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(De)colonizing the image of female beauty and (de)commodifying women: the industry of plastic surgery in Brazil and Texas

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Plastic is capital. We readily think of the plastic of credit cards and debit cards for the financial power they give us. Right now, there is a burgeoning industry of plastic surgery in North and South America. This type of Plástica introduces an economy of appearances in which physical beauty is the valued product. In my area of Dallas, Texas, women's social gatherings can include Botox parties in the place of bridge (card) parties or garden clubs. Using a study of beauty and plastic surgery among Siliconadas in Brazil and comparing it with research on cosmetic or aesthetic plastic surgery in Texas, I will draw on some findings of interest to us as practical and pastoral theologians. Specifically, this research looks at self-esteem of women opting for augmentation or alteration of their physical self and at how colonialism, post-colonialism, and de-colonialism has addressed and impacted this issue. The paper explores asymmetries of power that impact individual and group social identity. For those whose history has been shaped ontologically, theologically, and psychologically by colonial forces, detaching from the lure of the "colonial gaze" as defined by the powerful, the elite, the slave holders, the media, capitalism, film, and conquerors, requires both resistance and resilience. How do we as pastoral and practical theologians in our work facilitate freedom from the images and the industry "of beauty"? This is an issue for practical theology in both research and action as we seek to liberate Hope and Self-Esteem.

Introduction

Plastic is capital. We readily think of the plastic of credit cards and debit cards for the financial power they give us. Right now, there is a burgeoning industry of plastic surgery in North and South America. *Plástica*, or the medical procedure of plastic surgery, introduces an economy of appearances in which physical beauty is the valued product. For the purposes of this article, I am distinguishing cosmetic plastic surgery from reconstructive surgery (as in burn victims). In my area of Dallas, Texas, which represents an economically and socially privileged class, women's social gatherings can include Botox parties in the place of bridge games, book clubs, or garden clubs. At first glance, because my interest in plastic surgery is that sought by middle-aged women, I thought the search was for the Fountain of

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Youth. As well as defeating aging, plastic surgery also conveys power over the body and a desire to reach a certain ideal. Pressure is also on teenage girls in the United States to look good. For example, *The Washington Post* released an article in 2019 from Bethesda-Chevy Chase High School in Maryland with boys' ratings and rankings of their female classmates based on looks, from 5.5–9.4 (Schmidt 2019). My first assumption that the high rate of cosmetic surgery in Texas was linked to the high social economic status of those seeking alteration of their bodies was countered by the prevalence and high statistics of low-income persons in Brazil seeking plastic surgery. Is this peak in surgery only really a search for the Fountain of Youth or is there more to it than meets the eye?[1]

First, I am going to look at the statistics of cosmetic surgery in the United States and Brazil compared to other leading countries. Then, my design is threefold: utilize two ethnographic studies from Brazil, discuss the impact and introjection of the colonial gaze, and look at the impediments to resistance in (de)colonizing the image of female beauty. As Dr. Wanda Deifelt mentioned during a keynote address at the International Academy of Practical Theology, the mentality of the colonizers still prevails in Brazil (Deifelt 2019b). If practical theologians are to come to the table of influence to help change the narrative of continuing colonization as regards the bodies of women, we must discuss anew the meaning of *imago Dei,* embodied capital, and self-esteem.

Statistics are high in both the United States and Brazil regarding cosmetic plastic surgery. As the chart shows, these two countries had the highest numbers of cosmetic procedures in 2015.

The Number of Cosmetic Surgery Procedures by Country (Pariona 2018)

Rank	Country	Total Number of Cosmetic Procedures, 2015
1	United States	4,042,610
2	Brazil	2,324,245
3	South Korea	1,156,234
4	India	935,487
5	Mexico	907,913
6	Germany	617,408
7	Colombia	548,635
8	France	488,718
9	Italy	418,760

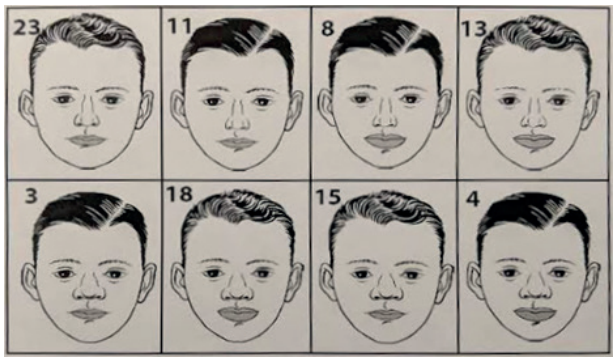
On the state of plastic surgery in Brazil, Bernardo N. Batista notes, "According to the most recent study on aesthetic procedures from the International Society of Aesthetic Plastic Surgery, Brazilian plastic surgeons performed almost 7 surgical procedures per 1,000 persons in 2016. This is surprisingly high, especially if compared with the 4.6 procedures per 1,000 persons performed by our American colleagues in the same period" (Batista 2017, e1627).

