



Book Reviews

Pretty Modern: Beauty, Sex, and Plastic Surgery in Brazil.
Alexander Edmonds. Durham, NC: Duke University Press,
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Pretty Modern is a provocative ethnographic excursion through the labyrinth of context necessary for understanding the rise in popularity of cosmetic plastic surgery in contemporary Brazil. Edmonds captures a rich and diverse range of voices that mostly celebrate this rise and congratulate Brazil on its very own flexible (read: neoliberal) and “sex-positive” (Goldstein 2003) approach to modernity. He gracefully captures the national sentiment while offering gentle critiques of what seems to be madness at times by listening closely to his Brazilian informants as they “constitute beauty as a social domain that has its own internal logic and cannot be reduced to an operation of other forms of power” (p. 20).

“*Willkommen, Bienvenue, Welcome*” (remember the opening to *Cabaret*?) to the übersexy and surreal modernity of Brazil! Brazil boasts a newly booming economy that is characterized in a recent award-winning commercial as a giant awakening from a deep sleep—a veritable economic engine of rising wealth and prosperity. Still a sticking point, however, if, of course, ignored by the marketing geniuses, is the obstinate and obscene Gini coefficient pointing to the persistent problems associated with socioeconomic, racial, and gendered inequalities. In the shadows of this sleeping giant, we find emerging debates about the value of affirmative action in the ambiguously constructed Brazilian hierarchical race-color scheme, as well as elements of a seemingly ancient class system that is superficially—and, yet, compellingly—leveled at the beach. Women are in control of their sexual desire and are anything but pushovers, but in the context of this book, the feminist intelligentsia is somewhat absent or perhaps has nothing critical to say about the issue. Instead, the majority of characters produce narratives that support the “given”—that attractiveness is a new form of capital—and why should anyone be prevented from seeking out their own true best form of it?

In this celebrity-peppered ethnography, we meet the “King of Plastic Surgery,” Dr. Ivo Pitanguy, who has achieved

celebrity status for his skill with a scalpel, his charitable contributions, and, above all, his zealous advocacy of the idea that his patients have a “right to beauty” (p. 51) because, he asserts, beauty literally makes you healthier. For their part Brazilians treat the charming and cosmopolitan Dr. Pitanguy as a heroic exemplar of his profession, immortalizing him in the 1999 Rio de Janeiro Carnival with the samba theme song “The Universe of Beauty: Master Pitanguy.” Brazilians believe in Pitanguy and his fellow practitioners. A popular saying told as a joke by plastic surgeons captures this sentiment: whereas a traditional psychoanalyst “knows everything and changes nothing,” the plastic surgeon “knows nothing and solves everything” (p. 76). Surgeries considered cosmetic in other countries are viewed by a broad swath of Brazilians—as reparative of the mind and self-esteem.

So it is that inside the walls of the ailing public hospitals, impoverished women wait long hours to obtain financially supported liposuctions, breast surgeries, face-lifts, and nose corrections. The female patients and their surgeons feel that plastic surgery resolves the tensions between motherhood and sexuality—who needs Viagra in this environment?—and repairs the damage to the body done by breast-feeding and vaginal birth. Edmonds acknowledges that the medical gaze is at times aligned with a certain (if taken-for-granted) misogyny, in an atmosphere where everyone wants to see women meet their beauty potential. One surgeon tells his patient who is concerned about her belly after childbirth, “You are really young . . . no way. You have to have a surgery. If your husband can’t pay for your breast [surgery], I’ll do it for free, because it’s absurd, a young woman of your age having to look like that” (p. 185). Now, that’s a cool guy! The pesky informed consent system established in post-Nuremburg Europe and strengthened in post-Tuskegee United States is admittedly and sheepishly dodged a bit so as not to produce fear in the patient. But we should not underestimate the importance of the skills that plastic surgeons gain in Brazil, carrying out surgeries in public-health hospital settings early in their careers before opening up their own private spalike clinics in wealthier neighborhoods. The feeling expressed by Edmonds’s surgeon informants is that this circularity approaches “a game where everyone wins” (p. 93).

