

The Descendants of Japanese Immigrants in Brazil and “Eye Westernization Surgery”¹

Os Nipo-brasileiros e a cirurgia de “Ocidentalização dos Olhos”

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RESUMO

Este artigo tem por objetivo examinar algumas formas contemporâneas de invenção e construção da identidade nipo-brasileira. Concentro-me para tal nas práticas corporais ditas de “ocidentalização” que concernem os nipo-brasileiros e, em particular, na cirurgia de “ocidentalização dos olhos”. Isto porque, no caso dos *nikkei*, a forma dos olhos é o traço físico em que mais incide o “racismo de marca”. O racismo e a discriminação que se focalizam no fenótipo têm relação direta com mais de cem anos de presença dos japoneses e seus descendentes no seio da sociedade brasileira, onde se encontra a maior comunidade nipônica fora do Japão. As práticas corporais ditas “de ocidentalização” e os padrões de beleza que exprimem constituem formas significativas pelas quais os membros do grupo agem e reagem na e à sociedade brasileira, desenhando seu perfil étnico e social.

Palavras-chaves: Imigração, Nipo-Brasileiros, Identidade Étnica, Beleza, Cirurgia Estética.

¹ This text is a modified version of the previous articles that had been published in French and in Portuguese (SCHPUN, 2007a; 2007b). It was translated by Miriam Adelman and Thomas Scott-Railton.

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ABSTRACT

This article examines some of the contemporary forms of invention and construction of Japanese-Brazilian identity. For these purposes, I concentrate on the body practices referred to as “westernization” in which Japanese-Brazilians have engaged – in particular, “eye westernization” surgery. In the case of the *nikkei*, the shape of the eyes is the physical trait that most sharply elicits “appearance- based racism.” Racism and discrimination, which focus on phenotype, exist in direct relation to the more than hundred year presence of the Japanese and their descendants at the heart of Brazilian society, that is, in a country that is home to the largest Japanese community outside of Japan. These “westernization” body practices, as well as the beauty standards they give expression to, act and react upon Brazilian society, shaping the group’s ethnic and social profile.

Keywords: Immigration, Japanese-Brazilian, Ethnic Identity, Beauty, Esthetic Surgery.

INTRODUCTION

Today, Brazil contains the largest ethnic Japanese community outside of Japan. Concentrated mostly in the states of São Paulo and Paraná, there are an estimated 1.5 million *nikkei* (immigrants of Japanese origin), of whom slightly less than five per cent were born in Japan. The remaining 95% is made up of the descendants of Japanese immigrants, people born in Brazil over the course of five generations (PEREIRA; OLIVEIRA, 2008, p. 34; BELTRÃO; SUGAHARA; KONTA, 2008, p. 58-9). Moreover, since the 1980s, Brazil has become an emigrant-producing nation. In a unique twist, Japan has come to welcome a singular type of immigration from Brazil, composed of the descendants of its own emigrés, who are referred to by a specific term, *dekasegi*.

This article examines several contemporary forms through which Japanese-Brazilian identity is invented and constructed. My research took initial inspiration from references to the centrality of the body within the literature on migratory movement between Japan and Brazil. These references, albeit scant and marginal, pointed to the body and its interpretation by social actors as fundamental to the perception and expression of Japanese-Brazilian identity. Three of these references that particularly drew my attention are transcribed below.

Interested in the questions of identity that the *dekasegi* encounter, sociologist Adriana Capuano de Oliveira interviewed members of this group, after their return to Brazil. The fol-

Following passage is an extract from a conversation between three young women in her sample:

- Man, they have hideous bodies.
- No kidding! Japanese women's bodies are weird...
- They're horrible!
- ... they're not only ugly, they're weird.
- Yeah, one time [...] you know when you're standing like this [...] they looked at us because they found us really weird, [...], because we all [...] have a Japanese face ... but we only look Japanese, anyone can see that we aren't.
- That's right.
- It's funny that you can tell: over there [in Japan] even for those who here [in Brazil] have really Japanese faces, over there people look at them in the street...
- And you can tell they are Brazilian, right?
- ... and you know.
- You can tell, that one's Brazilian, this one isn't.
- Then we were [...] watching, and we said to each other like: "my God, their bodies are soooooo weird!!!!" [laughs], that's not normal, it's like a plank of wood, there's nothing in front, there's nothing behind.
- It's awful! Their hips are so wide, you know?
- Big hips, no waist.
- And no butt.
- Yes, that's exactly it. (OLIVEIRA, 1999, p. 296)

The oral narratives that Oliveira collected point to a perception that social identity and corporeality are tightly interrelated. The above passage speaks eloquently in this regard, with two elements that should be emphasized: her interviewees' adhesion to Brazilian standards of female beauty, and the perception that their "Brazilianness," just as the "Japaneseness" of the Japanese, is legible on their bodies and through their bodily demeanor. This issue had already been raised by Fernando Henrique Cardoso, during a conference that was significantly titled "The Americanness of the *Nikkeis*":

A very curious fact is that the *nissei* [children of Japanese immigrants] way of dressing and walking changed rapidly. They might be Japanese in every other way, but they have already acquired the Brazilian way of walking, and one's way of walking is a very significant cultural trait. (CARDOSO apud REIS, 2002, p. 101).

