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October 18, 2017

Plastic bodies

By Emily Yates-Doerr

Plastic Bodies is an extraordinary monograph, produced from a decade of careful engagement with techniques of place-making, othering, and ethnographic theory. Anthropology at its very best, this is work that makes evident the plasticity of the binary. Through gripping stories of the self in the other, the here in the there, nature in artifice, and the beauty in mess, readers come to understand that binaries are always socially made. Because sociality is not fixed, binaries are always on the move. When differences take the form of one side or the other, this is never the end of the story.

“*War on Menstruation!*”

Sanabria’s study of the role that sex hormones play in contemporary social life in Salvador, Brazil opens with a troubling observation. Contraceptive hormones, taken by well over 100 million women worldwide, are increasingly marketed in Salvador as being more natural than menstruation. Both evolution and religion are drawn into the fold: *Your grandmothers, pregnant and nursing, did not have regular periods; Eve did not menstruate!* To regain a woman’s natural state in conditions of modernity, preventing this “useless waste of blood,” experts routinely tell women that it is necessary to incorporate ever more pharmaceutical hormones into the body. Suppression in the name of liberation.

That well-financed marketing campaigns brand hormones as natural has particular salience in the global south, where neo-Malthusian concerns for overpopulation serve to justify interventions that seek to control much more than population size. Readers will come away from the book with a clearer sense than ever that blood – and bleeding – are sites at which social hierarchies are reproduced and renegotiated. But as the intersectionality of gender and race becomes obvious, so too does it become obvious that ontologies of gender and race are situated in environments that do not easily travel. That race and gender are co-constitutive in Bahia has different material effects than their co-constitution elsewhere. (In this sense, the text is a nice corrective to what Sanabria refers to as anthropology’s “bad habit” of mistaking multiplicity for relativism).

As plastics in the form of pill packages, synthetic injections, and their toxic environmental afterlives are among the objects studied, *plasticity* becomes the driving analytic of the text. Sanabria situates the term as a capacity to receive form, and also as a capacity to give form in that it carries resistance. She draws on the writing of Malabou to make a distinction between flexibility and plasticity. “Flexibility” has been colonized by neoliberalism, a critique made by many, including Emily Martin’s brilliant *Flexible Bodies* some decades ago. Plasticity, however, is not merely receptive but adaptive. The term connotes polysemous dimensionality, containing both determination and a capacity to be otherwise.

The book takes an “object centered” approach, following hormones through

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their diverse leakages in and out of practices of medicine and everyday life. At the same time, Sanabria intervenes with a smart twist on object-centered anthropology by showing that objects might be better conceived as materialities, or, more precisely, “accreted socialities.” Building upon scholarship attending to the [social lives of medicine](#), she shows us how making an object travel requires that a certain amount of context must travel as well. The context that travels is not innocent, as becomes clear through careful ethnographic description of the chemicals available in fertility drugs, how they are marketed, and in whose bodies they wind up. (Sanabria also gives us her own exquisite reflections about what has been written in and out of the story she tells. Pages 195-197, especially, might be required reading for everyone interested in writing ethnography because they do such a fantastic job of unpacking the problems of describing an “other” place that, in living and in writing, becomes one’s own.) Traveling context – and the constant making and unmaking of material sociality that goes with this – is what the analytic of plasticity helps the reader to grasp.

The text critically engages with bodily integrity, demonstrating how people treat the body as bounded while simultaneously attending to its malleability. At the heart of plasticity is the shift in focus from *either/or* to the space of and, and, and. Bodies are bounded, *and* they overflow their boundaries. This is where the innovative force of plasticity becomes especially powerful and Sanabria’s contribution to decolonial anthropology so compelling and urgent. It’s not “the body” that needs to be overturned, but rather the logic underpinning “matters of fact” that requires something to be either one thing or another. Plasticity, as such, is not so much a condition of possibility; it is a condition of actuality, that applies not only to bodies in Bahia, but to *every body*— although people in Bahia may generally have a better sense of this truth than most. In Bahia, nature, as well as *matters of fact*, have long been taken to be plastic.