There are, too, in this public hospital setting, the endless reflections on Brazil's complicated color hierarchy that in the context of plastic surgery translates into "corrections of the Negroid nose" and attention to the higher potential for keloid scarring on Afro-Brazilian bodies. The old cliché that held in Brazil since the colonial era was that "money lightens." Now, the meaning and interpretation of a "good appearance" for those descended from African ancestors is not only contoured by the economic and cultural capital that in Brazil has always been tied to a certain habitus, it can also be altered by acquiring sexual capital, a form of capital that Edmonds claims that Pierre Bourdieu neglected (p. 248). If the black movement failed at some level to capture the imagination of the *povo* (the people) then in this new instantiation, they can remake themselves as "aesthetic citizens," using new medical technologies to negotiate markets and elusive notions of health (p. 114). In this brave new Brazil, appearance is a form of value and plastic surgery "enables the aged, the abandoned, the unemployed, the nonwhite, the unloved, to name their condition an aesthetic defect and objectify it in their bodies" (p. 114). *Plástica* has become thoroughly banalized in this context.

Edmonds sees all of this and shares it with the reader, but it is the voices of individual Brazilians that dominate. Indeed, a compelling feature of the book is that the reader encounters a diverse range of interlocutors who, in their musings about the social architecture of *plástica* in Brazil, can approximate just about any possible subjectivity. Yet the voices tend to celebrate rather than critique. Thus, the "popular" (i.e., impoverished) women crammed in the waiting rooms at the public hospitals who make black-humored fun of their own bravery and guinea pig status also insist on their desire for *plástica* and claim that it is to please themselves and not some man's gaze. Because they sound so convincing in their convictions, they come across as agents of their own desire, in spite of quite obvious differential opportunities for social mobility, gender equity, and racial equality.

The multiple and complex arguments about plastic surgery laid out in Edmonds's book demonstrate that "beauty" under late capitalism and under the spell of imaginative neoliberal marketing engenders new forms of identity that entail a "progressive commodification" of the self—a self that can garner increased valuation and social mobility, perhaps here even breaking through stubborn and entrenched economic, social, and cultural forms of capital. The patient's romantic embrace of this new aesthetic medicine can potentially negotiate color hierarchies and tensions between the maternal and erotic body; it might propel the individual to improved forms of self-esteem and success. Just as with the much acclaimed social mobility of Afro-Brazilian men available through the route of professional athleticism—for example, soccer in Brazil—Afro-Brazilian women now, too, can access some form of

social mobility through the route of professional beauty trades. In Brazil, so it seems, "nine out of ten Brazilian girls want to be a model" (Veja 1999, in Edmonds, p. 208). As Edmonds notes in the conclusion, "For some workers and consumers on the margins of the market economy, physical allure can be an asset that actually seems to disrupt the class hierarchies that pervade many other aspects of their lives. . . . Beauty then can be seen as a kind of 'double negative': an unfair hierarchy that can disturb other unfair hierarchies" (p. 250).

Edmonds's *Pretty Modern* clearly captures an overwhelming national feeling and presents it in a respectful and tempered poststructural arrangement that is likely not to offend his Brazilian interlocutors. I found his ethnography to be important and compelling, yet I occasionally longed for more critical engagement from Brazilians—other voices?—on racial-color inequalities, aesthetic commodification, thoroughly banalized surgery, and the sly promises of neoliberalism. Where are the Brazilian feminists? What about members of the increasingly visible black-pride movement? Because I am deeply skeptical about the economic utopian potential of this new form of aestheticized capital, I hope that, if they are not out there already, there will be more critical perspectives audible in Brazil in the coming years.

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Peru's civil war between the Shining Path movement (Sendero Luminoso) and the Peruvian state (1980–92) generated a battalion of "Senderologists" seeking to make sense of the extreme violence that characterized the conflict. The publication of Orin Starn's "Missing the Revolution: Anthropologists and the War in Peru" (1991) also catalyzed critique and self-reflection on the part of anthropologists who were taken by surprise by the war and its virulence. Yet much of what was written had a journalistic feel to it and too often tended toward sensationalism, depicting violence rather than analyzing its causes. Even seasoned anthropologists found it difficult to