

The embodiment of hope: Brazilian beauties, Carioca beauties

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Anthropologist Carmen Álvaro Jarrín's book can be read as a treatise on the production and circulation of what is named and embodied as beauty in Brazil. It is a work and ethnographic research of excellence that employed beauty as an analyzer to ponder on the subjectivation and biopolitics of production, hierarchization, and legitimization of bodies based on social markers of gender, race, and class in contemporary Brazil and, especially, in the metropolitan region of Rio de Janeiro.

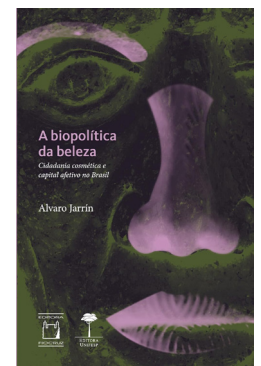
Carmen Jarrín then adopts the lens of beauty to focus on different processes that intertwine in an actual deployment of beauty, a concept by Michel Foucault in his analysis of the deployment [dispositif] of sexuality and which, despite not being used by Jarrín, fits perfectly in how it analyzes the intersection of heterogeneous discourses and practices – “discourses, institutions, architecture, regulations, laws, administrative measures, scientific statements, philosophical, moral, philanthropic propositions, and the said and the unsaid”¹ (p. 124) – which they will embody what will be identified as beauty in the Brazilian context.

Carmen Jarrín argues that beauty, primarily the one produced and modulated by plastic surgery, emerges as an affective capital originating from “a mutually constitutive relationship between embodied, sensory relationships to medicine, and the biopolitical rationalities and forms of governance that embed doctors, patients, and the state in networks of knowledge and practice”² (54). In this effort to reflect on beauty, she delves into Brazilian plastic surgery through extensive fieldwork in plastic surgery services in Rio de Janeiro, complemented with field insertions in Belo Horizonte and interviews with almost three hundred subjects of this field (71 health professionals and 197 clients). Thus, Jarrín brings us from inside the surgical centers, medical offices, and waiting rooms, diverse and even contradictory perspectives and life stories – of professionals, residents, and clients –, which produce, preserve, and give new meaning to the “need” and naturalization of “becoming beautiful” or “self-improving” through plastic surgery.

Besides plastic surgery services, mainly public ones that were configured as teaching hospitals where residents and renowned supervisors produced and manipulated “beauty” at low cost for the general population, Jarrín also analyzed other spaces and discourses, such as model schools located in favelas of Rio de Janeiro and both historical eugenic and media discourses that produce plastic surgery as a desire and necessity, that is, as a project, an asset, or capital in the neoliberal capitalism context. Like many other analyses that seek the bases of a given discourse and practice, Jarrín's book has a traditional first chapter that analyzes the historical genesis of beauty in Brazil through the eugenic efforts of medicine and public health in the 19th and early 20th centuries and the real and symbolic establishment of Dr. Ivo Pitanguy as the “father of plastic surgery”. However, such historical discourses do not remain in History. At the beginning of the book, on the contrary, Jarrín shows us the resonances and effects of the eugenic bases of that medicine: in contemporary biomedical conceptions about the need to modify the body through plastic surgery since, as stated by an interviewed plastic surgeon, “Miscegenation improved the eugenia [eugenesis] of the population, and beautification techniques aid eugenics because they help people remain youthful and improve themselves”² (p. 302); in the desires and rationalities of potential patients who save money for years for plastic surgeries that would give them greater “self-esteem” or change their lives, even though such change could not be better defined; in the promises and circulation of hope for social mobility through beauty parades in peripheral and favela territories in Rio de Janeiro.

Thus, the beauty deployment is divided into different locations and heterogeneous beautification practices, which jointly produce and compose two main axes that become the focus of the book's analysis: the biopolitical and affective spheres of the production of beauty, which are located more or less in one chapter or another, but which effectively intersect throughout the book. Here lies this work's great strength and importance, as Jarrín constantly avoids simplistic or even Manichean explanations that could give it a place of authority or establish the last word in the treatment of beauty in Brazil.