Using two ethnographic studies of beauty and plastic surgery among *siliconadas* (those who have had aesthetic cosmetic plastic surgery) in Brazil and comparing the results with research on aesthetic cosmetic plastic surgery in Texas, I will draw some findings that might be of interest to practical theologians. Specifically, this research looks at the self-esteem of women opting for augmentation or alteration of their physical self and how colonialism has impacted this issue. Has (de)colonizing adequately addressed this issue? This article explores asymmetries of power that impact individual and group social identity. For those whose history has been shaped ontologically, theologically, and psychologically by colonial forces, detaching from the lure of the "colonial gaze" as defined by the powerful, the elite, the slave holders, the media, capitalism, the film industry, and conquerors requires both resistance and resilience. How do we as practical theologians facilitate freedom from the images and the industry "of beauty" as we seek to liberate hope and self-esteem? How does this surge in plastic surgery

1 As I dissect motivations for this industry of plastic beauty, I do not write in judgment of those seeking such beauty. Other explorations consume people in addition to The Search for Beauty: The Search for the Fountain of Youth. The Search for the Holy Chalice. The Search for the Holy Grail. Perhaps some of us search for an intellectual ideal through writing and reading books and papers and thus use education as social capital. Knowledge can be power and social capital as well.

impact our understanding of liberatory theology, the *imago Dei*, embodied capital, and self-esteem? I will argue that liberatory theology includes a means of resistance to the commodification of the beautiful body and a catalyst for restoration of self-esteem. The latter can be achieved in part as the inferior other or the less-than-beautiful see themselves in relation to the *imago Dei*, in whose image we are created.

The impact of colonialism and the lingering effect of the colonial face as the model of beauty is clearly illustrated in the work of Lauren Gulbas, a cultural and medical anthropologist. She spent fourteen months in Caracas, Venezuela, and conducted 499 formal interviews. Her project was an attempt to obtain "a more comprehensive understanding of how the body is variably constituted in ideologies of race, class, and gender in Caracas" in part by "investigating how the body becomes engaged as a form of social and economic capital through the practice of cosmetic surgery" (Gulbas 2008, 35). In her interviews, Gulbas used a deck of seventy-two images of faces, which were created by Marvin Harris for his own Brazilian ethnographic work (Harris 1970). An example of these images, those Gulbas's interviewees described as *blanco*, is below (Gulbas 2008, 93).



It was found that the most desired face was number 11, a light-skinned complexion with straight hair, thin lips, and an aquiline nose. In all of the other facial pictures, one or more of the following undesired characteristics will be found: wavy hair, full lips, and a flattened nose. For men, one of the most popular forms of plastic surgery is rhinoplasty, surgery on the nose (International Society of Aesthetic Plastic Surgery 2018). Face 11 is the ideal image of masculine beauty because it more closely resembles European features of the colonizers.

While in São Leopoldo for the International Academy of Practical Theology in 2019, I saw light-skinned complexions with European features on billboards near the Campus at Faculdades EST and in the duty-free shops of the São Paulo airport (some examples of these images, which I took on April 3–4, are below). How can we analyze the prominent and lingering images of colonizers on Brazilian streets and in Brazil's hub of international transit?

Alexander Edmonds's study *Pretty Modern* draws on a range of examples to "analyze how sexual and class aspirations subtly mingle in beauty culture" (Edmonds 2010, 34). In conclusion to his work, he returns "to the central theme of beauty's relationship to social conflicts in modernity" (Edmonds

2010, 34). He argues that physical beauty disregards social hierarchy and grants social mobility. It grants power to "those excluded from other systems of privilege based in wealth, pedigree, or education" (Edmonds 2010, 20). As such, plastic surgery turns the body into a valuable asset that can threaten hierarchies, and in so doing, the beautiful body benefits self-esteem (Edmonds 2010, 250). Fungibility (an ease to trade) in a beauty culture allows an exchange between sexual attributes, acts, bodily parts and economic commodities. Plastic surgery is a commodity exchange between two forms of cultural capital, and thus beauty is not controlled by the socially dominant class culture (Edmonds 2010, 25). *Plástica* "responds to, and incites, [a] view of beauty as an egalitarian form of social capital, one that depends less on birth, education, and connections to cultivate" (Edmonds 2010, 252). Social imagination allows people to dream; in this way, beauty becomes a popular form of hope and liberation (Edmonds 2010, 252).