Moving even further along this path, one historian, reminding us that the *nikkei* of all generations are still referred to as "Japanese" in Brazil, added that "a sense among *nikkei* that they could only become Brazilian by changing their appearance has led many women to have plastic surgery on their eyes" (LESSER, 1999, p. 170).

It was on the basis of these three references, found in works focused primarily on other questions, that I became particularly interested in the bodily practices of Japanese-Brazilians

that are called, in Brazil, “westernizations” and “eye westernization” surgery². This is a reflection of the fact that in the specific case of the *nikkei*, the shape of a person’s eyes is the prime physical trait that is focused on, within the culturally-prevalent Brazilian tendency to identify ethnic groups through phenotype.

Giselda Seyferth (2008, p. 54) retraces the movement through which, at the end of the 19th century, “race” replaced cultural elements such as language and folklore as the demarcator of nation (and of nationalism). Accompanied by racial hierarchies, and by racism, race also marked the construction of Brazil as a nation, placing white Europeans at the top, Black people at the bottom and all others – including the Asians, or Japanese, who are the subject of this article – in intermediary position. Miscegenation, which occupies a privileged position in the debate, appeared in Brazil as an element that was simultaneously original and complexifying. This was due to the widely-embraced belief that, through miscegenation, the population would be gradually “whitened” (through the selection of “the better”) and that this would become the path to the construction of the “Brazilian race.” This is the issue around which the theme of immigration (and of migration policies) was incorporated into the debate on the construction of nation – and race (idem, p. 56, 62-3; SKIDMORE, 1976, p. 81-6, 154-62). It led to the promotion of white European immigration. The immigration policy that was established as of the mid-nineteenth century was based on this racial premise. It excluded local workers, of Black and mixed-race origin, and workers arriving through African and Asian migratory flows from the market for free labor. Asian migratory movement thus became the object of major debate, and considerable hesitation, before its final materialization (DEZEM 2005, 2011 [2008]). Yet in order for the selective constitution of the “Brazilian race” to take place through “whitening,” immigrants had to merge with the local population, assimilating their language, religion and local culture. The assimilationist principle, which was quite enduring in Brazil, was thus a part of racialized notions of nation-building.

In the midst of the debates that accompanied the birth of migratory policies, a hierarchy was shaped into which Europeans were placed, according to criteria of cultural proximity: Germans were sidelined, to the benefit of groups of Latin origin, who were considered close to the nation’s Portuguese roots and thereby less resistant to assimilation (SEYFERTH, 2008, p. 67). Yet such differences were less pressing and exclusive than those pertaining to hierarchies based on skin color: the civilizing intent of “whitening” took precedence as criteria for identifying

² In Asia, this surgery is called “double eyelid surgery”. I use the Brazilian expression, in keeping with the term interviewees used.

which migratory flows were the desirable ones.

Furthermore, it should be kept in mind that Brazilian elites did not have total control or choice over migratory movement. The latter began to diminish, threatening efforts to maintain an abundant and cheap labor supply. Thus, despite restrictions on Asian (“yellow”) immigration, a group seen as an intermediate race, situated “between civilized whites and barbarian blacks,” the need for labor power spoke more loudly. Japanese immigration was thereby accepted, and even advocated, by São Paulo state coffee growers. As Michael Hall recently summarized it, when asked about the issue of whitening,

It is my impression that São Paulo landowners would have hired blue or green workers, workers of any color, as long as the latter could be obliged to pick coffee cherries at the lowest wages possible. At the same time, we find assertions, amongst the Brazilian intelligentsia of the period, of most brutal racism, and I imagine that the coffee growers shared this prejudice. However, when it became hard to import Spaniards and Italians, these landowners quite willingly ignored the twenty or more years of anti-Asian hysteria and began, in 1908,³ to import the Japanese, apparently without the need for much mental gymnastics. (FONTES; MACEDO, 2016, p. 833-4).

This decision, based on economic imperatives, created a situation in which the “anti-Asian” hysteria that had fueled both political hesitation and sharp debate over the course of several decades was then confronted by the real presence of Japanese people on Brazilian soil.

The assimilationist perspective on immigrants which, as Seyferth (2008) has signaled, was developed during the Republican period, created further tensions in the relationship of the Japanese to Brazilian society. In addition to being non-white, they had, from the beginning, been considered “unassimilable.” This was due not only to the cultural and linguistic difference that lay between them and Brazilians, but also to a legacy of obstinate and enduring racism, extensively documented by Priscila Nucci (2010). Replete with preconceived notions, anti-Japanese sentiment⁴ spread throughout different historical, national and international contexts, before culminating in the 1934 quota laws, which brought their entry, then at a peak, to an abrupt halt. It also led to the persecution of the Japanese as an ethnic group during the World War II years (SCHPUN, 2009). Although the post-war times were marked by the pacification of such

³ The first boat carrying Japanese immigrants destined for the coffee plantations, the *Kasato-Marú*, got to the port of Santos, on the coast of the state of São Paulo, in 1908.

⁴ See Dezem (2005; 2011 [2008]) and Ramos (2008) on this point, providing eloquent comparison between the treatment that was given to a project (whose authorization was declined) for the immigration of Black North Americans to Brazil in the 1920s and the images and ideas that circulated, during the same period, regarding Japanese, or “yellow” immigration.

tensions, the debates that preceded the writing of the 1946 constitution were not free of the anti-Japanese racism of the previous period. Rather, such sentiments remained alive (HAYASHI, 2020).