In its meticulous focus on Salvador, *Plastic Bodies* offers readers from elsewhere powerful insight into a revolutionary politics of bodies. I am wary of re-centering contemporary US politics in the discussion, given that American politics are already taking up a great deal of academic space. Yet because US Americans have so much to learn from the ways in which Latin Americans – and particularly Latin American women – have responded to centuries of suppression, a brief comparison seems worthwhile:

As with much in political life, *Plastic Bodies* confronts us with deeply entrenched misogyny. Picture a so-called expert who unflinchingly describes a woman as a dog in estrogen-emitting heat, and suggests she should use the drug *Elcometrine* to control her body since she has “no tail to prevent penetration.” Elsewhere: a doctor who threatens Sanabria, while gently stroking her cheek, with the promise that if she doesn’t take hormones she’ll “live to regret it.” Powerful men who treat women as property are not new; capitalism and democracy alike have been founded upon this abuse. Still, for as long as there has been abuse, so too have women engaged in its refusal in powerful ways. I’m struggling with my language here, for I’m not sure that refusal, which retains focus in “no,” best characterizes the ways in which women in the text, even amid a good deal of horror, cultivate vibrant, alternative pathways of joyous living (that their productive activities get such little academic and political space does not mean they are not shaping the world). In her response to the book forum, I would be interested to learn more about how Sanabria thinks the work of “and, and, and” can interfere with the misogyny of politics as usual today, and how might this be different from – or, better put,

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multiple to – the spaces of proliferation encouraged by promissory pharmaceuticals (in which a production of possibilities resonates with insatiable capitalist longing).

I suppose an answer to this question is already anticipated, since the book might be read as an intervention that unsettles the way in which interventions have tended to proceed. Sanabria shows how the rhetoric of choice underpinning much of the global push for change embroils us in a limitless, and violent, spiral around the desire for more intervention—and with this, more of a certain kind of nature. Drugs to encourage “natural” libido in the face of late-capitalist exhaustion, drugs to then control the side effects of these drugs, and yet more drugs to control the side effect of those to achieve the most natural state of all. Just yesterday in Guatemala, where I’m writing this commentary, a midwife told me that it took ten injections of different neurotropas to cure a patient of her husband’s adultery and alcoholism, to return her to a place of balance. Sanabria’s text is filled with similar stories.

In the face of technologies that are either counterposed to nature or used in the name of nature, Sanabria works to articulate a mode of being technological that is not defined by its relation to nature. In doing so she shows us that the distinction “not intervened in / intervened in” (which might be read as natural/cultural) is not the correct site at which to evaluate the politics of intervention. This observation is critical for undoing a dangerous, flawed comparison between the partiality of nature made apparent by feminist science studies and the “alternative facts” deployed to justify racist and sexist politics today. Indeed, the capacious ontologies of mattering described in *Plastic Bodies* bare no resemblance to the ‘post-truth’ that is leveraged by neo-conservative politics. The book makes evident that we are no way *beyond* truth; that truth is multiple, makes it ever more urgent.

Sanabria leaves us with the idea that instead of projects that desire after that which is natural, we might instead focus on design.

“We need to learn with the explosive and potentially corrosive character of plasticity, without yearning for a lost stable referent or investing too much hope in an endless flexible promissory future.”

We might, in other words, move closer to the generative capacity of spaces that are otherwise to dominant and dominating narratives (while also recognizing how much more than ‘narrative’ is at stake). A world of plastic bodies may be unsettling for those who long to live upon the solid ground of “nature.” And that is exactly right: unsettling nature is precisely what we should be doing. The forms of sociality that we will need to remake in its place may not be solid—and this is why they hold tremendous, and ever more necessary strength.

Emily Yates-Doerr is an Assistant Professor of Anthropology at the University of Amsterdam. With Christine Labuski, she organized and edited the recent Somatosphere series, “[The Ethnographic Case](#).”

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