Edmonds notes that, in Brazil, "the female body was certainly an object of an elite, patriarchal gaze. Yet women too became consumers of beauty as the colonial patriarchy and later state paternalism faded, and as Brazil developed a flourishing consumer culture" (Edmonds 2010, 25).

Medical anthropologists, social anthropologists, sociologists, and historians are discussing and researching the burgeoning industry of plastic surgery. My goal is to come to the table of discussion as a theologian and engage in the dialogue. In doing so, I raise four issues: theology, *imago Dei*, embodied capital, and self-esteem.

Theology is a critical study of the nature and essence of the divine. The idea of God as the beholder (Psalm 139) is foundational to theology. However, women are the primary objects of a social gaze (Edmonds 2010, 25; Davis 2003, 185). Society looks for an image of beauty as defined by a colonial heritage. When women are perceived as symbolic objects and defined through the gaze of others as available objects, they are "a being-perceived" (Bourdieu 2001, 66). Drawing on more than ten years in Brazil, anthropologist Donna Goldstein concludes that women of the favelas, or shantytowns, of Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo are also historically embedded in a colonial heritage that has prioritized light skin and European physical features as high status (Goldstein 2003, 25). For example, on "a white or light face," these "high-status" features include straight hair, thin nose, and small lips. Would a paradigm shift from the passive position of "a being-perceived" to an active posture of "a being who perceives" contribute to a liberatory theory and practice? How could the power of the *colonial gaze* be broken?

Imago Dei is the translated image of God. This term is applied only to humankind and has its roots in Genesis 1:27. We are created in God's image. Thus, the *imago Dei* is a symbolic relationship between us and God. Theologians develop this connection largely in terms of spirit, mind, and soul. How can we as practical theologians expand this concept to include daily lived reality in the body that does not match or strive to match a colonial ideal? As Goldstein emphasizes, "a colonial heritage … has prioritized certain bodies over others" (Goldstein 2003, 25). How do we as theologians form movements of resistance to this prioritization? How do we prevent colonial ideologies from being reproduced today in the guise of dominant ideologies?

The bourgeoning business of plastic surgery intersects with ideologies of race, class, and gender. Plastic surgery becomes a political rather than an aesthetic practice as hierarchies of power and class privilege are negotiated (Davis 2003, 79). For example, "a woman's experience of her body, and her body as undesirable, is shaped by complicated ideological dilemmas where individuals struggle with cultural discourses of gender, perceived 'racial' attributes, and economic status" (Davis 2003, 185). Plastic bodies are perceived as beautiful bodies, as the beauty pageants in South America reveal and advertising confirms. The winners of beauty pageants become major celebrities, akin to Academy Award or Heisman Trophy winners, and the pageants are major sources of revenue for advertisers, sponsors, and the plastic surgery industry. How do we speak into this "culture of beauty" in ways that are liberative?

Embodied capital. Capital is wealth usually thought of in terms of money, real estate, investments, or financial assets. Beauty is also capital. Cosmetic plastic surgery offers embodied cultural/social capital. Beauty is seen as a resource, closely correlating to wealth with its own economic value (Jarrín 2017, 2, 16). Beauty is also power and social capital. In his three years of ethnographic research in Brazil, medical anthropologist Alvaro Jarrín articulated the perceived connection between beauty and social capital: "Working-class Brazilians firmly believe that having a *boa aparência* (good appearance) is essential on the job market, because if one's looks signify humble origins, there are few chances

of getting a white-collar job that pays better than average" (Jarrín 2017, 3). Beauty offers the hope of upward mobility, better marriages, modeling jobs, and fame.

When the human body is used as *embodied capital*, how do we as practical theologians develop an embodied theology and counter with the belief that bodily reality is sacred reality? As we "think with the body," as theologian Elisabeth Moltmann-Wendel says, and theologize from the starting point of the body, what is the place of beauty incarnate, embodied in flesh or in human form (Moltmann-Wendel 1995, 85)? How does the doctrine of Incarnation inform our understanding of the body? What exactly is beauty as understood in theological terms?