And these immigrants, as well as their descendants, became the object of an “appearance-based racism” (NOGUEIRA, 1985; 1998; 2008), just as the Black and mixed-race populations had already become. Unlike Italians, Spaniards and Germans, the Japanese were easily recognized by their phenotype and thus, were not benefitted by public sphere anonymity. As Mitsuo, one of the interviewees of my recent research, pointed out, during the Vargas years, racism was brought out by what was written “on one’s face⁵” (SCHPUN, 2009, p. 220). To think about Japanese immigration from this prism seems to me to be able to cast light not only on understandings of the long presence of this ethnic group on Brazilian soil, but also to reverberate comparatively – given this history – within the extensive literature that discusses the racism that Black populations have had to confront. “Appearance-based racism” is a migratory differential that diverse generations of Brazilians of Japanese origin have had to bear. In the long term, contradictions involving racialized perceptions of nationality, during the Imperial period and the Republic, as well as the assimilationism that was applied to the management of migratory flows, were particularly penalizing to Japanese immigrants and their descendants.

The weight of this history continues to make itself felt. Thus, “appearance-based racism” is clearly woven into the long history of Japanese immigrants and their descendants in Brazil. Many of my interviewees remembered that they had been made fun of as children. Although they were often unable to provide specific examples of the teasing they endured, taunts such as “hey, Japanese kid, open up your eyes!” (a double entendre, since the latter expression is used to warn someone to take heed, or be careful) were mentioned.

It seems to me that there are a number of questions and issues emerging from this phenomenon which are fecund enough to stimulate further research and reflection. My case study of bodies and beauty standards enables inquiry into the space that Japanese-Brazilians occupy within contemporary Brazilian society. Issues of temporality speak both to the complex process of a group’s integration into a host society and to the transformations of ways in which a group invents and expresses its collective identity. At the same time, regarding the aesthetic practices in question, we are encouraged to inquire into modes of construction of femininity and mas-

⁵ The Brazilian Portuguese expression that my informant used here, “está na cara”, has the figurative meaning, “it’s obvious”, or blatant. Here, it was used in double entendre, in the sense that Japanese ethnic identity is “written” on the physical features of the face, and also “obvious” and undeniable. The informant’s name has been changed. Interview, August 2011.

culinity, since perceptions of beauty, and the management and expression of one's personal assets for beauty and seduction, mobilize men and women differently. Lastly, research of this sort must flesh out the way these core elements intersect, rather than juxtapose, insofar as the construction of gender is a part of the construction of an identity that evolves over time, as a unique type of presentation of the self, for those who wish to be neither Japanese nor Brazilian, but rather Japanese-Brazilian, in the sense of the hybrid or "hyphenated" identity suggested by Lesser.

THE SURVEY

The main sources for this research were interviews that I carried out between 2005 and 2008. I interviewed three plastic surgeons, two men and one woman, all three *nikkei*. It was thanks to two of these surgeons that I gained access to the ten patients that I would subsequently interview, almost all of whom were patients of these same surgeons. Patient interviews were carried out via email. This choice reflected my fundamental concern for the preservation of anonymity. Several individuals declined to take part in an interview. For others, the fact that they would not be interviewed face-to-face made it easier for them to agree to collaborate with me. As for their backgrounds, almost all of my interviewees had a higher education and were currently employed; exceptions were the youngest person, who was still a student, and the oldest one, who was already retired. All of them – children and grandchildren of immigrants – were of 100% Japanese descent. With the exception of the aunts and uncles of one the interviewees, and the second marriage of another, interethnic marriages, where they existed, began at the third generation – that is, among the grandchildren of immigrants, the *sansei*.

Half of the sample had been to Japan, and two among them had done specialized studies there (for a length of one to two years). Three reported knowing no Japanese at all, while others said that they had "some idea" of the language. There were interviewees who told me that they still had the opportunity to practice Japanese with other members of their families. Some of them reported having inherited values and principles from their families that they identified with the "Japanese culture" of their ancestors, a heritage that had been passed on to them.

Four of my informants had their "westernization" surgery done in 2005-2006. One of them, who had first had the procedure done in 1978, at age 20, was having it redone at this later date. The youngest person to have the surgery performed did so when she turned 15 in

1995; four others had had theirs in 1975 and 1977. In those days, one of the three surgeons I interviewed was just beginning to develop the technique and decided to offer family members a chance to try it out. I interviewed three cousins who underwent the operation (two sisters and a brother), one niece, and the doctor's own sister, who was operated on by another surgeon in the family. Among my group of informants, there were two cases of mothers and daughters getting operated on, the mothers before their daughters. In one case, a mother had her surgery redone, as she believed its effects had worn off over the years, at the same time that her daughter underwent it for the first time.

In addition to these interviews, I consulted various websites geared toward Japanese-Brazilians, including the websites of several Japanese community magazines. In some of the latter, I found articles that gave tips on feminine beauty and published photos of young Japanese-Brazilians, evoking hegemonic standards of female beauty. The prominent space that was given to these photos indicated that there was much at stake there, leading me to devote around three years to collecting and analyzing them. I also visited the homepages of Brazilian plastic surgery clinics, not exhausting their abundance yet able to get a good idea of how they market themselves, and whether they made an explicit offer of "eye westernization" surgery as a separate category.

