

Beauty standards, racism and plastic surgeries in Brazil

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Abstract. This paper discusses the relationship between beauty standards, racism, miscegenation and plastic surgeries in Brazil, from the perspectives of Anthropology and Sociology. Beauty standards have a great impact in people's lives, women in particular are greatly influenced by the notions of beauty as a measurement of their value, but such beauty standards are influenced by racism and eugenics. With the advent of new technologies in plastic surgery, it became possible to enhance the human body according to current beauty standards. In this paper, three articles were selected to develop the idea that these medical practices support racist and eugenic conceptions of what people should look like. In the first article, the main discussion is about the myth of the racial democracy in Brazil and how the prejudice in this country is veiled, and yet, violent. In the second article, the author focuses on investigating the effects of eugenics in the medical professional's perception of beauty and how it influences the public's demand for plastic surgeries in Brazil. In the third article, the authors present plastic surgeries as an enhancement technology, which directly affects people's lives, specifically, the relationships built after the surgery. In conclusion, it was identified that these beauty standards affect women's well-being and sense of self, while also carrying values of racism and eugenics, which define who is valued and who is condemned within Brazilian society.

Keywords. Beauty standards, racism, miscegenation, plastic surgeries.

1. Introduction

This article is a work on the discussions about racism, beauty standards and plastic surgeries in Brazil. This paper is part of the discussions in great areas, such as Social Sciences, Anthropology, Sociology, topics on gender, health and technologies. This article is divided into three parts: introduction, discussion and conclusion. In the first part, I start the discussions about plastic surgery, beauty standards, and racism. In the second part, I present the main arguments about the relationship between racism, beauty standards and plastic surgeries. In the third part, I articulate the author's arguments and conclude the discussions.

Beauty and appearance are extremely relevant variables in women's lives. Women's bodies and subjectivities are influenced by current trends, from hairstyles to body shape to clothing style. In this context, beauty standards or aesthetic standards are present in women's daily lives. These standards are variable and therefore unreachable

Beauty standards are in line with the current social order, so they are valued only as what is approved by the social order's thinking. These standards are crossed by variables such as race/ethnicity, age, weight, and gender. Traits that define femininity in women are admired, so young women with little or no bodyhair, thin with a small waist, defined buttocks and small breasts, straight hair, and fair skin are considered beautiful.

With the progress of medicine, the body has become a major target of surgical interventions. These surgeries, until a given moment, were performed in the name of health. However, currently, such procedures are also performed for aesthetic reasons. In this sense, a scenario of confusion of boundaries between aesthetics and health is settled¹. Thus, surgeries are seen as technologies that enable people to change their appearance and conquered what is considered beautiful at the moment. Current authors understand this process in terms of people enhancement¹.

As mentioned earlier, aesthetic standards are influenced by the current social order. As a

consequence, it makes a lot of sense that, a country that took so long to abolish slavery, did not create public policies for the inclusion of black population in society, and still faces the consequences of racism, considers black women as outsiders of the standard simply because of their skin color. However, some traits of black women's body are considered beautiful, such as defined buttocks and breasts, thick lips. On the other hand, some traits of black women's body are seen as not desirable, such as the nose considered "negroid". Considering these traits, miscegenation is brought up for discussion as an issue that is at stake for women's bodies in Brazil. These discussions will be further explored in the next sections.

2. Discussion

2.1 Racism and Sexism in Brazil

In Lelia Gonzalez's text "Racismo e Sexismo na cultura brasileira," the author questions why the myth of racial democracy has been so widely accepted by the Brazilians and directs her efforts towards dismantling this myth, explaining that relations are more complex and affected by disguised prejudices. According to Gonzalez, "the place where we stand will determine our interpretation of the double phenomenon of racism and sexism"^{2(p224)} [author's translation]. In this sense, the author argues that people who benefit from the racist and sexist structure of society will hardly have a critical view of it. Thus, for her, both racism and sexism have violent effects on black women².

