly related to raising Nigeria's prestige.

Material Capital

In contrast to highly visible beauty pageant contestants, who are public figures that provide an array of body laborers with symbolic capital through branding and free advertising, hostess workers in the Vietnamese sex trade operated in private and hidden spaces within an underground, illicit economy. As such, sex workers compensated beauty experts with direct cash payments. There was an entire economy that thrived off business backstage. The bar had a backdoor entrance, where body laborers could enter the women's dressing room without being seen by any of the bar patrons. The bar had connections to a whole host of informal beauty experts, who provided sex workers with free consultations to generate sales. Makeup artists, hairstylists, manicurists, tailors, and even plastic surgeons came through the bar on a daily basis to provide women with free consultations. With the exception of plastic surgeons, these body workers were working-class urbanities. Sex workers in these bars often had to pay for their own dresses, clothing, and beauty services. Pageant contestants in Nigeria received a host of "free things" to help promote or brand a product (McClain and Mears 2012), while sex workers received free gifts from wealthy Vietnamese men to help elevate the look of all women working in the bar.

Hairstylists could make between $50 and $100 on any given night, just for blow-drying, curling, and styling sex workers' hair. On most nights, at least five to 10 women lined up to get their hair done. Each hairstyle cost $10 and would last for one to two days, depending on how long a worker would wait before shampooing the cigarette smoke out of her hair. These hairstylists also generated extra profits by selling hair extensions that they would affix onto to the workers' heads backstage in the bar. New workers who came into the bar with short black or dark brown hair spent roughly $100 to $300 to buy temporary hair extensions that were glued to the lower part of their hairline. The cost of hair extensions varied with respect to the quality and thickness of the hair that sex workers requested.

Tailors could earn anywhere from $30 to $200 for each custom dress they made for hostess workers. In pitching her services to the workers in the bar, one tailor, Phi Ha, tried to assert her expert knowledge of the new Korean fashion trends and how they are more appropriate for the sex workers' body types than Western fashion trends. She explained, "Korean magazines have clothes that are made to fit on Asian women's bodies. The models have similar figures, and the clothes are designed to fit this body type." Phi Ha pointed to a dark red dress with a nude lining underneath it in a Korean magazine and then proceeded to pull a cut-out of the dress from her bag and placed it on the table for the women to view. The dress was short and cut off mid-thigh and the neckline was cut in a V-shape all the way down mid chest so that there was room for enough cleavage to come out in the middle. This design, she explained, "would not fit on a Western woman's body because it was made for a petite Asian body." Each week, hostess workers would place orders for one to three new dresses so that they could keep up with the latest trends and styles. The most sought-after workers often reinvested their earnings by ordering nicer and more expensive dresses, with the hope that by capitalizing on a more expensive look, clients in the bar would compensate them accordingly. This group of tailors capitalized on their direct access to hostess workers, who felt this pressure to continually update their looks.

The bar had a close relationship with two separate plastic surgery offices that hired doctors trained in Singapore, South Korea, and Thailand. These offices provided women with free consultations and significant discounts. Plastic surgeons played a critical role, permanently altering sex workers' bodies. These doctors often relied on the madams to refer new patients to their clinics. Sundays tended to be the slowest days in the bar, because clients usually spent those days with their families. During this downtime, hostess workers worked with tailors, got their nails done, or received consultations for plastic surgery. One Sunday afternoon, Hanh, the head madam of Khong Sao Bar, invited two plastic surgeons to the bar to provide Hong and Duyen, two new workers, with free nose consultations. During the conversation, the surgeons—Doctor Khanh

and Doctor Minh—explained to the women that the two most common procedures were a rhinoplasty (nose job) for $250 and double eyelid surgery, which cost $400. All of the women in the bar had a rhinoplasty, and roughly 80 percent of them had double eyelid surgery. Doctor Khanh told the new workers, "You should prioritize the rhinoplasty over the double eyelid surgery because a new nose will give your face a lift and make you look more like a new person than the double eye-lid surgery." Trying to seem sympathetic about the potential costs of these procedures, he said to both women, "There is no need to rush. Let's fix your nose first and then after you have saved enough money, we can work on your eyes later." Because Hanh, the head madam in the bar, had a personal connection with these doctors' offices, the workers received a discount of almost $100 on the prices they charged regular clients.

In short, an entire informal political economy of body laborers thrived in the backstage of high-end hostess bars. Most of what we know about sex workers consists of the emotional and intimate labor that they provide to their male clients. We know far less about the people who provide these women with body labor. This network of barbacks, runners, hairstylists, makeup artists, manicurists, tailors, and plastic surgeons directly profit off of the services they provide backstage through direct cash payments. In this way, hostess workers financially support body laborers that provide services to them backstage. The following section examines how those who consumed these looks further capitalized on these differently staged bodies.