PLASTIC SURGERY

Brazil is number two in the world in amount of plastic procedures performed. A 2003 survey by the Gallup Institute that included a sample of 500 accredited surgeons revealed that the members of the Brazilian Society of Plastic Surgery (SBCP) perform around 374,000 plastic surgeries per year. These numbers do not take into account the surgeries performed by dermatologists, ear-nose-throat doctors, ophthalmologists and gynecologists who, although lacking the necessary training for this type of plastic surgery, may also engage in it.

Since then, the general trend has been upwards. The last SBPC survey, published in 2018, found that 1,742,861 plastic surgeries were carried out that year, of which 60.3% were aesthetic (around 1,050,945) and 39.7% reparatory. This means that each of these professionals performed around 286 plastic surgeries during the year, 24 per month, 6 per week (almost 4 of

which were done for aesthetic purposes).⁶ In the last ISAPS survey, carried out in December of 2019, it was shown that the United States was the country with the greatest number of plastic surgeons (6,900, versus Brazil's 6,011) and world leader in non-surgical plastic procedures (2,630,832). Yet Brazil was ahead in total number of surgical operations (1,493,673). Although the surgeries I look at here, referred to as “eye westernization,” are not a part of the typology used by the ISAPS, the operation called “eyelid surgery,” which may include patients of Japanese origin who seek this specific type of intervention, is, according to the above-cited research, one of the most “popular.” Its popularity in Japan is no coincidence; the country appears among the top three countries in the world in number of eyelid operations performed (150,589 cases or 12% of the total number surgeries of this sort in the world), followed by Brazil (145,346 – 11.5%) and the United States (113,988 – 9%). Of the total number of plastic surgeries done worldwide, almost 80% involved female patients, whereas 20% were done on men.⁷

The Brazilian boom in aesthetic surgery dates back to the middle of the 1990s.⁸ In 1990, only 60,000 Brazilians underwent this form of surgery. Over the course of the decade, the increase in the number of total annual surgeries reached 580%.⁹ This rise took place in part because of greater parity between men and women. In 1994, 95% of the patients were women. In 2000, they represented only 70% of the total.¹⁰ Yet these numbers should be treated with caution. According to a Datafolha Institute survey carried out in 2009, the most detailed one to which I had access, 88% of aesthetic surgery patients are women, a percentage that drops for reparatory surgeries (59% female).¹¹

This growth also took place within an atmosphere of democratization. While costs remained high, certain private insurers – and the surgeons themselves – made the dream of aesthetic surgery possible for a vast middle class. The practice is now in no way reserved to elites, models or television and entertainment celebrities. The patients that I encountered in the waiting rooms of the three clinics that I visited, as well as those whom I interviewed, confirm the

6 See: http://www2.cirurgioplastica.org.br/wp-content/uploads/2019/08/Apresentac%CC%A7a%CC%83o-Censo-2018_V3.pdf (access on June 2nd 2021).

7 See: <https://www.isaps.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/Global-Survey-2019.pdf> (access on June 2nd 2021).

8 Perto da perfeição, *IstoÉ*, 09.15.2000.

9 Império do Bisturi, *Veja*, 01.17.2001.

10 These numbers come from the SBPC. For the years 1994 to 2000, see the article cited from the *IstoÉ*.

11 See http://www2.cirurgioplastica.org.br/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/Datafolha_2009.pdf and <https://www1.folha.uol.com.br/ciencia/2009/02/503430-numero-de-plasticas-de-mama-ultrapassa-o-de-lipoaspiracoes-no-brasil.shtml> (access on June 2nd 2021).

idea of expanding middle class access.¹²

It should be mentioned here that this evolution is part of a more general trend in growing consumption of beauty products and services in Brazil. We know, for example, that the number of professionals working in beauty services jumped from 361,000 to 679,000 between 1985 and 1995, before reaching 1,043,000 in 2003. According to a study by Euromonitor, an agency that studies Brazilian industries and markets, the personal hygiene and beauty product sector witnessed an annual growth of 10% and in 2013 employed around 5.7 million persons.¹³ In 2018, Brazil ranked fourth in the world, behind the United States, China and Japan.¹⁴

This incredible growth, which has had a strong impact on the daily life and urban culture of the country, can be explained primarily by the women's mass entrance into the labor market, a process which began in 1970. While at that time women represented 11% of the economically active population, by 2001 they were 42% of the working population and, in 2018, 45.3%. With their income rising, women spent more, including on beauty products and services. Furthermore, as physical appearance became increasingly incorporated as a factor of discrimination in an ever-more selective labor market – notoriously as of the early 1980s – both men and women were obliged to pay more attention to their appearance. Today, we are witnessing a marked increase in male consumption of personal hygiene and beauty products, including a rise in the male clientele of beauty institutes.¹⁵ Finally, all of these changes are associated with higher life expectancy and a greater fear of aging.¹⁶

12 Unfortunately, none of the surveys consulted here provide data on the socio-economic profile of patients (although the 2009 survey provide information on sex, age, nationality and “race”/skin color).