The author proposes a profound reflection that goes beyond the socioeconomic perspective of the situation of black women in Brazil, since most of the works of the time were already focused on this issue². To conduct this reflection, Gonzalez uses speeches that are reproduced daily to bring discussions closer to what black women experience in their daily lives.

The author questions how the effects of racism are seen in terms of something that is considered natural to happen. For example, thoughts such as: black people are naturally marginal and their place is in the slums; black people are naturally criminals, maids, and cooks. Gonzalez argues that when something is understood as natural, something is being erased to benefit someone. Thinking that black people naturally live in slums and are criminals is another example of how prejudice in Brazil exists and is veiled through the reinforcement of myths such as racial democracy².

In her text, the author also discusses the relevance of carnival to represent the myth of racial democracy. Gonzalez describes carnival as a moment of freedom, fun, "drinks, women, and samba"^{2(p227)}. Nevertheless, she draws attention to the 'mulata' parade and points

out that it is crossed by a great symbolic violence. According to the author, during carnival and exclusively at this time, black women are transformed into queens, a goddesses, with a maximum exaltation of the figure of the black woman, her body and her dance moves².

Gonzalez argues that the deification of black women during carnival goes against her daily life, where she is seen as a domestic worker². Thus, the author argues that the 'mulata' and the domestic worker are "attributes of the same subject"^{2(p228)}, varying according to the situation in which she is seen². The 'mulata' is seen as a goddess in the exceptional context of carnival, but she is seen as a domestic worker during the rest of the year. For Gonzalez, this would not be a valorization of the figure of the 'mulata', but a sexualization of her body.

The author also discusses the prejudice of not having prejudice in Brazil. It is so common to people discriminate others that, for Gonzalez, exists a prejudice of not having prejudice. Thus, discrimination becomes a fundamental element to understand the relationships in the country². Black people feel daily repressions from racism, but according to the myth of racial democracy, this type of prejudice would not exist in Brazil. Gonzalez understands Brazilian racism as a veiled and disguised prejudice, while also being violent². Therefore, the author points out that understanding the place of black people as a dirty place is a racist thought, as well as enabling the exaltation of the figure of the 'mulata' only in the circumstances imposed by carnival and erasing black history from Brazilian history is also a racist practice. Therefore, Gonzalez argues that the myth of racial democracy is also a discursive battle, an attempt to erase complex experiences of the black population, to silence and naturalize prejudices².

2.2 Miscegenation and plastic surgeries

In Álvaro Jarrín's article, the author discusses the relationship between miscegenation, eugenics, and plastic surgeries in the Brazilian context. The anthropologist conducted field research with Brazilian plastic surgeons between 2006 and 2008. Through his observations and analysis, he argues that the beauty standards promoted and sought in plastic surgeries are influenced by eugenic discourses, which view miscegenation as a process of improving the appearance of the population.

Plastic surgeries are seen as a procedure for improving the body, meaning that they serve to reshape the body according to the beauty standards valued at the time. According to Jarrin, surgeons often encourage a mixed-race ideal of the body and argue that miscegenation has improved the country, in terms of the beauty of its population. In a conversation with plastic surgeon Amir Nacúl, the doctor comments that "miscegenation has improved

the eugenics of the population, and beautification techniques complement eugenics because they help people look more rejuvenated and improved"^{3(p66)} [author's translation]. In this context, surgeries are understood as procedures that complement miscegenation, or rather, "harmonize bodies that present discordant racial characteristics"^{3(p64)} [author's translation].

It is important to reflect on what is meant by "discordant racial characteristics"^{3(p64)} [author's translation]. According to Jarrín, the ideal mixed-race Brazilian values a "white femininity lightly eroticized by black sensuality, or a brownness that seeks to whiten and diminish its racial difference"^{3(p69)} [author's translation]. In this sense, some features present in the black population, such as a perky buttocks, voluminous and non-sagging breasts, and thick lips, are valued; while features such as a so-called "negroid" nose, meaning thicker, and open ears are devalued.