In this movement, she complexifies, questions herself, and calls into dialogue different authors and concepts that make us see from beauty the subject's very establishment, the idea of a nation, and the social logic that structures what we were, are and can



become in Brazil. Although racist, sexist, or classist narratives are harshly reproduced in the book, they are never taken out of their context. They are always accompanied by analyses that decouple them and expand their possibilities of meaning so that no doctor or client takes on tones of good-boy villainy. Instead, they are analyzed as products and producers of this biopolitics of beauty that crosses them in countless ways and directions.

The biopolitics of beauty is mainly composed of Chapter 1 (already mentioned above) and Chapters 2 – Plastic Governmentality and 5 – The Raciology of Beauty, where we follow from the establishment of plastic surgeries in the field of Brazilian public health and the manipulable boundaries between reparative and aesthetic surgeries to the main procedures performed and their promises of gender, race, and class normalization. Chapter 5 stands out for delving into discussions of the embodiment of racial inequalities and the consequent beautification projects based on whiteness, which take, for example, the notion of miscegenation and the so-called “negroid nose” and “excessive curves” as characters to be “corrected” or “improved” to hopefully achieve a particular social legitimacy or mobility, and the perception of themselves as more or less beautiful or ugly under their racialization forms.

The desire for beautification and the consumption of plastic surgery, which would configure them as hopeful technologies, are analyzed mainly in Chapters 3 – The Circulation of Beauty, 4 – Hope, Affect, Mobility and 6 – Cosmetic Citizens, which invest in the concept of affective to bring beautification processes into people’s daily lives. Thus, we see the active body signified and shaped in the intersection of viscosity that, even if on an implicit or non-conscious level, will potentially localize it or stigmatize it regarding gender, race, and class. The production and circulation of an “affective capital [that] is an ineffable, indistinct, and precarious quality”²⁽¹⁸⁵⁾, but which makes beauty “a practice of self-making as well as a form of work, one that crafts the producer’s subjectivity at the same time that it generates value on and through the body”²⁽¹⁸⁴⁾. Suppose the body becomes a personal and social project through beauty. In that case, the affective mobilizes and subjects it to investment to the point of producing itself and allowing itself to be produced as a “cosmetic citizen” in and

through biotechnological beautification networks. There is no explanatory answer in the restrictive or definitive sense of the term. However, the analysis of the affective capital of beauty shows us bodily why we beautify ourselves and desire in some way to be recognized as beautiful.

Jarrín ends her book by pointing out how the device of beauty persists in different transnational contexts, which shows its strength as a biopolitical project and opens up other possibilities for analysis. Thus, although his extensive fieldwork also incorporated discourses and practices from another city outside the metropolitan region of Rio de Janeiro, the end of the reading leaves us with at least one central question: do cosmetic citizenship and the affective capital produced by the biopolitics of beauty relate more to Rio de Janeiro and its metropolitan region or Brazil, as stated in the work from its title? Even if the Rio de Janeiro analyzer allows us to think about Brazil when reading Jarrín’s analysis, would the territorial diversity and the tones that the “national” inequalities analyzed here take on in different locations of the country not force us to complexify this biopolitical project of beauty? This is not to say that Carmen Jarrín’s analysis is incomplete or erroneous. On the contrary, I reiterate that she produces an authentic treatise on the biopolitics of beauty in the circulation of discourses, practices, social relationships, and affective between expert subjects and clients around the body beautification processes and the promises that such beautification carries in the Carioca/Fluminense and Brazilian contexts. There is a lot of Rio de Janeiro in the book, which, yes, radiates and produces “Brazil”, as the author clearly shows, but also seems to open clues that we may need to take the lenses proposed in “The biopolitics of beauty” to radically look and look again at the very idea of Brazil and the different Brazils out there.

References

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