13 See Dweck (1999, p. 10-11); Dweck, Di Sabbato & Souza (2004, p. 16, n. 58); Brasil é o terceiro país do mundo em consumo de produtos de beleza, **Globo Universidade**, 11.02.2013 (updated on 06.28.2014). Available at: <http://redeglobo.globo.com/globouniversidade/noticia/2013/11/brasil-e-o-terceiro-pais-do-mundo-em-consumo-de-produtos-de-beleza.html> (access on May 26th 2021).

14 See <https://forbes.com.br/principal/2020/07/brasil-e-o-quarto-maior-mercado-de-beleza-e-cuidados-pessoais-do-mundo/> (access on June 2nd 2021).

15 Brasil é o terceiro país do mundo em consumo de produtos de beleza, **Globo Universidade**, 11.02.2013 (updated on 06.28.2014). Available at: <http://redeglobo.globo.com/globouniversidade/noticia/2013/11/brasil-e-o-terceiro-pais-do-mundo-em-consumo-de-produtos-de-beleza.html> (access on May 26th 2021).

16 See Dweck (1999, p. 6); Dweck, Di Sabbato & Souza (2004, p. 5, 9); IBGE (2009, p. 20, 22); IBGE (2018, p. 2).

THE “WESTERNIZATION” OF APPEARANCE

On its website, the clinic of one of the three surgeons that I met has “eye westernization” posted as the top of its welcome page. On the menu of procedures offered, the item “surgeries for Asians” appears, under which a more detailed explanation on eyelid surgery is provided. The prominence given to this type of surgery is not coincidental. In 2001, the number of aesthetic surgeries undergone by Asian patients in Brazil reached fourteen thousand, twice as many as in the early 1990s.¹⁷ Half of these interventions were the so-called “eye westernizations”: in 2004, the SBCP estimated that 8,000 of them were performed. Among the most recent surveys, the only one that refers specifically to surgery on “Asian eyelids” is the Datafolha endeavor from 2009. Although this study does not include surgical modalities that account for only 1% of the total and excludes everything that is considered “light” (performed by surgeons in their offices), a footnote appears that indicates that this specialty represents only 0.4% of the total (1,837 interventions). If this study is in fact a faithful reflection of reality, then the number of operations is actually falling. Yet this procedure, unlike all of the other types that were not counted, was deemed worthy of special attention. The very small number of procedures recorded by the Datafolha institute, which polled 360 surgeons (of the over 5,000 members of the SBCP), is perhaps due to the fact that not all surgeons are sought out for this type of surgery. “Eye westernization” may be more frequent in clinics run by *nikkei* professionals or catering especially to a Japanese-Brazilian clientele. In fact, in studying the websites of aesthetic surgery clinics in São Paulo, Rio de Janeiro and Paraná, I did not always find explicit mention of this type of surgery. Some highly sophisticated clinics in Rio de Janeiro did not speak of it at all, while other, unquestionably less elegant clinics in Paraná did – with the obvious aim of catering to the potential clientele of a state with one the two largest Japanese-Brazilians populations in the country. In São Paulo, at the time that I carried out this research, references to “westernization” were far more frequent than in other places. The recent “success” of this type of surgery among the target population deserves further and careful attention.

In any event, the website mentioned above, run by one of the doctors I interviewed, is solicitous toward candidates for this type of surgery, catering to a significant proportion of so-called “Asiatic” clientele. This clientele may indeed feel reassured – and drawn in – by such special treatment. The ensemble of procedures described in the category of “surgery for Asians”

¹⁷ De olhos bem abertos, *Veja*, 08.07.2002.

includes, in addition to eyelid surgery, operations on noses, breasts and buttocks. The website explains that:

Many Asians have a flattened upper nose, called an “Asian nose,” and many of them wish to have it built up in order to give greater harmony to their profile.

Many Asians exhibit mammary hypoplasia, in other words, underdeveloped breasts. A small percentage exhibit a masculine body profile; in rare cases, Asians can be affected by mammary hypertrophy.

As breasts are symbols of femininity, women want them to be in proportion to the rest of the body.

Some Asians have “squashed” buttocks and wish to have them reinforced.

Even before introducing all of the surgical options available to patients of Asian background, the website makes the following reference to differences, undoubtedly meant to build the trust of potential clients:

The Asian aesthetic type is different from the Western one. The bone structure, proportions and dimensions of each body are different. Everyone’s features must be respected and the aesthetic of every ethnic group should be drawn out. Everyone has their own beauty and it is the surgeon’s job to help bring it out.

EYES

In Brazil, the practice of “eye westernization” began in the 1970s. Out of all the surgeries “for Asians,” it is the simplest. It requires only local anesthesia, lasts only an hour, is the cheapest and, above all, promises the quickest, and least uncomfortable recovery period, rarely lasting more than a week – factors that are undoubtedly important when a decision is being made.

This surgery aims specifically at constructing a crease in the eyelids, which, according to different sources, 30% to 50% of Asians lack at birth. Asians also experience a greater accumulation of fat around their eyes than Westerners. The surgery consists of an incision in the eyelids, through which excess skin, fat and muscles are removed, and the construction of a crease, inside of which the scar will be placed, and thus rendered invisible. The secret of a successful operation consists in respecting specific measurements for the construction of the crease. In fact, Westerners “naturally” have a larger crease in their eyelids (10mm to 15mm) than Asians do (5mm to 8mm). Thus, according to one of the surgeons I interviewed, an overly long crease

can look “artificial.”