In this context, beauty is understood in terms of a greater or lesser mix of the traits presented in each ethnicity. The surgeon said, "the mixture of races in Brazil has left many people with the wrong nose or ears. That's why people have surgery, to look more like those beautiful people who mixed less, like Gisele Bündchen and Daniella Cicarelli"^{3(p69)} [author's translation]. Surgeries serve to erase or clean up these unwanted features³. In this example, the wrong nose is perceived as the negroid nose, not the "European" nose. Thus, a context is identified in which beauty standards are influenced by eugenic and racist discourses.

Jarrin also comments that in these contexts, health and beauty are related, a person's beauty is associated with their good health.. The anthropologist comments that for surgeons, "beautifying, consequently, is improving not only the individual but the population as a whole, collaborating with the work of miscegenation to improve the Brazilian nation"^{3(p66)} [author's translation]. In this way, physical appearance is understood not only as a matter of individual health, but also as a matter of the country's collective health. For these doctors, by changing a person's face, it is possible to change even their personality, "creating a better person"^{3(p73)} [author's translation].

The anthropologist criticizes that, in medical offices, miscegenation is not understood as a social and political process with the intention of whitening the population³.

2.3 Plastic surgeries and improvement

In Edmonds' and Sanabria's article, the authors discuss how hormone therapies and surgical interventions have become routine healthcare for women, which are considered essential for modern femininity. According to the authors, patients

understand these procedures (hormonal and surgical) as "integral part of common forms of self-care, which include physical exercise and weight control, going to the beauty salon to get their nails done or hair straightened, maintaining a tanned body or a shaved body"^{1(p195)} [author's translation]. Thus, they argue that the boundaries between aesthetic and medical treatments are difficult to define and often overlap¹.

The authors draw attention to the observation that cosmetic surgeries are performed in response to social pressures and aspirations produced by the social contexts in which the patient is embedded¹. These surgeries are motivated, for example, by the desire to maintain or create relationships, to approach the appearance of models, or to access new social networks. Plastic surgery is understood in a more complex context, in which it represents the possibility of access to "new social worlds"^{1(p196)} [author's translation] through the body and appearance. Thus, the body in which interventions are possible and manipulable is understood as a plastic body¹.

Aesthetic procedures are performed by women at different stages of their lives: in adolescence, after pregnancy, and during menopause. Edmonds and Sanabria draw attention to the fact that these procedures are offered in public hospitals in Brazil. They argue that the main reason why these procedures are performed free of charge in the Sistema Único de Saúde (SUS) is due to the presentation of patients' transformation desires, which are related to psychotherapeutic issues such as self-esteem, anxiety, and depression¹.

The anthropologists argue that plastic surgeries are "presented as technical means of improving a person's quality of life. As they increase the features that can be rectified, modified, or perfected, the association between what can and should be changed also changes"^{1(p203)} [author's translation]. As previously mentioned, these procedures are used as responses "to the social and somatic expectations that involve the course of life"^{1(p203)} [author's translation].

3. Conclusions

Through the presentation of Lélia Gonzalez's main arguments, I introduced the discussions about how racism operates in Brazilian society and its effects, such as the idealization of the 'mulata' in carnival. Building on discussions about racism, I brought up Álvaro Jarrín's contributions regarding the relationship between miscegenation, eugenics, and plastic surgery. According to the author, "plastic surgery is an interest topic for the analysis of racism in Brazil and Latin America because it is a medical science that reproduces many of the ideals of Neo-Lamarckian eugenics"^{3(p74)} [author's translation].

After introducing the discussions about racism and plastic surgery, I brought up the contributions of Edmonds and Sanabria regarding how such procedures are performed in response to social pressures experienced in various contexts¹. These authors argue that "these therapies are becoming routine, not only because they have been aggressively or cynically marketed, but because they reveal conflicts in gender norms regarding the appropriate and ideal way to arouse desire in the other and to desire the other [...]"^{1(p207)} [author's translation].

As previously mentioned, these surgeries are performed influenced by unattainable and changing beauty standards, thus, Edmonds and Sanabria argue that "many plastic procedures aim at a type of hyperfeminine 'perfection' associated with celebrity culture and a racialized Brazilian national identity"^{1(p201)} [author's translation].

4. References

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