Self-esteem can be founded or grounded in the gaze of the beholder. However, self-esteem—originating out of the psychoanalytic "inferiority complex"—is a more all-encompassing global notion. Edmonds explains that psychoanalysis in Brazil "was notoriously ineffective with the working class, while *plástica* claims to be a universal cure" (Edmonds 2010, 76). Cosmetic surgery assists in egalitarian aspirations along with wealth and pedigree to address life's inherited injustices (Edmonds 2010, 79). Cosmetic surgery is free in Brazilian public hospitals. The rationale for this is that beauty is a right for all. Beauty becomes an equalizer. Cosmetic plastic surgery, at its best, can enhance physical attractiveness. In Brazil, where plastic surgery is available to all classes, are the surgeons acting as humanitarian forces as they assist vulnerable people in their struggle for recognition, social mobility, and societal transformation? Jarrin exposes the underside of Brazilian plastic surgery in his recently published article, "Brazil Offers Free Plastic Surgery, and It Is Becoming a Problem." He investigates risky surgeries and experimental techniques in the public hospitals as patients describe their treatment as "*cobaias* (guinea pigs)" (Jarrín 2018). In the late 1950s, Dr. Ivo Pitanguy, a famous Brazilian plastic surgeon who opened the first institute of plastic surgery for the poor in Brazil, convinced President Juscelino Kubitschek of the right of all people to beauty. This right still exists in Brazil, where ugliness is still seen as a cause of psychological suffering and the pursuit of being beautiful is its humanitarian antidote.

Might we as theologians use the Hebrew Bible or the New Testament as resources? The matriarchs of the Hebrew Bible are described as beautiful: Sarah in Genesis 12:11, 14, Rebekah in Genesis 26:7, and Rachel in Genesis 29:17. Later, Esther is chosen for her beauty. King David does not know a thing about Bathsheba's personality or spirituality. He is attracted by her beautiful nude body while she is bathing (2 Samuel 11:2-4). Male beauty is also highlighted in the Hebrew Bible, as in Joseph's beauty in the eyes of Potiphar's wife (Genesis 39:6). Absalom and King David are both depicted as beautiful (1 Samuel 16:12; 2 Samuel 14:25). Beauty can also work against someone, as in the case of Tamar (2 Samuel 14:27). Amnon is infatuated by Tamar, his half-sister, and rapes her. In each of these instances, the woman or the man is "a being-perceived." Her or his beauty is identified by an external source (The New Oxford Annotated Bible).

Proverbs is replete with sensual, sexual, and bodily references, as is Song of Solomon. For example, the man in Song of Solomon says,

> How beautiful and pleasant you are,
> O loved one, with all your delights!
> Your stature is like a palm tree,
> and your breasts are like its clusters.
> I say I will climb the palm tree
> and lay hold of its fruit.
> Oh may your breasts be like clusters of the vine,
> and the scent of your breath like apples,
> and your mouth like the best wine. (7:6-9 ESV)

There are examples from my work as a practical theologian, however, that instead show women who have become "a being who perceives."

Brenda, a forty-five-year-old seminary student, struggled with loving herself.[2] As a woman in midlife, she did not consider herself attractive to look at or worthy of companionship. One semester, she went on a week-long retreat with other seminary students. There was quite a bit of silent time at the retreat; she felt God very near. She walked the labyrinth, she journaled, she worshipped, she prayed, she sang. One day, in the solitariness of her simple room at the Dominican retreat center, she was drawn to the mirror. She began to look at her face. And it was beautiful. She looked at the pores of her skin. Some were large and pocked from pimples of her youth. On that day, they were beautiful. She looked at the lines on her face. She smiled. They were smile lines. And they were beautiful. Even the age spots looked beautiful. Her eyes were a radiant blue, even the gray in her hair was a pretty color on

2 Names have been changed to protect the identities of Brenda and Martha. Their communications have been used with permission.

that afternoon. Brenda wrote in her journal in January 2003,

> As I looked at my face and caressed my skin, I was struck with a thought. It was God telling me, "This is how I see you. You are beautiful to me. What you don't like: your pores, your lines, your age spots are all beautiful to me." I couldn't tear myself away from the mirror. For once I was not looking at the mirror, hating my flaws. I was looking at myself through God's eyes. I was able to love myself as God loves me. I was seeing myself through God's eyes and for the first time in my life, I was beautiful. As I walked down the stairs to go for my hike, I thanked God that I am not beautiful by society's standards. I am just plain. Because I am plain, God has blessed me to see myself through God's eyes. And I am beautiful (Brenda Smith, private journal entry, 2003).