BIG EYES, BEAUTIFUL EYES

When one looks at “before” and “after surgery” photos of patients, it is clear that, as one of the surgeons stated, “the operation does not hide one’s origins.” According to him, it is solely a matter of the patient “improving his or her appearance.” Nonetheless, it is the “ethnic” traits of this “appearance” that patients are seeking to “improve.” Thus, it is no coincidence if codes of communication function particularly well between surgeons of Japanese origin and candidates for “eye westernization.” The clientele of the clinics that I visited, run by *nikkei* doctors, was definitely more Japanese than generically “Asian.” And this market niche seems to have been graced with very particular care and attention. At the time, one of the clinics was performing around 200 eyelid surgeries on *nikkei* per year. The owner of another clinic estimated that his own yearly average was around 60 and believed the demand was growing. By means of comparison, this same doctor said that he performed liposuction, the “flagship service” of his clinic, around 120 times per year. Breast augmentations, also on the rise, were on par with the “westernization” surgeries as well. Eye westernization has therefore seen real success, as this surgeon confirms.

But let us now return to the issue of “improving one’s appearance.” The patients that I interviewed had no trouble defining what this meant. They wanted to have the creases on their eyelids, and especially, the bigger eyes that these creases would make visible. In describing their eyes prior to surgery, they often claimed they were too small, too puffy, or that they looked like they were closed and made it difficult to apply makeup or wear contact lenses. It may be true that more fat around the eyes can create the appearance of puffy, smaller eyes that do not open as widely. Edith Y. commented that “among us, descendants of Asians, when we describe a Japanese man or woman that we think is beautiful, we talk about the eyelids, whether or not they have the crease.” Having a crease in one’s eyelids is therefore, above and beyond all else, a standard of beauty.

Some of the women interviewed reported that prior to the operation, they used a number of techniques to make temporary creases, either with makeup pencils or solutions coming from Japan: special glue to stick the eyelids together (which dissolve on contact with water), or adhesive tape in the form of eyelids, which one of the interviewees purchased as a teenager, before

switching to the common and much-cheaper scotch tape. These solutions had the disadvantage of being temporary. In effect, surgery alters one's being, rather than one's appearance alone.

BEAUTY AND AESTHETIC SURGERY

Two central problems emerge here. The first is the opposition between true and false, natural and artificial. On this point, Alexander Edmonds argues that for aesthetic surgery to be acceptable from a moral point of view, we must talk in terms of self-esteem, rather than beauty. It is only then that the imposture of wishing to become what is not one can be excusable (EDMONDS, 2002, p. 215-6). Therefore, rather than seeking to be beautiful, or to be even more beautiful, these patients would be trying to find normalcy by correcting potential “defects” in their appearance.

This leads us to a second question: is the desire for adaptation, to be like the others, the foremost motivation behind this “westernization,” as the term used in Brazil to designate this surgery would seem to imply? Can the ethnic characteristics at stake here be likened to “defects in need of correction”? We might think this is the case, considering the fact that almost all of my interviewees had been on the receiving end of comments made in ill-will and mockery – such as the explanation, which one woman heard, that the reason why Japanese people have small eyes is that they fry too many dumplings. Nonetheless, if we listen to the motivations expressed by patients at the moments in which they made the decision to undergo surgery, beauty came first. These patients were not seeking to be normal but to be exceptional; they didn't wish to “blend in”, but rather to “rise above” (idem, p. 217).

It should also be added that not only do photos of surgery patients clearly show that the Asian phenotype is in no way erased by this operation, but, more importantly, the unanimous reports of satisfaction with results indicate that the disappearance of this phenotype was not its principal goal. On this question, Tania K. and Rosa M. reported that only people of Asian origin noticed their facial modifications and praised them; thus, they “remained Asian.” And only one of the interviewees drew a connection between the teasing that she was object of in her childhood and the desire to have a crease in her eyelids – a link that she quickly minimized:

But when I really think about it, at the moment that I decided to have the operation done I was not remembering any teasing; [as a decision] it was aesthetic in nature,

simply because I wanted to become more beautiful!

JAPANESE-BRAZILIAN BEAUTY

Moralizing discourses always hide the aggressive competition underpinning aesthetic practices: it is not, in fact, a question of normalization, or homogenization, or of becoming beautiful *per se*, but rather of becoming more beautiful than the others. As such, if we look at the photos of young *Nikkei* on the various websites that target Japanese-Brazilians – notably on one of these websites, in which the “most beautiful Asian women,” and, more recently, the “most beautiful Asian men” become the focus of “photo essays,” – what in fact we see is a desire to display beauty and to valorize bodily attributes that incorporate an already existing search for greater beauty.

By closely examining the photos of the young men and women, it is clear that eyes are a central element of the work that precedes the ritual of photography, invested with particular importance. Of course, not all of the models have done surgery on their eyelids, although one of the plastic surgeons interviewed maintained that “a majority have” and claims not to understand the reasons that lead others to opt out, to “go without the crease.” Yet just because some do not get the surgery done does not mean that they disregard the issue. The ways in which they do their makeup is proof of this; for young women, eyes are the target of a sophisticated choice of colors, shadowing, etc. And many of them draw in the crease with pencil, as do young men. For the latter, it may be the only element of makeup they use, or at least, the most visible one.

