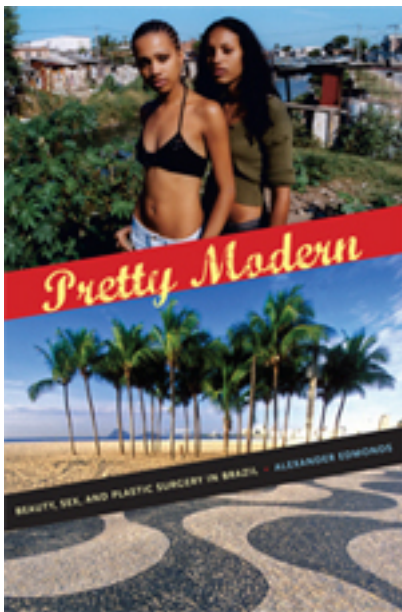


## ***Pretty Modern: Beauty, Sex, and Plastic Surgery in Brazil* by Alexander Edmonds**

Ashley Mears | Boston University

Edmonds, Alexander. *Pretty Modern: Beauty, Sex, and Plastic Surgery in Brazil*. Durham, NC and London: Duke University Press, 2010. 297 pages; \$24.95 paper.



At first glance, beauty culture in Brazil is a feminist nightmare: NGOs such as *Lente de Sonhos* provide *favela* children with lessons in how to be a fashion model, a fantasy shared by an estimated nine out of ten Brazilian girls. Carnival has become such a commercial showcase of *siliconadas*—women with breast implants—that a local plastic surgeon is recognized for his talent during the festivities. In a country known for staggering economic inequality, plastic surgery rates are among the highest in the world, and the bodies of everyone from beauty queens to their maids are likely to bear telling scars on breasts and abdomens. Brazil is one of the few countries in the world to offer state subsidized cosmetic surgery to the “popular classes.” Everyone, one surgeon declares, has the right to beauty, and so even the poor get the chance to mold themselves into the likes of Pamela Anderson.

But take an extended second look at *plástica*, as Alexander Edmonds does in *Pretty Modern: Beauty, Sex, and Plastic Surgery in Brazil*, and our perspective shifts: the pursuit of physical perfection in a country celebrated for sensuality is revealed to be both painful and empowering, a simultaneous confirmation and negation of the self, and, ultimately, a means for Brazil and its people to find footing in the modern world. Edmonds, an ethnographer in visual and medical

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anthropology, begins by asking: why is there so much plastic surgery in Brazil? This deceptively simple question leads him into the complex relationships that take shape in consumer culture around questions of sex, medicine, selfhood, motherhood, race, and the post-colonial project of modernizing Brazil. Beauty, under this lens, is anything but superficial.

*Pretty Modern* presents a wealth of ethnographic data, weaving together thick descriptions of hospital waiting rooms, television studios, and everyday conversations, illustrated with images of advertisements and frank portraits of Edmonds's informants. The book is divided into three parts. In the first, Edmonds traces the logic of beauty as a human right and a resource for self-esteem, pulling together the threads of Brazil's historical love affair with psychoanalysis: "The psychoanalyst," one plastic surgeon jokes, "knows everything but changes nothing. The plastic surgeon knows nothing but changes everything" (76). The second section of the book wrestles with the aesthetics of race, evident in patients' attempts to "correct" a "Negroid" nose, while the existence of racial hierarchies are denied in a country that has long aspired to be a "rainbow" of democracy. Here, cosmetic surgery is one strategy to secure the benefits of having a "good appearance," understood as a white appearance. Lastly, in "Engineering the Erotic," Edmonds makes his sharpest arguments on sex and the medical management of the maternal body, a body that, within the cultural frame, is at odds with the sexually desirable body. In the final pages of his study, Edmonds braves a foray into the domain of socio-biology, taking seriously arguments about the biological and evolutionary bases of the near-universal quest for youth. After decades of social science arguments for the social construction of gender, as well as of sex, *plástica* confronts us with a "return to nature" of sorts, as the body is refashioned as a biological object and medically managed vessel of seemingly essential sexual desirability.

At the close of *Pretty Modern*, Edmonds preferences neither the logic of the "natural" nor the "constructed" body, and the reader is left to speculate the consequences—or, perhaps, benefits—of our present turn towards bio-logic. This study does not tell a linear, clean-cut story. The world of beauty is messy and Edmonds effectively indulges in intellectual tangents in order to explore the meanings of everything from domestic service to the breast. Yet in place of parsimonious arguments, the study is filled with observations punctuated by the word "perhaps" and concepts linked via such uncertain terms as "intertwined" and "entangled." It might be that Edmonds is a cautious thinker, but the end result is that you have to be a cautious reader, too, in order to decipher the causal connections of his argument.

Ultimately, as *Pretty Modern* shows us, it is women, the poor, and the darker-skinned for whom *plástica* offers a route to *aparecer*—to appear, to be visible, and to claim belonging in a society in which exclusion is an unacknowledged fact of daily life. *Plástica*, Edmonds writes, "enables the aged, the abandoned, the unemployed,

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the nonwhite...to *name* their condition an aesthetic defect” (114). *Being within reach of the poor, plástica* enables a sense of hope. Beauty, in this analysis, both demands slavish devotion and contains emancipatory potential by disrupting hierarchies of race, class, and gender. Visibility as an object of desire is a limited form of social inclusion. But Edmonds exhibits considerable restraint in not dismissing this compromise, even as he notes the increasingly competitive logic of body sculpting, which ratchets up the standards for success in labor and marriage markets. Asking Edmonds to take a political stance is not a fair critique, because at the outset he’s interested in analyzing, not condemning, *plástica* and its patrons. “Beauty certainly is ideology,” he writes, “but it is not (only) false” (173). This may not soften your sense of the world of plastic surgery, but it does help us understand the lives of the many who enter into it.

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**Ashley Mears** is Assistant Professor of Sociology at Boston University. She received her Ph.D. from New York University and was a visiting fellow at the Center for Gender Studies at the University of Cambridge. Her research focuses on the intersections of culture, markets, and inequalities. In her first book, *Pricing Beauty: The Making of a Fashion Model* (University of California Press, 2011), she examined the backstage production of the ‘look’ in New York and London fashion markets. She is currently researching international model scout networks as a way to understand global flows of culture. Her articles are published in the journals *Ethnography*, *Poetics*, and *Social Forces*.