Martha, a sixty-year-old professor, has a skin discoloration known as vitiligo. Michael Jackson had this same skin condition. Martha was mocked as a young child and was called "Spots" by her classmates. When I discussed this article on plastic surgery with her on March 24, 2019, she identified with the desire for physical beauty. However, Martha's journey was not that of plastic surgery. In second grade, she received a Bible. She read John 3:16, memorized it, believed it. She said, "John 3:16 was about me. God loved me, created me, numbered the hairs on my head, and called me by name. God loves my physical self and my sexuality" (Martha Lewis, telephone interview, March 24, 2019). She was intrigued by the passion narratives of the Gospels, especially the mockery of Jesus. She adopted the response to those who mocked her by adhering to the injunction the in Sermon on the Mount: turn the other cheek (Matthew 5:39).

In a follow-up email she sent on March 31, 2019, Martha added, "In I Samuel 16:6ff, Samuel anoints David as King in place of Saul. While David is described as beautiful in physical terms, God also tells Samuel not to look on outward appearances (in choosing from among Jesse's sons), because God looks at the heart" (Martha Lewis, email on March 31, 2019). Here is a God who models the role of beholder or perceiver. God models the active posture of a being-who-perceives. Furthermore, Martha added, the beloved of God in Isaiah has an appearance so marred and a form so disfigured that others hide their faces (52:13–53:3). Even the Beloved was not beautiful by human standards.

What impact can practical theologians have in a media-driven and media-dominant society? If any discipline in theology can form a bridge between the pedagogy of theology and its empirical application in a media-drenched society, it will be a critical mass of practical theologians working the dynamics of praxis-reflection-praxis (or reflection-praxis-reflection) within our subdisciplines. In the 1960s in the United States, the chant and phrase "Black is Beautiful" took root in the country as people of color resisted the imagery and dominance of "White is Beautiful." Reading materials, especially in educational institutions, as well as liturgy and sermons in progressive churches, became more inclusive. Theological institutions became more diverse in student body and faculty as the institutions often engaged in preferential hiring of non-whites and in increased financial aid for minority students. A minister and homiletician, Revd. Martin Luther King Jr, became a leader of the civil rights movement; the Black Lives Matter movement is a continuation of that today. Ironically, the cell phone recording of a black man named George Floyd being slowly asphyxiated by police in Minneapolis was the **medium** for worldwide protests.

To replace an old or injurious image, that image must be shattered. Then, a new and healthy one can be formed (Morton 1985, 31). This will require the collaboration and activism of religious educators, homileticians, liturgists, ethicists, pastoral theologians, moral theologians, musicians, spiritual formation educators, and those teaching church and society to shatter exclusive and deleterious images that are media-driven. When practical theologians act, protest, or demonstrate, those actions themselves give the media positive images to promote. There are already public allies in this activism to whom we could point and support. "In the task of shattering injurious images, such as those pandered by air-brushing public images, there are already allies whose voices should be heard." (Susanne Johnson, interview, June 26, 2020) "Many female celebrities [in the USA] recognized the negative impact on ordinary women – and especially in young females in their formative years – when pictures of models and celebrities are airbrushed to such an extent that they over-state the perfection of beauty in the women, and polish away things considered to be 'flaws,' such as freckles" (Johnson 2020). This airbrushing or "polishing" also includes modifications to the body contour, elimination of "kinky hair," slimming down thighs and waists, enhancements of breasts, and retouching the color of skin. These electronic modifications increase the allure of "beauty" as "embodied capital". The #MeToo movement,

started by Tarana Burke, is also a burgeoning outcry against the commodification of women and the rape of their bodies by prominent men in workplaces and in businesses like the movie industry.

In the midst of our countercultural activities to weaken the damaging effect of media, to subvert the allure of advertising, and to expose a beauty industry that can be exploitative; in our resistance to the *passive posture* of "a being-perceived"; in our promotion of agency for "a being who perceives," perhaps a counterweight could also be a "God who perceives" (Psalm 139). This is a God of grace, not judgment. In metaphorical terms, in cultures that are obsessed with The Search for the Fountain of Youth, a worthy counterpoise could be the Search for the Holy Grail. The legendary Holy Grail was the cup of the Last Supper containing the blood of Christ from the Cross. The finder would receive neither monetary gain nor glamor, but healing and self-realization.

The concept of *Imago Dei* as revealed in sacred texts has been lost to colonial images of beauty and worth. Now is the time for academics and activists to shatter "Colonial is Beautiful." Perhaps the prayerful words of Wanda Deifelt during opening worship at the International Academy of Practical Theology in Brazil expressed this search: "Help us to see the Beauty within each of us, so that we may see the Beauty of others" (Deifelt 2019a).

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