“JAPANESENESS”

A question arises as to the role played by “Japaneseness” in this quest for beauty, or for greater beauty. Regardless of their generation, my interviewees all seemed proud of their heritage. Nonetheless, a temporal variable does come into play here, differentiating generations in terms of their collective experience of Japanese community engagement with broader Brazilian society. I would say that for those who were born during the 1950s, their Asiatic appearance brought them greater strife during childhood and youth than it did for those born thirty years

later. The process of integration, especially the removal of discriminatory barriers, was slow, and did not spare the first generations. Silence and discretion were characteristic features of an initial response to daily discrimination. Physical appearance, to which racism latches on, rendered experiences of discrimination both enduring and unavoidable. Discretion, in turn, was linked to a notion of duty, as connected to honor, learned at home with one's elders, but also served to nuance the accentuated visibility of difference – imposed by phenotype – that stood in the way of integration.

In more recent decades, barriers of discrimination constructed around the Asiatic phenotype have become more porous, and the international climate has also changed. This has resulted in an increasingly valorized and valorizing image of Japan. Thus, the younger generation benefits from a more positive context, both at national and international levels (the long history of immigration and the global success of Japan, which today is also home to a community of Brazilian emigrés). In this context, to take advantage of and display the “Japaneseness” of one's appearance – which these young people, men and women, reinvent, rather than “emphasize” – becomes an asset, rather than a social handicap.¹⁸

We are therefore witnessing a social construction – albeit a subtle one – of bodily markers of ethnicity that *nikkei* are comfortable with. It is one in which they can recognize themselves to their own advantage, in the sense of a search for excellence in beauty that includes recourse to the most radical, that is, the long-lasting techniques developed by aesthetic surgery.

“JAPANESENESS” AND “WESTERNIZATION”

Writing on the rapid rise in markets of beauty products and services for people “of darker skin” in Brazil,¹⁹ Peter Fry (2002, p. 315) argues that the existence of such products does more than just “respond to a necessity;” they themselves create this necessity and, “in doing so, they surreptitiously disseminate a ‘black identity’ across all of Brazil.” I will borrow Fry's

18 Higa (2015, p. 184-201) supplies us with a particularly interesting example coming from an artist of Japanese origin who politicizes his body and his Japanese-Brazilian identity through performance. His politicized exhibition of his own body as an ethnic body is something that I believe would have been inconceivable within earlier generations.

19 I will not discuss the Brazilian racial question here, nor, more precisely, the wide spectrum of colors in the black and mixed-race populations that contribute to its complexity. Rather, I make use of Peter Fry's conception, in my discussion of an issue to which it seems pertinent.

idea of the “dissemination of a common identity” that is invented on the basis of the body and interventions upon it.

Comparing Brazil to the United States, Alexander Edmonds argues that in Brazil “beauty is not politicized” and that “cosmetics can be ‘just’ cosmetics; blond hair, slim noses, breasts that are reduced – or enhanced – are considered as ‘things of beauty,’ not of race” (EDMONDS, 2002, p. 244). In order to understand racial issues within the political dimensions that any quest for beauty can take, we must attentively examine what people “with darker skin” are saying about it. Analyzing this relationship between beauty and politics, Peter Fry (2002, p. 318-9), defends the idea of a political role of investing in beauty:

In order to be able to go beyond that which is truly specific to them, which is to say racial discrimination, and the low self-esteem derived from negative representations attributed to the person and their “appearance,” it is necessary to modify the social representation of the Black aesthetic...

Thus, once it becomes a question of appearance and the body, which are the central markers of racism in Brazil, aesthetic investment takes on political meaning. Interviewing Black beauty professionals, and specifically the owner of a hair salon, *Dona Daí*, the author argues again that:

Dona Daí feels satisfied when her clients, equipped with the self-esteem that she helps them to create, are able to achieve success in the sex, marriage and employment markets. [...] she insists that the only difference between whites and blacks lies in the aesthetic realm. (idem, p. 320-1).

Of all the immigrant groups inside Brazilian society, the Japanese and their descendants have suffered the sharpest “appearance-based racism.” They have more reason than others to reinvent their own aesthetic. And if we return to the idea mentioned above – the dissemination of a communal identity that expresses itself precisely through the legitimacy given to other perceptions of beauty and investment in appearance – we can explain the visual message carried by the sample of photos examined for this research. They are meant as a medium for the invention of an ethnicity that expresses itself through a phenotype that thus embodies beauty, one that is perfectly capable of being recognized as beautiful. There is, of course, a social context that makes both the emergence of this type of message as well as the adhesion that it engenders possible. This context is due in part to the significant increase in the female workforce in Brazil, but also to the construction of a “Japaneseness” that follows not only from the growth of the market for beauty products and services, but also from the greater segmentation of this market.

Increasingly specialized magazines offer proof of this: the magazine *Raça Brasil* is perhaps the most radical example, discovering and contributing to the construction of an urban black middle class that is willing to consume all the types of beauty products that it advertises.²⁰ The Asian aesthetic is also reinforced by specific messages in a number of *nikkei* magazines that devote a non-negligible importance to beauty – especially when directed toward the younger generations. This is not to mention the “eye westernization” that, by enlarging the eyes of Japanese-Brazilians, shows, among other things, the different ways in which they have been “opened”.

GENDER...