Offstage: Consuming the Look

In both Nigeria and Vietnam, women's economic mobility and the bodily transformations that come with it represent the nation's economic prosperity or progress both to the country and around the world. Transforming women's bodies to fit distinctive Global-African and Pan-Asian ideals was crucial to projecting the nations' respective shifting positions in the global economy. Shifts in women's embodiment that were on display were routinely noticed and celebrated by the men around them who consumed these bodies as a means of projecting diplomacy and attracting foreign investment.

Projecting Political Diplomacy in Nigeria

MBGN is owned by a group of middle-aged male executives who budget $120,000 to produce the annual show, which they offset through form sales, sponsorship deals, and vendor discounts. MBGN winners sign a year-long contract with Silverbird, which entitles the company to 70 percent of their proceeds from any appearances or promotional campaigns in the country and 50 percent outside of the country. They offered three sponsorship packages: a platinum level at $333,333, gold for $266,666 and bronze at $200,000, with the "value added proposition" of local and international publicity through MBGN. Incredulously, Silverbird claimed they lost money organizing the pageant, but were compelled to organize the pageant annually to fulfill a national duty. MBGN is a signature event for Silverbird, and executives often capitalized on beauty queens as household names by taking them on business outings and galas, because these women commanded attention.

Although beauty pageants around the world are used to enhance national reputation, Nigeria's especially poor international image, juxtaposed against the high hopes for its promising future, heightened the stakes. Despite the hopes surrounding the upward economic trajectory of Nigeria, a number of problems persist in guaranteeing a secure business environment due to dodgy business schemes, bureaucratic institutions, and murky legal policies. Associating with young women who are positioned as responsible role models through their charm, beauty, and intellect, recast their ownership of pageants as a form of respectable entrepreneurship that provided

extraordinary opportunities to young women who typically encounter structural barriers in the labor force that helped boost business culture in Nigeria.

Through working with beauty professionals and devoting a considerable amount of time to their looks, contestants' physical embodiments, and by extension their lifestyles, were expected to change dramatically over the course of the contest and beyond. Contestants' body capital mattered beyond their individual lives, highlighting Nigeria's prospect as a valuable nation, its economic growth, and internationalization. Silverbird took credit for this, but also recognized the value contestants brought. Mr. Tim explained,

> MBGN brings us out there. Silverbird is not a dull brand, it's a bright brand. People want to know where she is. Be associated with her. And know what she's up to. She helps our brand and adds a lot of value to the company.

MBGN contestants also helped Silverbird build relationships with state officials who they invited to the event as special guests and requested their financial sponsorship. During opportune moments, politicians used contestants and their winnings to emphasize a shift in the country's image. For example, when MBGN's representative to Miss World, Agbani Darego, was crowned the first black African Miss World in 2001, the government granted her national honors and the president at the time, Olusegun Obasanjo, hailed Darego's win as a source of national pride and a direct reversal of the dominant image of Nigeria, which had shifted from "the dark days of military rule [and] the number one haven for corruption and bad governance [to] number one in beauty and intellect." Another state official remarked that her win symbolized "a new Nigeria and a democratic dividend. . . . [Her] victory has now opened doors to our youths to compete with the best in the world" ("Government Congratulates Darego, Miss World" 2001). Darego's Miss World title symbolized the promise of promoting continued development within the country, as well as the prospect of launching Nigeria as a bona fide member of the international community due to a world-recognized competitive edge. It also solidified the country's longstanding desire to be a trailblazer for the African continent, signaling the country's readiness to successfully engage in other competitions within political and economic arenas.

Projecting Economic Confidence in Vietnam

In a country where men rely on social contracts more than legal contracts, male bonding rituals of establishing social trust are crucial to brokering business deals (Hoang 2015). As regular patrons, male clients spent an average of $1,000 to $2,000 per night and $15,000 to $20,000 per month in *Khong Sao Bar*. As such, elites used women's bodies to project confidence in Vietnam's market economy to help wealthy elite Vietnamese businessmen attract FDI from Asian investors. Vietnamese businessmen's ability to convey a new global configuration hinged on women's well-groomed bodies that adopt a Pan-Asian aesthetic ideal as a counterpoint to representations of Western feminine ideals.

Technologically and surgically altered bodies symbolized the nation's economic progress to elite businessmen. Male clients also played a crucial role in mediating workers' sense of self-worth. Whenever a group of men entered the bar, the madams would greet them and order the women to line up, so that the men could select who they wanted at their tables. During the lineup, men regulated women's appearances by complimenting them or critiquing their style of dress and body parts. Male clients rewarded women they found aesthetically pleasing by inviting them to sit at their tables. It was not uncommon to watch men play with women's noses or to ask questions about their various surgeries.

In fact, local Vietnamese men often acted as representatives of the nation, showcasing the nation's beautiful women to their foreign investors. One evening a few days after Diem returned to work following her rhinoplasty, Quang, a 39-year-old client, pointed to her nose and asked

everyone at the table, "What do you think of her nose? She doesn't look like a poor country girl anymore, does she? This face looks modern [*Mat nay nhin tay thiet*]!" Everyone laughed as he kissed her nose, raised his glass, and cheered everyone at the table. Diem shyly covered her nose and looked down as the men complimented her. For these men, Diem's nose represented not only her own transformation but also the progress of the nation.

