The politics of beauty in an age of globalization. Why do white, Western and wealthy faces rule the runways? TEXT: ASHLEY MEARNS

My introduction to the beauty industry came at age 13, when my mother brought home a big, glossy magazine with Cindy Crawford on the cover. It was 1993, a year when Linda and Naomi were famous names with recognizable faces. I pursued the teenage dream to be like them, posing first as the girl in the back-to-school catalogues in my hometown of Atlanta and then, after college, as a regular on the runways in Hong Kong and, finally, as an editorial face during graduate school in New York.

By the time I retired at the “old age” of 26, the globalized industry from which I exited felt different from the one I had first entered. There were more models, fewer jobs, and new work opportunities cropping up across Asia. Little did I know that, when I embarked on my first modelling trip abroad to Tokyo during a summer vacation, I had been taking part in globalization: the international linkage of finance and ideas—money and culture—that is bringing previously disparate groups of people into contact with one another. The modelling industry tells us much about the politics of beauty in a global age.

I met agents who managed the original supermodels, and they could recall the days when modelling careers were expected to last at least a decade and the Berlin Wall was a major business barrier. With the Eastern bloc open and scouts equipped with digital cameras and the Internet, scouting has increased exponentially. Agents can now circulate pictures to clients anywhere, anytime. In glossies today, Linda and Naomi have given way to a sea of nameless, replaceable beauties, their names typically of eastern European or Brazilian inflection, their shelf lives truncated to a few seasons.

Scouts search for new faces throughout eastern Europe and Russia—virtual supply warehouses, along with Latin America, of young women who are ready and more than willing to answer the global demand for fresh white faces. They look for young women—girls, really—between the ages of 14 and 18, who are skinny (size 0) and tall (at least five foot nine) and, above all, have a distinctly “edgy” face that holds some promise to become a superstar like Gisele or Kate. It’s an exceedingly slim possibility, given the global glut of competition, and,>

Image from photographer Zed Nelson’s book Love Me. The “Barbie button” nose procedures are popular in Iran.
considering the quickening turnover of the career, it’s not a wise long-term investment either.

Though scouts scour the global south, they limit their searches to white bodies. So, while they may frequent Brazil—where the majority of the population is a mix of mestizo and African heritage—they concentrate their searches in southern states where the population is blond-haired and blue-eyed to reflect the colonial roots of German immigrants. Plucked from rural villages with few attractive economic alternatives, girls are then shipped to a dizzying array of cities, usually including at least one stop in Asia—perhaps Hong Kong, Seoul or, these days, even the burgeoning fashion-catalogue market of Guangzhou, China. The flow of models very rarely reverses direction, and this is another hallmark of globalization: unequal flows of culture and capital.

It always struck me as bizarre that I, an American girl with brown hair and my mother’s slim Polish nose, would end up modelling lingerie for grown women in Japan. At one point there was a poster of me in Tokyo, smiling in a noticeably padded bra and large control-top spandex shorts, enticing Asian buying power with a standardized vision of female beauty: white, Western and wealthy. Any top modelling agency in Tokyo today has an entire division of Caucasian imports as well as a division of local talent. The reverse—an entire ethnic wing in a New York agency—is unheard of. Most North American modelling agencies take on just a handful of ethnic girls, who are understood to work less, make less money and have problematic (i.e., not stereotypically white) bodies.

We know that the world is rich with diversity in what is considered beautiful. With few exceptions—facial symmetry being the main one—beauty ideals are culturally and historically specific. For instance, fat female bodies are idolized in Niger, where desert Arabs force-feed their teenage daughters before marriage; meanwhile, here at home, extreme slenderness has reigned supreme ever since the emaciated, doll-like Twiggy debuted in the swinging ‘60s. The quest for beauty itself is one of the few universal truths uniting women the world over—until quite recently, that is, with the spread of a global beauty ideal that privileges Caucasian bodies. It’s a trend long in the making, since the export of Western media to markets in the global south and recently exacerbated by the Internet.

A stunning and stomach-turning range of products and practices aid women in pursuit of a white aesthetic. Skin lighteners with names like “White Perfect” and “White Beauty” proliferate throughout Asia and Africa. Increasingly normal are surgical procedures for Barbie button noses in Iran, double eyelids in Korea and, perhaps most extreme, taller heights in China. Leg-lengthening surgery requires that both legs be broken, sawed through to the bone so that metal pins can be inserted and then stretched over the course of several months to add a few centimetres of height. It’s agonizing, slow and expensive—and apparently worth it in cutthroat Chinese marriage and labour markets where some job advertisements specify height requirements (at least five foot five for female flight attendants!).

Here at home, racial mixing of a sanitized sort has caught on to much fanfare, marked most noticeably by Canadian-born model Saira Mohan, of Punjabi, Irish and French heritage, who was heralded as “The Perfect Face” in a 2003 Newsweek cover story on global beauty. Readers commented that Mohan’s face is hardly
“global”—more like a hint of ethnic difference on a white brunette. In our post-racial society, where we want desperately for race to disappear as a social issue, such faces come in handy. They pay homage to a surface flare of difference while leaving old standards unchallenged. That’s the beauty of whiteness—it’s the invisible yardstick against which everyone else is measured.

This is the underlying problem with the ongoing issue of racial minorities, or the lack thereof, in fashion. Black models who are seen as conforming to physical standards of whiteness tend to be in greatest demand. It’s what one New York stylist described to me as the look of “high-end ethnic,” which means that, in his words, “the only thing that is not white about you is that you are black. Everything else about you,” he continued, meaning body, hair and facial structure, “is totally white.”

If “global beauty” translates into implicit white Western beauty, does this homogenized aesthetic mean yet another stage in the long colonial history of the world? Well, yes, but there’s more to the story. Amid this convergence on Western beauty ideals, we can find parallel trends around the world that complicate, and indeed challenge, the old standards. In India, for instance, a country in which skin lighteners outsell Coca-Cola, high-fashion magazines have made a public commitment to showcasing darker-hued women. Dark-skinned models who defy the traditional Western aesthetic are an increasingly common sight, and not just in edgy magazine editorials. Witness Atong Arjok, a California-born model of Sudanese heritage, posing recently for mainstream department stores. Unlike the models featured in the famous 2008 All Black Issue of Italian Vogue, Arjok—with curly hair, eggplant-dark skin and full lips—recently appeared in a Macy’s catalogue. She is decidedly not a “white black girl,” nor is she called out as an exception to the white rule. She’s just beautiful.

Let’s imagine for a moment what would happen if the Fashion Week runway circuit—which has lately been whitewashed with what one magazine editor described to me as “that blank, blond look from eastern Europe”—switched to an “all-Indian trend.” Would you want to see it? Could there be a prevalent “Sudanese look” on the runways someday, and what would it take for that to happen? Perhaps the agents, scouts, magazines and luxury fashion houses could collectively decide to switch gears. It’s unlikely to happen in our lifetime, and not just because the fashion market doesn’t manage easily coordinated public campaigns. A bigger problem is a global hierarchy privileging Western culture and white aesthetics. Cultural producers are, after all, themselves products of the world, and ours is an unequal one, in forms ranging from the material, like international debt systems, to the symbolic, like the pain of not seeing people that look like you in the pages of a magazine. It’s a social order so thoroughly entrenched that it seems natural and, hence, invisible. Our challenge is to start noticing it.