According to the statistics, in 2001, 30% of aesthetic surgeries in Brazil were done on men;²¹ in 2009, according to the Datafolha survey, they accounted for only 12% of the total.²² Beyond the available numbers, one thing is clear: men are much less willing to be interviewed than women are. Because of these difficulties, Alexander Edmonds chose to not interview them at all and to limit his research on aesthetic surgery to female patients. Nonetheless, when we read some of their responses, especially those regarding beauty and seduction, we cannot help but wonder how men might have responded. Thus, I decided that I would not give up until I found men who were willing to talk to me about “eye westernization.” What did these men tell me? Firstly, they did not talk about beauty at all, and rejected the idea that it had been one of their motivations. One of them had elected to undergo the operation because he found that his eyelids had a tendency to fall, making him look weary. He systematically refused any other possible explanation. After a long negotiation, he authorized his doctor to send me the photos of him that were taken at the clinic, documenting his facial transformation.

The tired look that he felt his eyelids gave his face had disappeared with the noticeable widening of his eyes, which now in fact looked more “open”. His surgeon considered that this “brought out a youthfulness [to his face] that had not been there before.” The earlier, wearied

20 For more on *Raça Brasil*, see Kofes (2010a; 2010b), Piscitelli (2010), Gilliam & Gilliam (2010), Dias Filho (2010).

21 Perto da perfeição, *IstoÉ*, 09.15.2000.

22 I have not found (reliable) more recent data on Brazil. The international research cited here, for 2019, indicates that 20% of all patients were men, but disaggregate data on countries is not available.

appearance was therefore signified as a sign of age, even though his face bore no wrinkles. It was therefore a question of a “state of mind,” rather than beauty, although the surgeon also invoked – again through use of euphemism – the “harmony” that his face had acquired.

The other male interviewee had undergone eyelid surgery thirty years prior to my interview, when – as I mentioned first – one of his relatives, a plastic surgeon, had begun to offer the procedure and operated on a large number of his family members. He insisted on the fact that he would not have taken the initiative on his own. He declared that because he trusted the surgeon, he had let himself be convinced, even though his eyes had never bothered him. He did not even know whether to say if the results had been satisfactory, given that he had not had any expectations. Not only was beauty not in question during the interview, but he denied playing an active role in the decision to undergo surgery. Rather, he attributed it solely as the result of invitation made by the surgeon, who in turn took advantage of having many relatives on whom to “carry out his research.” Moreover, two of his sisters and one female cousin, whom I also interviewed, underwent the operation at the same time and in the same circumstances. Yet their stories are completely different. In their case, their acquiescence was connected to the pre-existing desire to “do something about their eyes.” None of them mentioned the importance of these procedures for their relative’s research, much less that such a motivation would have been the main one.

Masculinity is therefore constructed either out of a complete silence regarding beauty, as something that would supposedly only concern women, or, more blatantly, through passive and apathetic adherence. While feminine adherence to a practice that is in no way mundane is constructed through enthusiastic and firmly assertive initiatives, that of men seems to unfold through resignation. Even if men join women in these practices, it seems that they are not able to assume the latter as a matter of choice, nor recognize in them common meanings and motivations.

Beauty thus remains, first and foremost, a female affair– even if the photos of young men with a line drawn on their eyelids indicate that among young people, there is an emerging public male recognition of the importance of investment in appearance. Furthermore, beyond these practices themselves lies the question of how investments in beauty – however discrete – are displayed, revealing gender differentials around the issue of working on one’s appearance.

...AND ETHNICITY: THE LURE OF “WESTERNIZATION” (CONCLUSION)

Here, questions of gender intersect with the migratory question, as it connects to both ethnic identity and temporality in the history of immigration and Japanese presence in Brazil. It is not only a question of how Japanese immigrants to Brazil have constructed a Japanese-Brazilian identity with strong physical resonances – and one which goes hand in hand with the forms that discrimination against them has taken – but also of its construction within a context in which it can be displayed without inhibition, even if such exhibition concerns women more than men.

Thus, we encounter, on the one hand, men born after the war, who are still hesitant about fully assuming their adhesion to a Japanese-Brazilian identity that requires a particular investment in appearance and the valorization of their own aesthetic. On the other, we observe the young men of the group, who, alongside the women, display signs of adhesion to such investments.

The construction of an identity that rests upon Japanese origins while at the same time goes beyond them, alongside the fact that it has found the opportunity to manifest itself, are signs of an immigration that ultimately has been successful. Thus, when one of the surgeons who was interviewed asserted that “the operation does not conceal one’s origins,” he is, of course, defending his patients from the accusation that they are denying their roots. Undoubtedly, his goal is also to legitimate a practice from which he clearly benefits. Yet it is nonetheless the expression of a common sentiment, one that he shares: the pride of being a *nikkei*, as opposed to the discretion and self-effacement of previous generations.

Furthermore, the choice of “wearing” such an identity in public, especially for women, reveals an understanding of Brazilian society that is worth noting. Alexander Edmonds is therefore correct when he says that beauty has been “nationalized” in Brazil: “[Brazilians] see beauty as a question of national character, even pride” (EDMONDS, 2002, p. 247). And this pride rests largely on the women who, as true calling cards of the Nation, are thus thought to do it justice. Joining in, the *nikkei* adhere to such a vision, putting the Japanese-Brazilian beauty of the women of the group on display.

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