These body modifications, which highlighted the women's malleability and mobility, were crucial to local Vietnamese business elites, because they signaled the nation's progress and economic development. Dong, a 60-year-old businessman, explained,

> When you look from the outside in, it seems like they need our money, but we need them just as much as they need us. When you bring in businessmen from Asia, you can say, "Look, this country is growing and developing so much that even the poorest village girls can afford to get plastic surgery." It shows them that we're a nation that is growing very rapidly and there is a lot of potential in our market. They represent Vietnam to the most important people, our investors!

For foreign investors making multimillion-dollar business deals in Vietnam, women's enhanced bodies provided figurative reassurance that Vietnam was a dynamic market where they could expect to see returns on their investments. Sex workers' altered bodies projected Vietnam as a nation on the move, where even the poorest of the poor were beginning to reap the rewards of economic development.

Discussion and Conclusion

In our ethnographies, we center the political economy of embodiment among display workers, body laborers, and economic and political elites. We argue that these varied stakeholders critically depend on each other through their onstage (bodily display worker), backstage (body laborers), and offstage (body consumers) activities that generate varied forms of labor and structures of compensation that profit from display work. Through focusing on production and consumption, we trace various economic exchanges, as women's bodies move from undergoing body work to displaying their bodies in ways that ultimately accrue to support financial and state power.

Display workers are able to capitalize financially on their beauty in markets not accessible to the other groups, yet they do not work alone. Rather, they rely on a network of body laborers to enhance their bodies and on economic and political elites who consume these displays thereby legitimating their work. Body laborers accumulate symbolic and material capital, while economic and political elites aspire to stabilize broader nation-state economies and project political confidence. We further show how this profit is constrained by the extent to which display work is visible. When women's bodies are thrust into public arenas, such as beauty pageants, producers and consumers reap symbolic capital in the form of marketing and advertising that they can capitalize upon in other arenas. By comparison, spaces where women's bodies are staged only for private consumption (as in the case for sex workers) by a select group of elites primarily gain material capital or direct cash payments. To be sure, there are ways that public stages also accrue material capital and private spaces accumulate symbolic capital. Indeed, these spaces do overlap, for example, there are hidden elements of the Nigerian beauty pageant industry that are outside the purview of the general public to avoid spectacle and scandal. Moreover, the clients in Vietnamese high-end bars are high profile businessmen who use these private interactions to solidify their national power. However, for analytical clarity we have focused on these cases main orientations to further elucidate the two key dimensions of these reward systems.

Body laborers contribute to broader aesthetic industries, which thrive off beauty queens' and sex workers' shifting, sometimes unpredictable aesthetics. Through body modifications, they add value to these women's bodies that yield yet more profit not just to display workers, but also to

economic and political elites. State and finance players, who are mostly men, utilize these bodies to convey prestige and strike business deals to solidify access to private economic capital and symbolic state power.

Through these differential systems of exchange, these stakeholders destabilize global hierarchies around aesthetics and the political economy, while reinforcing local hierarchies around gender and class. Leveraging our comparative research design, we show how regional cultural and economic aspirations are embodied: they are literally stitched and sewn onto these women's bodies to encourage the international circulation of new ideals. In Nigeria, beauty queens symbolize universalized, idealized femininity to promote African heritage across the world. In Vietnam, sex workers seek to fit a Pan-Asian ideal for local elites to showcase to foreign investors as a symbol of Vietnams ascendancy in the new global economy. In both instances, these bodies exuberantly highlight their respective countries' newly desired positions as emerging economies, positioned against Western ideals to assert the importance of African and Asian bodies in ways that bolster the relevance of Nigeria and Vietnam. These practices are emblematic of larger discourses about progress, success, and modernity. The deployment of these terms becomes financially and symbolically lucrative for wider political economies. This is not just about the beauty services that people buy, but also about how represented nations shift their places in the broader political economy.

Although staying mindful of the specificities of our cases, we argue that our examples are illustrative of other, similar cases where heightened display work holds national resonance, particularly for other emerging economies. The patterns that we identify across these two regions underscore the portability of our argument. As global economies are reconfigured, the dynamics we have identified will likely shift further. Scholars have forecasted that service and aesthetic economies will lead the growth of emerging economies (Warhurst and Nickson 2001). This prediction and our data indicate promising new research agendas that can capture these rapid changes. For example, in 2014, Nigeria officially surpassed South Africa as the largest economy in Africa due to a recalculation of outdated financial figures that had not accounted for the growth of service industries. By 2015, like many other East and Southeast Asian nations, Vietnam experienced record growth rates of over 6 percent, compared with North America at 3.2 percent and Western Europe at 1.4 percent (Hoang 2018b). Together, Vietnam and Nigeria make up two kinds of emerging markets where the political economy of embodiment is expanding, as they experience greater interest from investors and tourists alike, who are looking to capitalize off of globally staged bodies. Future research can continue to document how these changing factors influence the movement of capital and bodies on display in a rapidly evolving global order.

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